

# Dark Hope



Paula  
Calloway

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BY

PAULA CALLOWAY

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## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my beloved husband, Garrett, and my daughter Carole, a special young man, Logan, supportive family, and close friends. I want to thank Stefani Kelsey, Martine Jardin, and eXtasy Books for giving me the opportunity. I would like to acknowledge my webmaster, my husband, for designing and maintaining my website. May this be the beginning of our dreams.

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## PRELUDE

An intense blue-white glow of astral shields shimmered fervently around a man and woman in the center of a small apartment. The short woman possessed golden-blond hair that flowed to her hips and dark blue eyes, which sparked with a glimmer of hope.

Electra stood naked, her buxom body a curvaceous enticement while the play of shadows danced across her features. A crystal pendant in the shape of a star hung nestled in her cleavage. It shimmered brightly and reflected the flickering flames of the candles around the circle.

Alan stood beside his lover, the slow roll of a vial between his palms warming the scented oil. Neatly cut short blond hair draped his bangs sexily over his brown eyes. Nakedness revealed his defined lanky build. "Shall I anoint you now?"

She faced her lover. "It's time." Her eyes glistened even brighter when the cork popped from the vial then lingered on the oil trickled into her lover's palm. The discarded vial tossed aside and his hands rubbed together, she closed her eyes and inhaled a deep breath.

His touch gentle and loving, he massaged her shoulders then eased his palms to fill his hands with

soft, supple mounds where his thumbs slowly traced deep, pink, sensitive flesh. He knelt. Her moan accompanied the glide of his hands along her waist and over her hips. Ever gentle, he enjoyed the pleasure derived while his hands coaxed the oil down the outside of her legs then back up the inside of her thighs.

Electra shuddered and seized a handful of his hair for support. When the probe of gentle fingers opened her to his gaze, she groaned. A violent tremble accompanied the snaked slide of his tongue. Licks elicited her gasp. Hungry lips encircled their target and her moans increased with every determined suck her lover inflicted on her needy body. Warm hands cupped her buttocks and pulled her tight against his face, but balanced her at the same time. The plunge of an eager tongue collected her nectar and stole her sanity.

Alan slid his hands higher up her back, his face pushed softly against her feminine center. Gentle, he lowered her perfect figure to the floor. Her mumbled whispers warned him her mind spun while his tongue danced a last waltz. Ever slow, he moved up. With a slow lick, he savored the fine dew formed on her skin.

She bucked her hips against his hold. "Fill me, Alan."

"My pleasure, sweet Electra." Inch-by-inch, he nipped a path up her supple body. Paused at ample mounds, he nibbled sinful peaks then claimed her lips in a soul-searching kiss. His tongue plunged deep within her mouth as his single thrust penetrated her

velvet warmth and sheathed his veined hunger in paradise.

She lifted her hips and met his thrusts. Every deep driven stroke heightened her need. Breathless, she begged for more and offered all of herself to her lover. Their oil slicked bodies glided against each other in their search for release. His body shuddered and her urgent climax piqued. Her ears thundered and the room spun. When his seed unloaded into her, she matched him, her pleasure screamed.

They lay there several minutes, their bodies entwined. Skin-to-skin contact provided warmth and gentle caresses expressed mutual adoration.

Electra slipped from her lover's embrace. "It's time to continue."

Alan sprang to his feet and proffered his hand. His welcomed offer brought her to stand before his sated body. "Guide me."

She directed him into position, retrieved the small broom from the corner and magically swept the area clear of all but their sexual energy. Finished, she leaned the besom against the wall. The ritualistic circle boasted boundaries marked off with gold, silver, black and white candles. Each candle held a specific meaning. Nearby stood a table covered with a black cloth. Arranged in a particular manner, matched candles adorned the table while their flames flickered brightly. A large ancient book of spells lay open on the table. On its pages, a series of words written in an archaic lexis, waited to be uttered.

Electra clutched her pendant with her left hand and raised the copper wand in her right. She touched

her lover's forehead with the pendant then slowly moved it to rest on his chest over his heart. Her glance into his eyes brief, she frowned at the look of horror upon his face.

Alan reached for his lover, but the slap of an unseen force launched him through the air. He crashed against the door and shook his head to clear it. His gaze fell on the faltering shields of the circle and his hand reached for the heart of his life. "No!"

The feel of a sinister presence behind her scattered gooseflesh over her body and warm breath wafted across the back of her neck. She glanced over her shoulder and into the monstrous face of a demonic beast. "I didn't conjure a demon." Her attempted step hindered by the sensation of glued to the floor, she stared into the evil eyes. Surprised by how much one noticed in mere seconds, she trembled in ultimate fear.

A slow smile revealed long sharp teeth while the beast's putrid breath emitted a carrion stench. Green rancid drool dripped onto her shoulder. Luminous vibrant red eyes fixed in a hungry glare pulsed through her veins. The hideously distorted face might have once belonged to a dog. Its large hairless body stood balanced on four tentacles while four more branched from its body and undulated through the air.

The creature hissed with each word. "Someone wants you."

She turned her head and stared at her fallen lover near the door, her mouth open in a silent scream. Something enveloped her body and intense pain



seared her flesh. A black tentacle floated past her face and circled her head. Blood trickled down her face and seeped into her eyes. Blinded by a haze, she watched her lover's eyes widen in horror.

\* \* \* \*

The creature vanished with his lover into another realm. Alan lay frozen as all stilled. Shields shimmered, flashed and disappeared. He scanned the room. "Where is she? Is the portal now closed? Is she lost to me forever?" Shaky, he scrambled to his feet and eased toward the circle. Flung back by an invisible force, he heard a slight creak from the floor as the wall stopped his flight.

Out of nowhere, the besom slid down and slammed the floor between the candles. Lightning illuminated the room a split second. An immense toll of thunder rumbled across the sky.

"Freedom." The gravelly, hollow, whisper came from another dimension. "Freedom!"

"And so will I be free in a year," murmured another, softer voice. "Rise again Blood Moon. Rise and free meeee!"

"Electra, forgive me!" Terrified, Alan snatched his pants and fled the room. He headed out the window at the end of the short hall and ran home.

\* \* \* \*

Bob, the barkeeper, yawned and tromped upstairs to bed. Uneasy about the wide open door of the small

suite rented to a young woman, he paused, but hesitated to invade her privacy. Worried for her safety, he peeked in. "Summer, is everything ok?" Silence answered. He stepped partway into the entryway and looked around the small studio apartment. On the floor stood several burning candles of various colors arranged in what appeared certain patterns.

"Not like her to be this careless." Careful not to disturb their position, he blew out the candles. The copper wand on the floor caught his eye. For fear it might get damaged, he picked it up and set it on the black covered table near the window. He blew out the silver, gold, black and white candle on the table then left and shut the door behind him. "So unlike Summer to do such. I'll have a stern talk with that young lady tomorrow." His yawn stifled, he muttered under his breath about the dangers of unattended candles and fires on the way to his own room.

## CHAPTER ONE

Angelique Sterling bolted upright and fought for every breath denied her lungs. With a few mumbled words from childhood, she soothed her deepest fears. Her mother's whispered words cherished, her breathing easier, she listened intently. "No one and nothing here but me." Sweat-soaked sheets earned her frown. "What a nightmare." When the attempt to assure herself the ordeal unreal failed miserably, she rolled from the bed and grimaced at the cold floor against her feet.

Once in the bathroom, she showered and fast regretted her overwhelming want of a man. "Or is it need?" She went on dates before, but never with a man anything less than excruciatingly chivalrous and boringly polite. "For once I'd like to meet a man who makes a pass."

Dressed in a clean nightgown, Angelique changed the sheets then moved to the window. She raised her face toward what she knew was a dark, moonless, starless sky. The moon's touch cool moisture, the sun's dry warmth, neither caressed her cheek. For as long as she remembered, she tracked the moon's cycle

and, on certain nights, it seemed no star would trek the sky in the absence of the moon's light.

A shiver stole over her and she hugged her arms close around her upper body. "I never did care for the Dark of the Moon. Especially the dreams that come with it." Uneasy, she shuddered, turned away and started work a few hours early. Life remained the same and it would never change... Just as the Braille she read and the blackness, which served as her vision.

Angelique loved the old home where she lived. It rescued her from the hills of North Carolina where she might still be trapped if her father hadn't bartered with a long time editing friend for the use of his cabin in exchange for her ghostwriting skills and a small salary. Ever grateful, she appreciated her employer's kindness and his gift.

Rustic, yet modern, the cabin overlooked the Oregon coastline. Raw primal power of waves crashed against sheer walls. Pure inspiration sang while sounds of thunderous rushes roared their glory. The salty scent of the ocean refreshed and the subtle mist of the spray invigorated. Forests smells, especially after a rain, wafted across the porch with the sweet aroma of pine and other magnificent woodland giants.

In spring, the fragrance of wildflowers drifted through her open window. Through summer, the gentle wind danced with the wispy stalks of tall grasses. During autumn, the rustled leaves sang. With winter came the crispness of the snow crunched beneath her boots.

Angelique enjoyed each season and nature's bestowed gifts. A nearby neighbor helped her shop while her benefactor paid the bills from her earned monies and banked the rest in her personal account. Her computer, equipped with a program, which utilized voice commands to write, also accessed the phone to call for help if needed. Prior to her moving in, the owner built an old style wooden fence around the property that prevented her fall from the cliff's edge. For her, life was wonderful.

"Except for the intrusive new nightmares." Dismal, she sighed. Her days came and went as always, but her nights turned into a sleepless hell. Every night a repeated nightmare led to sweat-soaked sheets and a horrible impression of something very wrong. Days became weeks and the nightmares intensified with each revelation. The last time she laid the cards for herself, they told her the worst was yet to come with the next Dark of the Moon.

\* \* \* \*

*Angelique watched the sexual anointing and the ritual in horror, unable to stop the process, never able to see the faces of the couple in the center of the ritualistic circle, and in the end, unable to confront the challenging horror. When the astral plane opened and the beast grabbed the woman, an unseen force hurled the man out of the circle and broke the protective barrier. The circle faltered, held then the woman vanished. Candles flickered and danced while the besom kept open the circle as the man fled.*

Startled awake, Angelique sat up and reached out

with her mind into the room. As always, emptiness answered. With the lift of her hand from the sheets, she shivered at the caress of the night's chill across her palm. "Soaked again from fear. And lust." Always she watched the sex act. Lust drove her, taunted her, beckoned her and made her want something she never experienced, but somehow craved. She slid from bed and made her way to the shower for a quick rinse.

Finished, dried and dressed, she vigorously brushed her hair. Half out of her mind with boredom, she welcomed the interruptive ring of the phone. She picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Angelique, it's Aunt Janice. Oh, I'm so glad I caught you."

"Hi, Aunt Janice." For longer than Angelique remembered, her gift recognized emotions from one's breathing or tone. Strong distress radiated from the elderly lady's voice and she used said gift now to soothe. "What's worrying you?"

"Oh, Angel, I'm so worried about Electra."

She straightened. Her twin sister was always the wild child who left home first, quit school and chased dreams. "Why, Aunty?"

"Your mother and I just received word... The officer said they must wait for the correct amount of time... We haven't heard from her in several weeks..."

Angelique stiffened. "Aunt Janice, I need to know what you're talking about."

"Electra... The Florida police... Oh, dear me, this is so difficult."

"Aunt Janice, tell me what you know."

"Electra was doing her card readings in a small bar... She always did like doing that. She disappeared, Angel, and no one knows where she is. The officer told your mother and me to stay put until they gathered more information, but they didn't say we couldn't send someone. If your father were alive, he'd go."

"Yeah, he would, Aunt Janice." This wasn't the first time Angelique chased her sister. More than likely, her twin gallivanted off on another excursion of some sort, but she doubted revealing said information posed any good. "I'll see if I can find her. What's the name of the bar and where is it?"

"A place called The Dusky Pier. Let me look... Oh, here it is... Sixteen forty-five Arling Way in Harborton, Florida between Marco Island and Naples area," Aunt Janice informed.

She scribbled the words on the nearby notepad to commit it to memory. "Okay, Aunt Janice. I'll let you know what I find out. Take care and tell mom not to worry. Everything will be fine and I'll make sure I find my errant sister." With the receiver hung up, she pressed the voice activation sequence. "Computer, dial Jenkins, work."

A mechanical voice affirmed the command obeyed. "Jenkins dialed."

An older male voice answered, "Hello?"

Angelique sighed. "Mr. Jenkin—" His gentle laugh earned her smile.

"Angelique, when will you stop being so formal? It's Albert, remember, dear?"

"Albert, I must ask for an indefinite leave of absence. It seems my sister got herself into a situation and I need to make a trip to south Florida. I don't know how long it'll be before I get back."

"Send me what you've completed so far then go take care of what you must."

"Thank you. It'll be on the way in a few." Angelique hung up. "Computer, send file ghost seven to editor Jenkins at e-publishing dot com."

"File transferred."

"What would I do without you?" She didn't expect any response and lifted the receiver. "Computer, dial Susan, home."

"Susan dialed."

A very businesslike woman answered, "Hello?"

Angelique softened the urgency in her voice. "Susan, I need some help. I must make a trip to south Florida. Could you perhaps help me pack and drive me to the airport?"

"Of course, dear. I'll be there in a few minutes. You leave packing and reservations to me."

"Thank you." She hung up the receiver and sat on the corner of the desk. "What should I pack?" Within a short time, a knock on the door garnered her attention. "Come in."

Susan entered and shut the door. "Florida! Oh how wonderful. I always wanted to go, but it's so far away. Is there a particular airline in mind and when you wanted to leave?"

Angelique didn't wish to diminish the woman's excitement. "I do need to get there as quickly as possible." Air whipped past and indicated the



woman's sudden pivot.

"Is everything all right? I mean, if this isn't — oh Angelique, what's happened, darling?"

"My sister is missing, but she's done this sort of thing before. Could you help me?" The squeak of her computer chair and the slide of her mouse announced her friend's action.

"Let's see what I find on Delta via the internet." Susan tapped the monitor. "Oh look, there's a flight out of Portland at six-thirty this evening, which gives us enough time to get you packed, there and checked in. You'll arrive in Salt Lake City at nine-nineteen, depart at eleven-forty-five, arrive in Atlanta at eight after five in the morning, depart at nine-forty and get to Naples Municipal Airport at eleven-twenty-three tomorrow morning. And all for under six hundred dollars. You can pick up the ticket and itinerary at the airport. Shall I make the purchase?"

Angelique opened her purse, withdrew her credit card and offered it. "Yes, please and inform them I'm blind." The woman's gentle fingers brushed her palm as her card left her hand.

"Will do, dear. Okay, according to this, they'll help you get from one flight to the next."

The mouse clicked several times while she patiently waited. "I'll need someone to help me get my luggage and a taxi."

Susan chuckled. "All cities have Yellow Cab, darling. Let me see if I can locate them and what I can arrange. Ah, yes, here's the number." She dialed the phone.

"Yellow Cab."

"Hi, my name is Susan Peterson and I'm calling for a young lady who needs to arrange her pick up at the Naples Municipal Airport. She's blind and will need the driver's assistance to collect her luggage. Is this possible?"

"Sure," the dispatched answered cheerfully. "All I need is the airlines and her name. I can get the rest for the driver. Tell her remain at the gate and the driver will retrieve her then her luggage."

Susan rattled the Delta flight number and arrival time. "Her name is Angelique Sterling."

"The driver will be waiting at the gate upon her arrival."

"Thank you." She hung up the phone. "All set, hon. Now let's get you packed."

Her elbow cupped by her friend's gentle hand and guided, Angelique recognized the bedroom carpet under her feet. Stationed near the bathroom door, she listened to her suitcase complain during its drag from the closet until plunked down on the bed. The travel case soon followed suit. "I'd like to wear my white sundress and carry my sweater coat."

Susan offered the requested article of clothing. "Here's your sundress. If you'll put that on, I'll get you two weeks of clothes then show you how it's packed."

"Thank you." With the bathroom door shut behind her, she dressed and returned to her bed. Her hand guided over each separate pile of clothes, she smiled.

"Colors are packed from lightest to darkest. Here are the shirts, mostly T-shirts, shorts, some jeans, two nightgowns, your slippers and spare tennis shoes. I

presume you'll wear your sandals."

"Of course. It's not snowing yet." Deeply grateful her friend packed her clothes in an order of convenience, Angelique smiled as her sandals nudged her feet. She slipped on the shoes. "You're a good friend."

"Oh think nothing of it." Susan patted her hand. "I'm collecting your full bottles of shampoo and conditioner along with your hairbrush, toothbrush, toothpaste, nail file, liquid soap, loufa and other feminine needs. Okay, hon, let me get these to the car then I'll come back for you."

After the woman brushed past, she flung a prayer to the air. "Electra, you better be in real trouble this time." A door's open and shut sound urged her collect her white cane and purse from the computer desk. The warmth of the woman's hand slipped through her arm and ushered her outside.

"Let's hit the road, hon. I still have your card. There's an ATM at the airport. We'll get you some cash for the road."

Seated in the passenger side, her legs inside the car, Angelique tugged her seatbelt snug and listened as each sound and motion announced an action. Her door shut, the driver's side dipped, that door slammed, the engine purred to life and the vehicle sped away. She listened to trees whiz past while the ocean's aroma faded. Relaxed for the drive, she closed her eyes and drifted to sleep. Awakened by the opening of her car door and the older woman's hand under her elbow, she shook her head and cleared it.

"Come along," Susan urged. "I've a nice young

man here helping me with your luggage. Once I get you inside, I must leave as I can't go past the main security check. There's an ATM."

She exited the car and, her elbow cupped, was guided to a certain spot. A machine's whirl, the shuffle of money then a click, accompanied the card placed in her hand. The press of several bills in her palm garnered her complete attention.

"There's a fifty, a twenty and two tens in that order from the bottom up. I'll walk you to the counter. I'm leaving you in good hands here, hon. You let me know if you need anything."

"I will, Susan. Thank you." After a brief embrace by her friend at the counter, Angelique knew the faded perfume declared the woman's departure. Her billfold retrieved, she nestled the money and card in a zippered side pocket.

"May I help you, miss?"

The gentleman's friendly voice earned her smile. "I purchased a ticket earlier under Angelique Sterling." His swift typing lasted mere seconds.

"Of course. If you wait there, one of our flight attendants will escort you to the gate. The lady with you already tagged your bags. I'm placing them on the conveyer belt which takes them to the plane."

Appreciative, Angelique nodded. "You're very kind for telling me the steps. Thank you."

"It's my job, miss. I'll give your ticket to the flight attendant who will accompany you to the gate. Here she is now."

"Hello, Miss, my name is Jennifer. Please allow me to guide you."

"Thank you." Escorted around the counter and down what seemed a long corridor, Angelique listened to the security procedures. Safely through the gate and directed to a seat, she sat.

"If you wait here, miss, another flight attendant will help you board the plane."

A loud announcement came from the speakers. "Passengers of flight one four zero five will begin boarding in five minutes. Those with disabilities and small children will be seated first. Thank you."

Patient, Angelique studied the surrounding sounds. The voices of children called down by their mothers intermingled with various conversations and the sounds of turned newspapers blended with the shuffle of passersby.

"Miss Angelique Sterling?"

She proffered her arm. A feminine hand grasped her hand. "Yes."

"My name is Julia. I've come to direct you aboard. I'll help you to your seat and will show you where all the buttons are. After we land, someone will assist you to your next flight."

"Thank you." Seated, Angelique listened carefully while the stewardess explained each button. The flight attendant handed her a blanket and pillow. She closed her eyes and rested unbothered by dreams. A gentle shake of her shoulder startled her awake.

Uneventful, the debarking and boarding process started and ended in much the same manner and she slept right through the last leg of her trip until landed in Florida. The stewardess guided her to the exit where another attendant waited. An approach of

heavy footsteps preceded a man's voice softly speaking to her helper.

Julia guided her hand. "There's a Yellow Cab driver here who says he's to help you with your luggage. I'm assured he's a gentleman who works primarily with the company's most special customers. Miss Sterling, this is William.

"This must be the driver Susan arranged." Angelique proffered her hand. The returned grasp belonged to a hand not much larger than her own, but rather calloused. His soft greeting almost escaped her ears as his quick firm handshake withdrew. "Hello, William."

"Miss Sterling, I'll take you to the luggage conveyer then we'll be on our way." William guided her steps along the corridor then halted. "This is the luggage conveyer. Tell me what I'm looking for then wait here for me."

"There are two pieces, a large bright red with white trim and a small matching travel case." Her ears tracked his every move. Patient, she waited several minutes until his return. The sound of shifted bags held her attention until his hand cupped her elbow.

"Miss Sterling, I have your luggage. Even checked the name." William directed her to his cab and opened the back door.

Careful, Angelique climbed into the cab and shut the door. Her ears attuned, she recognized the slam of the trunk, the shift of the vehicle upon a person sitting in the front and the slam of the driver's door. "I'm going to Harborton, between the Marco Island and

Naples area. There's a small bar called The Dusky Pier at sixteen forty-five Arling Way."

"I'm familiar with it, miss. It'll take about an hour."

After the vehicle's engine purred into life, she rolled down the window and let the wind whip through her hair. She grabbed the loose tendrils, secured them with her hand and inhaled deeply. The smell of the ocean much the same, this aroma contained a stale, dampness, almost like the subtle decay of foliage. Everglades. Her wish to see the landscape, all she could do was imagine the scenery while the car whizzed past each tree. A gentle gust of wind teased her with a faint wisp of an alluring scent.

Angelique inhaled deeply, but failed to identify the tempting lure for as swiftly as it assailed her senses it vanished. Sudden longing surged through her veins in the form of a desire she couldn't name. It intensified as though she closed the distance to its source with every turn of the taxi's wheel. When the vehicle stopped, she shook her head to clear it.

"We're here, Miss."

Attuned, she focused on his exit of the car, the slam of the driver's door, a pause then the squeak of her door. His gallant cup of her elbow helped her from the taxi. "Thank you."

"Wait here and I'll quickly fetch your suitcases, Miss."

Angelique heard the trunk open then close just before his steps reached her side and his hand cupped her elbow. Helped inside to a barstool by the driver, the soft push of air against her ankles and a brief click of metal declared her luggage waited near the bar by

her feet. "You've been very helpful."

