



Saving Jenna

The Night Creatures

Violet Summers

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Dedication

To Angela Knight, who had a great idea for the beginning, and was the first person to ever use our name and “New York” in the same sentence. And, as always, to Terri who is the crucial third part of our collective Borg-brain.

Chapter One

“What the hell are you still doing in bed?”

Jenna cringed as her father’s voice sounded from the doorway. She turned away from her sister Rowan, who was lying in the bed, to face William Stone.

“Rowan is sick.” She didn’t meet his eyes. William could always tell when she was lying and she couldn’t afford for him not to believe her now.

“She looks fine to me.”

This time Jenna let her eyes skim over his face. Her handsome father stood at six feet. His green eyes flashed with charisma and, for Jenna and her sister, danger. His distinguished silver hair was combed back to perfection and he wore one of his thousand-dollar suits, befitting the guests that had been arriving at the house for the last fifteen minutes.

“I have senators, congressmen, a house full of people who expect to see all of my family.” He had an almost musical voice, one that had swayed countless people to support his various causes with an eager blindness. Now he used that voice like a weapon against Jenna, pressing with the sheer weight of his will to get his way. It was the same tone he’d used for all of her twenty-nine years, but tonight it lacked its usual power over her. Tonight Jenna and Rowan were going to take back their lives.

“Father, she’s been ill all day.” They’d made sure of it. “Do you want her vomiting on your guests?” Jenna kept her voice low, as befitting the bedside of her sleeping, sick sister. Turning back to Rowan she brushed the hair from her eyes, surreptitiously covering her sister’s furrowing brow. “I think she should see Jordan.”

William laughed a cynical, nasty laugh Jenna hated.

“Our dear doctor has better things to do than come up here because *she* isn’t *feeling* well. Rowan can tough it out.” He moved further into the room. “You, however, are not ill. So get yourself into the dress that cost me extra for the additional fabric to cover your rather large proportions, and get downstairs.”

God, please let this work. Jenna stood, forcing the trembling in her legs to stop. “I think it might be better if I stay here with Rowan. She may need me.”

The slap shouldn’t have been a surprise. He’d done it hundreds of times before. The sting never got better.

“You’re not here to think. Your only function in this family is to stand behind me and try to look like a faithful daughter and a true believer.”

Jenna didn’t rub the place on her cheek that throbbed with pain. William would only hit her again.

“I’m sorry Daddy, please forgive me.” Hanging her head, Jenna waited in silence. She’d played this game with her father on more than one occasion. William tipped her chin up with one elegant finger and examined the red mark glowing against her pale cheek.

“Fine.” He shook his head in disgust. “You can stay up here this evening. I have Erin. I find it humorous my *adopted* child obeys me better than the two daughters who are my flesh and blood.” He threw a copy of his planned speech for this evening on the bed. “I expect you to memorize every word of this speech. If you won’t support me at

public functions, then you will start doing print interviews. Your first one is in two days.”

Jenna’s breath eased when he father turned and walked to the door, only to catch when he paused and let his glittering green gaze rake over her.

“Jenna, remember that I am the only man who will ever love you, ever take care of you.”

Oh, God help her if that was the truth.

He shut the door and Jenna collapsed on the side of the bed, her heart thumping in terror and exaltation. Step one of their plan had worked.

“Okay Rowan, you can stop *sleeping* now,” she whispered, sotto voce.

Rowan flipped the blanket aside and sat up, touching Jenna’s face. “You should have played the sick one, not me.”

“Right,” Jenna scoffed gently, “and let father whip you again? I won’t let him do that to you.”

Rowan sighed as she rose from the bed. Walking to the closet, she pulled out jeans and a sweatshirt.

“I can take it, Jen. Better me than you.” Rowan pulled the sweatshirt over her head, quickly shaking out her chestnut tresses.

“Why? Why is it okay that you take the brunt of his anger? I can’t stand the guilt.” Jenna went to her sister, placing her hand on Rowan’s arm. “I’m not as weak as you think I am.”

Rowan hugged her. “Jenna, I don’t think you’re weak. Now come on. Let’s get going.”

Rowan and Jenna made their way down the back stairs. Her father’s guards were too busy checking for snipers and guests not on the invitation list to notice them. Too busy looking for the Night Creatures William Stone had dedicated his life to exterminating, one way or the other.

The irony of it made Jenna smile even in the midst of this chaos. Her father’s bigotry had never affected her...she was fascinated by the Night Creatures, had always been. Perhaps it was his legacy to her.

Over the years their father’s fundraising galas had become bigger and more extravagant as more and more humans fell under the spell of his hate-filled speeches. He was a brilliant orator; his handsome face and natural charm had warmed crowds across the country. But his other face, his “real” side was just as brutal and bloodthirsty as the creatures he denounced. It was a side Jenna and Rowan knew all too well.

Humanity for Our Children, his organization, was touted as a political movement working to keep human rights in the forefront of the political agenda. The ugly truth was William despised every Vampire, Were and Shifter to walk the earth. In public he was a leader, in private he was a sadistic killer of Night Creatures. A modern-day Dr. Mengele who created creatures beyond imagining for his own entertainment and profit.

His “cherished” daughters were actually pawns he used as he saw fit. No one knew about the emotional and physical abuse he heaped upon Jenna and Rowan every chance he got, or the pleasure he took in meting it out.

Jenna swiped clammy hands down her thighs, trying to block out her rising dread at the thought of her father’s retribution should they be caught.

A picture on Rowan’s dresser snagged her attention. The three Stone sisters stood arm in arm: Jenna, her golden brown hair tumbling over her shoulders, stood between

Rowan and Erin in front of a blindingly blue lake. That had been a glorious summer, the last summer before Jenna and Rowan had fallen prey to their father's evil machinations.

Erin, the youngest, was luckier than her sisters. Stone had kept from her the worst of his crimes. Consequently, she believed all the garbage their father spewed, eating up every word. She was the loyal daughter, the true believer, so she'd escaped his punishments.

Jenna wished like hell they could have brought Erin with them, but they had known better than to try. She wished things could be different, but the frustrating truth was that Erin was determined to turn a blind eye to their father's evil ways. It broke Jenna's heart and enraged Rowan to see what Erin had become when they could remember the mischievous, playful toddler with big blue eyes and a fluff of wine red hair who'd filled their lives with such joy. Erin would not leave Stone willingly, nor would she allow Jenna or Rowan to do so. So in order for them to escape, they needed to leave their baby sister behind.

She and Rowan were getting out of here tonight, or they would die trying, because Jenna knew if her father caught them, he would surely kill them. Or at the very least he would make them wish they were dead.

They managed to make their way into the garden behind the house.

Rowan rubbed her hands together as they huddled behind the large lilac bushes.

"Okay, so we meet tomorrow morning at nine. You remember where Corey's diner is, right? Corner of Ninth and Rose?"

"Rowan, I remember. We've been over this. Please be careful, I can't lose you." Jenna wrapped her arms around her sister, squeezing her tightly. "I love you, Rowan."

Rowan held her just as tightly. "I love you, too. Are you sure you want to split up?"

Jenna pulled back, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Yeah, I think we have to. It increases the odds one of us will actually get away."

Rowan nodded, not bothering to wipe her tears away. She slowly backed away, taking the path leading south off the property. Jenna gave her sister one final wave before heading north.

Jenna wanted to cheer when she made it to the woods surrounding her father's compound. It had been easier than she'd anticipated, but the patrols on the property were thinner because of the extra security in the house. It had been the perfect opportunity to escape. Maybe their last one.

Treading carefully she increased the pace of her steps.

Alone in the woods, really alone for the first time in her life, Jenna let her mind wander just a little bit to last night's dream.

Nico had come to her, as he always did, finding her in a gothic stone bedchamber. His mouth grazed her earlobe. "I have missed you." His dark-velvet voice caressed her while his cool hands drew circles around her shoulders and down her arms.

"I missed you, too," Jenna whispered. Her body ripened with his simple touch. It was hard to find her voice. She sighed as his full lips found her neck, sliding slowly over the sensitive length. His arms came around her, pulling her back against his solid chest. She smiled as she felt a familiar bulge digging into her lower back.

"You smell delicious," he growled, nipping the delicate skin at her nape.

"Do I, now?" She pushed her ass against him and wiggled. His cock pressed even harder against her soft derriere, and she smiled.

A noise behind her jerked her from her reverie and brought her to a standstill. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the glare of several flashlights moving closer. Jenna started running, a flat-out sprint toward the edge of the woods where, God willing, a car was waiting for her.

It had taken over a year to plan their escape. Each step had been more dangerous than the last. Getting a hold of two cars to take them away had been the most precarious step of all. A sympathetic housekeeper who had been molested by Sal, her father's head of security, one time too many, had helped the girls to procure the cars and arranged for them to be placed during the night of their escape.

The clearing leading to the road, the one that led to her freedom, came into view. She heard rough shouts behind her, but Jenna didn't slow down. Her thighs were burning, her lungs were on fire, but she continued to run.

They weren't taking her back, she'd die first.

Jenna burst from the forest, hitting the side of the car as she skidded to a stop. Dropping quickly to her knees, she felt along the front wheel well until her fingers touched the cold metal of a key. Desperately she grabbed the key, scrambling on adrenaline-filled legs she opened the car door, throwing herself inside.

It took two tries to jam the key in the ignition. Finally the engine roared to life, and Jenna threw it in reverse, spinning tires and throwing gravel in her wake.

Chapter Two

Nic Alero leaned back against the wall of the dark club, the heavy metal music beating like a hammer in his skull. He casually brought his bottle of beer to his lips, all the while keeping an eye on the dance floor. Club Smoke was as safe as someplace run by a Were-Dragon could be, but Aidan Gallagher, the club's owner and Nic's friend, occasionally asked Nic to provide some muscle and intimidation. Sipping the bitter brew, he winced. After four hundred and fifty years his body tolerated small amounts of foreign liquid, but blood was the only thing that truly satisfied him.

He took in the scene around him; scantily clad women crammed the dance floor, grinding on each other and the men brave enough to take them on. A year ago he would have been in the mix of sweat and sleek bodies, seeking out blood and sex from one of the women who regularly offered themselves up to the Vampire.

Humans loved being with Vampires, with any of the Night Creatures, really. Nic knew there was nothing quite like the rush one felt the first moment a lover's fangs pierced tender flesh, nothing like the power of a Were riding over and inside of you like a lightning storm. So the humans flooded Club Smoke because it was one of the few clubs in the Metro area to allow, hell, even encourage, mingling between the species.

It was a novel approach to uniting human and Night Creature society, and it served Nic well. Free blood, freer sex: It was every hungry, horny Vampire's dream.

Now, as he surveyed the large space, it seemed tacky and sad. The blood never lost its appeal, but the mindless sex had. Looking over the mass of hormonal, over-stimulated humans and Vamps, Nic was tired.

After four centuries he was tired of dealing with curious humans treating him like a side show freak or a sexual novelty. He was tired of those who would idolize him, of those who would hate and hunt him.

Nic knew all Vampires experienced this kind of melancholy somewhere in their long lives. This year it was his turn, and as he saw it he had two choices: He could walk into the sun or he could quit whining and get on with his life.

He'd tried going back to Italy, the place of his birth. The countryside was still breathtaking, even by moonlight. The blood willingly provided by beautiful young women had been intoxicating, infused with the amazing local wines. But soon enough even his childhood home became a prison, a constant reminder of the beautiful Vampiress who'd pretended to love him, only to abandon him, confused and suffering from his change.

Nic knew exactly what he needed to still his craving. Nic needed his mate, his One. He gave a soft, bitter laugh. *His One*. It was a legend among his kind, for each Vampire there was one person, one being, out there who would complete them. Nic thought he knew better. In four hundred and fifty years, he'd never seen a hint this mysterious *One* existed, not for him, and not for any other Vampire he knew. Believing this part of Vampire folklore was akin to believing Vamps couldn't eat garlic or cross running water; stereotypes, nothing more. His head called him a fool for wanting to believe in such nonsense, but his heart was another matter. Deep down Nic longed to feel the kind of bond with another, the kind that existed in the history books but nowhere else.

Except in his dreams.

Jenna! Her name flashed in his brain like a neon sign. If only he knew where the hell to find her. Six months ago he'd heard her heart cry out in the night. He'd entered her dream and found his destiny. One look at her lovely, heart-shaped face and he was enamored; but it was the purity of her heart that captured him completely. In their shared dreams he'd experienced the kind of passion and fulfillment his kind only ever fantasized about. Sharing Jenna's dream, Nic knew the legends were true. He'd found his One.

Her presence in his dreams was killing him. To have her in his sleep and not in real life bordered on torture. He found himself lazing the night away in bed, not willing to miss a single second of her dreams.

Sex, real sex, lost its appeal when compared with the communion of souls he experienced with Jenna in their dreams. He hadn't fucked another female in months, not since the night he'd realized that touching another woman felt like adultery, like a betrayal of all he and Jenna shared.

His dreams of Jenna became his secret obsession, a distraction he couldn't afford. The most maddening thing of all was that he knew she was out there; he'd been dreaming of her for months, but no matter where or how he searched, she was as insubstantial as smoke trailing through his fingers. And she was so familiar. He knew he'd seen her somewhere, but where?

His Blood Brother Sebastian took notice, questioning him discreetly about the changes in his behavior. Nic told him nothing. What could he really say? *I've fallen in love with a woman who takes away the desire to walk into the sun, but I've only seen her in my dreams.* But perhaps now it was time to confide in Bas. The other Vampire was a gifted investigator and security expert. If anyone could find Nic's mystery woman, Bas would be the one.

God, he was pathetic, pining after a woman he couldn't even find, but when he closed his eyes, Nic saw her clearly. She was the image of a Greek goddess, tall and curvy with softly rounded hips and ass, and full, lush breasts. She had an angelic face with smooth, creamy skin and a ripe pink mouth. Her brown eyes held just a hint of green; her light brown hair held streaks of gold as it fell to her shoulders.

Jenna was everything he hadn't known he'd been searching for. She was shy in her manner, but when he made love to her she turned into a wildcat, purring in his arms.

Nic finished the stale beer and set the bottle on a small table next to him. He needed to speak to Aidan about a change in scenery. The Were-Dragon would understand Nic's restlessness and relieve him of duty for the night. Or for however long it took Nic to get his head straight.

As he walked through the throng of partiers, he tried to shake the memory of last night's dream. She was so sad, his Jenna. And maybe a bit frightened. Nic's every protective instinct screamed at him to find her, protect her, most of all to claim her.

"You have been gone for almost a week," he murmured. "I have missed you."

She lay before him, gloriously nude, the cream and berry perfection of her body glowing against the rich satin duvet.

"I haven't been sleeping well," she admitted. There was something in her eyes that worried him. Something more than the usual wistful longing he usually found there. "And the medicine the doctor gave me didn't allow me the luxury of dreaming."

Dread filled him as Nic gazed into her expressive, troubled eyes. "Why haven't you

been able to sleep? Tell me, Jenna, what is troubling you?"

She met his gaze and for a moment he thought she might speak, might finally open up to him, allowing him to find her, to protect her, to keep her.

Then she blinked, and the moment passed. Nic prepared to press her, to demand she share her thoughts as freely as she shared her body, but she reached out her slim, strong hands and wrapped them around his cock, strangling his words in his throat and crushing his good intentions.

Shaking his head at his own futile musings, Nic approached the double doors marked Employees Only and pushed through. His hard-soled boots clicked on the tile floor, masking a second set of footsteps. Suddenly, without warning, he was thrown against the concrete wall.

"Chandra," he groaned in resignation, catching her upper arms in his hands. The female Vamp smiled naughtily at him, her fangs descending as she lunged for his neck. He tightened his grip on her arms, holding her off a bare inch from his throat.

Her full, red-painted lips glistened wetly as she gave him a pout. "Oh, come on, Nicky. I just want a little taste." Her red-tipped nails scraped stinging paths down his chest.

"Fuck, Chandra, I don't need this right now."

She moved in closer. "Oh, I know what you need," she purred, dropping to her knees.

Nic looked down at the top of her silky blonde hair. Chandra was hell on wheels and enjoyed her sex as rough and ready as any male. A year ago he would have slammed her into the wall and fucked her until she couldn't stand. Tonight was a different story. He looked down at the beautiful Vampiress kneeling between his thighs, ready to use that wicked mouth on him. After a minute he sighed. He felt nothing. There was no stirring in his cock. The pounding erection he'd had just remembering the dream of Jenna's hands on him withered under Chandra's greedy gaze. He didn't long to lift Chandra's short skirt and rip away her thong to get to the heat hidden inside. He caught the scent of her arousal, and looked down at his crotch. Nope, nothing. It was no use. Dreaming or awake, his dick belonged to Jenna, and it wouldn't get hard for anyone else.

Gently he pulled Chandra to her feet. "Not tonight, Chan," he said regretfully.