"It's forty-five dollars and eighty cents, miss."

Her cane carefully leaned against the bar, she pulled several bills from the purse draped on her shoulder. Earlier placement of the unfolded bills in her purse her only way of counting, she proffered sixty dollars. "Thank you for your kindness. Please keep the change." The bills gently slid from her fingers.

"Thank you, miss."

With his departure accompanied by a breeze from the door, Angelique adjusted her sundress, sat on a barstool and set her purse on the bar. Intent, she listened to her surroundings. Wooden planks announced each heavy footstep on the other side of the bar. Old Spice filled her nose. *The barkeep*. His steps halted.

"Not many pretty ladies come in here alone. What can I get you?"

She smiled. "A Coke would be fine. I'm Angelique Sterling and I'm looking for someone. Could you please help me?"

"Name's Bob and depends on who it is."

After the brief gurgle of the soda fountain followed by the soft plop of a glass on the counter, Angelique inched her fingers toward the cooler air, which lingered around an ice-filled drink. A set of old weathered masculine fingers brushed her hand. Her smile warm, she figured the man picked up on her blindness. "Thank you. I'm looking for a girl named Electra. She's my twin sister." She folded her cane and slipped it inside her purse.



"Didn't realize you... Forgive me, Miss." Bob cleared his throat. "I don't know anyone by that name, but there was girl here for several months named Summer who looked rather like you."

"She wrote Mom in North Carolina and said something about working in a bar and reading Tarot cards."

"Sounds like Summer. She disappeared a month ago without so much as a word and I've not seen her since. She left all her things in the room upstairs and such worries me a lot. Matter of fact, I called the cops after waiting the minimum amount of time, but I thought about calling the police today. She wa—is a sweet lady. The cops never called me. Did they call you?"

Angelique shook her head, "No. My Aunt did. I came here at the request of my mother."

Bob sighed. "No one has seen her since that night."

She liked the soft swish of a cloth over the wood counter, which signified his cleaning. "You said you still have her things. Do you have her tarot cards?"

He studied the young woman. "I haven't touched anything in her rooms or the table she always used, as yet. Your sister paid in advance, so rent's paid up till end of next month. I take it you want to see them?"

Angelique nodded. "They might tell me something."

Bob leaned closer. "But if you're blind, how can you read them?"

"I don't need eyes to see what they show me."

"Very well."

Angelique stood. His footsteps moved from behind

the bar and approached her side of it. "May I use my hands to see your face?"

"I suppose." Bob stood very still while her fingers touched his face, chin, mouth, nosed, closed eyes and forehead.

"Exactly as I pictured. A kindly old man." Her smile warm, she lowered her hands and picked up her purse. "Thank you. It's how I see people."

"Didn't hurt a bit."

At the gentleness of his hand on her elbow, Angelique welcomed his guidance. "Thank you."

"This way." Bob gently nudged her toward the table her sister used until her disappearance. "People liked her reading the tarot. She was pretty good at it. Kept my bar filled on slow nights, too." He chuckled and pulled out a chair.

With her ears focused on sounds, she touched the chair, sat and located the edge of the table. A drawer slid open on the side of the table and his hand placed hers on the edge of the wooden ledge.

"She kept her cards in this drawer."

His steps moved back. Angelique reached out, ascertained a nearby chair and set her purse on it. Her lips trembled as her hands eased over the table and her fingers investigated the smooth wooden surface. Visions of her sister flashed through her mind. A tiny stab pricked the tip of her forefinger. "Ouch!" The vision faded. She placed her injured finger in her mouth, but honed in on the barkeep who shuffled closer.

Bob cleared his throat. "Here, let me see."

His fingertips brushed the back of her hand, but

she pushed him away. "Later. Her work area first." Aware the cards would be wrapped in a deep purple cloth, she discovered the deck, carefully pulled out the bundle and set it on the table. She opened the silky material and touched the top card. "Death holds a Lady in the Tower." Shivers tickled her spine when she turned over the top three cards, fanned them out and sensed the barkeep's uneasiness.

"The card called Death is on top of the Priestess lying on the Tower. How'd you do that? What trick is this?"

## CHAPTER TWO

A chair creaked as if relieved of weight. Angelique trained her senses on the heavy footsteps that treaded on the plank floor toward her position. "I told you. I don't need eyes to see the cards." The gentle earthy scent of bergamot and sandalwood enticed.

"Either she feels them or has a spirit guide."

The subtle caress of a deep masculine voice danced a shiver along her spine and the sensation both excited and unsettled her every nerve. She studied the new voice.

Bob cleared his throat. "People can do that?"

"*She* can. Some people develop such talents. Summer, or rather Electra, was one of those people who believed in her potential and located the resources to teach her. There are others gifted with such talents and simply need a mentor to teach them their abilities. Like this woman." The click of his boot heel deliberate, Nicholas signified his location.

"And some are cursed with it as their only sight." Angelique frowned at the fact no picture of the man came to her mind. *That's not normal.* Curious, she slid from the chair, stood and proffered her hand. "I'm Angelique Sterling."

"I'm Nicholas and it's a pleasure to meet you. Shall

I see to your injury?" Gentle, he captured her hand.

The brush of his lips across the back of her hand surged shivers down her spine. *Is that because he instills fear or because of his touch?* "I guess you overheard and saw. I almost forgot about it. It's no big deal. May I see your face as I did Bob's?" At the barkeep's murmur under his breath followed by a chuckle then his shuffle away, she smiled.

Nicholas stood before her, his voice deep and warm, "I would consider it a pleasure and some things are never forgettable."

Angelique cleared her clouded mind and settled her hands on his forearms. Her nimble fingers glided along the silky material of his shirt toward his shoulders. His muscles rippled beneath the material. Her touch encountered his neck then his face as her hands eased down the front of his chest and discerned the pirate style shirt. *A romantic?* Warm, deep breaths drew her palm to rest on his upper body and feel the steady rise and fall of his chest. The rhythm soothed, calmed. "What color is your shirt?"

"Forest green."

Surprised by the softness of his voice, she secretly longed to see green. Especially forest green. Her fingers glided to his neck and, ever gentle, trekked along his jugular vein. The closeness of his breath warmed her face while the steadfast strength of his pulse propelled a tremor through her veins. She guided her fingers along his square jaw to a small cleft on his chin. A picture drawn by her touch, she committed the detail to memory then traversed across more of his perfectly chiseled features.

Angelique trailed her forefinger over his lips. Twitches at the corners of his mouth indicated his attempt not to smile. Her mind listened to the voice within while the knowledge revealed by her touch conjured up a psychic image. As her hands reached his smooth forehead, she discovered massive height. The picture in her mind revealed a sinfully handsome face. She stepped forward enough to fondle his soft and wavy hair until her fingers discovered the ends just past his shoulder blades. "What color is your hair?"

"Chestnut brown with reddish glints," Nicholas answered softly.

The seductive whisper in his voice coaxed her heart to skip a beat. She stepped back, regained her composure and shook off the effect. Her fingers explored his face a second time. With her arms lowered, she whispered, "By the will of the Goddess."

"Thank you."

The tone of his voice scattered gooseflesh over her body. Angelique shivered and sensed the intensity of his look. Her face grew hot. "Forgive me. I've been blind since birth and learned to be a bit forward at times. I don't know colors, but it's nice to hear them."

"I'm not offended and it seems you've been granted a phenomenal gift or, as you call it, a curse. I'm six foot five, look twenty-nine and weigh two hundred-thirty pounds. By all means, please continue," Nicholas urged.

"You don't mind?"

"Not in the least." His invite intended to beckon, he captured her hands and settled her fingers over his

cheeks. "We were here."

Angelique shivered. "Uh, yes, I know."

Nicholas released her hands. "My eyes have been described as warm brown."

She trailed her hands down his handsome face and over his throat then skipped over his chest before she made a fool of herself. Hesitant at his taut stomach, her fingers paused at the waistband of his jeans while his muscles flexed with deep breaths. Aware the patient man her hands investigated waited, she couldn't move.

"Don't stop now," he whispered under his breath. He wrapped his hands around her wrists and smoothly directed her palms to the sides of his hips. "Dark gray jeans."

Her fingers assured her the soft denim snugly fit his body. Angelique gasped as her mind swarmed with the image of his narrow hips and muscled thighs. She jerked away her hands. "I didn't mea—"

"Thank you for the compliments." Nicholas laughed warmly. "My soft leather boots are knee-high. Now shall I take care of your injury?"

Shocked the tiny puncture slipped her mind again, she frowned. *What is this effect he's having on me?* "Yes, please." She proffered her purse. "Would you kindly ask Bob to put this and my suitcases behind the bar for safekeeping?" The offered item left her hand. "Thank you."

"Bob, would you oblige the lady?" Her purse surrendered to the barkeep, he captured her hand and placed it on his arm. "This way." He escorted her to another table and pulled out a chair. "Sit here."

Angelique obliged with a smile. "Thank you."

"Let me get your soda then I'll see to your finger," Nicholas offered.

Attune to her surroundings, she sensed his pivot, tracked his lengthy strides to the bar and, within seconds, his return to her side. Her soda glass nudged her hand. Scraped wooden legs announced a chair pulled out and its creak declared his seated weight. The capture of her hand in his earned her shiver, but his firm hold captivated her attention.

"Trust me?"

Internal instincts compelled her trust as if guided. "Yes." Something about him Angelique couldn't place lured her closer. His squeeze of her finger an attempt to cleanse the wound with the flow of blood, she gasped.

Nicholas reassured softly, "Forgive me."

A soft stroke of something warm and wet slid across her fingertip and a fleeting, yet strong, loss of something unidentifiable rattled her senses. The caress of his finger replaced all previous sensation. She withdrew her hand. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Nervous, Angelique smiled. "May I see Electra's room?" The chair scraped.

On his feet, Nicholas cupped her elbow. "This way." He led her to the stairs and stepped aside. "There are seventeen steps."

Cautious, she counted each step until his closeness stole her concentration and cost her a step. His hands on her waist only long enough to steady her, his touch unlike anything ever encountered, she longed



for more. Most men she dated behaved kindly because of her blindness, but the humdrum nights always ended with the same, either a handshake or a hug then departure. This man's touch differed in that it teased. Strange sensations stirred within her and butterflies fluttered in her belly. At the top the stairs his body moved closer and the hand on her waist guided her to the right.

"In here." He opened a door and stepped aside.

Ushered into the room's entryway, Angelique sensed being both drawn and pushed by a force not her escort. Uncertain, she eased closer and both forces strengthened as her foot crossed the entrance. Fear seized and, shaky, she stepped back. An enraged scream resonated through the room. Brute force rushed forward. She spun, pushed past him and slammed into the opposite wall. Frantic, she turned for the stairs. The thud of his boots announced his big strides then his hand seized her arm.

Nicholas drew her into a protective embrace. "Angelique, what's wrong? You're deathly pale."

She buried her face against his chest, her voice locked in her throat. His scent washed over her, filled her and intoxicated her, but didn't quell her fear.

"Tell me what you saw," he commanded gently.

"Let me go, please." Angelique fought the building tears. "*Please.*" Unsure of whether to run or use him for a shield, her hands clutched his shirt and half-pushed, half-pulled. She peered past him toward the still open door. His body shift granted him a glance over his shoulder at the open doorway.

Nicholas faced her, his sigh a concession. "I'll shut

the door, but you must promise *not* to move. Understand?" Gentle, he pressed her shoulders against the wall. "If you move, you *will* fall down the stairs."

Her nod subtle, she shivered at the loss of his protection. The hinges yielded a slight creak a moment before the door clicked shut. She eased down the wall, sat on the floor and sensed him crouch down before her. His concern warmed her, but her trembling remained uncontrolled.

He brushed a tear from her cheek with his thumb, his whisper soft, "The door is closed."

Angelique shook her head. "It's still there."

Nicholas furrowed his brow in puzzlement. "What's there?"

"A doorway."

"I can't remove the door without sealing off the room. Such a feat requires lumber," he informed gently.

Angelique shuddered. "Not the door to the room. An opening to... somewhere."

"We'll go downstairs and you will explain what you're telling me." Nicholas captured her hands in his and stood with her mere inches from his body. "Understand?"

She slumped against the wall. "You know what I'm talking about."

He turned her and moved down the steps ahead of her. "What makes you think such?"

Angelique followed, her hold on his shoulder guiding her steps. "You're a witch." His rich laughter filled her ears, but she disliked his sudden

amusement.

"What makes you so sure?" Nicholas remained cautious of her footing.

"I just know." She missed a step.

His pivot swift, his hands on her waist instantly steadied the troubled angel. "You're close, but not on target." He escorted her downstairs and seated her in her previous seat. "Stay here. I'll be back in a minute."

Angelique locked her senses on him, but failed ascertainment of his brief departure. Upon his return, she inhaled his warm and enticing earthy scent. She welcomed the way his gentle touch guided her hand to her drink.

"Set that out of your way," Nicholas directed.

Silken cloth whispered while it settled on the table. With her hand on the material, her senses tingled as the deck set beside her hand. She appreciated how his consideration didn't make her feel like an invalid. The scrape of a chair on the floor alerted her it moved closer just before the wooden item announced his seated position set him facing her side. Disturbed by his nearness as every nerve in her body sprang to life, her senses fed off him like electric current dancing along metal.

He placed her hand on the deck. "Read for me?"

Angelique set aside her drink aside and, focused on the warmth that radiated from his body. She swallowed hard at the heat his touch stirred. Revelation undeniable, her heart sank for this handsome man was fire and earth whereas she was air and water. Experience assured such never worked and a sad, but short unbidden laugh escaped her

throat. Reluctant, she moved her knee away from his leg. A deep breath drawn and released, she faced her questioner. "Can I take a few minutes to tune out upstairs?"

Nicholas understood. "If you need."

"It's how the cards work for me." With her eyes closed, she mentally washed her mind of everything. Unlike her sister who could read at the drop of a hat, she needed on the same wavelength as those she obliged for her readings, far and few between, were very accurate. Her sister could see the cards and possessed practiced knowledge of their meanings, but she, blind from birth only saw what her spirit guide revealed. She picked up the deck and shuffled. "Is there anything in particular you want to know?" The closer his body leaned in, the more shaken her senses became.

His tone invited, "Your future. Maybe you'll receive a message about Electra."

His warmth and closeness beckoned her like a moth to a flame. Angelique almost dropped the entire deck. Her senses overwhelmed by his presence, she fumbled her recovery of the scattered cards. "Why?" Three cards slid under her fingertips and declared his collection of those missed by her nimble fingers.

"Because that's what I want. Read," Nicholas cajoled.

His subtle persuasion unlike any she encountered before, her new companion fast became hard to resist. "Very well. On the condition I may ask about you afterwards."

"If that's what you desire."

Her thoughts on herself, Angelique shuffled the cards and occasionally cut the deck until it felt right. She set it to her side, flipped the first card and continued in a manner far different from her sister's. With the name of the card given when turned, along with its meaning, she finished the reading and gathered the cards. "Now you know me and there was nothing of Electra."

"Now I know what the cards *reveal* about you."

Puzzled by the fierce heat emanated from his body, she frowned. "Should there be more?"

"Perhaps."

Angelique shuffled the cards. "And now I will ask about you."

Nicholas answered softly, his tone a subtle warning, "Are you sure you want to do that?"

"I am."

"Then read."

The cards flipped like before until her hand reached for the seventh card, Angelique paused. "The missing card is supposed to be in this spot." She looked straight at him and heard the absent card move across the table until it nestled under her fingertips.

Nicholas declared, "I was testing you."

With the card in her hand, she frowned. "I hate tests and they always foul the cards for me." She relaxed as her knee touched his leg, but couldn't ignore the delightful tremor that raced through her veins. Her thoughts focused on him, she shuffled, cut the cards until it felt right then placed the deck to the

side. The cards flipped in the same manner, she frowned at each card while her fingers stroked their worn surfaces. Repetitive reference to the night, the glimpse of the Blood Moon, the faint peek into the long ago past, the pooling blood and the threat of power befuddled. "It doesn't make sense."

"What?"

"I don't understand any of them. They all refer to so many different things. It's like I'm not supposed to know anything about you." Frustrated, Angelique gathered the cards and read again. She sat back, annoyed. "It's no different. Why can't I read you? What aren't I supposed to discover about you?"

Nicholas lowered his tone, "Perhaps you're supposed to ask me. Or maybe the cards feel it would be better at this time if you didn't know anything about me. Then again, maybe there's a reason you can't read me."

She pouted. "Or my gift is not as you thought."

"Ask what you will and I'll tell you what you want." He paused for dramatic effect, "On one condition."

Angelique remained wary. "And what is that?"

"You accompanying me to a private room where we can talk without someone interfering or overhearing our conversation since such could be hazardous to my position in life or my reputation." Nicholas captured her hand in his and placed it over his heart. "I swear I'll do nothing to hurt or endanger you in any way if you put yourself in my care."

She withdrew her hand, but couldn't deny his warmth pleased. "It's the only way I'll get my

answers, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Angelique sensed no danger from him and his aura felt clean, safe, almost welcoming, inviting. "Very well. I'll trust you and see what happens."

"You'll be safe," Nicholas assured.

The slide of his chair announced his rise as the warmth of his hand captured hers. Happy to oblige his every lead until her foot hit the stairs, she balked. "No! I won't go up there!" A gush of air announced his pivot then ended when his arms wrapped around her waist. His warmth enveloped her entire being.

"I said nothing will happen to you—"

Angelique vehemently shook her head. "Don't make me go up there. Please." She sensed his gaze briefly leave her face then swiftly return.

Nicholas relented. "All right. We'll go to my house. If you like, you can stay there. It'll save you the cost of a hotel." Gentle, he raised her chin with the knuckle of his forefinger. "I'll help you find your sister."

His breath brushed across her face and the sweet scent of mint soothed. Warmth flowed through her like a gentle caress. Urged by an inner voice to trust him, she sensed that this man, this protector, would let no harm befall her and might be the difference between death and life. Her mind flooded with the vision of a tall, dark rescuer and compelled her to follow intuition.

His thumb slowly brushed across her trembling lips. "Will that be ok?"

Slightly nervous, Angelique accepted for her instincts never misled before. "Very much so."

Nicholas escorted her to the bar. "Purse and suitcases, please, Bob. Miss Sterling will stay with me. If you don't see or hear from her tomorrow, call the cops and turn me in. Tell Zane and Matt to go home." He handed her purse to her then grabbed her suitcases. "Feel safer?"

"Yes." She laughed softly. "And the saved funds are deeply appreciated. Who are Zane and Matt?"

"You definitely look prettier with a smile than a frown." He cupped her elbow. "The guys I was sitting with when you entered the bar."

Angelique sensed his amusement. Blood rushed to her cheeks. Directed outside and halted after several feet, she listened as his touch withdrew seconds before keys jingled, a car door unlocked and the passenger door opened. Her elbow gently cupped, she was seated and the door shut behind her. Within seconds, the sound of the open trunk preceded the weight of her luggage placed inside then a soft slam. The driver's door opened and the shift of the car, followed by the shut of his door and the second jingle of keys informed her of his presence. "It's nice of you to offer me a place to stay."

"You're welcome to stay as long as you like. This is a midnight blue nineteen sixty-five Mustang Fast Back with dark blue interior." Nicholas turned on the CD player. "Do you have a favorite?" He turned the key. The engine rumbled softly then settled into a purr.

She liked how the car pulled away with no jerking. "Eighties. I liked what everyone called the hair bands. Poison was my favorite."



"So did I."

Angelique smiled at the soft slide of a CD slipping free of its cover followed by the whirl of the disc slipped into the player then the click of a pressed button. "You can crank it up."

Nicholas chuckled softly. "Hope you can handle this music. I only encountered your sister in passing, but Bob says she spent her spare time working the bar and rented an upstairs room. I wish I could tell you more, but I can't."

"It's okay. Electra's run off several times. Mom's grown used to it over the years. She probably wouldn't have called me if the police hadn't called her." Relaxed, she listened to the sound of Poison's greatest hits until Mama's Fallen Angel vibrated the speakers. "This is Electra's theme." She sang along until the song ended.

He said softly, "You've a really good voice."

## CHAPTER THREE

Driving along and deep in thought, Nicholas mused about this twenty-three year old angel who unexpectedly entered his life. From the moment his gaze fixed on her, he possessed an urge to protect her, to keep her close and remain near her side. His mind drifted back over their encounter, which for him, was dangerous.

He recalled her fingertip against his lips and the touch of his tongue to her injury. His intent had been to heal, but almost instantly the flavor of her sweet sanguine fluid seized his every sense. Jolted by the effect, he tensed up, but the damage was done. The drag of her finger across his lower lip, granted him a calculative breath then a release.

If he had known her innocent, Nicholas would have never committed such an act in that fashion. Tentative, he licked his lips then lightly traced her fingertip with his forefinger to close her wound by touch, a longer, but equally effective method. Pleased by her faint shiver, which was not an effect he was unaccustomed with, he concealed his smile. He intently observed her since her entrance into his bar for her mere presence heightened his senses and his

exceptional ears honed in on her every word. Something lured him to her, but he couldn't place it... at that time.

When he brought her hand to his mouth and his lips softly brushed the back of her hand, he inhaled the soft and subtle fragrance of a meadow rainstorm and wild roses. His hold tender, he studied her intently. Her small soft hands boasted long, shapely, well-cared for nails, which lacked the colorful polish he considered tarnish on a woman's hands. White sandals complimented her feet. Obviously, this natural lady loved nature.

The lacy white cotton sundress with its multiple tiers and tiny straps hugged her waist, enhanced her curves and flattered her tanned skin. Toned and slender, her petite five foot one body weighed one hundred twenty-five pounds. Straight silky golden-blonde hair flowed smoothly to her hips. Sapphire blue eyes showed no discoloration of blindness and were deeply alluring. *What will she give for the gift of sight?*

A smile slowly crossed his face while Nicholas remembered his study of the angel who was undoubtedly stronger than her sister. Much stronger. When his finger raised her chin, he wished to lock her gaze, but understood it impossible. He regretted that other methods posed too great a risk right now and feared her sapphire eyes might hold him like a trap. For the first time in his life, he was mildly surprised.