The female ran her hands up and down his chest. "Come on, Nic. It's been over a year since we've played together." She moved in for a kiss, but he blocked her. "What's with you?" Her cold green eyes narrowed on his. "Do you have any idea how many men want to fuck me?"

"Then go find one of them." Her eyes widened in outrage, and Nic's hands went to her shoulders to hold her off.

"Chandra, I said no. Not tonight nor any other night. I won't give to you what belongs to someone else."

Nic could all but see her mind working as he set her away from him.

"You're joking, I get it." Her hands traveled down the black dress that hugged her slim body like a second skin. "You are a cruel tease." She cupped her breasts and lifted them to Nic like a pagan offering. "But you can't say you don't want this, Nicky. You can't say you don't want me."

"Chandra," taking one of her hands in his; he pressed it to his flaccid cock. He kept his voice harsh, pausing for emphasis between each word. "I. Don't. Want. You."

Her hands fluttered to her sides and her pale green eyes began to glow. Nic waited for her verbal assault, but it never came. Instead, she straightened her spine and tossed her long, blonde hair over her shoulder.

“Have it your way, Nic.” Her voice was cool and composed, and utterly at odds with the hell-fire glow in her eyes. “But you and I both know there isn’t a female alive or dead that can give you what I can.”

She turned on her five-inch stilettos and marched out through the employee entrance.

He let his head fall back against the wall and gave a low groan of frustration. He definitely needed to get out of here. Turning to continue on to Aidan's office, Nic froze as a familiar scent filled his nose.

Blood. A lot of blood. He stood still and focused on nothing except the blood. He followed the scent, and before he'd reached the end of the hall, he began to hear screams coming from outside the building. Faint, terrified cries for help.

He picked up speed. As he passed Aidan's office, he reached out to pound on the door. There was no need. The door flew open, Aidan and Sebastian came stalking out.

“You hear it, too,” the Dragon asked. Nic nodded, still headed for the emergency exit.

There was something really bad waiting for them outside.

*

Jenna lurched under a brutal kick to the ribs. Her left eye was swollen shut, blood trickled from her mouth and nose. She'd fought her father's minions for as long as she could, but she'd known it was a losing battle. There was no contest, the two hybrids possessed more than human strength, and Jenna had never been the fighter, anyway. That was Rowan. So in the end, she did the only thing she could, wrap herself up into a ball and wait to die. Her body was becoming numb to the pain, on the cusp of going into shock.

She'd been running from them for what felt like days, but was really only a few hours. In spite of all their careful planning, Jenna and Rowan's escape was discovered almost immediately. A short, harrowing car chase ended when her tire was shot out. Somehow, whether by luck or providence, she'd managed to guide the car safely to a ditch, and then she ran like hell.

Ducking down this alley hastened the end for Jenna. It was blocked off on one end, leaving no escape route. The hybrids caught her easily, and it was child's play for them to batter her to a bloody pulp. In fact, they'd acted like children at play, laughing and crowing like teenagers as her blood flew and her bones snapped. To add insult to injury, the entire time they beat her, they took turns reminding her that they did so with her father's blessing.

Her hair was yanked back, arching her neck painfully, and hot, rancid breath bathed her face.

“Do you want some more Jenny-pie? Or are you ready to go back to where you belong?” Her hair was released. She didn't have the strength to hold her head up, and it clunked painfully against the dirty concrete.

With her one good eye she watched the two men move away from her. The taller one was animated as he spoke, pointing from her to the other man. The shorter of the two, Sal, kept shaking his head back and forth. He was one of her father's more brutal Enforcers. Close to three hundred pounds of pure muscle, his face was square, his jaw

wider than a normal man's. His mouth housed a set of sharp canines, a product of his mixed Werewolf heritage. Sal didn't have the ability to shift into animal form, but he didn't really need to. Thanks to her father's experimentation, Sal sported a pair of small beady black eyes set in a long, thick face that looked more like a muzzle than a man. He had a superior sense of smell and a terminal case of pissed off. He truly enjoyed torturing people.

Jenna rolled over to her stomach while the two argued. Her bloody fingers dug into the concrete as she dragged herself away from the men. Crawling on her stomach toward a single source of light, she desperately scanned for some type of weapon. She knew she wasn't making it out of this alley alive, but maybe she could take one of these bastards with her.

Near the edge of a full dumpster lay a length of pipe. Jenna reached for it, trying to inch her body a little closer. Her fingers stretched, reaching out...it was almost within her grasp, one more inch and she'd have it.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going, cow?"

Sal grabbed her foot, dragging her away from the pipe. Jenna kicked out as hard as she could, but her energy was spent.

"Stupid, stupid bitch. It kills me Harv, you know? She had everything she ever wanted, and it still wasn't good enough." Sal flipped her to her back and let her wrenched leg fall to the ground. As he dropped to his knees over her, his weight slammed painfully into her stomach.

"Princess here was raised by the greatest man alive, but what does she do? She keeps trying to leave. Instead of helping with the cause, she betrays her father." The disgusting creature leaned into her and licked, his long, slimy tongue leaving a trail of unspeakable nastiness along her cheek.

"The greatest man alive?" Jenna heard the hysteria in her voice, and tried futilely to choke it back. "You're a *pet*, Sal. He uses you for his dirty work. The minute you stop being useful he'll put you down like the diseased animal you are."

The hybrid didn't answer, just dropped his head to sniff along the line of her neck, pausing to close his teeth threateningly around her throat.

"Sal, what do you think you're doing, man?" Harv asked. Jenna thought she heard a little bit of panic in his nasal voice.

"I'm teaching her a lesson," Sal laughed, grabbing the neckline of her shirt in both hands.

Her t-shirt shredded, and then Sal's meaty hands were on her breasts, grabbing and squeezing painfully. Jenna couldn't hold back the cry. Every inch of her skin hurt. Mindlessly she raised her arms, trying to cover herself, to hold him off. He laughed as he grabbed her wrist, twisting it until she heard a snap and watched her hand go limp. Then her screams echoed off of the brick and concrete walls surrounding the alley.

God, she didn't want die this way. Why couldn't they just put a gun to her head and get it over with? She gathered the courage to look up at Harv, who was just standing there now, watching. Jenna wasn't sure exactly what odd DNA cocktail her father had used to create Harvey, but the man was ridiculously tall with a long, elastic face and an odd, double-jointed way of moving. While he wasn't as fierce and terrifically frightening as Sal, something unnatural about Harvey made him even more disturbing.

"Please, Harvey. Please just kill me now and get it over with," she begged. The other

man's eyes shot to hers and for a brief moment she thought he might intervene.

Her thoughts strayed to Rowan as her consciousness began to slowly fade. Had she made it out? And had she done a better job of escaping her pursuers?

And what about Erin, her youngest sister? If Rowan hadn't escaped, and Jenna was dead, who would rescue Erin?

No, Rowan would be all right. Jenna needed to believe that. Rowan was the strong one, much stronger than Jenna. She'd stood up to their father on more than one occasion and though she paid a steep price for her disobedience, she'd always survived.

A slap across her face brought her attention back to Sal, brought her back to the here and now. One hand dug cruelly into her breast, while the other scrabbled at the snap of her jeans.

"What do you think, Harv? I had to leave Annie and my nice warm bed to come find this bitch. Let's say you and me have a little fun before we drag her back to Daddy Dearest."

Sal's fetid breath washed over her skin before he suddenly sank his teeth into her shoulder. He grinned when she cried out in pain. "You know you want it from a real man," he gloated. "Don't ya, sweetheart?"

Gathering up the last of her strength, Jenna took a deep breath and spit in Sal's hideously grinning face. She had a moment to enjoy watching his smile fade and twist into a look of bitter hatred before his fist slammed down. At least she wouldn't have to witness her own rape, she thought as the darkness took her away.

*

Nic burst into the alley just in time to see the woman spit in the face of her attacker. They'd done a real number on her. Her face was bloody and swollen; her clothing ripped and pulled down to give them access to her body. The sight of someone so obviously helpless, being brutalized so methodically sent Nic's already unstable temper into overdrive. As the brute's fist plowed into her temple, Nic sprang into action. His fangs elongated as he rushed the man sitting on the woman's abdomen. Catching him by surprise, Nic easily lifted him, throwing him into the wall.

Kneeling down, he brushed the hair from the woman's face and froze. Time ground to a complete halt. He was unable to move, even though he heard the fight continuing around him.

It couldn't be. Not here. Not this close to death. Even covered in blood and dirt he recognized her. Jenna, his dream woman, his heart. Her pulse was faint and thready. He heard her heart slow and stutter. He would not find and lose his woman in one moment.

He raised his head high and let out a war cry that ricocheted off the walls like a bullet.

His vision went red, washing the alley in flames of crimson as he whipped around. Somewhere in the back of his mind he heard Sebastian shout, "Blood Rage! Aidan, get out of the way."

The rage flowed through Nic's body as he opened his arms wide, stalking toward his prey. Aidan and Bas effectively cut off the attackers' escape as Nic approached them.

"Vampire scum." The short one smiled, his appearance taking on an animalistic quality. It would do him no good. Nic was in a blood rage, and only the death of the two men who beat his woman would bring him back from the brink of madness.

He ran toward the short one, all but flying down the length of the alley. The other

man pulled out a wooden stake and tried to push it into Nic's chest. Nic ducked to the side as the taller man thrust wildly, missing him by a mile. Nic grabbed the attacker's arm, bringing it down over his knee and breaking it at the elbow.

And then turned his attention the first one, the one who'd dared to touch his Jenna. Without breaking his stride he launched himself at the shorter man. They both fell to the ground. Nic straddled the attacker's chest, pinning his arms to his sides.

"You deserve a long death," Nic spat, his voice low and dangerous. The other man gazed up at him with eyes full of arrogant hatred.

"Bring it on," he rasped out. "It's an honor to give my life in service of the cause."

Nic gave a disgusted grunt and grabbed the bastard's head, twisting it sharply, and effectively snapping the man's neck. His head lolled to the side like a rag doll.

Nic jumped up, turning toward the tall one, who was frozen in abject fear. With an almost casual gesture, Nic bent and retrieved the wooden stake. He threw the weapon like a lance, piercing the man's heart.

As the second attacker hit the ground, Nic turned to find Aidan kneeling next to Jenna, his hand at her throat searching for a pulse. He knew Aidan's only intention was to help her, but the sight of the Dragon's hands on his woman caused the flames to flare in his eyes again.

"Get away from her," he growled.

"Oh, fuck," Bas's voice cut through the growl rumbling from Nic's throat as Aidan turned to glare at Nic in disbelief. "Aidan, move now!" The other Vampire, Nic's Blood Brother, grabbed the Dragon by the arm, yanking him away from the unconscious woman. Nic knew he should be grateful that Bas had intervened. If Aidan had continued to touch Jenna, Nic couldn't have stopped himself from attacking him.

Nic slid to his knees, putting his hand under Jenna's blood-soaked hair.

"Jenna? Beloved, wake up," he gave a broken little laugh. "I have never said *that* to you before." He stroked her forehead gently, trying to avoid the knots and bruises on her delicate flesh. "Jenna, I'm here. It's Nic. See, I told you I'm real. Open your eyes for me, Jenna."

"Nic, what the hell's going on, and how do you know this woman?" The concern in Aidan's elegant British voice was evident as he looked down at the battered woman Nic held. "I think you need to back off, mate. There isn't anything we can do for her. We need to call the police. This is a matter for the humans to deal with."

Aidan's hand squeezed his shoulder. Some part of him knew that Aidan was trying to help. But it was drowned out by the predator in Nic, who turned his red gaze on his friend and hissed, "We do *not* involve the humans in this. She is *mine!*"

Jenna's soft gasp brought his attention immediately back to her, and the two other Night Creatures in the alley ceased to exist. Her good eye was slit open, and when she finally managed to focus in on him it widened. She licked her cracked and parched lips, and whispered something. Nic bent down, placing his ear to her lips to hear her.

"Nico?" Her voice was aching vulnerable.

"I am here, Beloved." He stroked her hair. He couldn't stop touching her.

"You're real." There was so much wonder in those two simple words that it broke his heart.

"I'm real." He gave her a softly chiding smile. "I told you I was real." Unable to resist, he gently licked a cut on her cheek, closing the wound. Her essence fizzed through

him, sending a jolt of joyous recognition to his core. In spite of her injuries, in spite of the probable grim future, he smiled down at her, a full smile containing all the joy of a man who has found the other half of his soul.

She gasped when he smiled at her. *“Vampire.”*

“Your Vampire,” he corrected.

She gave a little nod, and her eyes closed again as Nic caressed her cheek.

*

She was dreaming. That was the only explanation. Nico was a figment of her imagination, so he couldn't exactly suddenly come to life and rescue her from the hell she'd been living. Or maybe she was dying. Maybe this was God's way of easing her out of Hell and into Heaven. Whatever the case, this was her dream and she was going to spend the last peaceful sleep she had making love to Nico.

He'd asked her something, but she couldn't quite grasp what, so instead of answering him, she reached out and laid her hands over his hard cock. It pulsed under her touch, pining for release.

She cupped him, slowly rubbing her thumb up and down his length.

“You play a dangerous game, woman.” His smile was wicked as he covered her hand with his own and pressed it harder to him. With his other hand he managed to undo his offending trousers, freeing himself to spring into her hand directly.

Jenna smiled as she wrapped her fingers around him. Her fingers were long and slim, the only truly slim part of her body, but they wouldn't quite meet around his amazing girth. His cock head wept, and her thumb slid through the wetness there.

“Damn, woman, you drive me crazy,” he growled as he raised himself up and over her, bringing his cock to her plump lips. Jenna's tongue was hot and greedy as she licked the mushroomed head, swirling circles around the sensitive ridge until Nico began to shift his body in time with her strokes.

“Take me Jenna, take me deep within your sweet mouth,” he ordered. Jenna stretched her lips wide around him and Nico began to slide in, inch by inch, so very slowly, allowing her time to adjust to his widening girth.

He pulled back and dove in deeper with each pass. His face was drawn in lines of almost painful pleasure. God, she loved seeing what her touch could do to him. It inspired her to do more, to give him as much pleasure as he gave her. She sucked hard as he pulled out, savoring his salty taste as the wet sounds of his cock sliding in and out of her mouth broke the silence.

Nico groaned and pulled completely out.

*

Her blood called to him, her scent sinking inside of him, becoming part of who he was. Finding her should have been the happiest moment of his long life. Instead he would be forever branded with the image of her beaten and bloody, her attacker preparing to rape her.

He pulled the sides of her tattered shirt up, trying to hide her naked flesh. She was so bruised. Dark purple and blue marks were scattered over her creamy skin like an obscene splatter painting.

“Nic, man, what the hell is wrong with you?”

He hissed over his shoulder as Aidan once again tried to approach him.

“She's human, Nic,” the Were-Dragon's voice was agitated, a common occurrence.

“We need to call the cops. It’s the Law.”

“Fuck the Law.” He heard his voice go guttural. “We call no one.” Nic shifted his body, keeping Jenna from Aidan’s line of sight.

“She needs to be seen by a human doctor.” The Dragon visibly reined in his hot temper, and was obviously trying to be calm and rational. “She’s hurt really bad, mate.”

Nic felt no such obligation to be calm and rational.

“She goes nowhere.” He spun, still blocking Aidan’s view of Jenna’s bare body. “Now back the fuck off, Dragon,” he spat.

Aidan began to glow blue.

*

“Whoa!” Bas reached out just in time to pull Aidan away from Nic. He knew the look in Nic’s eyes. Aidan, a Were, wouldn’t understand the other Vampire’s body language.

The Were-Dragon’s skin still glowed an eerie blue.

“Aidan, leave him be.” Privately Sebastian rolled his eyes. He guessed now it was his turn to be the calm, rational one. Fuck it all.

Nic had been obviously troubled for a long time. Now, watching his extreme reaction to the bloodied woman he crouched over, Bas was beginning to understand why.

Aidan turned reptilian eyes in his direction. “You better explain what the fuck is going on with him, Bas.” The blue glowing skin began to harden to the texture of leathery armor.

Fuck it *all*. This was just what he needed, Nic ready to shred anyone that came near his woman and Aidan ready to go all scaly on him.

“Aidan, man, calm down.” Bas kept one eye on Nic, who now had his woman rolled to her side, inspecting the boot mark on her lower back.

“Talk fast, Sebastian. Talk fast before I kick Nic’s blood-sucking arse.” Bas gripped the Dragon a little tighter and moved him further away from Nic.

“I believe that Nic has found his One,” Bas stated calmly, trying to keep Aidan from changing. It was incredible to witness the legend reveal itself to be true.

“His what?” The Dragon was still glowing, but at least he was distracted.

“His One, his soul mate. Sort of like when one of you lizards find your other half. Vampires don’t often find their other halves, but she is his. He won’t let you near her while she’s hurt. He can’t.”