He remembered the desire to avert his gaze and tore away his eyes. Her blood tainted him and now he stood in a tight spot. The fact the woman remained

unaware of said knowledge served as his only reprieve for if another laid their hands on her, the fiend could use her against him. With protection no longer simply an option, he disliked the choice of death or enslavement.

Nicholas reveled in how her touch caressed and enticed while her scent served as sheer temptation and resembled his favored smells of a rainstorm on the meadow with a hint of wild roses in the distance. The gentle exploration of her hands and tender glide of her fingers teased and coaxed. This angel wrapped herself around his senses, evoked his empathy in a way none other had and he welcomed the feel when her warmth flooded his entire being.

He debated revealing his two faithful followers, the twins that came to him a month ago, with information the clan needed his help and informed him the situation required him here when the proper time arose. Unique beings, guardians were destined to guard each other and the world. Each twin controlled two elements and were powerful when united, but the loss of one twin almost always ended with the other dying soon after. They were a unified force that couldn't safely live without the other. With a subtle nod, he decided not to tell her. Yet.

Nicholas glanced over and obliquely noted her scarlet blush. This angel, truly a beautiful woman just coming into herself, tempted his every sense. Her voice, soft and melodic, sensually caressed him while he drove along the highway. The delectably teasing morsel possessed no idea of her capabilities or what magic her mere presence wove over his wits.

After a bit, he pulled into his carport, shut down the engine and jumped out. He trotted to her side, opened her door, helped her from the car and shut the door behind her. "Wait and I'll get your luggage." With her suitcases retrieved, he held one under his arm and the other in his hand then cupped her elbow and guided her slowly along the railed pier of his house.

"This is what I call home." He opened the front door, ushered her inside, set down her luggage and flipped the light switch. Ever careful, he led her from the entry hall to the living room on the right. "I wish I could show you everything so there's no chance of you getting hurt, but I'm not sure how."

## CHAPTER FOUR

“If you allow me to follow your voice to find the various rooms, I’ll memorize things as I touch them. I learn to find my way about very quickly.” Angelique proffered her purse. “Please drop this on the end of the couch nearest me.” With her purse taken from her hand, she guided herself around the furniture to where the soft plop announced the beginning of the couch.

“I follow sounds, sense temperatures and hear reverberations off walls. A couch is heavier than a chair and the sound on carpeted floor is more muffled than linoleum. Wooden floors sound solid and often thud. When walking around, you can hear the difference in sound as you approach some thing.” She giggled. “Empty rooms are the worst so as long as you don’t have any of those I won’t meet any walls. Now, would you care to show me around? And don’t forget to give me the colors.”

Nicholas chuckled. “All of my walls are off-white with various pictures placed for decorative purposes.” He verbally guided her directly across the hall into the eat-in kitchen. “The kitchen, trimmed in ivy accents, has dark antiqued wooden cabinets and

cupboards, practically any appliance wanted and a breakfast bar island. The nondescript table and six chairs are mahogany. There's a sliding glass door. The linoleum in both areas is simulated wood."

Impressed with her navigation around the furniture, he verbally directed her back into the living room. "The furniture is simple, deep blue and arranged in two seating areas. Two chairs with a table between them face a couch with an end table at each end. The entrainment center is an antique mahogany bookshelf style on the opposing end of the room and faced by another couch, which is the same as this one. The carpet is three-toned beige."

Nicholas guided her back the hall to two doors. "The one on your left leads to a room used by my two of friends when they visit. They have their own bathroom." He pushed open the door on the right. "This is my bedroom. The king sized bed is done in black with red trim, the double dresser is mahogany and the carpet is dark blue. The bathroom is on the right and decorated in beige."

Angelique felt her face grow hot. "I don't think I should be in your bedroom unless I have no other choice."

He showed her the private bathroom and returned her to the living room. "Think you can find your way around now?"

"I'll manage." She eased her way to the couch and sat.

Nicholas spoke softly, "I'll get us some drinks and we'll see what happens."

Her senses alert, Angelique tracked his steps into

the kitchen where the sound of two delicate glasses tapped the counter. The refrigerator opened, several ice cubes chimed and the soft gurgle announced a poured of liquid. Attuned as his steps brought him closer, she smiled as a chilled glass nudged her hand. "Thank you." She sipped the refreshing liquid. "Ummm, sweetened iced tea."

"A southern favorite. Do you mind if I open the sliding doors?"

"That'll be fine. I like the sea air." Jetlag caught up with her and she enjoyed another sip of tea. After the fingers of her unoccupied hand discovered the end table, she set her glass on it and leaned back. She sensed his movement and heard the sliding door open.

Nicholas returned and sat in the chair across from his guest. "What do you want to know?"

Angelique settled into the softness of the couch. "Your name?"

"As I said before, I'm Nicholas."

"Your full name?"

Nicholas hesitated. "Why?"

Angelique frowned. "You said you'd tell me. Now, what's your full name?"

"So I did. Nicholas Von Buren. I'm a rich, spoiled brat who inherited daddy's money."

"Somehow, I doubt that." She yawned. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine, thirty in a few months." Nicholas laughed softly.

Angelique sensed the intensity of his gaze, but no fear. She absently caressed the couch. "Why didn't



you see what I saw in Electra's room?"

"I wasn't meant to."

With her elbow propped on the arm of the couch, she rested her head on her hand. "Try again." She heard his drink set on the table.

"I'm not the witch in this room." Nicholas briefly debated how much to reveal. "I'm a shaman."

Her expression exhausted and curious, Angelique lifted her head. "No one called me that except Electra. And you. Twice."

"It's not meant as an insult. Electra proudly declared herself a witch. You should be, too, for you are a witch." He knew her powers, far greater than her sister's even untrained, lay untapped. "You're tired, Miss Sterling. Why don't you get some sleep?"

She slid down on the couch and laid her head on the cushioned arm. "Because you might not answer my questions in the morning, Mr. Von Buren." Sleep beckoned and she yawned. "What's a shaman?"

"Someone who calls upon the elements to heal, protect and befriend those in need. To be more concise, I'm a warrior-mage more appropriately called a dream handler," Nicholas answered softly.

Tired, Angelique mused, "What do you do?"

"Various things." He lowered his voice to lull her to sleep. "And they depend on what needs to be done."

"Who are you? I must know." She failed to fight the slumber or the warm draw of his deep voice.

Quiet, Nicholas stood, stepped forward and crouched beside the angel. "Do you really wish to?"

The gentleness in his voice a soft caress, Angelique

longed for more. "I do." She cuddled into the couch and her eyes closed. Sleep claimed her.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“I didn’t lie about my age, but you should have asked when I was born, sweetheart.” Nicholas intently studied the beauty, the strength of his empathic link enhanced by the taint of her blood in his system. “I am Nicholas Von Buren, the Faceless One. I am a three hundred fifty-one year old vampire who feeds on blood only once during the height of the full moon, on psychic thought when I desire and on regular food as I need. To some, I am a malevolent demon.”

He kept his voice soothing to avoid waking the angel. “To others I am a benevolent angel. Good, evil, whatever I am depends on whom you ask and who you are. What I do depends on the person I am watching, helping, or with. Some deserve death and some deserve healing. Everything has a price.” His forefinger gently stroked her cheek, his touch designed not to disturb. “I wonder what yours is.”

Nicholas gently scooped her into his arms, stood and carried her into his bedroom. Her body effortlessly held in one arm, he pulled back the covers and carefully laid her on his bed. He drew the

comforter to her chin. "Sleep well, Angelique. No one has ever been where you are." The soft moan, which escaped her throat welcomed, he watched her snuggle in then shut the door.

Upon his return to the living room, he sat on the couch and locked his gaze on the men who entered through the sliding glass door. He studied the twins come to help in the impending task. "Always the clan is there. When it benefits them." Both twins bore tattooed sigils on their back for they were guardians, like he and his twin... Until his brother's death. If vampiric at the time, his brother would have lived. Unbidden, the thoughts rapidly flooded his mind.

Their tattoos completed mere days before, they were to go on their final test the next night. Thirteen and foolish and destined to become proud guardians, they thought themselves invincible. One night they went dream walking and everything went wrong. His brother's mistake of challenging something too hideous and powerful ended with his own bloody death and he, Nicholas Von Buren, was responsible because he lived and that meant he failed to shield his brother. Shamed, he faced the loss of everything... family, clan, feather, medallion, tattoo and the return of his broken sword.

Stretched between the Poles of Dishonor, he endured the painful stripping of his tattoo from his body. He managed to remember only a certain amount of the agony since unconsciousness meant oblivion and no pain, which was better than any medicinal means available to the clan. The removal of his tattoo left a horrible scar he would bear for the rest

of his life. Anger raged and he swore vengeance against the clan and for his brother. Since then he learned all on his own, both as what he was meant to be and as a vampire.

Nicholas drifted even farther back to when the master tattoo artist, Dancing Dragon, prepared the bare back of a clan member with the smear of a strange gel over the skin. While the gel set, Dancing Dragon ground charcoal into a fine powder and mixed it with squid ink to create black or crushed various plants and berries for red, blue, green or any other needed color. He would mix the color with a chant and set it aside.

The master artist placed the end of a bamboo shoot that held a needle against the clan member's skin. With the appropriate design created, he tapped the bamboo and drove the needle into the skin. Gel kept the blood from running too much as the skin was pierced and held open the tiny punctures until the ink was rubbed into the flesh. He witnessed several new artists drive a needle too deep or not deep enough. Results were not pretty and did not feel nice.

Twin births were unique among the clans and those alone were destined to be Guardians. All tribal shamans, mages, priests and warriors wore the clan markings of feathers, scars and tattoos or some combination thereof. Tattoos differentiated between positions in the clan, feathers indicated clan markings and scars signified attainment of full power. Clan children had their left ear pierced if male and their right if female. The color of the stud designated the child's birth clan.

At certain ages, children were fostered to various clans for training as priests, shamans, warriors, mages and so on. Of all the clans in the tribe, the only one who never fostered in either way was that of Dancing Dragon. Their secrets were so sacred they never left their clan, but passed from one generation to the next. The possibility never occurred for the Dancing Dragon to be in jeopardy since marrying into the clan was possible, but once in, there was no way out.

Nicholas lacked the traditional facial scar for his power was never attained while part of the clan. He received a medallion and feather, as was his birthright, but upon his brother's death, the sacred talismans were stripped from him before the Council of the Clans and he was named The Faceless One. Tears trekked his face when he witnessed his Sword of the Familiar broken and declared dead. In the end, they turned their backs and banished him from the homelands. Left with nothing except anger, hatred, pain, a broken sword and a scar to remind him of his failure, he departed.

"I conquered the vampirism and came to power on my own as a vampire and what I am. I am a nightwalker." He looked at the patient twins. At twenty-four years of age, both men stood six foot four.

Matt leaned forward in the chair, fingers interlaced, his thumbs tapped against each other to an unheard drumbeat. The younger man smiled mischievously. Obsidian eyes glinted and the mere trace of sage lingered. Ebony hair with blue highlights reached past his shoulder blades and sported a braid

with a brown hawk feather on his left side.

The moonlight guardian wore black leather pants, a black swordsman's shirt, a short soft-brushed leather jacket and a necklace with gator teeth on each side of a silver medallion. Sheathed and slung across his back hung a Sword of the Familiar that fed on moonlight. A crescent shaped scar adorned the right side of his face from the corner of his eye to the corner of his mouth, which flashed silver when the sword fed. His blue and green tattoo signified him an earth and water mage.

Nicholas chuckled at the dark-haired twin's frown and his dislike of chickens. He recalled the young man's story of being trapped in a hen house where he endured more than his fair share of being hen pecked, chased and bitten, compliments of his brother.

Zane leaned back in the chair, a leg draped across the chair arm, his foot tapped in an unheard drumbeat that matched his brother's. The younger man grinned roguishly. Emerald green eyes sparkled and the hint of sweet grass drifted. Copper hair with blond highlights reached past his shoulder blades and sported a braid with a black eagle feather on his right side.

The sunlight guardian wore black button fly jeans, a black skin tight t-shirt, a full-length black leather duster and a necklace with bear claws on each side of a gold medallion. Sheathed and slung across his back hung a Sword of the Familiar that fed on sunlight. A crescent shaped scar adorned the left side of his face from the corner of his eye to the corner of his mouth, which flashed gold when the sword fed. His red and

white tattoo signified him a fire and air mage.

Nicholas chuckled at the fair-haired twin's glare and his dislike of worms and slithery creatures. He recalled the young man's story of being shoved into a worm pit where he spent half a day in search of escape, compliments of his brother.

"Sweet." Zane grinned. "Shall we visit the room or wait it out and see if she's capable of reaching her potential by the time the moon's right?"

"Waiting is tempting." Matt winked.

"Her inability to enter is not good." The sunlight guardian frowned.

The moonlight guardian nodded. "Can she can do it?"

Nicholas chuckled. "I think she can if you two are willing to help me help her. She possesses more ability than Electra ever dreamed. We must show her how to use it. What I'll need is for you to work with each other, work with us and not fight with us or with each other."

Matt stood. "If there are no objections, I'm willing to check out the room."

"Not before I do." Zane sprinted for the door.

With the twins out the door, Nicholas strode into his bedroom. Asleep in his bed, the angel kicked off the sheet and her dress rode high on her enticing thigh. Moon glow provided a silvery sheen to her silky smooth skin and a glowing hue to her golden-blond hair. Tempted to glide his hand from her dainty feet, up her sexy leg, along her shapely thigh and over her curvaceous hip, he swallowed hard. The whole ordeal revealed far more than he needed to see,



but not as much as desired.

His sigh soft, he walked to the far side of the bed and quietly changed into a pair of ragged cut-offs. He lay down and kept near the edge of the bed, his arms tucked behind his head. Her breathing lulled him to sleep while the scent of a meadow rainstorm and wild roses washed over his senses.

Nicholas opened his eyes when her petite body cuddled against his side, but dared not move for fear of waking the delightful beauty. The caress of her hand on his chest and her head nestled against his shoulder earned his smile. His breathing steady, his arm slowly slipped around her shoulders, he drew her closer. Aware of no method to wake her and let her keep her reputation intact in this position, he cringed for it worsened once her bare leg slipped over his and her charming figure snuggled tighter against his body.

Surrender eminent, he savored the feel of the lovely angel. Heat of silken flesh aroused, softness of full lips invited and fiery hunger stirred. The very notion of claiming her hardened his ever muscle. Her aphrodisiac scent surged a tremor through him while the beat of her pulse teased. His urged reigned in, he clenched his jaw at her nuzzle of his shoulder. He reveled in her touch as her hand flexed several times against his smooth chest.

## CHAPTER SIX

The sun crept over the horizon. Bergamot and sandalwood filled her senses. A warm shoulder her pillow, Angelique opened her eyes and halted the caress of her fingers on his solid chest. When the stroke of his palm rubbed down her back, she hastily scrambled backwards. The fact his very presence disorientated her senses granted her an unexpected discovery of the bed's edge. His hand seized her waist.

"Easy, sweetheart." Nicholas drew her close, his hold secure until her composure regained. "You're okay. Nothing happened." He released her waist. "*Nothing.*"

She inched toward the edge of the bed, stood and faced him, her hands on her hips. "Why are *you* in the bed? Why am *I* in the bed?"

"It is my bed and I put you in it last night." He grinned at her frustration. "It was not me who crawled to the other side. I *stayed* on my side. You *came* to me."

Angelique sensed his amusement at her predicament and frowned at his casual reminder. Unable to think of a retort, she carefully crossed the

floor until her fingers discovered the wall. She debated the direction of the door.

"The bathroom is one foot on your left. Straight inside the door, turn right, two feet forward is the toilet with a paper holder one foot on your right, probably about waist high to you. Four feet straight forward from the toilet is the sink. A towel hangs on a small ring about a foot to the left. When you come back into the room, put your back against the end of the bed and walk forward six feet, you'll find the hallway door. Come try," Nicholas coaxed gently.

Reluctant, she obliged, relieved herself, returned to the room and sought the hallway door. She succeeded quite easily. "You give decent directions." Her retort haughty, she tossed her head so her hair splayed through the air. *After all, he caused the ruckus.*

He chuckled deeply. "Next time, I'll walk you into a wall."

"You wouldn't *dare*." Angelique abandoned the room, her fingers and memorized steps her guide.

"Don't temp me, woman." Nicholas came to his feet and stealthily followed.

Successful in navigating the hall and crossing the carpeted living room without a stubbed toe, she welcomed the cool kitchen floor under her feet. With her hand extended, she located the counter and followed it. Something familiar, something she couldn't place, compelled her and she lacked the strength to resist. She couldn't deny his distraction of her senses. Halted by a solid wall of warm, bare muscle, she inhaled the faint scent of sage. Her heart thumped wildly. "Nicholas?" A male body leaned

close.

Matt whispered softly, "Wrong person."

A shudder raced through her veins. Angelique spun and encountered another wall of warm, bare muscle. Sweet grass assailed her nose. Her heart pounded to escape her chest. Tentative, she reached out her hand. "Nicholas?" Another male body leaned close.

Zane spoke kindly, "Guess again."

Terrified, her back against the counter, her hands cautiously extended to either side of her, she touched muscled stomachs and discovered the newest bodies in the house. Panic set in. "Nicholas!" Swarmed by his presence, she couldn't focus on his location.

Nicholas spoke soothingly, "Right here, Angelique. I see you've met Zane and Matt. Two steps forward."

With her hands shoulder high, Angelique shielded her face and lunged forward. Her direct collision into his solidly muscled body froze her with her hands pressed against his lower chest. His arms swiftly embraced her close. The steady rise and fall of his chest calmed her while his soothing scent filled her nostrils. She melted into him for everything about him made her feel safe, secure, protected.

"Bad boys. Go to your rooms." He looked down at the sweet angel in his arms. "They've taken their coffee and retreated to the deck."

Bergamot and sandalwood tickled her nose. Irrked she now turned to him for safety as moments ago she fled his presence, her step back ended with a slap on his upper arm. "Are there any other bodies in this house? Or any other surprises for that matter?"

Perhaps something you forgot to reveal? How about a pit of alligators or crocodiles or snakes or rats or spiders or some other heart stopping something." Frustrated, she backed away until halted by the counter. "If you'd rather I weren't here then please say so and I'll leave. I can stay elsewhere." His arms on each side of her waist, she shivered.

Gentle, Nicholas pinned her against the counter. "If you'll give me a minute—"

"A minute to do what?" Angelique scoffed, "Frustrate me to the point—" His arms instantly around her, she trembled when his muscles tensed as though restrained to avoid crushing her against his hard body. The heat of him so close overwhelmed her every sense.

"If you give me a chance, I'd like to explain. Otherwise, I *will* kiss you," he warned quietly, his tone seductive.

Nervous, she pressed her hands against his chest and leaned back. "You wouldn't dare." Oddly inhibited, her senses failed to detect his next attack and subjected her to an overload of erotic sensations. Her mind whirled, her heart pounded, her thoughts flew. She shivered. His presence overwhelmed and it seemed every part of him existed everywhere at once. The firm push of his hips against her belly securely pinned her to the counter and stole her breath.

\* \* \* \*

"You win," his whisper husky, Nicholas straddled her legs and eased his hands around her throat. Ever

gentle, his thumbs pushed up from under her chin and raised her face. "I warned you." He brushed his lips across hers and, her quiver ignored, lightly pressed his mouth against hers in a slow, lingering oral embrace.

He groaned at her initiated torrid duel with his tongue while his mouth ravished hers. His palms felt the treasured beat of her pulse thrum inside his veins. The feel and taste of her made him heady. An inner hunger stirred, intensified and turned feral. Ever aware he could not avoid taking her much longer, he shuddered for he had tasted her and her blood called, beckoned, held, and claimed him.

Oh, what Nicholas wished to do to the sweet delicacy his tongue so diligently sampled and explored. His kiss designed to awaken her sensuality, he dipped his tongue inside and explored the sweet taste of her again. He needed, wanted and would ravish... Their oral embrace reluctantly broken, he released her and stepped back. An insatiable hunger now burned and raged inside. Dangerously hot-blooded, he reined in his lust for her sex and her blood.

His voice was tight, "Now, as I was *trying* to say, I did not mean for the day to start like it did. You curled up against me. As for the twins, I apologize. Twins are what they are. You should know that. If you want to leave then I'll take you wherever you wish and pay for all your expenses. Otherwise, let me get you some coffee. Besides, I think you have more questions. How do you like your coffee?" He observed her and, innately aware of her thoughts,

knew what he did to her because the pensive angel did the same to him.

\* \* \* \*

"Sugar and cream." Angelique traced her lips with her finger. She recalled him pressed against her while his tongue's hungry strokes inside her mouth caressed, wanted, demanded.

Their coffee quickly fixed, Nicholas held both cups in one hand, cupped her elbow and guided her to a chair at the kitchen table. "Sit here and let me call Bob to tell him you're okay. That is if you still desire to stay here after this morning."

Overwhelmed with the urge to trust, she decided if being with him helped her find her sister, so be it. "I do." She sat as a cup nudged into her palms. The wind brushed past her with his movements and carried his scent a moment before her ears detected a portable phone lifted from its cradle and dialed.

"Bob, it's your boss. You sound pretty cheerful." A pause filled the silence. "Yeah, your girl's fine. I called to tell you she'll stay here rather than a hotel." He chuckled. "Yes, here and she's laughing at you. Do me a favor, see if the cops have any new information. Call your cousin Buddy and have him start tracking. He owns some good hounds. And don't mess with Electra's, I mean Summer's, room. Goodbye, Bob."

A chirp tickled her ears and a nearby chair announced his seated weight. Her hand gently nudged by the phone, Angelique accepted the device.

Nicholas suggested, "Is there a person or two you

need to call and inform them of where you are? My expense and you can give them my number."

"My mother and Susan, but if I tell them how, they'll call everyday." Grateful, she welcomed the soft hum, which indicated his activation of the phone while in her hand. She dialed. "Mom, hi. I can't stay on long, but called to tell you I'm here in Florida. I have... a friend helping me look into Electra's disappearance and as soon as I find out something, I'll call you. My friend's paying for this, so I need to get keep it short." With the phone hung up, she smiled. "She'll talk my ear off if I give her the chance."