Bas didn’t tell him that the notion of a Vampire’s One was thought to be no more than a myth, because he was certain that this woman was Nic’s. Vampires were not territorial over strangers. This woman was definitely a stranger. Nic’s complete overreaction to Aidan being near her was all the proof the ancient Vampire needed.

“Oh fuck, tell me this is some kind of joke.” Aidan shook free of Bas’ hold and slid his hand down his long auburn braid, a habit of his when he was frustrated beyond words. “I didn’t think you assholes had souls, much less mates for them.” The Dragon-glow faded and Aidan was back to his usual pissy self, Bas realized in relief.

He snorted. “Listen Puff, there’s a lot you reptiles don’t know about us.” He grinned and ducked the Dragon’s half-hearted swing at his head, before turning serious again. “This isn’t a joke, Aidan. We need to give him some room. Imagine how you’d feel if it was your mate.”

Bas smiled when Aidan cocked his eyebrow; he knew Aidan couldn’t ever imagine

himself with a mate. Bas wasn't even sure the Dragon wanted one.

"A Dragon's mate is an entirely different thing," Aidan grumbled. "It's a biological imperative. Find the one who's a genetic match with you and make little Dragons. There's no soul involved in the deal. It's totally fucking biological, so since there are no female Dragons about I'm in the clear."

The two men turned, watching as Nic tenderly ran his hands down his One's arms, wincing as he discovered the broken bones in her wrist.

Aidan looked just the tiniest bit shaken. "No," he repeated, "it's an entirely different thing."

Aidan appeared to shake off his distraction and turned back to Bas. "You're not kidding me, are you?" Bas shook his head.

"Well, this is just bloody beautiful." The Dragon shook his head, sending his long braid whipping through the air. "Two dead humans, and from the looks of it she's soon to follow. It's the Law, dammit. We have to call in the human police for this."

"We couldn't do that even if that wasn't Nic's One," Bas said. He toed the head of the shorter dead man, turning him to face Aidan. "This is Sal Mendez, head of security for William Stone. And that," he nodded toward the woman cradled in Nic's arms, "is Jenna Stone, his eldest daughter."

"Holy...well *fuck* me." Aidan spat as he spun around to pace the alleyway. "You know this could start the war Stone has been asking for."

Bas understood the concern etched into Aidan's face. Stone's organization had been looking for ways to contain Vamps and Weres for more than half a century now.

He shrugged. "Then so be it. Nic will never let her go."

Aidan busted out his cell phone. Bas left him to his conversation. He could hear Aidan calling in a clean-up crew.

From behind him Aidan called out, "She better damn well be worth it."

"To Nic she is everything," Bas murmured to himself.

*

Nic's head snapped up as he heard Bas' careful approach.

"Nic, we have to move her." The other Vampire kept his voice soft, unthreatening. "She cannot be here."

He let his eyes pierce those of his Blood Brother. Nic knew his face was drawn into harsh lines, his eyes blue flame.

"We need to get your One to the penthouse." At Bas' soft words, Nic forced himself to focus. He'd do Jenna no good in the grip of Blood Rage. "We'll call Elena," Bas continued, clearly ignoring Nic's internal struggle. "She'll know what to do for your woman."

Nic nodded slowly, allowing Bas to help him gather Jenna into his arms. Bas put his arm around his shoulder, steadying him.

"Let's go, man, and get your woman healed."

God help everyone if Elena was unable to save Jenna, Nic thought. He'd been growing more restless with every night that passed, his temper more and more uncontrollable. Finding his One would give him the much-needed peace he required to control his beast. The fury Nic would be powerless to contain if she should die was unimaginable. The best the world could hope for was that Nic would destroy himself before he scorched the city around him.

No, Nic thought. Jenna had to live.

Chapter Three

Nic kept Jenna clasped tight to his heart as he ran down the dark alley. He didn't look around; his focus was utterly on the woman in his arms. He knew Bas had his back if anyone else was chasing Jenna and had enough of a death wish to attack them.

He'd finally recognized who Jenna was. He'd caught glimpses of her on the television at her psycho-father's press conferences. Bile rose in his throat. How Stone could do this to his own flesh and blood was beyond Nic. It was bad enough that Stone wanted the Night Creatures to be segregated from the rest of the world's population...if not conveniently dead. The humans may doubt it, but Nic had always known Stone's real goal was genocide. And now he'd proved himself every bit the monster he claimed to hate: he'd sanctioned the beating and rape of his own daughter.

William Stone had needed killing for a very long time. Now, Nic vowed, he was going to be the one to do the world that favor.

Nic's eyes began to glow again at the mental image of the short bald man straddling Jenna's body. The stink of him hovered on her bruised skin and swam through Nic's nose, sending him into a killing lust, something he hadn't experienced in over two hundred years.

Jenna whimpered in his arms and Nic loosened his hold on her, realizing that he had squeezed her closer to his body. She was so cold, and had lost so much fucking blood to those animals.

He pressed his lips to her temple and inhaled. Under the blood and grime was her sweet scent, a scent that was now permanently imprinted on his DNA. When he'd sealed the jagged cut on her cheek, sampling her blood, he'd made her a part of himself. He would be able to find her anywhere, no matter what the distance. It was just one more tool he would use to protect her from her father and his army.

His stomach lurched as he felt her heart rate slow down even further. God, maybe he'd been too late. Her breathing was thready, at best. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* His thoughts raced with each pounding step he took. Elena had to save her. No other outcome could be permitted.

As Nic and Bas arrived at Nic's building one of the guards held open the door for them. The man didn't blink twice at the sight of the two racing Vampires, one with a bruised and bloody human female clutched in his arms. There was a reason Nic lived here. He rushed to the elevators, felt Bas slip in behind him. Neither man spoke. Nic knew Bas was well aware of how fucked up he was right now. The other Vampire didn't need to hear the proof out loud. Moisture gathered in the corners of Nic's eyes and he blinked several times to clear it.

He felt Bas' familiar touch on his shoulder and closed his eyes for a moment, accepting the small comfort from his friend.

The doors opened into Nic's penthouse apartment, and he strode quickly into the guestroom. As gently as possible he laid Jenna on the soft bed. Without a word, Bas walked into the bathroom where he gathered hot water and towels. Bringing them into the room, he placed them on the table next Nic, who knelt by the bed stroking Jenna's hair and the areas of her face that weren't horribly bruised.

“Bas,” the words felt ripped out. “Call and find out where the hell Elena is. Aidan has to have contacted her by now.”

* * * *

Dipping the cloth in the soapy water, Nic wrung it out and stroked it along Jenna’s swollen jawline, gently washing the blood away. She moaned when the cloth made contact with her skin, and Nic flinched. He hated seeing her in pain.

Dammit, Jenna should be in his bed, not this impersonal guest bed. He should be loving her, driving between her full thighs. But, fuck no. Instead he was stroking the blood from her skin, watching the movements of her chest become shallower with every breath she exhaled. His hands shook with fear and rage, his body kicking out more adrenaline than he knew how to deal with. So he just kept cleansing his woman.

There was a faint sound at the bedroom door and Bas waved Elena across the threshold. She nodded to Bas as she passed him and came to a stop next to the bed.

“Nicolas,” the woman said gently, “you must move so that I may attend her.”

Reluctantly Nic dropped the cloth back in the bowl and moved to the other side of the bed. Elena set her small leather bag down. Opening it, she retrieved two candles, one black and one white. Several small wooden statues, fetishes, as well as coarse salt in a glass jar immediately followed.

With quick, graceful movements Elena placed the fetishes around the bed, creating a triangle of protection, with Jenna at its center. That done, she lit the candles and passed them, one at a time down and then back up the length of Jenna’s body. First the black candle made the circuit, and Nic watched, fascinated, when the flame flared ebony for just an instant as it passed over Jenna’s heart. She repeated the motion with the white candle, and this time as the candle passed over Jenna’s heart, a gust of black smoke seemed to fly from her still form, taking on a vague, malevolent shape before disappearing into the air.

Nic and Bas both stepped forward at the apparition, but Elena gestured them back, nodding as if she’d expected it.

After placing the candles on the small stands at either side of the bed, the healer lifted the jar of sea salt, and poured a slow circle around Jenna’s body. She sang as she cast the circle, offering salutations to the four corners, to the Lord Sun and the Lady Moon. As the circle closed there was a brief pulse of light. It illuminated the old woman’s face, and Nic realized that at one time Elena must have been an incredible beauty.

He watched in awe as the healer began gliding her hands slowly down the length of Jenna’s body. They floated a bare inch above his woman’s skin, and as Elena chanted in her musical voice they began to faintly glow. She guided the light back up the length of Jenna’s form, finally stopping with her right hand hovering over Jenna’s forehead, her left over her heart.

Suddenly the chanting stopped, and Elena placed her hands directly onto Jenna’s ravaged flesh. Lightning raced up and down the length of Jenna’s body, the length of the healer’s arms. Jenna arched, her entire body curving off the bed, and a high keening cry burst from her bruised lips. The healer looked equally transfixed.

Nic was on the bed, almost breaking the circle in his headlong rush to save his woman, when Elena’s quiet voice stopped him cold.

“If you wish her to live you will stay where you are, Vampire.”

Nic froze. Elena was the most renowned healer in their community. No one knew where she came from or even how old she really was. She was a mystery among the Night Creatures. All anyone knew for certain was that she was, indeed, ancient and very powerful. She was the vessel for a magic that otherwise would have died out centuries ago. Hundreds of centuries.

Now she pierced Nic with her black eyes.

“This woman, she is your One?”

Nic nodded.

“Those who hurt her did more than batter her body,” the healer explained. Her voice was brisk, but not without compassion. “They were evil, the men who abused her. She’s been bound by powerful black magic. That is what you saw hovering above the bed, and that is what caused her to react to the healing with pain.” The elderly healer stroked her right hand tenderly over Jenna’s forehead. “I’ve cleansed her of vile magic, but she needs your blood to fully heal her injuries. They are beyond even my power, and that power is not insignificant. For now, though, she cannot drink from you. So we must use a little modern technology to speed the process along.”

Going back in her satchel, she pulled out a large syringe. As she addressed him, Nic felt his eyes go wide.

“Come to me Nico, and kneel before me. I am too old to try and reach you.” Elena slashed a line through the sea salt, creating a narrow opening in her circle of power.

Nic followed her command, going to his knees in front of her. She took in his apprehensive expression and gave a light chuckle that reminded him of wind-chimes. “Four hundred and fifty years, and how much violence? And you still fear the doctor’s needle.” She shook her head in rueful amusement as she closed the circle again. “Remove your shirt child.” She was still smiling gently as Nic stripped off his shirt. As soon as he was bare, Elena began chanting again. Her voice was clear and powerful.

When she looked back at him, Nic froze in awe. Elena’s dreamy eyes were no longer black, they had gone completely white, and they were glowing. When she opened her mouth it was not her voice that came out, but another, many others, the countless generations of healers who’d left her their power.

“Nico Alero, do you freely give your blood, your essence, to your One, even knowing that she may not live through this night?”

“Yes,” Nic said without hesitation, but he knew that she would live. She had to.

Elena placed her hand upon his neck, murmuring in her strange language. His blood began to burn in his body, the worst where her hands lay over his jugular. The louder her voice, the deeper the burn. Sweat poured from his head and shoulders. He gripped his thighs as his blood ignited in a torch of agony and his body trembled.

Elena plunged the long needle into Nic’s neck without warning, and she wasn’t gentle about it as she extracted his blood. It felt like his very life force was being sucked out. His teeth elongated instinctively and he hissed at the old woman, forgetting for a moment everything but the fire she poured through him.

“Still yourself, Vampire.” Her eyes had faded again to their usual liquid black, and her voice was once again her own. “I had to call upon some very old magic so that your One may live. Your small amount of pain just might ensure that she will be able to decide whether or not she wants to walk through life with you.”

Nic forced himself to remain still as Elena extracted the needle from his neck. He

crouched, shaking in reaction, as Elena turned around to Jenna. Placing the needle into her neck much more gently than she'd jabbed it into him, she pushed the plunger down until every last drop was injected into Jenna, whose eyes popped open suddenly as the needle was removed. Her body went into a seizure, bucking up and down again on the bed.

"Hold her, Nico. You must calm her before she injures herself even more." Elena moved and Nic sat down on the bed next to his One. He clasped Jenna's shoulders gently and pinned her to the bed. It didn't work. His Beloved thrashed in his grip, and opened her mouth wide, screaming.

"Hold her," the healer's voice was sharp now, obviously not open to argument.

Nic didn't want to hurt Jenna's traumatized body even more, but he quickly lay down next to her, laying one heavy thigh over her thrashing legs, and using his arm like a bar, pinning her to the bed.

She began to sob. "No, I won't go back there. I won't. You'll have to kill me first."

Nic pulled her body closer into his. He slid his free hand under her neck, turning her face into the warmth at the crook of his neck. He wanted to cry right along with her.

"Shhh, Beloved, everything is all right now," he crooned against the top of her head. "You are home now. Safe. You will never go back there, this I promise you. You will never see that bastard who dares to call himself your father."

He didn't know how long he whispered assurances into her tangled hair, but at some point he realized that her hands were digging into his shirt, she was holding on for dear life, not trying to escape. Nic shifted to hover over her, his weight braced on elbows and knees to spare her poor body any more pressure or pain. Freed, his hands moved to cup her cheeks.

"Jenna, Beloved, look at me," he demanded. Her head moved fretfully, her eyes open and darting blindly around the room. "Jenna," he let his fear sharpen his voice, and her eyes snapped to his, slowly focusing in and losing their haze of confusion. She blinked a few times, tears filling her eyes to spill down her cheeks. Nic leaned forward and caught the tears she was shedding on his tongue, stroking reverently over the velvet of her cheeks.

"Beloved, you are home where you belong. Home with me." He brushed his cool lips across her temple and rolled back to her side, curling protectively around her now-calm body. Her breathing regulated and as she became heavy in his arms, he knew she was unconscious again.

"She may live yet, Vampire," Elena chuckled. "She is strong, this one."

"Thank you," Nic said quietly. There was no way he could ever repay the healer for the gift she'd given him.

"You are most welcome. She will be a good mate for you. Her spirit is strong." The healer chuckled again. "She will keep you in your place."

With an impossibly young and joyful smile, Elena broke her protective circle and gathered the items she'd brought to heal Jenna, leaving the two flickering candles on either side of Jenna's head. "Keep these by her tonight. They will protect her should anyone try to interfere while she heals from her injuries."

Nic nodded gravely, silently vowing to himself that anyone who tried to interfere with his woman again would have a Vampire in Blood Rage to deal with.

On her way out the door Elena stopped in front of Bas. "Watch him tonight,

youngling,” she murmured softly to the other Vampire. “Make sure he doesn’t turn from her protector to her vengeance.”

* * * *

Four days. It had been four days since the attack, and still Jenna was not awake. Nic rarely left her side. When he did, she would slide into delirium, screaming out that she would never return, never let Stone control her again. Worse were the times she would weep, seemingly trapped in her hideous memories. The desolation in her cries tore a hole in Nic’s gut every time he heard it. There was little he could do but bathe the sweat from her body and keep her as calm as he could.

His voice proved the best sedative when she went wild. Nic spent hours talking to her, telling her stories of his childhood in Italy, reading to her from old books of poetry, anything to help her through the ordeal.

Her body was healing faster than any human should heal, but it was still going too slowly to suit Nic. The bones in her wrist were mended, the bruising lighter than only four days could account for. Elena called daily to check up on the patient, and when Nic raged over Jenna’s failure to wake, she explained to him over and over that Jenna might be out for several days. She’d been through a traumatic experience that most mortals wouldn’t have survived. Her body needed the rest, but more, so did her spirit, which had been polluted with Stone’s vile hatred and evil.

He didn’t leave the apartment, not even to feed, choosing instead to sustain himself on bagged blood. Bas was the only one he could bear to have in the apartment, the only one he’d allow anywhere near her unconscious, vulnerable body. Perhaps he might have trusted Aidan with her if the Were-Dragon hadn’t come the night after the attack and made his disapproval of her so obvious. He’d accused Nic of bringing trouble from the human community into their midst by keeping the eldest daughter of the man most invested in confining the Night Creatures to Reservations, as white men had done to Native Americans so many generations ago.

According to both Aidan and Bas, Stone hadn’t made Jenna’s absence public. Yet. In fact, he’d been photographed the day after the attack attending the opera with his youngest daughter, the fiery haired Erin. When Nic pointed out that there hadn’t been any trouble, Aidan argued that Stone was just biding his time, waiting to strike when it would be the most damaging.

Aidan thought he was fucking crazy, but his old friend with his hard Dragon heart couldn’t possibly understand what was going through Nic’s mind or his heart, and Nic wasn’t going to waste his time trying to drive his point home with the Dragon.

At some level he understood Aidan’s concerns, even shared them. But his connection to Jenna was too strong. Even before he’d seen her, before he’d known she was his One, he’d loved her.