He asked softly, "Anyone else?"

"Just one." Angelique dialed the phone. "Susan." She repeated the information given her mother. "Could you please call Mr. Jenkins for me?"

"Oh, sure, hon. You take care and keep me up to date."

"Thank you, Susan." The call disconnected, she set the phone on the table. "She's a wonderful person and is always there to help me."

Nicholas returned the phone to its cradle. "Tell me about your family."

Angelique grimaced. "My father set me up with the editor I work for a few years before his death in a work-related accident. Mom received enough insurance to take care of her. Electra was the wild child who did all the things good girls didn't. She was the first to experiment with everything. The night she got drunk, mom blew and Electra ran away for a week. I thought I lost the one pair of eyes I ever had



until her return. There was the night she got high. I was afraid mom would kill her. It all worked out and things settled down until the night Electra came home giggling about her sexual escapade. Mom and Aunt Janice put her on birth control."

"It's only fair for you to ask what you will of me."

"It is so hard to tell where you are." The gentle cup of his hand against her face compelled her nuzzle his palm. His caress stirred something deep within.

Nicholas whispered softly, "Does this help?"

"I've never encountered the inability to mentally latch onto someone before and it makes me feel so helpless." Angelique frowned. "It emphasizes my... lack of vision."

"That's not the way I meant it and you know it," he answered soothingly.

With her face leaned against his hand, the warmth of his palm intensified, but the tenderness in his touch felt unlike anything experienced or imagined before. She didn't want it to end. "I can see people in my mind then feel their face and see a nearly exact picture with my hands. Why is it I never saw those two or truly picked up on their existence and why can't I see you or read you more than I have?" His thumb rubbed her cheek and she loved his touch.

"Slow down, sweetheart. There are reasons for everything and answers to each of your questions. First, if the twins, Zane and Matt, are shielding each other, it's nearly impossible to see or read them, let alone notice their existence. That you even sensed them indicates you're very perceptive because it's something trained guardians do as a method of

protecting each other." Nicholas held her hand. "Second, I'm shielding myself and preventing you from seeing or reading more because I don't wish you to fear me."

Apprehensive, Angelique withdrew her hand. "Why would I fear you?"

He leaned forward, his voice a gentle warning, "Do you really want me to answer that?"

A nervous shiver crept over her entire being. "Yes."

"I told you this last night while you slept. What I *didn't* tell you was that your inability to possess the same vision as the rest of the world protects you," Nicholas whispered.

Angelique smelled sweet grass on her left and sage on her right. "And what does it protect me against?"

"Me."

"Why would I need protection from— You know what, it doesn't matter why." Her empty laugh unsettled her nerves. "I couldn't run if I wanted to because I can't *see* to find the door!" She suddenly lost all sense of his presence.

Nicholas leaned forward, his soothing voice calm, commanding, "Angelique."

Tears quickly built. Angelique tentatively licked her lips. "What else can I do?" She loved the gentle brush when his thumb removed a trickling tear from her cheek.

"Do you *really* think I'd hurt you? Do you think Matt and Zane would *let* me hurt you?" Aware the twins would give it one hell of a try, he knew if they managed to take her from him, it would be someone's

death and he was immortal.

"I don't know. If you did, what could I do?"

Nicholas lowered his hand. "I would *not* hurt you. Not my style. Do you still wish the answer as to whom and what I am?"

Angelique both did and didn't for fear the response might be something she couldn't or wouldn't desire to deal with. Nervous, she inhaled a deep breath and released it. "I think so." His hands gently grasped hers and calm emanated from his embrace, which soothed her senses.

His tone soft, he repeated last night's statement and ended with, "And now you know me."

His revelation stunned. *A vampire? A nightwalker? This kind and considerate man is a blood lusting, throat-feeding beast. How safe am I? Will I liv* – She shuddered at the very idea of his bite. Tentative, her trembling hand reached for his face, but she still wasn't sure of his location. "Do I?"

Nicholas captured her wrist, guided her hand to his mouth and placed a kiss the center of her palm. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips into her warm, supple skin. His second kiss no less gentle and affectionate, he whispered against her flesh, "I will *not* hurt you. I *cannot* hurt you." Aware of her fear, he pressed her hand against his cheek and dropped his mental shield.

Visions flooded into her mind. Angelique jerked away her hand, her head thrown back in agony. Soft sage assailed her nostrils then faded. Her collapse on the floor softened by an attentive guardian's swift interception, she reeled. The scent of a sweet grass

flooded her senses. She curled into the fair-haired twin's embrace and sought to shut out the visions, her voice faint, "No more." Images ceased and his concern flooded her senses.

"Angelique, they'll stop now. I didn't realize you would read me so easily. Most people can't pick up the visions no matter what they do unless I strengthen them. I figured you'd get something, but I didn't realize you'd get that much that quick. I swear all I did was open my mind. I did *not* direct anything." He knelt and reached for her hand.

She scrambled into the arms of the fair-haired twin securely wrapped around her. Energy in the room sizzled and the scent of sweet grass soothed.

Nicholas glowered, his voice dangerously low, "I would *never* hurt her on purpose and you *both* know it."

His echoed voice indicated his face mere inches from someone else. Angelique shivered when the rush of wind announced his angry steps stormed away. A slam of the bedroom door left no doubt of his whereabouts. The scent of sweet grass wafted through the air as the fair-haired twin behind her loosened his arms. Certain the nightwalker would never deliberately inflict hurt on her, she shifted to stand.

Zane asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you." A hand grasped hers while the faint hint of sage filled her nostrils. Certain who pulled her to her feet, she welcomed his guidance to a chair.

Matt whispered, "I don't think he intended to hurt

you."

Angelique listened as the dark-haired twin retrieved a drink. She shivered at the chilled glass nudged into her hand.

Zane urged, "Drink this then tell us what happened."

Her hand trembled with her sip. She set the glass on the table and wiped her face with her hands. "I was hit once in my life by a man and I thought that was bad. I've seen things in the night, in my dreams that terrified me beyond words." A shudder racked her body. "But this was far worse. It was like being punched in every way possible, but instead of just once... It was like being continuously pounded. He didn't mean it. I've been trying to read him and both of you so hard I guess I forgot to tone down my receiving intensity."

The sunlight guardian assured, "I don't think we'll drop our shields anytime soon."

Matt quizzed, "Will you be all right?"

"Yes. When you do, please warn me first." Angelique rubbed her temples and stood. "I need to lie down."

"He's in his bedroom," Zane warned.

"I know." She left the twins and headed to the nightwalker's side.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Quiet, Angelique entered and tried desperately to visualize his location. "Nicholas?" A steady breathing the only response, she made her way to the side of the bed near the bathroom and eased in, her expression apprehensive. Her hand extended, she encountered the warmth of his side and inched closer. It wasn't hard to discern his position on the side of the bed farthest from the bathroom with his arms tucked behind his head. Cuddled up against him, her head on his shoulder and her hand on his bare chest, she caressed his muscled chest and inhaled his scent. His sigh halted her action.

"I've watched you since you entered. *That's* what you did this morning," Nicholas whispered, his voice husky.

"I apologize." She shifted to push up, but his arm gently seized her waist.

"And *this* is what I did. Do you wish to leave?" He tugged her close.

Angelique shivered at his warmth and almost moaned at the sensations his deep timbre pulsed through her body. His touch stirred a heat in her belly she didn't understand, but desired to. She longed for his kiss, wanted his lips pressed against hers so his

tongue explored her mouth again. Cuddled against his side, she inhaled his scent. "I apologize for today." His hand gently directed her face upward.

"You didn't answer my question so I'll ask again." Nicholas pitched his voice to seduce, "Do you *wish* to leave?"

"I'm not sure of the right answer."

"The right answer is the one you give. I'm not sure what went wrong and why it hurt you, but I will *never* open my mind for you again if there's any risk involved."

Angelique truly did enjoy his arms wrapped around her body. "It was my fault." His shrug gentle, she closed her eyes while her hand absently trailed designs on his chest.

Nicholas failed to make out the pattern. "How was it your fault?"

"I was attuned to you automatically with my reception spiked as high as possible so when in your presence I could easily read even the tiniest thing you let escape. I have virtually tuned you out because I don't want to endure that ever again. I'd rather not read anyone at all than to get pounded like that a second time."

He surrendered the study of her hand. "What are you doing?"

Angelique yawned. "With what?"

Nicholas whispered, "Your fingers."

Her action halted, she briefly looked at her hand, her brow furrowed in bewilderment. "What was I doing?"

"Nothing." He dismissed it. "If I open my mind

and you have me tuned out, will you get hurt again?"

Instinctive, Angelique tensed. "Probably not, but I don't want to try yet because I'm tired." She sighed at the gentle caress of his one hand on her back while his other rubbed her arm.

Nicholas compelled with his voice, "Sleep, Angelique, sleep."

Her hand again moved in the pattern as she nuzzled his chest. *His touch is so comforting.* She drifted to sleep.

He closed his eyes and rested, the angel at his side.

*The dream plowed through her as Angelique moaned. Trapped behind an unbreakable glass wall, she watched the vision again... the ritual... the couple... flicker... the horror... flash... the beast... the open door... the couple looked at her... the man unknown... the woman... Electra. "No," she cried. "Noooo!"*

\* \* \* \*

His stomach struck hard, Nicholas bolted upright. With the situation assessed in a split second, he seized her flailing hands and pinned her thrashing body beneath his full weight. The twins opened the door. He growled the command between clenched teeth. "Angelique, this does *not* look good for me."

Zane slapped his hand down hard on the nightwalker's shoulder and ripped him from the woman. "Get off!" His gaze hot and full of hate, he drew his sword, his stance between the woman and her attacker ready. "Stay back, Nicholas."

Slow, he rose to his feet and the fair-haired twin



involuntarily stepped back. With fire in his eyes and passion in his voice, he growled viscerally, "Foolish, boy." He locked his gaze. "Do you think I would *dare* such conduct?"

Matt touched her shoulder. "Angelique, are you all right?"

Angelique bolted upright and stared through the dark-haired man crouched before her. She instinctively pointed at the sword wielder. "No." The white flash of raw power from her fingertips hurled the fair-haired twin across the room and into the wall. Scents of sweet grass, water and earth filled the room.

"Angelique." Nicholas spoke softly, his voice a caress, "Look at me, Angelique." Her head turned in his direction. Once beautiful sapphire eyes, now hauntingly devoid of recognition, stared. He slowly crossed the floor. "Angelique, you don't wish to hurt anyone, do you?"

She grabbed the dark-haired twin's wrist and peered into his eyes. "You."

Wary, Matt called, "Nicholas."

"I know and I'm trying. Believe me. I *am* trying. Angelique, look at me," Nicholas commanded, his voice steady. He noted her unrelenting grip on the dark-haired twin's wrist tightened with his every step as his body shielded the dazed fair-haired twin. "No. Me, Angelique. Just me." Her gaze on him, he warily moved closer. "I'm losing her. You must hit her. She goes out cold and I take possession or she remains trapped in her night terror."

"Do *what*?"

He barked, "*Hit her.*"

Matt scowled. "I've *never* hit a woman in my life. Are you crazy?"

"Hit her now *or* we lose her," Nicholas warned heatedly. "Your reluctance cost us. She knows. You should have tried."

Angelique withdrew her touch from the dark-haired twin. Her fingertips glowed blue then became tiny electrical charges. A jolting current flooded his body. His collapse on the floor accompanied the scent of sage and fire throughout the room.

Zane scrambled to his feet. "What's going on?"

Nicholas lunged, landed on her with his full weight, grabbed her wrists then pinned her beneath his body. "Angelique." His voice low and dangerous, yet velvety and mesmerizing, he purred, "*Listen* to me. *Look* at me." He gazed into her now coal black eyes. "I will *not* lose you."

Matt whispered hoarsely, "Help him, brother, or she'll kill us."

The vampire forced the writhing woman back down on the bed. "She's complicating things over here, boys. Put a small cut on her so I can bring her back using her blood and mine. Do *not* make me bite her." He continued his struggle with the furious angel.

Zane snapped, "I can't."

"I can," Matt growled coldly. He seized his dagger from his boot, nicked her shoulder then fell back against the floor. "Get her back." His eyes on his brother, he leaned against the wall. "That hurt."

Nicholas firmly held her arms. "I'm sorry, Angelique." He allowed her blood to momentarily

ooze from the small wound. His lick slow, he briefly savored the soul searing and exquisite taste of heaven. With his control forced, he lowered his head and suckled only what he needed. The urge to draw more resisted, he closed the wound with a gentle lap of his tongue and gazed upon at the angry angel. He reined in his powerful urge and hoped to calm her before something lost control, namely him.

"Mine," Angelique snarled.

"Yes, yours." His stare deep into her sapphire blue eyes revealed regret. He effortlessly evaded her attempt to bite him for his blood to her right now would make her a mindless servant and he did not desire such. With her mind coerced to accept his will, he pushed deeper into her psyche. "Yes, Angelique, it's me you want. Come back to me. Come back," he whispered persuasively. Her struggles ceased, her strength dwindled, her eyes closed. "Yes, Angelique, come back." Even after her breathing indicated slumber, he relented none of his hold. "I will make up for what I did," he whispered softly, his voice guilt-laden.

"We'll meet you in the kitchen." With his sword collected, Zane ushered his brother from the room.

Her breath hot and fast on his chest, this dainty woman taunted him in numerous ways. Nicholas carefully lifted his body from her and slowly removed his weight. "Sleep well, sweetheart." He left the room, shut the door and joined the twins where he sat in the closest chair. "She'll be all right."

Matt frowned. "Why couldn't you bite her?"

Aware his eyes flashed a warning, he grimaced,

"Except under the *right* conditions biting either kills or enslaves. Neither of those is something I want to live with." Exasperation warred with amusement when he turned to the fair-haired twin. "Why couldn't you cut her?"

Zane shrugged. "I didn't want to hurt her."

Matt stared, his incredulity undeniable. "She threw you across the room into a wall with..."

"An earthquake shockwave," he answered flatly.

"Then nearly plowed enough lightning through me to make me a crispy critter and *you* didn't *want* to hurt *her*? Did you *want* her to outright kill us or slowly rip us apart limb by limb?"

"Back up," Zane retorted dryly.

Matt furrowed his brow. "How did our vampire friend escape zapping and sailing?"

Nicholas smiled. "I don't think I did. While we were lying in the bed earlier, she absently drew a pattern on my chest. I think it was a hex, a protective sigil, which prevented her from hurting me, but even then I don't think I was targeted because I wasn't armed or threatening anyone in the room. Let me get the first aid kit because you guys don't want me to heal you."

The moonlight guardian flexed his wrist and winced. "When hell freezes over."

"*That* can be arranged."

"Says you." Zane touched his head and flinched.

On his feet, Nicholas grabbed the woman's suitcases, quietly entered the bedroom and put the luggage in the corner. With the first aid kit retrieved, he returned to the kitchen. His tiny, inconspicuous

link with her kept him innately aware of her status. He sat. "Matt, run your arm under the cold water while I fix your brother's bump."

"Ought to call you dad." Matt complied.

"Bump?" Zane frowned. "You almost got cleaved in half by my sword in there."

"I know." Gentle, Nicholas treated the open gash on the side of the fair-haired twin's head.

His amusement clear, Matt chuckled. "Do you really think you *could* have hit him?"

"Keep it up and we'll see if I can hit you, brother," Zane retorted.

"Oooooo, I am quaking in my boots!" He burst into laughter.

Nicholas firmly grabbed the fair-haired twin's arm. "Sit." Obligated, he placed a patch over the wound and wrapped gauze around the man's head. "Don't take it off for twenty-four hours. After that it won't matter what you do."

"I'm gonna kick his ass," Zane snarled.

"He doesn't own a donkey," he stated nonchalantly. In truth, he enjoyed the playful banter of the brothers. "Would you really have cleaved me in half?"

"I *thought* you were attacking her." The sunlight guardian eyed the nightwalker. "If you had been, yes, I would have."

Calm, Nicholas met the emerald green gaze. "Do you really think I would do something like that to *any* woman?"

"You should have seen it from our viewpoint," Matt stated.

"I can't believe you two would think so low of me." He shook his head. "You've been around me long enough to know when I feed on blood, I use the scum of the earth and when I feed on psychic energy, it's such a token amount no one ever feels it. Why would I stoop to something as vile as to *taking* from a woman what I could simply ask for not to mention that it would be easier and quieter if I did it using mind control rather than brute force with you two around."

"It did seem a little far fetched," he admitted casually.

Zane grinned. "Give us credit for trying to rescue her from *you*."

"And meet your demise at such a young age." Nicholas smirked playfully.

Matt sat and extended his injured arm. "Oh by the way, Zane, mom called."

Zane strode to the refrigerator. "Yeah and she said your feet still stink." He grabbed two apples, shut the door and returned to the other men.

"And you forgot your mirror, pretty boy." The moonlight guardian flinched and jerked his arm from the nightwalker. "Hey!"

"Picking on a little brother is mean." Nicholas grinned wryly.

"Yeah." Zane tossed the second apple at his twin who caught it with his good hand. "Keep it up, brother."

"That's why I did it all the time." He chuckled and finished treating the man's injury.

"Yeah," Matt grinned.

"At least I didn't say ouch," Zane chided.

"You two will be the end of me. She's waking." Nicholas stood and strode to the bedroom in mere strides. Quiet, he sat on the edge of the bed beside her hip.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Angelique rolled over and slid her hand up to cuddle the pillow under her head. Her fingers brushed a very warm, very solid muscled thigh and her hand shifted directions. The scent of bergamot and sandalwood filled her nose. "Did you change sides?" She smiled sleepily. Gentle, his thumb caressed her cheek and pushed a wisp of her hair from her face.

"No," Nicholas answered softly. "I thought I'd watch you sleep."

Shifted onto her back, she stretched languorously. "You're being weird. I really do need my clothes." Back on her side, her hand caressed his leg again until her palm rested above his knee. Her fingers lightly tickled his thigh. She liked how the feel of him heightened her senses. "Please?"

"Sentimental. Your clothes are in here." Her touch enjoyed, he longed for more of it. "Of course I'd enjoy you running around in my shirts." He teased softly, "Or even better, in the nude."

Angelique lightly smacked his stomach and ignored the sting of her hand. "I don't think so."



Clothes." His laughter amused, the sudden lack of his weight bounced her a bit. Her hand suddenly in his warm one, she let him pull her to sit. The next bounce of the bed declared the big piece of luggage settled toward the end. She heard the latches pop one after the other. *He is so considerate, so helpful, s—* Hinges squeaked with the lifted lid.

Nicholas set the travel case beside her hip. "There you go, sweetheart."

The velvet caress of his voice pulsed shivers through her veins. Her hand glided across the inside of the big case, drew out a pair of cut-offs, a T-shirt and panties, set them aside and closed the lid. "Would you please find a place this can be kept out of the way then show me where you put it?"

He kept his voice seductive, "Consider it done."

Angelique listened while his large hands scooped up her luggage and moved it across the room. The image of his flexed biceps flooded her mind. She shivered when his footsteps closed the distance.

"I put it on the top of the double dresser." Nicholas cupped her elbow, brought her to her feet and directed her to her suitcase. "How's this?"

Her arm grazed his and she admired the powerful muscle that flexed in response. "I would say absolutely perfect." Her face grew hot, but not as much as his breath, which cascaded from her ear and over her shoulder to glide down her cleavage.

"Good." He whispered softly, "Don't move."

Angelique mentally followed his strides across the room to the bed. The nightwalker truly stirred something in her she didn't understand. "Is there a

place in the bathroom where I can keep the little one?" His warm palm cupped her elbow.

"Your clothes and travel case are collected in my other hand." Nicholas guided her into the bathroom, set the small luggage on the counter and guided her hands. "Will this work?"

"Yes and the last thing I need is a quick introduction to the bathroom." Familiar with the toilet and sink, she was shown the closet with towels and washcloths, tub and shower with each time from where directed. She rapidly memorized the room and its primary contents.

"Anything else, sweetheart?"

"You to leave so I can shower." Angelique wished to see him with more than her hands and feel him with more than her senses.

Nicholas invited, "And I thought I might get a reward for all my help."

"If you come here, I'll give you a little kiss." She never heard him move, but when his towering presence suddenly reminded her of her smallness by comparison, she shivered.

His voice was low and seductive, "A kiss like earlier."

Masculine scent and closeness stirred heat deep within her belly. Faint, Angelique feared his ability to overwhelm her senses in that manner again. Nervous, she stepped back. "I—uh, n-no." His arm swept around her waist.

Nicholas liked her reaction. "I'll leave, but another step and you'll be in the garden tub the hard way." He lowered his voice, "I would hate for such to

happen.”

“I will.” She felt his gaze, but couldn’t find the courage to follow through with the offered kiss.

“Enjoy your bath.” He pressed his lips against her forehead then turned away.

Tempted to ask him to stay, Angelique frowned when the door shut. She turned on the water, adjusted it to a comfortable temperature then gathered and set her shower items in a corner of the tub. Stripped, she stepped in, sat and cherished the feel of the water while it washed over her. Her eyes closed, she longed for the nightwalker’s touch to caress, glide over and slide down her body, to feel her like the water did, to touch her as no other did. A broken moan escaped at the incomplete feeling that devoured, the heat swelled within, the raging fire, which coursed through her veins.

Frustrated by the emptiness in her body beyond words, she despised how the lack of a man’s touch deprived her of the knowledge to get to the nightwalker she wanted. *What pleasures would Nicholas’s caresses bring?* In a hurry to return to his side, she bathed, washed her hair, stood and drained the tub. She rinsed under the shower and wished the water wa— *Stop it, silly girl.* The water turned off, she towel dried her hair then her body. Dressed in matter of minutes, she tidied up the bathroom and brushed her hair. Careful, she made her way to the kitchen.

## CHAPTER NINE

Nicholas headed for the twins. "So boys, now that I tortured both of you, as well as her, did we figure out what's for dinner?"

"I'll go get it if you pay for it," Matt beamed.

Zane snickered. "He'll pay for it and I'll go get it."

"Quit," Nicholas chided. "Dinner should be native to the area. Wonder if she likes seafood?"

Matt teased, "Do they have that in Oregon?"

"You're an airhead," Zane quipped.

"I'd agree to go out, but you two are worse than kids." Nicholas fixed his gaze on the petite angel who crossed the floor. In the world, this was a creature of dreams any man would enjoy on his arm. This was no lady one put on a pedestal and admired from a distance, but a woman who played the part a man desired. He knew in public, the angel would be classy, but in private, an unleashed firestorm when it came to sexual passion. Oh yes, this was definitely a woman who could be the lady in the parlor and the whore in the bed. His bed.

Moreover, the angel stirred his sexual appetite like never before. Thankful, he enjoyed the pleasures mortals did for these little things most corporeal

beings forgot existed, made his dark side bearable. White shorts and pale blue T-shirt heightened the golden tan of her perfect voluptuous body. Slender ankles and willowy wrists allowed a man's hold of her delicate feet and svelte hands while his mouth taunted her toes and fingers since they were ideal to nibble upon.

*They aren't the only places I'll investigate.* Nicholas would certainly enjoy kissing his way up her long, shapely legs and sylphlike arms. He liked that his angel's backside was not a firm, hard tush, but a rounded rump he could sink his fingers into or pop and enjoy a fleshy jiggle. Her curvaceous hips, designed to be seized in the heat of the moment, would confine her to his whim.

His hands itched to grab the slender waist made to hold until completion where neither moved. Full breasts, not so over abundant as to detract from the rest of her delightful body, weren't the firm mounds most men craved, but the soft and supple flesh a man buried his face between and died happy. Beautiful to look upon with high cheekbones, her countenance possessed sweet tasting lips that made a red rose envious. Innocent eyes competed with even the most brilliant star sapphire. Droplets of water sparkled as the sun glinted off her still damp, golden-blond hair.

Matt dropped his half-eaten apple. "Whoa."

Zane snatched it up. "You're drooling like a thirteen year old boy the first time you saw your best friend's oldest sister in a bathing suit."

"Take a long walk off a short pier and forget to hold your breath."

"That's exactly what you looked like when we were thirteen."

Matt sneered. "Like you didn't."

Zane scowled. "I didn't drool."

"That's right you didn't. You fainted."

"I did not."

Matt scoffed. "Oh please, you're not going to tell me it was the heat, are you?"

"Well... it was hot," Zane quipped.

## CHAPTER TEN

Angelique listened as the nightwalker's steps closed the distance. "So what's there to do around here?"

"The twins are at it again." Nicholas cupped her elbow and guided her to a chair. "We were thinking of dinner, but wished your opinion. There was a suggestion of something local like seafood and someone wondered if you enjoyed such in Oregon. The actual question is do you wish to go out or have it delivered?"

"We do have seafood, mostly bay, but delicious to us locals." She giggled softly. "We even have a Chinese delivery. I think whatever you decide is fine, but don't eliminate pizza from the menu."

"Do you have any preferences?"

Angelique shrugged. "If I knew what was in your kitchen I'd cook you something myself."

Nicholas assured, "I'm pretty well stocked. What do you have in mind?"

"Let's see what you have and I'll tell you what I can make." She made her way to the kitchen.

He stayed on her heels. "Is there a preference as to

what you might wish?"

"Give me a shopping list," Matt volunteered.

"And instructions on how to shop," Zane quipped.

Nicholas inhaled a deep breath and slowly released it with a soft growl.

Angelique sensed his rather silent chide of the twins. "Do you have any duck or chicken?"

"Chicken. Whole, cut up and filleted breasts."

"How about whole roasted chicken, seasoned and stuffed with sausage hinted sage bread, surrounded by cut up potatoes, celery, carrots and onions and topped with mild flavored gravy blended to a silky texture?"

"Sounds good. Tell me what you need." Nicholas listened to the named ingredients and cooking utensils. He repeated each requested item as he proffered it.

Angelique set each item in a certain spot near either the stove or the sink depending on what it was. "And a covered roasting pan."

He set the pot on the stove and guided her hands to it. "Is there anything I can do?"

She washed the vegetables. "Give me a sharp knife, set the oven to three hundred fifty degrees and leave the kitchen in my hands." The light press of his body against hers while his arm reached around her, ignited an inner fire that danced shivers down her spine.

Nicholas pulled a paring knife from the drawer and, vigilant, placed the handle in her hand. "Be careful. Call if you need anything." He set the oven and joined the twins at the table.



Angelique prepared the vegetables, mixed the stuffing and set them aside. She cleaned and stuffed the chicken, rubbed the seasons into it and set it in the roasting pan. With the cut up vegetables scattered around the bird, she placed the lid on the pot and opened the oven. Ever careful, she slid the roasting pan in, shut the door and washed her hands. Her hand on the counter, she made her way to the kitchen table. "Someone time forty-five minutes, please." His steps closed the distance.

He captured her hand. "I'm timing it. Wish to walk the dock?"

She smiled. "Sure."

Nicholas ushered her through the sliding door and onto the dock where he slowly led her around the house. He stopped at the southwestern corner and pulled her to stand close, drew her back against his front and lowered his mouth to her ear. "I wish to ask you something."

Angelique shivered at his deep inhale of her scent. "Hmmm?" She leaned against him and listened at the surf gently crash against the pylons that held the house above the waves.

His soft whisper cascaded around her ear, "What would you give to be able to see what I see?"

She raised her face to the evening sun. "I don't know. I've been told the sun is golden and the moon is silver, but color means little to someone who's never seen it. I do know I love feeling the sun bathing me in its radiant warmth as much as I love the moon embracing me in its lustrous coolness."

"Beautiful description." Nicholas slowly caressed

her arms. "But what would you give to *see* them? To see colors? To see the world?"

"I don't know." Angelique considered such an offer unobtainable. Her parents had done the cotton for fluffy and other items for texture as well as hot for red, cold for blue and other temperatures for colors, but it wasn't the color for her mental images stayed black, white and shades of gray. That remained all she saw. "How can giving anything change what is and has always been?" His arms pulled her close and she cherished his consideration of something she wanted all her life. She treasured the caress as his warm voice named her the colors, but regretted not knowing what the color looked like.

"Where there's a will, there's a way."

"I'm not sure what you mean." Caution set her on alert.

Nicholas offered, "If I could let you see, even for just a few hours, what I see through my eyes, would you accept my gift?"

Angelique measured the value of the gained knowledge, even if for a brief time, verses the lack of said familiarity. "What's the price?"

"There are two. I could pay one of them, but not the other. The one I could and would pay makes it so you'll not feel the pain."

Her voice quavered, "And the other?"

"The other is the possibility of regret because you can't keep the vision." Nicholas longed to give her the gift of sight, but that required time and her desire.

"I don't know." Thoughtful for a moment, Angelique frowned. "What kind of pain would you

suffer?"

"Do you remember when I said I feed on blood once during the full moon?"

Uneasy, she shuddered. "*Don't* bite me."

"Not you." Nicholas hugged her tighter. "Two others. I must feed that night as usual, which requires something that deserves to die then, once everything is over, I must feed again to regain my strength. Or else."

Angelique twisted within his embrace. "Or else what?" His hands dropped as she turned around.

"I'd starve within the week."

"How much do you need to feed... on the second person in order to recover?"

Nicholas longed to hold her again. "Depends. Why?"

Angelique wasn't sure she wanted the answer. "Would the person you feed from die?"

"No, but they'd be tired until their body recovered from the blood loss."

"What happens to the second person afterwards?"

Nicholas refused to lie. "Depends on the person."

"You're not answering me." Frustrated, Angelique pushed him back until his body yielded no more ground. "Tell me the truth."

"The stronger and purer their blood, the less I need. The less I need take, the better their chance of surviving. If the person is sick, then there is always the possibility I could take on the effects of their sickness for a while."

"In other words, if they're a drug addict, you succumb to that affliction until you beat it."

"Yes," Nicholas answered flatly.

Angelique dropped her arms. "And you being such is detrimental to the rest of us in the house?"

"The twins would keep me from harming myself, them and you." He hoped.

"Right," she scoffed. "And all of this would be so that I could see for a few minutes?"

"A few hours," Nicholas corrected.

"No. I don't think I can live with the fact that you and the twins might possibly try and kill each other so I can see." Angelique shook off the idea as impossible. The aroma of dinner wafted outside. "Even for a few hours." She extended her arm, encountered the wall and made her way toward the sliding doors. "Dinner should be almost ready." His boots hit the planking twice then his hand cupped her elbow.

He guided her into the kitchen. "What if *I* wanted to take the chances and guaranteed your safety?"

"No." Determined to win the argument, she dropped the subject. "Would you please pull out the roasting pan and set it on the stove for me?" His move carried him past her position.

Nicholas grabbed the potholders, obliged, lifted aside the lid and shut the door. He pierced the meat with a fork, set down the utensil and grabbed a platter. "It's done." With two large forks, he moved the chicken onto the platter with the vegetables, scooped the broth into a bowl then guided her hands to the bowl and platter. Vigilant of her actions, he removed the roasting pan and shut off the oven. "What else can I do for you?"

"Nothing." Angelique sensed him move clear of her workspace. With the remaining ingredients added to the hot broth, she grabbed a wire whisk, whipped the mixture into smooth gravy then poured the thickened sauce over the chicken while she listened for the platter's indication of fullness. She set aside the gravy and stepped back. "Dinner's ready." Her keen ears discerned the difference between the nightwalker and the twins. The scent of sage and sweet grass, along with other sounds, told her the twins fixed their plates and the nightwalker lingered close.

He grabbed two plates. "Do you have a preference?"

"Not really." She flashed a nervous smile. "What matters to me is if it's liked." Various sounds indicated the twins sat, tasted a bite then dug in. His soft laugh filled her ears.

"Matt and Zane are devouring their food." Nicholas dished up two plates. "I don't think you have anything to worry about. Take my arm and I'll guide you to the table." He grabbed two forks, carried the plates and led her to the table. "The chair is six inches on your left." With her seated, he set her plate and fork before her then sat, sampled a bite, chewed slowly and swallowed. "This is really good."

Matt concurred, "Delicious."

Zane agreed, "Fantastic."

Angelique nibbled her food. "I'm glad you like it. It's not often I get to cook for someone, but I do enjoy it." She heard utensils set down.

"The world doesn't know what they're missing."

Matt sighed contentedly.

"I concur." Zane breathed enjoyably.

Amused, Nicholas chuckled. "They agreed on something."

The twins looked at each other. "So we did." They grinned in unison.

"But Zane said he was doing the dishes," Matt piped.

Zane quipped, "Mom said that was your job."

Nicholas laughed heartily. "You two."

Angelique burst into laughter. "And you said these two would keep you from doing any harm."

"They can," he assured.

She fought her smile. "I don't doubt your word or their abilities, but you really ought to hear it from my perspective." His rich laughter warmed her soul.

"I know. They disagree constantly, but when it comes to protecting, defending and shielding they're an extension of each other." Proud, Nicholas smiled. "They know what the other is thinking at all times. The biggest reason they do what they do is to try and catch each other off guard while attempting to get the better of each other in everything."

"I don't think I want to take the chance." Fidgety, Angelique twisted her fingers amidst each other. "I'd feel really bad if something happened to any of you. You've been really nice to me." The clank of dishes informed the twins handled the clean up detail.

Her distraction his advantage, he leaned close, his whisper seductive, "Come with me." With her hand in his, he guided her to the railing of the deck. "How *much* do you trust me?"

She shrugged. "I'm still in your house and since you haven't hurt me. I guess quite a bit."

Nicholas deepened his voice, "Do you *really* trust me?"

Angelique shivered. "For what?"

"Yes or no," he whispered softly, his tone even more persuasive. With his arms wrapped around her body, one snugly under her breasts, the other around her waist, he tugged her firmly against his body.

Frightened, she desperately sought escape. "What are you doing?"

"Come share the wind and ride my wings," Nicholas whispered in her ear.

Angelique panicked when the ground vanished from under her feet. "N-Nicholas!"

"I have you." He turned toward the open ocean and the setting sun. "You can't fall if you trust me. Relax, Angelique. Relax and trust me."

She clutched his muscled forearms and closed her eyes while she concentrated on his warm breath soft against her cheek and the feel of his flexed muscles securely around her body. "Are we... flying?"

"Yes." Nicholas warmed her neck with his breath.

"Please, don't drop me." Angelique sensed such would never happen and calmed. She relaxed her grip on his lower arm and welcomed his breath on her shoulders.

"*Never.*" He kept his voice soft, reassuring and gentle, "If you're waiting to fall, it *won't* happen. I promise you that." Affectionate, he nuzzled her neck upon her release of his other arm. "I told you. Now

do you trust me?"

His warm chuckle reverberated through her body. "I don't have much choice." The brush of his lips with a kiss upon her shoulder revealed his smile.

"If you'd like to land and climb onto my back, you'll enjoy it more," Nicholas suggested.

Angelique swallowed. "If I interfered with your wings, how would you keep me from falling?"

"Wings were meant figuratively. Do you trust me?"

"I don't like a question answered with a question, but I'll think about it."

"My answer to your question is your answer to my question." Nicholas quelled his desire to nip and simply kissed her shoulder. "Do you feel the sun?"

"Yes." Elated by the sensation of such freedom unfettered by her disadvantage in life, Angelique opened her arms. "I feel so... free. So wonderful!"

"Enjoy it," he whispered. "I have so many gifts I intend to bestow upon you, Angel." The sun slipped beneath the barrier of the horizon and the moon climbed into the darkening sky. His landing on a small island gentle, he held her close until steady. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Breathless, she enjoyed his scent, feel and touch. "Why did we stop?"

Nicholas replied, "I thought you might like to climb on my back for the return trip."

Angelique shivered. "Are you sure I won't fall?"

"Do you trust me?"

"There you go again, a question with a question. Turn around and tell me how to do this." His scent



engulfed her as his pivot settled him on one knee.

"It's easy. Climb on like I'm giving you a piggyback ride and just lay down. I'll hold your legs and you can wrap your arms around my neck or even hold onto my shoulders. If you're brave enough," Nicholas challenged.

"I'm not that bold!" Angelique gasped when one of his hands skimmed the back of her knee.

"Come forward."

She did until her knee bumped his warm back then put her hands on his broad shoulders and braced herself. Her fingers glided down his shirt while she leaned forward. As his chest expanded with each deep and steady breath drawn, she lowered her body a bit and settled her belly over his back. His warmth pulled her in, his kindness held her close and his touch danced more than shivers through her very soul.

Her knees slid toward his sides and parted her legs as his narrow waist wedged firmly between her thighs. The sensation jolted her and the pit of her stomach lurched. *What would it feel like to have more there than his back?* As his hands caressed the backs of her knees and his arms gently slipped under her legs, Angelique giggled. His warm laugh reverberated through her body and she latched her arms around his neck. "I like this very much." She shivered when his hands raised her knees higher on his waist.

Nicholas assured, "So do I. You can never fall faster than I can catch or dive and snatch."

She leaned a bit the side, her tone playful, "Was that a grunt?" His response a much more serious

grunt, she hugged him tight.

"It was a fleeting thought." He returned her jest, "You're not too heavy for me."

Angelique smacked his shoulder. "Beast!"

"Keep it up and you'll see how much." Nicholas left the ground behind and headed back the way they came. As her cheek pressed tightly against his ear, he nuzzled her. "Can you feel the moon, sweet Angel?"

She raised her head a bit. "This is so unbelievable. It must be a dream." Awestruck, she lifted her upturned face up and relished the moon's touch.

"No dream," he stated softly. "Just a gift from me to you."

Angelique enjoyed the rest of the flight and even reveled at his chuckle when she balanced on his shoulders and raised her body. His pace slowed.

"Hold on tight, Angel." With her compliance, Nicholas landed on the dock and set her on her feet. He faced her and admired her wind tossed hair. "Do you trust me now, Angelique?"

Excited, she threw her arms around his neck. "That was awesome! Of course, who would believe it?"

"I would." He eagerly embraced his angel.

With her senses overwhelmed, Angelique shivered at their closeness and the wanton urge this man stirred. Her body firmly pressed against him spurred her palms slide down his muscled chest, over his taut stomach and along his narrow hips. Want of what this nightwalker held against her on several occasions, tortured her with, offered, yet failed to surrender stirred her inner fires. His hand rubbed the small of her back and kept her lower body snug against his

groin while his other hand on her upper back pushed her breasts against his powerful chest. Tentative, she lowered her arms. "I, um, didn't mean to get —"

"I don't mind us this close," Nicholas answered softly. "I find it quite nice."

Her hand rubbed his powerful arms. She truly loved the feel of his hard muscles and the texture of his skin. With her hands rested on his muscled chest, she welcomed the steady rise and fall of his patient breaths. An exertion of slight pressure urged his release. His compliance appreciated, she stepped back. "I don't think this is a good idea. Water drowns fire and air erodes earth."

He brushed his lips across the corner of her mouth. "Just as fire feeds on air and earth drinks water, but you win."

Angelique shivered at the feel of his arousal and, her smile uneasy, stepped back. It became harder to fight what this nightwalker did to her senses. "I'm a bit tired." His hand captured hers and the warmth of his palm danced shivers along her spine.

Nicholas led her to the bed and, affectionate, tucked her in. "Take a nap." He kissed her forehead.

She reached out and discovered empty space. "I —"  
"There's no need to apologize."

His voice came from across the room. Angelique realized she never heard him leave her side. The shut of the door announced his absence.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nicholas stormed out the sliding glass door and soared into the darkened sky. The feral lust that raged through his veins needed burned off. As his flight reached high into the darkness of night, he turned and plummeted toward the ground then arched back into the air.

On many occasions he patiently studied his angel. *I have little doubt she will welcome my gift, but do understand her refusal is an effort to protect me and the twins.* He dared not reveal how everything about her enticed his sexual appetite, but remained concerned her playfulness could be his undoing.

Innately aware her fear might rile his blood and that was not his want, Nicholas equally worried the sight of her blood might push him beyond the brink of control. A control he never lost. Yet. His urges reined in by concern, he enjoyed the rest of his flight.

His mind swam with the idea of both of them naked while he rolled over. The image of his hands grinding her hips against his filled his mind. He groaned at the recollection of her womanly heat on his lower back. A savage tremor ripped through his body. Thoughts of plunging deep into her fiery tunnel

earned his visceral growl.

Composed with her, Nicholas enjoyed her experimental touch and inquisitive thoughts greatly. What he wished to tell her was that if it kept it up, he would return the gesture and resolve her curiosity. He refrained for fear of spooking her for his angel would come around in time.

His return home ended by a near soundless boot scrape on the deck, his entrance quiet, he glanced at the card-playing twins. He entered the bedroom, quietly shut the door behind him and leaned against it. The toss and turn of her body held his gaze. Saddened when her arms pushed away something no longer wanted, he crossed the floor and sat beside her hip.

Angelique rapidly tossed from side-to-side then flung her arm against his leg. "No!" Again, she turned away, her voice a mere whisper, "Please, don't."

Her strike ineffective, Nicholas leaned closer. "Shhh, I'm here." He heightened his link with her in an attempt to see her dream.

"Stay back!"

He stroked her cheek. "Angelique?"

Angelique tensed. "No!"

Nicholas grabbed her shoulders and gently shook her. "Wake up."

She clutched his arms. "You don't want to do this!"

Anger and fear alternated through her voice and across her face. Her eyes flew open, filled with the same haunting emptiness as before. He released her and drew back his hand, but truly did not wish to strike. "Angelique, *please*."

"So be it." Angelique reached out, growled and pressed her palm against his chest.

Nicholas stared into her eyes, his concern the reason the tear trickled down her cheek. "Why?"

"Forgive me." She unleashed an electrical charge through her hand. The spell intended to hurt him reflected back into her body. Her ear-piercing scream shattered the night as she threw back her head, dropped her arm and fell unconscious against the bed.

A quick glance down at his chest revealed the now bright blue-white outline of the shielding hex symbol previously placed there by her hand. It faded to invisible. Impressed and bemused, he cocked his head. "What did you do to me before and what did you *try* to do?" He slowly trailed his forefinger across her lips. "You protected me from your own abilities, sweetheart. Does this mean you feel something for me?" Ever gentle, he shifted her body, climbed into bed and cuddled up with his angel. "What is there between us, Angel?" Soft feminine breaths relaxed him until the woman in his arms stirred with the rise of the sun.

Her half-stretch halted, Angelique carefully lifted his arm. She rolled from the bed, gathered some clean clothes and showered.

Nicholas observed her every move until the bathroom door hid her from his gaze. *Should I tell her about how well her hex worked or not?* He disliked her discomfort at waking cuddled against his side, but enjoyed her finding it familiar enough not to scramble away. Ever aware of her, he propped up on his elbow

and watched her return and sit on the bed. The T-shirt hid nothing from his eyes and her shorts demanded his investigation. "Good morning."

Her heart skipped a beat at the deep warm greeting. She glared in his general direction. "I need to tie a bell around your neck."

He stealthily eased closer. "Now why would you want to do such?"

Angelique crossed her arms over her breasts. "So I know where you are."

His voice deepened to husky, "Then I wouldn't be able to do this." Nicholas grabbed her wrist, pulled her over his body into the bed. With her figure tucked beside his, he pinned her, slipped his knee between her legs and pressed his groin against her upper thigh. Ever so gentle, he kissed the supple mound hidden creamy white flesh. The lack of a bra brushed a hardened bud against his cheek and surged a tremor through his veins. He buried his face in the deep valley of her cleavage. "Don't move, Angelique."

His voice deep, compelling and enticing, her name a mere breath that warmed her, she briefly froze. His lips sprinkled kisses over her exposed skin followed by his tongue's slow lick of a titillating trail to her throat. Her moan soft, she pushed against his shoulders. "Nicholas, let me go."

"Ummm." He slid his body up hers and pressed his rigid need against her hip. His tongue trailed a seductive path over the hollow of her throat. "Delicious." The affectionate nuzzle of her shoulder led to her neck. Want and hunger vied. "Is that a

request or an order?"

"Both," Angelique squirmed.

Reluctant, Nicholas enjoyed the prowl of his gaze the length of her figure. His inner fires raged. "You win."