In the end, he couldn’t force himself to worry about possible species wars. His only concern was lying next to her. Her breathing was slow and easy, her expression serene.

He’d roused her every few hours and coaxed her to take some fluids, but she’d only taken small amounts, never fully awake. He ran the back of his hand across her cheek. Her skin was creamy and smooth to the touch, and lost the faint trace of fever that worried him.

She must be healing, he mused with a wince, because just this one small touch made

him hard, something that hadn't happened even when he'd seen her beautifully nude, bathing her. Sliding his hand down her neck he felt her pulse, counting each beat, relieved that it was strong.

* * * *

Jenna waited in silence, like she did most nights in her dreams. Tucked away from the real world, here she was safe, protected and cared for. Even if he was only imaginary, her dream lover gave her the comfort she so desired.

Nico, she'd screamed his name in pleasure in more than one erotic dream. He came to her nightly, bringing pleasure and comfort and the escape from reality she so desperately needed.

Jenna looked around. Tonight she was in a bedroom that looked like something out of a gothic novel. The walls were made of stone. A fireplace twice her height covered one wall, providing heat and low lighting, and casting eerie shadows on the wall.

Jenna knew this was a dream and would last for only a short time, but these dreams were her saving grace from the evil she witnessed on a daily basis. She closed her eyes, imagining him there with her.

Strong hands gently came down on her shoulders, hot breath whispered along her neck.

"You look ravishing tonight, My Lady."

Jenna leaned her head back. She loved it when he called her his Lady, or his woman. He was possessive, something Jenna had never experienced before. A plus-sized gal whose father rarely let her out of his sight, her social skills were almost nil. The brief affair she'd had with one of her father's cronies ending almost before it began. After taking her virginity, the man treated her cruelly, afraid she would tell her father about what they'd done. He certainly hadn't ever been possessive. Jenna decided that sex was extremely overrated.

His mouth grazed her earlobe. "I have missed you." His dark-velvet voice caressed her while his cool hands drew circles around her shoulders and down her arms.

"I can tell," she whispered, smiling at the feel of his cock as it rode the crack of her ass through her elegant dress. Her body ripened with his simple touch. It was hard to find her voice. She sighed as his full lips found her neck, sliding slowly over the sensitive length. His arms came around her, pulling her back against his solid chest. "You smell delicious," he growled, nipping the delicate skin at her nape.

"Do I, now?" She pushed her ass against him and wiggled. His cock pressed even harder against her soft derriere, and she smiled. "You're a bad boy, Nico," Jenna was amazed at how good it felt to be carefree. There was little room for such feelings in her real life.

"Say it again." He licked a hot path down her neck to just under her ear. "Say my name again."

Jenna put her hands up, winding them around his head pulling his mouth further onto her neck. "Nico." Her voice faded as he bit lightly into her flesh, nipping, and then soothing with his wicked tongue.

She loved it when he kissed her neck. It sent tingles of electricity straight to her pussy. The first time he'd kissed her there, she'd nearly come from that sensation alone, it was so pleasurable, a new erogenous zone for her.

She threaded her fingers through his hair, pulling his mouth tighter to her neck. He moaned deeply as he took her skin between his teeth and sucked hard.

“Mark me,” she whispered, and was rewarded with his low groan vibrating against her skin. “I want to wear your mark, to show the world I belong to you.”

“Oh Jenna, I need you.” His rough voice tickled her neck.

“You make me feel beautiful,” she said, her hands sliding up the front of his white silk shirt, savoring the ripple of hard muscles under her palms.

He cupped her jaw, tracing the edge with his rough fingertips. “Never doubt that you are indeed beautiful, absolutely the most beautiful woman in the world.”

She sighed and blinked up at him. “How can you possibly be this perfect?” She shook her head and laughed bitterly. “Of course you are. This is my dream. It makes total sense that you would be perfect.” she murmured when he’d released her lips. Tall and hard, his thick arms and thighs were roped with muscle. While the strength and sheer size of him was impressive, it was his face that captured Jenna.

Sculpted as if from marble, smooth and flawless, a face like that should never have worked on a man as big as he. Somehow, though, it fit him perfectly.

His nose was straight and strong. Thick black lashes framed a set of the palest blue eyes Jenna had ever seen. They were hypnotizing in their intensity. Those eyes held Jenna enthralled. Looking into their crystalline depths, she could see his very soul if she looked deeply enough.

Nico pulled her close, kissing the top of her head. “Beloved, I love your body. Your curves entice me. Your soft skin satisfies me more than any lover I have known.” He leaned back to meet her eyes and Jenna smiled feebly. “Open your eyes for me Jenna, I am real and waiting for you to open your eyes.”

* * * *

A small sound brought his eyes back to hers. Green-flecked brown eyes stared back at him.

“Welcome back.” His smile was wide, he didn’t care that his fangs were showing. He was too happy to remember she might be afraid when she remembered he was Vampire.

“Am I dead?” she asked, voice hoarse from disuse and a need for hydration.

Nic shook his head. “No, Beloved, you’re not dead.” She opened her mouth to speak again, but Nic quieted her. “Don’t try to talk yet. Let me give you something to drink first.”

He reached over her, retrieving a glass of water. “Let me help you sit. Your body really needs this.” He eased his arm under her shoulders and lifted her into a sitting position. Lifting the glass, he adjusted the plastic straw, bringing it to her lips.

“Drink slowly.”

He was trying to remain calm, but adrenalin flooded him. It was a struggle to keep from pinning her to the bed and plunging into her. She studied him as she sipped, and he wanted to squirm under her green-flecked gaze. She took her time, finishing most of the water before pushing the glass away. Nic took the glass and replaced it on the table. Then he fluffed up some pillows and gently laid her against them.

God, she’s beautiful, he thought, as a pink blush crept up her neck and into her cheeks. He felt the lunge of his cock against his zipper as he imagined that blush

stretching along the rest of her soft, pliant body. He turned so that he was facing her, forcing his mind away from his cock. Dammit, she'd just regained consciousness, but he wanted her. Wanted to feel her skin and taste her blood. Wanted to know for sure that she was here, lucid, safe and his.

Crossing his legs, he planted his fists on his thighs to keep himself from touching her.

"How are you feeling?" He prayed that his blood had done the trick and that she was whole again.

She blinked a couple of times, then stretched her arms above her head. The motion caused the t-shirt she was wearing to stretch tight across her breasts. Nic stifled a groan at the sight of her full nipples pressing against the soft fabric. She wiggled her fingers and toes and finally graced him with a smile.

"I feel wonderful. Are you sure I'm not dead? I shouldn't feel this good. And you're here with me! I can't believe you're real, Nico."

"Say it again, Jenna," the words tore free without his permission. "Say my name." Nic held his breath.

"I can't believe you're real, Nico," she repeated more softly, her lips caressing his name. His name on her lips was more than he could take. The air whooshed out of her as he crawled over her, crowding her into the pillows as he straddled her, hovering over her.

"I promise I am very, very real, Jenna. And we have much to talk about, Beloved, but not now. Right now I have to taste you, just a little. I need to feel you," he rested his forehead briefly against hers and exhaled. "Perhaps *I* need proof that *you* are real."

He leaned down, not trusting himself to touch anything more than her mouth. His lips grazed hers. Electric, like one of Aidan's lightening bolts, was the only description Nic could come up with. He dipped back down and sipped from her mouth. Her taste was so sweet and unique, like peaches and cream. It called to him in such a primal way. His dick never gotten so hard, so fast and with such urgency.

He wanted to go slow, to give her time to adjust, to make sure she was healed, but he couldn't do it. He needed to touch more of her, now. He raised his hand to her cheek, cupping her face to raise her chin, and dove back down to lick her full bottom lip.

Angling his head slightly, he slipped his tongue deftly between the crease of her lips.

She opened to him willingly, allowing him full access to her mouth. With her surrender there was no holding back. An animal growl ripped from Nic's throat as he deepened the kiss even further.

He demanded that she respond to his mouth, and she didn't disappoint. Her silky tongue tangled with his, filling him with her flavor and brushing him with satin fire. His breath came faster now as he pulled back to skim her face with his lips. He sprinkled feather-light kisses across her forehead, the bridge of her nose and the dimple in her cheek. He nuzzled her jawline, following it to the side of her neck. Jenna's body softened and her body heat rose.

Nic inhaled her scent and knew she wanted him, instinctively knew she was ready for him. His head was telling him to wait, but his body took control. He was too selfish, too needy to stop now. Watching her come so close to death before they'd ever even touched was his undoing. He needed to reassure himself that she was healthy and alive and finally his.