"I do?"

"For now." On his feet, he pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "*Only* for now." He grabbed his clothes and strode for the shower.

\* \* \* \*

Thankful the sound of the running water camouflaged, Angelique wanted him in a way she didn't comprehend, needed him in a way she didn't understand and his lack of cooperation drove her crazy. *If I start one more time and that man stops, no matter what I say or do, I'll scream! If I knew what to do I'd throw him on the bed and have my way with him. If I knew what to do.*

She jumped at the sudden thump of a dropped plastic bottle in the shower. Off the bed in a flash, she trod to the kitchen, rounded the corner and encountered a warm wall. Her fingertips rested against the muscled chest while she studied the mixed scent in hopes of detecting the stronger. "Zane?"

"Hmmm." Matt mumbled, "Close."

Zane whispered, "You called?"

"Telling you two apart is nearly impossible, but I *will* figure it out." Angelique sensed movement from both twins, but failed ascertainment of a mental



image. She welcomed how harmless they were. To her.

Matt asked, "Coffee?"

"Here." Zane guided her hand to the warm liquid.

"Thank you." Angelique accepted the cup, stepped from between the living barriers and made her way to the sliding glass door. Outside, she touched the railing and leaned on it, her face lifted to enjoy the sun's warmth.

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas showered and donned a pair of soft, barely faded jeans, which rode low on his hips and contoured his muscled legs. His shirt unbuttoned, he strode into the kitchen and grabbed a cup of coffee. He stepped onto the deck and, his gaze locked on her, ever so slightly lowered the shield until her actions signified a response.

Angelique turned her head. "Nicholas?"

"Right here."

"I sensed you."

"Yes." Nicholas stepped to her side.

Angelique rubbed her cheek against his arm. "How?"

"I lowered the shield."

"You really are taking chances with me."

"I didn't drop it. I simply lowered it so you would sense me." Nicholas leaned close. "You said you hated feeling helpless and since our ability to shield ourselves makes it such for you, I figured if I lowered it bit by bit, you'd be all right." He never intended

harm.

Angelique enjoyed his company. "How long did it take?"

"I was very vigilant of your reactions. About five minutes." He chuckled softly. "Did I go too fast?"

"No." She truly was pleased. "Just thoughtful as always."

"The twins can do the same thing so you can track them." Enticed by her scent, Nicholas inhaled deep.

"Like they would do anything of the sort." Angelique giggled. "Besides, I think they like being devious."

"Ouch." Matt snickered.

"She pegged you." Zane chuckled.

Angelique laughed. "That statement was targeted at *both* of you."

Matt quipped, "Touché."

"Bite you, brother," Zane huffed.

Nicholas cleared his throat. "Keep it up, boys, and I'll devise a punishment suitable for both of you."

Angelique sensed his wickedness. "Like what?"

"They don't *want* to find out." He ushered her back inside.

Laughter filled the room as the group sat around the table and enjoyed a quick, light breakfast, which proceeded into a hand of cards.

Directed into the nightwalker's lap, Angelique fought to ignore the pleasurable sensation of his touch. His chest pressed against her arm and she longed to push her back against him, but feared the placement of her hips in such a position.

While his hands caressed her thighs, Nicholas

informed her of the drawn card. He wished to turn her around, her legs astride his lap, her feminine warmth pressed against him, his lips locked with hers in passion.

Zane and Matt remained alert and rattled off played cards. The game ended a few hours later with the twins claiming the most wins and departing.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

With no desire to move, Nicholas caressed her thighs, his cheek rested against her shoulder. "You feel good." He envisioned one hand under her shirt, her soft mound cupped, his thumb caressing her sinful peak while his other hand skated inside her shorts beneath her panties. The idea of his finger delivering a gentle massage shifted to his finger's plunge inside her warm and welcoming passage. A powerful surge of feral energy ripped through his body. What he desired to do and what the angel allowed were not the same. Yet. Racked by a shudder, he sought control of the intensity of heat he exuded.

Nervous, Angelique fidgeted. "Nicholas—"

"Hush. I need to hold you for a moment." He reined in his desire then released her to stand. His gaze followed her rise.

"I can't get involved. It'll never work. It never can." She reached for the counter.

Aware her body vibrated with desire and need for him, Nicholas hesitated then followed her into his bedroom. He opened the bedroom windows. Cool air circled the room. His unbuttoned shirt fluttered in the

breeze. "I want you." Long strides carried him to the door. "I would do whatever you asked of me."

Angelique leaned against the wall near the bathroom, her whisper soft, "Do you really want me?"

His hand frozen on the door knob, he pivoted, shut the door and locked it. "More than you know or are willing to believe," he answered gutturally, the distance between them crossed in two strides.

"I thought you left."

Halted before her, Nicholas raised his hand and caressed her cheek. "If you don't want me to hear or know it, don't speak or think it." His thumb gently traced her lips.

"I didn't think you would." Angelique trembled uncontrollably.

"You have nothing to fear from me." He moved closer, his breath warm on her face. "I would never hurt you. You should know that by now." Ever gentle, he nuzzled her neck.

She tilted her head to one side. "Nicholas."

Drawn toward urges difficult to control, he inhaled her scent. Aromas of life and blood, rainstorm and roses, innocence and desire ignited his senses. His forearms propped against the wall on either side of her, he pressed his body close. The length of her lithe figure against his unleashed a powerful desire and the beat of his pulse thudded through his veins. He whispered against her neck, "Angelique, this is more than I can stand. Much longer and I'll not be able to deny myself that which makes you who you are."

Angelique swallowed hard. "Then don't hurt me."

"Never." His growl soft, he grasped her shoulders and ran his palms down her arms. Ever so slow he licked her throat. The pulse of her heart throbbed against his tongue. He groaned against her flesh, kissed her neck then moved to her lips. "Do you realize what you do to me?"

She fisted his hair. "No, but I don't want to stop."

Nicholas grabbed her hand and pried free before her hold undid all of his control. "Don't, please." Her hands pinned over her head, his breaths ragged, he rubbed the tip of nose along her jaw line. "I'll ask you once and *just* once." He came to her mouth, his whisper throaty, "Are you sure?"

Angelique shivered. "Yes."

Her hands firmly against the wall, he held his ground. "Don't move." With his eyes closed, he determined if lust or something else directed his course and discovered a gentle, softer power, yet stronger and more stable. He pressed his mouth against hers, slipped his tongue inside her parted lips and tenderly, yet hungrily, fed on her like he did in the kitchen. *She tastes wonderfully alive and she is mine.* Euphoria enveloped as he orally explored, his every stroke intended seduction. *Mine.*

Her moans wanton need, she wiggled her hands. She wanted to grab him, hold him tight and meld into his body.

Nicholas responded with growls of lustful hunger. Unable to get enough of her, his eager, yet steady kiss pursued. He slid his palms down her arms toward her shoulders. Silken soft flesh stirred his inner fire like nothing before. The encountered material earned

his growl. His palms glided down and settled on her waist.

The bottom of her shirt caught by his thumbs, he slipped his hands under the material and, his every move seductive, eased his palms up her sides. Reluctant, he broke free of her lips long enough to pull the T-shirt over her head then recaptured her hands, pinned them over her head and averted her possible protest. Adoration of her lacked bra brief, he returned to her mouth and devoured her gasp. He coaxed her yield again with his kiss.

Unhurried by her surrender, Nicholas trailed his palms down her arms, but this time paused beside her breasts. Her delightful mounds cupped, he adored how well such perfection fit in his hands. He brushed his thumb over the protruding nipple and deepened their kiss. The hardened bud his thumb caressed beckoned his mouth. Their oral embrace broken, he lowered his face and rubbed his chin over the silken flesh of her shoulder. "If you wish me to stop, now is the time to do so."

Angelique shook her head. "No."

A soft growl rumbled in his chest. "There will be no stopping." He pressed his body against hers, his hardness pushed against her hip. Hungry, his tongue licked down her throat and paused in the deep valley as he knelt and captured a taut pink bud in his mouth. Desperate with need for her, he teased and he explored every part of that sinful peak. His soft sucks turned eager as his unoccupied hand caressed her other mound.

Her back arched, she grasped his shoulders and

halfheartedly pushed him back. His cessation elicited a whimper. She abruptly tugged him close for his touch filled the emptiness that long haunted, sated a need which unsettled and appeased a hunger she couldn't. "More, yes... more."

A protective growl rumbled in his throat. *I will take her... I will possess her... I will own her... she is mine.* His tongue licked and lapped a path while Nicholas changed mounds to suck the delicate bud that begged for his attention. With one knee on the floor beside her foot and his other against her opposing leg, he held her in place while he skillfully popped loose the button on her shorts and unzipped them.

Her nails dug into his back racked him with a tremor. Leisurely trailed tiny nips and licks guided his path lower on her sweet body. Still restrained by that stronger, more stable feeling, he cherished how this angel stirred his hunger, fire and passion. He loved the taste of her flesh and circled her navel with his tongue. His seductive kiss of her belly accompanied the slide of his palms down the outside of her thighs and back up again where his hands slipped under her shorts and inside her panties. With her buttocks cupped, he eased forward until her feathery hair tickled his thumbs.

Angelique instinctively pushed him away. "Nicholas, I..."

"Trust me, Angelique, please." Nicholas held her in place for he would beg if need be, but hoped the angel yielded freely. Her muscles relaxed and he welcomed her consent with growled approval. The heat of his breath against her lower stomach scattered



gooseflesh across her body. He licked and nipped his way to the top of her open shorts. His hands caressed her thighs while his tongue savored delicate skin just above her panties. With her distracted by his oral assault, he hooked his finger over the crotch of both her shorts and panties then yanked the bothersome articles of clothing to the floor.

Startled, she pressed her back against the wall, but couldn't find her voice.

He nuzzled her stomach. "Give yourself to me, Angelique. I won't hurt you." His breath soft against her skin, he held her hips to prevent her escape, but regretted her trembling.

Angelique shuddered. "I—I'm scared."

On his feet in an instant, Nicholas placed his hands on her waist. "I know. Do you *wish* to stop?" Truly uncertain of his reaction if her answer were yes, he steeled his every nerve.

"I don't... Part of me does and part of me... part of me doesn't."

His inhaled breath deep, he placed his forehead against hers and sighed. Certain now he would stop if the angel wished, he kissed her cheek. "The choice is yours."

Angelique wanted to continue, desired him, needed him. "Don't to stop."

"Kiss me." Nicholas flicked his tongue over her lips and coaxed for a mere second before his eager mouth sought and claimed hers. The wrap of her arms around his neck compelled him pull her closer for a long, deep kiss. He trembled at their torrid duel, but couldn't get enough. When her leg slid up the

outside of his, he cupped her bare backside and effortlessly lifted her until his stomach wedged between her thighs. Her feminine heat seared his senses and his mind spun. Their oral embrace broken as her head innately flung back, his hand intercepted and cushioned the blow the wall intended.

She buried her face against his neck. "Please."

Her desperate need overwhelmed his wits and her willingness to stay surged relief through his veins. "Anything, Angelique." Nicholas pulled her closer and held her tight. "I was so sure you'd pull away from me." With one hand under her backside and her waist embraced, he carried her to the bed then released her to stand. "Climb into the bed and I'll come to you." His gaze followed her to the middle. He slid in beside her, propped up on his elbow and, while his hand rubbed her stomach and hip in a seductive caress, whispered softly, "Give yourself to me. There will be no regrets."

Angelique tugged him closer. "I'm yours."

Nicholas claimed her mouth as his hand gripped her waist and his thumb caressed her side. Their kiss broken moments later, he licked her throat and savored the delightful beat of her pulse until he nipped her shoulder. The rake of her nails on his biceps compelled his gentle graze of her flesh. He lapped the valley between her beautiful breasts as his hands caressed the perfect mounds and his thumbs massaged taut buds. Seductive feathery kisses down the center of her belly marked his teased path.

She fisted his hair and the buck of her hips elicited a feral growl. "Nicholas!"

Her responses adored, he worked his enticing magic over her body with his hands, mouth and tongue. It thrilled him when his actions made her senses spiral, her mind whirl, her heart pound and her blood pump wildly. Appreciative of her voluptuous body, he sat back on his haunches and removed his shirt. His gaze swept over her sexy figure. The discarded article tossed onto the floor, he rapidly undid his jeans. "Beautiful."

Angelique moved to cover her nakedness. "What are you doing?"

"No." Nicholas grabbed her hands and pinned them at her side. "You're the most beautiful woman I ever saw. You have such perfect curves. Your body fits to me as though we were meant for each other." Her hands released, he stood and removed his jeans. "You have no idea how beautiful you are, do you, Angel?" He adored her blush.

"No one..." the words faded as her voice broke.

"Ever told you so." He dropped his jeans, climbed back into the bed and slid his shoulders between her knees. "Let me show you how physically beautiful you are to me, Angelique. Later I'll show you how much more beautiful you are to me in so many other ways." Slow and gentle, he eased up to the silken hair that taunted him as his shoulders urged her legs apart and his forearms slipped under her backside then over her lower abdomen. His strength kept her in place while his fingers gently parted her nether folds and, ever so tender, kissed her sweet little pearl.

"Nicholas!" Angelique clutched a handful of his hair.

"Give to me," Nicholas whispered against her sweet clit.

The heat of his breath elicited her buck and she shuddered. The fact her vocalization drove him on compounded the situation since his actions made her so vocal.

His lips encircled her hooded pearl for a long and tender kiss as his tongue massaged with the intent to show her bliss. A long, slow stroke delivered the length of her folds, he relished her pleasurable shiver. Passion intensified his oral caress until his tongue plunged into her velvet warmth. He repeatedly stroked and enjoyed her delectable flavor while his mouth worked hungrily, his lips devotedly and his tongue diligently.

Her pleasure undeniable, Angelique screamed her release and climbed to new heights of ecstasy.

Her hips squirmed and thrust upward, Nicholas held her and fed greedily on her nectar until his eager pursuit soon provided another helping. His arms pinned her hips and held her body at his whim until he propelled her into an ultimate climax and beyond. The desperation of her squirm urged him to continue his dynamic strokes and persistent laps.

"No more, Nicholas" She gasped. "Please. I can't take anymore!"

"Angelique." Scattered kisses led him up her body until he stopped, his stomach wedged between her thighs and pressed against her velvety nest of curls to lick and suck each sinful peak. Alert to her, he eased up her body until a mere instant from penetration. As her hips pushed toward him, he pressed his hardness

slowly, yet firmly, against her maidenhead. Ready to slide into her, he knew the briefly intense pain associated with the loss of virginity inevitable. He quickly penetrated and her sudden gasp ripped through him.

Buried deep inside her, he whispered each word between a tender kiss on her shoulder and neck. "I couldn't do anything about that, but will make up for it. I promise." He affectionately nuzzled her neck. His kiss passionate, he slowly stroked her inner walls several times. Their oral embrace broken, his lips lingered against hers. "Let me kiss away the pain."

"The pain's gone," she whispered raggedly. Fearful of his loss, she gripped him tight.

"I'll make certain. I promise to come right back." He slid down her body, nestled between her thighs a second time and firmly held her hips. His tongue delved deep inside, hungry to taste her very special essence for that precious substance would forever protect him if someone forced her, or his angel chose on her own, to use her magic against him. It would also empower him to protect her from someone with similar magic. The precious end of her virginity savored, he cherished the essence no one else would ever taste, but him.

Desperate to escape his probing tongue, she squirmed and bucked. "Mercy! I'm begging, please."

With her scent enjoyed, he wiped his chin with his hand then kissed his way up her body. His lightest touch earned her quiver and he treasured each precious second. Starved for her, he smothered any budding objections with a tender, but hungry

exploration of her mouth. Her responsive body melted into his when his veined want nudged. Certain of her readiness, he eased forward.

She pulled at him. "All of you."

Slow and easy, he slid in and out, his pace increased with every smooth thrust while his body moved in time with hers. Her rhythm surpassed, he pounded deeper until her climax heightened him. Captivated by the intensity of her passion, his pumping dynamic, he brought her to sheer ecstasy, plunged his tongue into her mouth and lengthened her rapture with his kiss. He joined her at the very last minute and filled her with his seed then milked them dry.

Nicholas propped on his elbows, but remained embedded inside heaven. His fingers lightly caressed her shoulders and neck as he kissed the valley between her mounds and delighted in her shivers. Her breathing slowed, he smiled. "Are you all right?"

Angelique sighed blissfully. "Nothing ever felt so wonderful. I'm fine. How about you?"

"Perfect." *How do I tell her I savored her blood and should I tell her why first?*

She caressed his face. "What's bothering you?"

Nicholas nuzzled her neck. "The other night you had a nightmare and it was bad."

"I'm haunted by a nightmare me and it's getting worse." Angelique frowned.

His touch tender, he rested his cheek against hers. "Tell me." Seized by her involuntary shudder, he coaxed, "Tell me."

"It grows worse with each approaching Dark of the

Moon." She explained the various shapes, sounds and scents throughout her dream. "It's always the same, yet reveals more of itself each time the moon fades. Most nights I can ignore it, but..." She shook her head. "Not with the Dark of the Moon."

Nicholas discerned several things, but withheld his knowledge. "Will you let me in?"

Angelique wiggled her hips. "Let you in?"

He growled long and deep. "*Not* that. Into your dream."

"Why would you want to do that?"

Nicholas pushed a wisp of hair from her face. "I'm a dream handler. Perhaps I can find the missing pieces, see more than you or catch something you missed." He adored her trusting smile.

Angelique shrugged. "If you can."

"Oh, I can, but I needed your permission." He rolled from her and tugged her against his side. "Now rest and, come the right time, I'll see what the dream realm has in store for you."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The lunar cycles came full circle with the moon waxing and waning as Nicholas prepared for the last three days when no moon lit the sky. He did everything in his power to entertain and keep her patient for in this mental exploration, he intended to discern what troubled her and how he might help.

Nearly a month passed as time marked the point her nightmare held power. Their bond strengthened over the past several weeks and he grew unusually close, his need and want of her passionate, his desire to help untouchable.

The perfect night closed in and Nicholas stood ready to walk amidst her dreams during the heart of the Dark of the Moon. He drew her to him, his touch gentle, his passion tender, his love expressed to her for a lengthy time.

Angelique remained worried. "You're sure about this?"

He affectionately nuzzled her neck. "Beyond any shadow of doubt."

"And into shadow is where this dream will take us." His lips brushed the tip of her nose.

Nicholas kissed her lips. "And I will be there,



sweetheart."

Angelique shivered with fear. "You won't leave me?"

"No, my sweet angel." He rolled onto his back, brought her to rest on his body and hugged her tight. "I will never leave you to face any danger on your own. The world's been unfair to you for a long time and in far too many ways. You are a woman who easily adjusts to the complications fate lobs into your path. I will always be where you need me."

"Thank you."

"Roll over." Nicholas snuggled up to her back, his arm securely around her waist, his breath warm on her shoulder until her body relaxed and her eyes closed. Sleep carried her into another world. Her even breaths soon turned to restlessness as her body tensed within his arms. His hold on her tight, he gently delved into her mind and saw the vision that terrorized his angel.

Angelique slammed her fists into the unseen barrier between her and the scene. Helpless, she cried, "Stop! Please, stop. Leave them alone!"

*Nicholas observed the ceremony. The faces of the couple were a man he'd often seen accompanying the woman known as Summer in the circle's center. The astral plane opening, the demon grabbed the woman. The man was thrown from the circle by an invisible force. The circle weakened, but held, and the woman vanished. He watched the candles flicker as the besom fell and kept the circle open. The man fled. The plaguing nightmare ended.*

With the dream witnessed from her perspective, he understood her terror. He mentally soothed her,

cleared her thoughts and coaxed her to sleep. He understood why the twins came. The dreamed couple was her twin accompanied by a stranger, the horror was inevitable destruction and the beast was someone of his personal confrontation. His caress assured his angel slept soundly.

*I have looked upon heaven, battled hell and stand upon earth. Nicholas kissed her shoulder. I experience bliss in her arms, feel rapture within her body, see paradise within her eyes and savor the ecstasy this woman gives me. I can end it all a simple sacrifice of the dreamer beside me, the woman I am fast falling in love with, the lady I am willing to risk my heart for and the witch who holds a power over me. "Never," he snarled into the dark of the night. "Not now, not ever. If you desire a sacrifice, it will be my choice by my hand."*

A growl rumbled from the darkness and stirred his angel.

Angelique snuggled closer. "Nicholas?"

"Hush, it was only thunder. Sleep." Compliments of her precious given virgin blood, Nicholas knew the woman at his side could not deny his persuasion. He wished to ease her torment, take away her fears and protect her from that which haunted. The fact he was a vampire allowed his discernment of someone, or rather something, which slipped through the veil in search of her and he was a bonus.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Angelique stretched and felt the heaviness of the afternoon air. "Waking up to you is interesting."

Nicholas caressed her belly, her nakedness a magnetic lure to his every sense. "I could say the same, sweetheart." With a gentle squeeze of her side, he became serious. "We need to talk then involve the twins. Being a dream walker allowed me to see into your mind during your nightmare and discern something very disturbing. Someone is crying out for help to you through your dream."

Her lower lip trembled. "Electra."

"Yes. The dreams are increasing in intensity as her cries grow in strength. She needs you." He understood her loss.

Infuriated by her helplessness, Angelique seized a handful of his hair. "And how am I supposed to get to her?"

Unfazed, Nicholas bent his head to her whim. "Through the door left open on the Blood Moon. She tried to right a wrong and was trapped by a demon with no intentions of releasing her until he holds you in his grasp. She reversed the candles. I can stand

between you and the beast if you're willing to attempt the rescue, but it's best dealt with on the next Blood Moon in October."

Her fingers relaxed. "The room. Reversed how?"

"Release my hair, witch." Her compliance rewarded with his chuckle, he rolled from the bed and tugged on his jeans. "Recreate the spell the right way and confine the incorrect circle then close the original before you close the one you will create. She had the black, white, gold and silver where red, green, blue and yellow should have been. This caused the opening of the other side into this side. Bob kept Electra's apartment untouched."

Angelique sat up. "I don't know how."

Nicholas folded his arms over his chest. "Yes, you do. I'll guide and protect you. That which holds power over your sister, seeks you and, in conjunction, me."

"What makes you so certain of my capabilities?"

His leap across the bed put him face-to-face with the angel. "I know you, witch." With predator senses on full alert, he grasped her upper arms and brought her to stand as he did. "You are the spirit, the directive element when all forces are joined. You can take what is given, realign it and send it to do your bidding instead of what it was intended to do."

Angelique queried, "Can I?"

"More than you realize. Do you know what you did to the twins?" Her silent declination his answer, Nicholas embraced her close. "You traced a sigil on my chest while we were in bed one night." He relayed the incident of her doings to the twins in

every detail. "You discerned and utilized the two elements most offensive to them. You need to ward them against others when they assist you. I am familiar with just how much twins are hell in reality, but you gave them a taste of it in the here and now."

She inhaled a shaky breath. "Tell me what to do."

Gentle, he pushed the hair from her face. "I'll gather everything for you tonight. You can help me. Let's find the boys." He tucked her panties in her hands. "After you conceal that delightful figure."

Angelique dressed with the help of him handing her clothes. "You'll spoil me."

Severely tempted to hinder her with an occasional grope, Nicholas refrained due to the situation's seriousness. He ushered her into the kitchen. "Zane, I need you and Matt to gather the needed items in preparation for two warding sigils, the casting of a circle and a journey into the dream realm." With a nod from each twin, he prepped a quick brunch, enjoyed it with her then guided her to the deck. "If you accept my gift of sight, you could see my eyes, Angelique, just as you desire."

She smiled. "Do you know all my thoughts?"

He kissed her cheek. "As well as your dreams. Accept my gift?"

Angelique leaned back against his muscled body. "Yes. If it doesn't hurt. Much."

Nicholas kissed her shoulder then let his lips rest against her sweet flesh. "I'll do my best. I need about half an hour. Will you wait for me?" His whispered words and warm breaths skittered gooseflesh across her body.

"You're going to feed and have little choice." The caress of his hair against her neck declared his nod. "I'll wait here."

"Thank you." He kissed her shoulder again and knew the angel would never feel him leave until after he did. With a quick sweep of the outlying area and his usual source hidden where drug dealers kept their stock, he inhaled. It wasn't easy to find an uncontaminated supply, but on this night, he could ill afford a mistake. The selected drug lord clean, it seemed unlikely the brute would end up reported as missing. His sweep down from the cover of night stealthy, he effortlessly seized the wretch and ravenously ate his share.

Nicholas returned home and found his angel right where he left her, enjoying the moon's caress. The fact the woman never sensed him land behind her, earned his smirk. He gently seized her waist and snuggled her firmly back against his body. Her squeal silenced by his hand, he smiled at the relief, which flooded her at his familiar embrace.

Her agitation clear, Angelique moved his hand. "Not amusing. Can I face you?"

"This is better because if I take you this way, I won't use precious time sating my virile need." His fingertips grazed her shoulder while he moved her hair to drape over her other shoulder, his whisper and caress soft, "Does my angel dislike surprises?" He offset her senses with a seductive kiss on the curve between her neck and shoulder.

Delightful shivers raced down her spine. "N— I mean, only from you." She placed her hand on the

top of his head and pressed his mouth against her neck. Every part of her wanted him in more ways than she could fathom. Her eyes closed, she moaned wantonly.

"Don't think. Feel the pleasure. Let yourself go. Let me into you." Nicholas calculatingly trailed his tongue the length of her jugular vein. "Hmmm." His lips brushed her skin as his words caressed her flesh, "You smell delightful. And the things I want to do to you. I want to savor your celestial body in every way."

Her breath uneven, Angelique recalled the rapture the nightwalker bestowed upon her their first night. She adored his velvety voice, "Nicholas..."

Pleased by her responsiveness, he lightly grazed her neck with his teeth. "Keep your eyes closed until I say otherwise." He affectionately nuzzled her shoulder. "Offer me your neck for it is through this link you will use my eyes."

Her mind enraptured, she tilted her head. "Take me."

Nicholas tightened his arm around her waist, cupped her chin with his other hand and locked her firmly in place. The idea of fear ripping her free, her flesh torn in response, coursed an involuntarily shudder through his veins. He summoned his fangs and lowered his lips to her neck. His tongue sensuously caressed the rapidly pulsing beat of her lifeblood as it pumped through her body while an expelled breath warmed her skin.

Granted the gift to show her the world through his eyes by his first feeding, he decided enduring the

price of a second feeding to prevent hurting her more than the moment his teeth sank into her throat, worth it. With his mind focused on pain absorption, he bit fast and hard. The intensified effect disregarded, he concentrated on the sweet taste of her blood as his tongue massaged and brought forth a broken moan from the angel in his arms. His groan deep, he savored only what was needed, licked closed the small puncture wounds then kissed her neck. He pressed his lips to the slightly darkened suckle mark on her flesh.

Angelique leaned against his body. "I barely felt anything."

Nicholas embraced his angel. "That was my objective. You can open your eyes, but your perspective will be through mine. It'll take a minute or two to adjust," he warned softly.

Her eyes fluttered open. She raised her hand and shielded herself from the sudden light of the full moon.

"Relax. We have a few hours before I must rest." Aware his powerful need to feed would be irresistible in about six hours, he tucked aside the despised thought. "I'll show you color." And he did. Every color he could find, he named. He showed her a pink daisy, a purple orchid, a black swamp, a gray horse, a yellow dog, a brown deer, all the things his angel never saw, all the things the lady in his arms wanted to see, all the colors nature made.

Angelique eagerly absorbed the sights around her, his eyes her window to the world. She laughed at the site of the blue water with waves of white foam.



"Show me more! Please, show me more."

"All you wish." Nicholas held her close and soared into the night. Long ago he selected the area he lived in due to the lack of intruders, especially the young and wild summer tourist and the casually relaxed snowbirds. His choice almost as perfect as the woman in his arms, he smiled.

For the next several hours, he showed her the white sand beaches of Marco Island then stopped at the edge of Shell Island and helped her collect her first sea shell. Warm, salty sea air gently whipped their hair while he guided her through the air over crystal clear water. The color of the sand reflected upward and intermingled with the ocean's natural hues and created an inspirational aqua. He focused on the moon's reflection revealing schools of fish, which lapped at the surface. Fragrant smells of nature permeated the air as they passed over flowers of every size, shape and color.

Angelique clasped his strong arms. "It's all so beautiful!"

Nicholas whispered softly, "Did you see everything you desire?"

"All except you."

"We need a mirror for that." He headed home and stood them on the deck. Assured he provided her time to absorb what his eyes transferred, he eased toward the bedroom.

"Your home is beautiful." Angelique stared at her surroundings.

"Thank you." Nicholas guided her to the bathroom mirror and stood behind his angel. Gifted with

vampiric abilities, he, at one time, considered his inability to touch death a curse for immortality had its pros and cons. "Don't move." He flipped on the light and gazed upon the reflective surface.

She gasped at the nightwalker's reflection. "By the Goddess!"

He chuckled warmly. "You said that before."

Angelique couldn't break her stare. "You are truly a handsome man!" She reached out, touched the mirror and traced the outline of his masculine features, his sexy smile, enticing brown eyes. His virile scent extremely alluring, she sighed. Panic swarmed with her faded vision. "Nicholas?"

Nicholas caressed her shoulders. "I can make it permanent if you join me in this immortality—" Hit by a sudden drain with a staggering impact, he clutched his stomach. His jaw clenched, he gripped the counter for he needed to avoid her scent and his hunger. "The man I fed on was weak. Summon the twins. Tell them I need to feed and fast." Staggered by feral need, he stumbled to the bed. "Go, witch!"

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Shaken, Angelique hurried into the living room. “Zane, Matt, he said he needs to feed!” A warm hand brushed her forearm.

Zane guided her across the floor. “Come sit.”

A chair brushed the back of her knee and she complied. “Will he be okay?” Soft thumps declared the other twin sprinted from the room then returned, his uneasiness evident by his tone.

Matt spoke, “I’ll get him a whore.”

Angelique leapt up. “For what?” A wind gush announced his pivot.

“He’s weak and needs blood.”

*The purer the blood the better.* She didn’t relish the thought of her lover drugged or poisoned. “He can feed on me if he needs.”

Zane hesitated. “Wait a minute, woman. If we allow that, Nicholas will pitch a fit.”

Matt scoffed. “Fit? Try explosive fury.”

Angelique wished her threat more effective. “Either you tell me what needs done or I’ll do it on my own and deliberately mess up so you suffer even more.” The soft slide of metal against leather declared

a dagger drawn from a sheath.

Zane remained reluctant. "You'll need to slice a two inch cut on the inside of your wrist, but not on the main veins. Put it to his mouth and let him drink. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"He gave me a gift. It's only fair I return the favor." The warmth of his hand on her elbow guided her to stand.

He ushered her to the bed. "I dislike ultimatums. Sit." His hand slid down her forearm and captured the back of her hand in his palm. "At least let me make the incision so there's little harm to you."

Angelique shivered. "That's the least I can do for you."

"Let me find another source," Zane grumbled.

Determined, she shook her head. "*My blood.*" His disappointed sigh filled her ears as the edge of the dagger touched her flesh. The incision swift, she bit her lip to avoid crying out. Her wound touched to the cool lips of the weakened nightwalker's mouth. She shivered when his vampiric tongue hungrily lap at her sanguine liquid. "I'll be fine." At the sound of the twin's departure, she turned her attention back to the nightwalker partaking of her blood.

Nicholas forcibly seized his victim's arm, pulled her closer and drank deep the precious sweet life force, which met his demand. Guttural moans emanated during the feeding frenzy his mind swam in while greedy sucks delivered more of her life substance. His eyes flew open at the sudden realization of whom he devoured. He instantly stopped and his tongue coaxed her wound closed as,

ever gentle, his touch directed his collapsed angel into bed and close to his side.

Angelique snuggled into his warmth. "It didn't hurt. Much."

"Sleep, my love." Her comfort his primary concern, he situated her body and mentally lulled her mind into a restful haze then rose. He stormed into the living room. "*Who* is responsible?"

Matt stood. "I am."

Zane scoffed. "You wish. It was my knife."

"You're incapable of being responsible for anything, brother."

The sunlight guardian huffed, "Why is it every time I try to save your backside, you open your mouth?"

Nicholas snarled. "*Who* desires my wrath?"

Angelique slammed the bedroom door then reopened it. "Do I have your attention now?" Silence responded, but she banked on three gazes fastened in her direction. "Good. Who can sleep with all that ruckus?" She navigated her way to the couch and flopped on one end. "I chose to do what I did of my own free will with no influence so stop trying to blame the boys. Are you guys sure you aren't triplets?" The nightwalker's steps closed the distance.

"I assure you, we are not." He sat beside the angel. "What you did was a very dangerous risk. To *both* of us."

She brushed off his concern. "To whom? Stop worrying. At least I didn't have any afflictions and they didn't get into a bra-stuffing contest. Yet."

The room filled with relaxed laughter.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Authorities called off all searches and Angelique's monthly phone calls assured everyone everything possible was being done. Matt and Zane collected the needed items in a wicker basket while Nicholas taught Angelique various spells and objects used. Herbs were harvested with a bolline at the appropriate time and everything was cleansed and purified. Colored candles were marked with the symbol for the represented element and other such magical inscriptions.

Nicholas opened the basket and scanned the contents. Aware her power would reach its most effective when her menstrual cycle peaked on a particular moon, he remained thankful for their time together. "I suggest we strike while we have the greatest power on midnight at the height of the full Blood Moon. We have a few things to make tonight and several to learn by the moon's peak."

Angelique listened as several items announced being set out. Under his patient direction and the careful work of her nimble fingers, she fashioned a pair of white sachet bags two inches wide by three inches long. His hand covered and guided hers when

she picked up the feathered quill and dipped the tip in the dove's blood. She wrote, 'Goddess, bless me here in this time, and there in eternity' on a strip of paper.

She added one twin's name, inserted a teaspoon of the empowered rosemary in one sachet, added the strip of paper, sewed it shut and handed it to the man whose name it contained. With the steps completed on another piece of paper, she changed the name. Her action repeated with the second warding bag, she delivered it to its owner.

"Matt, Zane, attach it inside your clothes. It'll help." Nicholas set a tome in her lap and guided her fingers to the bookmarks. "I have a few pages for you to read. This one is to protect you from an attack, this one is to allay fear in the line of an attack and this one is a general protection spell against evil spirits."

Angelique traced the raised words. "Braille?" His hand pushed a wisp of hair from her cheek.

He caught her trickling tear with his thumb. "If you prefer, I can loan you my eye—"

"No!" She nearly dropped the book. "I have no desire to risk you again."

"Your compassion touches me deeply, thief of my heart." His voice was a mere whisper, "I need you more that you can imagine, Angelique." Nicholas long fought the words and her closeness didn't help his denial.

Angelique lightly trailed her fingers over his face and imprinted his every feature on her mind. "I need you, too, Nicholas." His muscles tensed and she frowned when the nightwalker pulled away.

"Let me clean up." He collected the supplies into the basket and set it on the table. On his feet, he swept her into his embrace, pressed his face against her neck and inhaled her scent. He more than needed her, but the words he longed to say remained unuttered since he was cast aside. In truth, he didn't think it possible for someone to care about him in that way.

She slipped her arms around his neck and clutched him close. Her whisper was soft. "Take me to the bed and love me, Nicholas." His long strides carried her into his bedroom and the kicked shut door signified their aloneness.

Nicholas set her on her feet and stripped, but his gaze never left her luscious body. Her flung aside t-shirt and yanked off her shorts earned his possessive growl while he predatorily skulked the angel who undid his every sense.

Angelique shivered. "Nicholas."

Behind her, he nipped the nape of her neck, trailed scattered licks and kisses down her back then grazed her backside with his teeth. Her startled jump surged a tremor through his veins. Instantly on his hands and knees, he prowled a circle around her legs until positioned before his delightful feast. "Move back," he growled viscerally. Gentle, his cheek nudged her upper thigh until the backs of her legs bumped the bed. His firm push propelled her backwards where her sprawl left her defenseless, helpless and at his mercy. In a flash, he pinned her down, his weight heavy upon her as his mouth claimed her lips. He sensed her excitement.

Their kiss broken, Nicholas nipped his way to her



breasts where his hands leisurely massaged the luscious mounds while his mouth latched on and suckled each perfect bud. Her hands tugged at his hair and encouraged as his mouth unhurriedly placed tiny love bites down her body to her belly.

His knees braced him on the floor while his arms slipped under her rump and raised her hips to his mouth. He licked, teased and kissed her delightful hooded pearl. Her useless squirms and bucks in his grip mixed with her cries for mercy remained unheeded and her climax flowed. Greedy, he licked and lapped her silken folds then delved deep into the core of her heat. Hungry, he tongued and sucked until his angel surrendered the sweet nectar he craved.

Her every muscle tight, Angelique fisted his hair. "Nicholas!"

Her insistent urges disregarded, Nicholas slowly ended his hunger with a gentle kiss on her silken nubbin. He loved her shuddered response and unhurriedly slid up her body. With his hips wedged between her thighs, his words in much the same seductive manner as his action, he whispered, "Angelique."

The sound of her name from his lips elicited her groan. "Please..."

He came to her face, locked their mouths together and plunged his tongue deep. His oral investigation deep and gentle, he growled when his rigid shaft encountered her beckoning warmth. Sheathed in a single thrust, he fed hungrily on her gasp while his strokes, long and deep, pounded his desire into the

angel who held his heart.

Her pushed up hips met his in a surrender of all she was and welcomed all her lover offered. The feel of him around her, on her and in her adored, she cherished the feel of his mouth against her neck. His teeth grazed her shoulder and his hands explored her body.

His drive dynamic, he plunged her into a climax then unloaded his liquid passion deep inside the angel of his dreams.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Time closed in on the set deadline as the twins and couple prepared. Blades were honed, wits sharpened and instruments rechecked. The intention was for Angelique to repeat the original ritual the correct way and open a circle around the standing circle while under the guardianship of Nicholas, Matt and Zane. All hoped, with the gift of magic sight, that Angelique could close the fouled circle then the circle cast by her own hand as Nicholas guided with Zane guarding on her right and Matt on her left.

The evening of the full Blood Moon heightened. Nicholas and Angelique drove in his car to the bar while Matt and Zane followed on their motorcycles. Bob had ordered the bar closed for that night.

Nicholas unlocked the door, followed everyone inside then secured the door. With the keys in his jeans pocket, he silently directed everyone upstairs to the small apartment he occasionally used. Stripped in a flash, he donned his ceremonial loincloth and knee-high fringed boots then bedecked his body in the customary paint dream handlers wore when they crossed the veil between worlds to face something of

unknown power. After he and the twins finished dressing, he cleared his throat. "Matt, Zane, turn your backs." Upon their compliance, he retrieved a simple, unembellished white gossamer robe from the closet.

Angelique inhaled as the air moved past. The scent of sandalwood and bergamot soothed her senses.

He knelt. "I have something for you to wear, but you need to disrobe. The twins aren't looking. It's only —"

"I'd be happy to." She quickly undressed and shivered from the slight breeze that swept across her naked body. When the silky material slid against her flesh and caressed her in much the same way his lips did, she jumped. The embrace of a sash gently wrapped around her waist then tied in front earned her smile.

Nicholas admired the ceremonial gown's graceful trail over her supple figure like a cascading waterfall while bestowing ethereal appearance where it covered. With a solid back, the sides and front draped open and he adjusted the two front panels to glide over her breasts and entwine at her pubic region before its downward plunge. He shifted the material and exposed most of her shapely hip and much of her rounded backside to enhance the beast's temptation since the angel served more as a lure than a weapon in the beginning. His one hope for all was his belief in his ability combined with the twins' to protect.

With his broken sword unsheathed, he prepared to replace it with a simple long sword. Aware the clan would welcome him back if the blade were healed, he recalled how his full power came only after

banishment and vampirism. *I dealt with both aspects at the same time on my own.* It was difficult, but his undead mentor helped for nearly two centuries before turning him loose to find his way. In the village legends, he was savior and destroyer, but in truth, his mentor was the first. He looked at the blade and sighed softly.

"Nicholas?" Angelique listened intently to his explanation. The subtle whisper of steel simultaneously revealed from both sheaths of the twins caressed her ears. "So your sword should be like theirs?"

Nicholas guided her to kneel by the broken weapon. As her hand extended, he swiftly seized her wrist. "No. Although a dead blade, it can still hurt you."

She tugged her wrist from his hold. "And if I feel drawn to it?"

He kept his voice soft. "It's the weapon of a guardian. A useless guardian."

Angelique caressed his face. "To his clan? Perhaps. To me? Never." Warmth guided her hand to the cold steel. She trailed her fingers over the weapon and her touch faltered at the broken section. "It can be healed, Nicholas Von Buren. The elements can repair this injury and strengthen the inflicted weakness. Within this room are the abilities to right this wrong."

"She's correct," the haunting voice of an ancient carried across the room on a wind that came from nowhere. A wavering form shimmered. "As your vampiric teacher and an overseer from the clan, I could not intervene until the time was right." His

gaze fell on the woman. "I knew her when she entered the bar."

Confused, Nicholas furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?"

"Anything broken can be repaired. The twins have their own special magic. The veil will be weakest at the third stroke of midnight." He vanished.

He quietly watched the twins collect the broken blade and depart the room. "Of all the things..."

"Do we have a chance?" Angelique welcomed his embrace.

Nicholas held her tight against his body. "I hope so. If this evil escapes, it'll wreak havoc upon the world."

"We won't allow that."

He kissed her forehead. "I need you so much, babe."

Angelique clutched him close. "I need you, too."

Nicholas pulled Angelique into his lap and hugged her in an embrace meant to last a lifetime. The door opened and they reluctantly parted. Matt and Zane entered the room, placed the mended sword on the floor and crossed the blade with their own weapons. With his eyes closed and his hands keeping a beat, Zane sang the chant from long ago while Matt danced the ancient steps, his feet in tune with his brother's rhythm.

Together, the twins wove the olden magic of the shaman, medallion and feather within an unseen circle. Their song and dance unified the power that strengthened them. White sage smoke and scent filled the room. Matt and Zane used their hands and

feathers and directed the smoke to encompass Nicholas and Angelique and themselves. Nicholas handed Angelique the basket, sheathed his repaired Sword of the Familiar and the group headed for the archaic room.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Angelique shifted the basket on her arm, opened the door and stepped into the room's entrance. Force drew and pushed. Her foot touched the room's entry. Rage smelled of an indescribable rancid odor. Something slapped her face. Black, purple and green flooded her mind and swirled with red, yellow and blue. White pulsed in the distance and scattered the pattern. She pushed forward. Assailed by an enraged scream, she gasped as brute force sailed her backwards into the hall.

Her body violently thrown into his, Nicholas grunted when his back slammed against the wall. "What magic is this and by whose hand does it gain power?" With her held close, he pushed a wisp of hair from her face. The bruise quickly formed as blood trickled down her cheek. He trailed his thumb along the cut and willed it closed. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. What was that?"

"A dark force." He swept her into his arms. "Do you wish to stop?"

"No." Angelique scrambled to her feet, the nightwalker at her side. She cherished the way his warmth enveloped.



Nicholas praised, "You're a strong woman."

"Did the basket get dumped?"

"No." He scooped up the basket and put it in her hand. "Determination is a trait I greatly admire."

A toll from the clock tower of a nearby church reverberated across the land.

Angelique approached the door and stood until the third clang. Something wavered in reaction when she moved to the center of the room and set down the basket. It was uncanny how her mental vision enhanced images and revealed partial forms of things around her. Her slight vision, tainted by shimmering light along with hidden dark and shadowy effects, almost allowed her to see. Grateful for her lover's guidance, she lit the cinnamon and caraway incense then faced the northeast corner. With her whispered chant respectful, her words and steps directed, she marked off the ritualistic circle.

Each sacred candle, carefully selected for its color, purpose and perfection, anointed with oil and inscribed to bestow each with extra power during the chant awaited her touch. She placed the candles, gold for the Lord, silver for the Lady, black for protection and white for purification, in the proper position on the small covered table.

Angelique placed four more candles, yellow, red, blue and green, which represented the elements, in specific locations on the floor. She offered each candle to the direction, gracefully knelt and ritualistically placed it in the proper spot while she recited the witch's rune. Her steps started in the eastern quarter and proceeded with her intonation of the welcome

chant followed by her anointment of the air with consecrated oil.

She lit each candle and chanted the phrase that accompanied said color. "The color yellow, element of air, representing swords, direction of east, liken unto spring and partial to the realm of childhood. The color red, element of fire, representing wands, direction of south, liken unto summer and partial to the realm of youth. The color blue, element of water, representing cups, direction of west, liken unto autumn and partial to the realm of maturity. The color green, element of earth, representing coins, direction of north, liken unto winter and partial to the realm of old age."

Angelique uttered the first protection chant. "Two wicked eyes have overshadowed me, but three other eyes overshadow them, Maiden, Mother, Crone, they watch my flesh, my blood, my bone." With the words repeated three times, she added the intonation to avoid fear in the line of attack. "I stand in circles of light that nothing may cross." The unsheathing of her lover's sword whispered a warning.

A hate-filled voice hissed. "You are an intrusion into my world, witch." His gaze swept over her figure. "I think I could find pleasure in you," he almost purred. "And I will after I dismiss these weaklings."

She snapped, "I think not."

The tall, dark figure strode into view. "I've waited for you. Brother." Geoff scowled. "At least I thought that's what you were. You never returned. I've been trapped within this... dream, this domain, waiting for

your valiant rescue. It's given me time to plot my revenge and steal what I knew yours." He motioned around the weak circle within the larger circle just recently created. "I was to be free tonight with the rising of the Blood Moon and the final stroke of midnight, but apparently you found a whimpering little witch who thinks I can be trapped."

Nicholas protectively placed his blade in front of his adored angel. "This is the witch I was meant to be with. As for the rest, I was unwillingly yanked from the dream by an elder and I was prevented from returning within the needed time to find you. I was stripped of everything over your loss, brother."

The lustrous dark eyes glared from the shadows. "Did you, brother?"

"You know I did."

Mordecai, a tall misshapen being with long, black greasy hair, his physique gaunt, his eyes a pale silver, peeked in from the hall and scanned the room. "Grant me entry, witch, and I'll tell you of the man who abandoned the woman here before you to death's grip."

Angelique whispered the words that granted entrance while her hands opened the circle the pitiful creature seemed unable to cross of his own volition. "Enter." Upon his compliance, she closed the circle.

"Thank you." His putrid breath rank with the stench of carrion, he whispered, "The fleeing man was a local the woman liked. Needless to say, he died almost two weeks ago, his body twisted and mangled in a car accident." His back hunched over, he shuffled closer. His long, dirt-coated fingernails scraped the

floor as he picked up the fallen besom. "I want to go home and that wretched beast over there won't let me."

She gawked at her vision bringing into focus an image of herself with short hair. "Electra." She uttered the general protection spell against evil spirits. "Welcome thou fiery fiend! Do not extend further —"

A streak of lightning flew from the dark.

All three guardians simultaneously dropped to their knees with Matt and Zane beside her and Nicholas behind her, their raised swords crossed in front of her body. The intersecting spot drew and reflected the bolt back to its sender. A scream rent the air.

With a vicious growl, Nicholas leapt over one of the kneeled twins at her side. He smelled the faint scent of her impending menstrual cycle and recognized her power about to be unstoppable if nothing failed. "Guard my Angel for this is *no* brother of mine." His sword poised and ready, he lunged into the other world, his aim the blackened heart of his enemy.

Matt informed, "Mordecai, the creature you granted entrance, escaped when the besom held open the circle. You must close the old circle then the new one. Such must be done before this foulness leaves here or the world will be overwhelmed."

Zane continued, "His brother is Geoff. If he stops you, he will escape and wreak havoc on the earth. The veil between worlds may never close."

The fearless guardians held their ground for they understood one or all could pass between worlds and

could be just as easily be lost in said place forever. They didn't tell of the battle beyond mortal eyes between the realm of the living, guarded by Nicholas, and the domain of the nether world, ravaged by Geoff, nor how her presence drained the darkness of its power. Zane and Matt failed to include that they were her shields, Nicholas was her protector and Angelique was the hope amidst the dark.

Her senses helped clarify what her eyes didn't make clear as Angelique stared in stunned silence at the ferociousness of the nightwalker she trusted. A rush of air announced the twins rose and stood at her side while their softly murmured chant poured strength and healing into her lover.

Nicholas snarled and rapidly sliced through the black tentacles, which reached from the darkness behind his demented twin. The beast writhed and spewed forth a black substance that quickly faded. With a proficiency acquired through decades of dedicated training, his sword aglow with white-hot intensity, he rapidly cut down each rancid feeler threatening to claim his body.

Geoff laughed evilly. "They keep coming and coming, don't they, brother? Do you wish to know why? Because they are a wondrous force I created for you. Now deal with me." He summoned many more of the long, slender tentacles and aptly seized his nemesis. Several of the feelers secured his brother's powerful arms as one managed a strangle hold on the muscled throat.

The vampire snarled. "Think about—"

He laughed raucously. "Struggle all you want,

brother. Once they get a hold, it simply tightens. Guess what I have for your... what did you call her? Oh, yes, your *angel*?" He gestured to the woman behind him. "Come, my slave, deal with your pathetic sister and save me the trouble."

Entranced, Electra raised her hands, her voice eerie. "Release me, Angelique, I beg you. Kill me and set me free of this beast."

Geoff seized her arm and jerked her close. "No more foolish nonsense!" He roughly shoved her forward several feet. "Do as you are told."

Forced to submit to her master's will, she sadly uttered, "Air and fire joined as one, water and earth bound to one another, do my bidding and eliminate this force."

His maneuver swift, Zane absorbed the bolt of fiery air. "She will not make the same mistake twice, brother."

"The only way to end this is kill him." Matt speedily intercepted the incoming blast of muddy water.

Both twins knew the next combination would severely hurt either of them, if not both. They looked at the woman they stood now helpless to defend.

"I love you, Electra." Angelique didn't wish to hurt her sister, but this battle wasn't something she could afford to lose. The nightwalker she developed deep feelings for made it very clear many would suffer if this didn't end. Her resolve set to help her sister, her lover and the twin guardians hardened her heart.

Electra smiled. "Yes."

She chanted, "Air wears away, water drowns, fire

eats, earth covers round, but spirit controls to turn back that which is unleashed to attack."

The enslaved woman raised her hands when her own spell engulfed her weakened body. Her scream filled the air for a mere second as white-hot fire devoured.

His slave collapsed in a heap, Geoff raised an inquisitive eyebrow and eyed the blind woman. "Apparently I claimed the wrong girl as my personal toy. How will you deal with *this*, witch?" With his brother bound and strangled by his tentacles, he grappled with the twin guardians and managed a good hold. "You two boys stay out of this." He lunged and seized her arm.

Angelique struggled to escape the burning tentacle. "No!"

He pulled her close. His breath hot on her skin, he inhaled her scent. "Now *that* can be dangerous." A tentacle brushed over her lower abdomen and he adored her whimpered shiver. "Better. There is only one way to remove me from this world." His gaze swept over her figure. "And that is something I don't think you have the guts to do or the power to command. The minute you fail, rest assured I will make a meal of you." When the three men became too much to handle while distracted by the woman, he dropped her to the floor and snagged the escaping nightwalker, but missed the twins.

Free from the binding tentacles, the twin guardians snatched their swords from the ground, rolled onto their feet and sliced through the black feelers with ease. Their powerful moves with the moon and sun

swords were precision as the crescents on the sides of their faces glowed an eerie silver and gold. Obsidian and emerald green eyes met as blue highlighted ebony hair splayed in unison with blond highlighted copper hair. The blue and green tattoo of the earth and water mage contrasted with the red and white tattoo of the fire and air mage while the twins cut free their vampiric companion.

Braced on her hands, Angelique lifted her head from the floor. The clash of metal and the slap of flesh made her fear for the men a reality. Something in her rose. "Let me show you power." She scrambled onto her feet and raised her hands. "Spirit of the unicorn breathing life, wings of the griffon stirring the air, heart of the phoenix fanning the fire, tail of the hippocampus moving the water and claws of the dragon raking the earth, bring to me that which I need to reverse the doing and return that which was unleashed."

The summoned elements soared into view in the forms of the beasts called forth, their target, the dark threat within the circle. Their attacks swift, the hippocampus and phoenix each grabbed an arm as the dragon and griffon each seized a leg. Unrelenting holds pinned the sprawled beast on the ground while a spiraled golden horn plunged into the chest and pierced a long dead heart.

His kicks violent, Geoff writhed and screamed. The creatures' attacks soon silenced his snarls and vicious threats.

Angelique visualized a blur-white light emanated from her hand to fill the surrounding space. Her fear



no longer existent, her voice strongly carrying the chant, she extended her dominate hand. "What is dark, be filled with light, remove this spirit, from my sight."

Once known as a brother, the mangled remnants of Geoff vanished into the world veiled beyond. Zane offered a hand to Nicholas while Matt shifted to protect Angelique. Silence whispered across the realms in a faded sigh.

His sword retrieved and sheathed, Nicholas moved to her side. "You all right?" Aware her vision would soon fade, he caressed her back.

Angelique hugged him close. "Is he gone?"

"For good. Electra—"

"I know." She forced a smile. "Electra wanted free of whatever bindings he held on her. Her death brought that."

Nicholas countered, "No. You can bring her back. Magic's hold is only permanent if you let it."

Angelique shook her head, "I saw—"

"You saw her die yes, but on this side of the veil she lives and can be brought back to the other side. *If* you will it. You have the ability to bring her back. Twins innately possess the gift to bring each other back if helped by the guardians. Matt and Zane are the guardians and Electra is your twin. The words and desire lay dormant within you, Angel. Summon them. Use them. Bring her home."

Warmth swirled in the pit of her stomach. The sensation became a fire that erupted into a full-fledged surge of power as it coursed through her veins. Her voice sounded so unlike her, so distant, so

erie. "Return to me that which had been taken. The veil lifted, her being mistaken. Release her soul so it may again thrive. The veil lowered, her body now alive." Her mind spun and lover's hands on her waist steadied her.

Nicholas whispered in her ear, "Your sister breathes, Angel. Matt's helping her to her feet."

Angelique shivered. "S-sh—"

"Is here and alive." He stepped back.

Electra gasped. "Angelique? It is you!"

Angelique used what little vision magic still granted her and embraced her excited sister. "Don't you *ever* leave me again! Do you have any idea how worried mom and Auntie Janice were— are?"

Her words spewed forth in a rush. "I don't know what happened, but it all went wacky then there was this really nasty beast an— oh, Ange! He was horrible and cruel and looked a lot like... the man behind you. Angelique!"

"It's okay, Electra," she soothed. "This is Nicholas. He's very, *very* special to me. We have some catching up to do, but I think getting you home to mom and Auntie is the best thing right now. When you get there, have her call Mr. Jenkins and tell him I need an extended leave until further notice. And please tell Susan I'm fine." She hugged her tight. "Take care of mom for me, El." Her sister's nod against her shoulder earned her smile.

"I will," Electra assured. "All of it. I owe you, Ang."

"Yes, you do, El." Angelique laughed softly.

"And you'll hold me to it."

"Yep."

Nicholas introduced, "This is Matt and Zane. They'll take you to the airport and see that you get on board the earliest flight and a cab home, but not before we finish the task at hand. Electra, I need you to close the circle you made."

"Okay." Her chant the reverse of her original casting, Electra completed the steps and ended the ritual.

Her sister's embrace warm, Angelique returned the gesture. "Go home, El. And stay there."

"I will, Ang."

"You better." She stepped back.

Nicholas spoke up, "Matt, Zane, see Electra reaches her destination."

Angelique opened the circle and closed it behind their departing steps. "Nicholas?"

Aware his lover's vision faded, he swept his arm around her waist. "It's okay. We must close the circle."

"I can't see."

"Follow my lead." Nicholas guided her step-by-step and escorted her through the ritual.

Her steps widdershins, Angelique thanked and dismissed each element and those who assisted. Her fingers extinguished the candles, beginning with gold and silver while she moved through the candles and closed the veil between the worlds.

Gnawed at, he pulled back and studied her face. No scent of blood tainted her flesh, but innate abilities discerned something dark and malevolent. "Stand still." Something not there before, now garnered his

attention. He gazed deeper into her body, knelt and lowered his head, his inhale deep. Halted at her belly by the area his brother touched, he remained motionless and inhaled the scent again. His heart sank as he stood, hugged her into his embrace and kissed the top of her head.

*But at a price you can't afford, my Angel. What my brother did with his foul touch... is so very wrong. How do I tell you what is being taken from you at this very minute?* Nicholas now understood her menstrual flow stopped because his brother ripped her uterus from her in an attempt to weaken his worst threat. He also sensed a curse eating away her body and surmised her life cut to barely a few short months.

"Can we go home?" Angelique adored his nodded hug.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Nicholas escorted her home. He turned to the woman at his side. "Is there anything you wish?"

Angelique led her lover into the bathroom. "I'm in need of a long, hot shower then a warm bed. I want you to join me." A slight gust of air announced his shirt whipped off and flung aside.

With his jeans stripped off, he adjusted the water and helped her into the tub. Her body tugged into his embrace as he joined her, he moved under the falling water. Their bodies wet, he squirted some of the liquid soap into his hand. Soapy hands slid over her slick flesh in his exploration of her every sensual curve. His caress gentle, his touch filled with tender love, he aroused her senses. The water rinsed the suds from her as he kissed her and stirred a passionate need inside both of them. Their oral embrace broken, he knelt then licked and sucked her hardening nipples.

Her fingers entwined in his hair, she groaned. "Nicholas, down, please."

"Gladly, Angel." Eager, Nicholas obliged. His

mouth fiery hot on her succulent flesh, he nipped his way down her stomach to the delightful garden that demanded his tender, loving care. He pressed her back against the chilled wall, wedged his arm between her thighs and coerced her leg over his shoulder.

Nuzzled into the warmth of her folds, he zealously kissed her hooded nubbin. His mouth massaged, her moans intensified, her muscles tensed and her excitement heightened. As his tongue delved deep into the delectable banquet of sweet nectar, he fed hungrily and sated his mouth until her uncontrolled trembles earned his chuckle. Her squirms and uttered mewls begged for his mercy until he leisurely relinquished his pursuit and stood.

Nicholas swept her trembling body into his arms, carried her to the bed and placed her in the middle. "I must make a trip to the village." He crawled in, brushed a wisp of hair from her face then affectionately rubbed her cheek with his. "Do you wish to accompany me?"

"Of course I will." Angelique shuddered under the intensity of his heat.

"Good." His knowledge and feelings what they were, he possessed two choices, love her till death snatched her from his grasp or bring her into his world healed and perfect.

Troubled by his prolonged silence, she cupped his face with her hands. "What's bothering you?" The shift of his weight scattered cool air gooseflesh over her body.

Nicholas propped up on his elbows, his sigh

heavy. *Do I tell you, my beloved Angel, what that growing malignancy is doing to you deep inside your body or offer to take it away forever more? Either way, you'll never have a child of your own.* "I can give you so much." Tears built in his eyes. "If you let me, I can give you life."

Angelique sensed his desperation as her fingertips traced his forced smile. "It has a price, doesn't it?" His slow nod elicited her deep breath. "Tell me what you can give me, Nicholas. Tell me everything."

Her smile encouragement, he framed her face with his palms. "Oh, my dear, sweet, Angelique." His whispered words were in conjunction with the feathery kisses he rained upon her face. "I can open your eyes and give you the vision you long for. I can give you the world, immortality and all of me you desire."

"I sacrifice living life as I know it, don't I?"

"Yes and no." Nicholas breathed his words against her skin. "I can give you the silver of the night and the cool of the moon. In time, I will be able to return the gold of the day and the warmth of the sun because your blood will strengthen. I'll guide you every step of the way, provide for your every need and be there for you. I will protect you, care for you, heal you and give you your heart's desire. You allowed me to do something I didn't think possible." He desperately desired her to look into his eyes and see. "You have given me a reason to live and made me feel again. I love you and I wish to show you that forever."

Angelique froze. "Y-you love me?"

"Oh, babe." He longed to tell her, but the words

didn't exist and he hoped to show her in time. "So much more than you know. So much more than my words can say."

Her lower lip trembled with her slow smile. "Give me all you want and claim me as yours forever. I love you, too."

Her admission sheer elation, Nicholas hugged her tight for a lengthy time. Propped up on his forearms, he gazed into the sapphire eyes that captivated him from the first moment he looked deep into them. "Are you certain?"

Angelique brushed his lips with hers. "I wouldn't make the offer if I wasn't serious about it."

He nearly choked at the opportunity this woman proffered. "Be certain, my love, for once done, I can not undo."

"Two requests. One, please don't make it hurt and two, make love with me." She smiled.

Nicholas groaned, "Angel –"

"Hush." Angelique tilted her neck. "Please."

He pressed his lips against her throat and whispered, "I will never hurt you for you have made my heart beat again."

She parted her legs. "Then make mine beat like yours." His embrace warmed her soul.

As his hips slid between her welcoming thighs, his thick length entered the moistness of her beckoning warmth and sank deep. His lips claimed hers and he passionately explored her mouth with his tongue and milked her body with his engorged shaft. With his every move slow and filled with untainted love, his passionate strokes elicited a delightful arch and a



climaxed explosion from the woman he loved ardently.

Their oral embrace slowly broken, he kissed, licked and nipped his way to her throat. Her rapid pulse summoned beneath his caressing tongue, he plunged his hardness deep. Powerful pumping demanded her undivided attention while he lengthened his fangs. Pushed up just enough to drive deep and hard, his every thrust dynamic, he rocked her up and down. The heightened response of her body accompanied by her moans increased with his driving force until her breathing became wildly uncontrolled.

With her in the throes of orgasm, her head thrown back, he gently bit into her neck. Every plunge slow and powerful, he physically milked her. His fervent sucking of her precious blood lengthened her rapture. The thrust of her hips drove him on. Her blood tasted as sweet to his mouth as her ecstasy to his shaft.

Her need sated, his own body ready to explode and desperate to join her, he released her neck and licked the tiny puncture wounds closed. He looked down at her lovely face while his nail sliced open a cut directly over the hollow of his throat. Dark, red blood trickled down his chest. Ever gentle, he cupped the back of her head and guided her mouth to his offer. "Drink of me and become one with me, Angelique."

"With all my heart and soul."

The eager press of her lips against his flesh followed by her hungry sucks, which drew his life source into her body, compelled him pump in conjunction with her feeding. Unable to withstand

any more, he plunged deeply into her and unloaded his seed to mingle with her sweet nectar.

## ÉPILOGUE

Nicholas stayed at his lover's side while her eyes adjusted over the next three days. "Are you all right?"

Angelique stared in awe as the attentive nightwalker filled her vision. "You truly are the most handsome man ever."

"Then we're a perfect pair because there has never been a lovelier woman in three hundred years. And you blush so beautifully." He winked, his smile warm.

She rested her palm on his cheek. "Show me the world."

Night welcomed the lovers as Nicholas showed Angelique everything the world had kept hidden. They ran through meadows misted by snow, flew over oceans of green with waves a flow, climbed majestic mountains near lakes of blue and explored golden deserts with sands not new. Matt and Zane were touched by the devotion shared between the lovers once fated for loneliness. The trip to visit the clan was planned for next autumn season when the sun wouldn't hurt Angelique.

Their entrance unhindered, Nicholas strode into the center of the village and stood before an older man.

The elder announced, "Our lost son has returned to us a warrior. Kneel, my son."

"Tell me, Great One, why should I kneel before and serve those who turned their backs on me?" Nicholas looked at the surrounding clan members. "What gives you the right to invite me in when I seek not since you cast me out? You turned your backs on me. What reason can you offer to encourage me to return to a place I no longer wish to be? None." He drew forth the sword sheathed at his side. "You once gave this to me. You took it one day and broke it." His hand motioned toward his accompanying lover. "This lady healed the blade you broke. I was once told I could return to the clan and receive my status upon this Sword of the Familiar being healed."

He raised the blade over his head. With the hilt firmly gripped in one hand, his other palm poised over the end of the steel, he brought the flat of the blade down on a collision course with his rising knee. The weapon shattered under his exerted force. He threw it to the ground, yanked the sheath from his side and tossed it to clatter on top of the broken sword. "I did return a healed weapon to you and thereby earned the reinstatement of my status. However, I prefer the life I lead in the outside world. I hereby break all contact with the clan. When you can return my sword to me healed, I will return to the clan."

Nicholas reached down, selected a small piece of the steel, picked it up and slipped the metal shard in his pocket. "Only upon the complete repair of my sword, will I return to the clan." With his back turned on what were once his people, he captured his lover's hand and strolled back through the woods to his car.

Angelique commented, "That sword will never be whole."

He pivoted, gazed deep in the clearest sapphire blue eyes ever seen and smiled warmly. "I want nothing more of those who refused to give me a chance and chose not to believe me. You are my life now."

"You are a most handsome man, Nicholas Von Buren and a welcome sight for my eyes as well as my heart."

Nicholas smiled. "I'm glad you find my gift to you of eternal vision so wonderful, my lovely angel and that your publisher let you move down here."

Angelique met his gaze. "You know I would pay any price to be with you and love means more to me than anything."

He plucked a wild red rose from a nearby bush and proffered it. "For my sweet angel"

Her love expressed in her eyes, she flung herself into his waiting arms. "I love you, Nicholas."

His hug tight, Nicholas smiled against her shoulder. "I love you, too. Angelique." He loved this woman, wild as a rainstorm and soft as a rose, his beloved angel.

Their embrace filled with loving devotion, Angelique and Nicholas smiled as Zane and Matt

stepped to their sides, their union a force meant to be dealt with should oppositional forces arise.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Pennsylvania in 1963, Paula Calloway became an army wife in 1989 and has one daughter born in 1991. Residing in Tennessee with her husband, Garrett, and daughter, Carole, and nephew, Logan, she enjoys computers, gaming, ponding and writing.