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Jenna put her hands to Nico's chest and pushed. What was she doing? She couldn't quite wrap her brain around the fact the he was real. The man from her dreams, the lover who made her tremble with sexual thirst, was real and sharing the same bed.

"Wait, wait, please," she begged, hoping like hell he would understand. He froze; his handsome face drew into a frown of concern. Drawing a deep breath, he gave a tight nod and pushed himself up, shifting to the side. Grabbing her hand, he brought it to his lips.

"I am sorry, Beloved," he said against her fingers. "I did not mean to go so fast, or to overwhelm you." He sighed again and pressed her fingers to his lips, letting his tongue sneak out to tease the sensitive tips. "Just days ago I thought I was witnessing your death, and now you're awake and so fucking beautiful that I just needed to feel you."

Jenna hid her smile, but not the blush that flamed her cheeks. No one ever thought she was beautiful. Nic turned to lie on his side, propped on his elbow with his head in his hand. He rubbed her palm over his cheek and she felt the liquid heat rushing between her thighs. Just like in the dreams, only multiplied a thousand times over.

"What happened to me? The last thing I remember is Sal punching me." Jenna shuddered at the memory, and then gasped as Nic's brilliant blue eyes turned a paler shade, tiny blue flames dancing in their depths.

The glow died as quickly as it came, and Nic caressed her arm as he told her the story of how he, Aidan and Bas found her in the alley. He'd killed Harv and Sal himself. He was unapologetic for their deaths, and that served to remind Jenna that he was no ordinary man, that he was a predator. But somehow she wasn't afraid of him. Instead, Jenna was humbled by the rage he felt on her behalf. This man recognized her from their shared dream, saved her life, avenged her pain, and nursed her back to health. She wasn't about to question fate for bringing them together.

He pushed up next to her, his mouth a scant inch from hers. "Is there anything else you want to know, Jenna?" His breath washed over her lips, bathing her in his spicy scent. "Answer quickly. because I'm going to kiss you again and again until you tell me to stop."

Jenna gave him a little smile, but remained quiet, which brought Nic to her in a bruising kiss. Jenna threw her arms around his wide shoulders when he moved over her, one denim-clad thigh pushing between hers. The t-shirt she wore rose along with his leg. She realized she wasn't wearing any underwear when she felt the rough fabric of his jeans brush against her wet heat, and she tried to close her thighs against him. She couldn't decide if the move was a success or a complete failure when all she managed to accomplish was to press his thigh even tighter to her pussy.

A chuckle sounded in her ear. "Open for me, Jenna. I am going to taste and feel every single inch of you."

Nic ran his tongue along her throat, moving down to her shoulder. His fangs scraped lightly over her skin, and while a part of her knew she should be scared, the larger part knew that this was Nico. Jenna knew, in every single cell, that he would never hurt her, and the sensation caused each nerve ending in her body to fire off electric pulses straight to her core.

"God, baby," he whispered, his breath trailing fire back up to her ear. His hands found her smaller ones. Entwining their fingers, he tugged them over her head, pinning them to the mattress. Her nipples hardened, poking into his solid chest.

"Jenna, I need to be inside of you," he said harshly. Strain was evident on his

handsome features. Jenna knew he was holding back. "Tell me now, Beloved. If you need me to back off, I will, but you have to say it now."

Jenna couldn't form the words; instead she freed one of her hands. Placing it on his chest, she trailed her shaky fingers down the length of his torso, finding the bottom of his shirt. She yanked it up. Nic captured her hand, stopping her.

God, don't let him stop now. Her body craved him. She wanted, no she *needed* to feel his skin sliding against her. Dream be damned, she wanted to feel the real man lying on top of her.

He sat up and Jenna protested the break in connection. Pulling his t-shirt the rest of the way off, he tossed it to the floor, never taking his blue eyes from her. Grabbing her hands, he directed them back to his chest.

Her fingers curled around the tightly muscled pecs. She felt the wet heat flood her again; her mouth began to water as he closed his eyes. Nic moaned low as if he was savoring the light scratch of her nails over his tight male nipples. Jenna took advantage of his obvious bliss to gently squeeze each tiny peak.

Nic's back arched and his eyes snapped open. He positioned his hands at the neck of her shirt, ripping it in two. Her breasts spilled out of the opening and her skin burned.

"Beautiful," he whispered. "Just like I knew you would be."

His hands slowly danced across her upper body. Jenna's flesh quivered and her nipples puckered even harder, waiting in breathless anticipation for his next touch. He was teasing her mercilessly, and it was killing her.

He slipped one long finger into his mouth, wetting it. Jenna held her breath as he sucked it slowly, bringing out of his wicked mouth and down to her pale nipple. Jenna bucked upwards as his wet finger made contact, tracing her taut nipple. His eyes glowed with unrestrained joy at her reaction and, laughing, he bent down and blew across the sensitized peak. Jenna moaned into the sensation. Nic was shredding her sanity one soft puff at a time. The pleasure was indescribable; the feelings gathering in her were overwhelming.

Tears filled her brown eyes. No one ever treated her with such care, such tenderness. No one had ever showered her with such acceptance and affection. The first drop tumbled over her lashes to land on her cheek. Ducking her head, she tried to hide her joy, her pain.

Nic's hand came under her chin, turning her to face him. Seeing her wet cheeks his brows knit together, puzzled. Thoughtful for a second, he leaned down, licking the saline away. The one small gesture caused the damn to burst. Jenna couldn't stop the flow of tears raining down, and after a moment she didn't even try.

He never said a word, he just let her cry, sipping each tear from her cheeks. He was drinking her sorrow, and the act devastated her control.

Her chest hurt, her heart swelling with something she was afraid to name. It was impossible to feel this much for a virtual stranger, wasn't it? But then, was Nico really a stranger to her? They'd shared the most intimate moments she'd ever experienced before they'd even met, in her dreams.

She tried desperately to swallow the rest of her pain; she didn't want to pollute the night with her past. She wasn't going to corrupt a beautiful memory, lying in Nic's arms was where she belonged. She was going to celebrate what was to come.

Chapter Four

Jenna's every quiver echoed in his own body, her every tear. There was nothing he could do but let her cry. She needed to purge herself. No one could escape what she had without some kind of trauma haunting them. Fuck, it was hard to do nothing but hold her. Her tears shredded his heart, tore his gut. He silently vowed he would do whatever it took to keep her from ever going through this kind of pain again. For now, he held her as the past crept up on her.

Damn, he admired her courage. She didn't sob out loud, nor did she curse the world, which would have been her right. She wept silently, and when it was enough she gave a hard swallow, and stopped.

Nic pressed his cool fingers to her hot cheek, bringing her eyes up to meet his, trying to pour all of his love, his passion and his admiration into his gaze. He must have succeeded at least a little, because her eyes widened, her lips parting on a small gasp.

His control broke yet again. This woman possessed the magic spell that shattered his control with one wondering look.

He fell on her again, wrapping his arms around her. Chest to chest, he held her, kissing her endlessly, pushing his tongue into her wet mouth, reassuring her that he was here, that he was real. That he was hers.

Jenna kissed him back with equal hunger, fingers winding into his long hair to hold him to her. She opened her legs for him with no urging, wrapping her full thighs around his hips, pulling him closer. Her eyes closed, her head tilted back, and he swallowed her moan as the material from his jeans created burning friction at her core. She writhed, arching her hips into him, and he broke from the kiss, throwing his head back to gasp for air.

Her eyes glowed green and amber, lit from within by her passion. Her body rose against his, begging for contact, for release. He pushed his hips against her, his bulging cock crying to break free of its denim confinement. She was scalding hot. He could feel her desire soaking through his jeans.

Her fingers crept up his spine, tiptoeing over each muscle, plane and ridge along his back. Each little stroke licked him with fire. He sucked in a breath, grinding his cock deeper into the cradle of her thighs while her fingers continued their play.

His mouth pressed to hers, then lifted to skate along her jaw. Pushing her hair aside, he rubbed his nose into the tender crook where her neck met her shoulder. Inhaling deeply, he groaned. Her scent. Nic would never get enough of it. The tip of his tongue came out to trace the path from her creamy shoulder to the side of her neck. Her pulse beckoned him to taste her. He pushed the urge down deep; tonight was for loving and healing. There would be other nights for that sort of sharing.

Instead, he moved back up, biting her lightly on the chin. He watched a smile spread across her face. Licking where he'd just bitten, he worked his way down into the valley of her breasts.

The fullness cushioned his face. He rubbed his cheeks over her silky skin, murmuring, "Jenna, you are so damn soft." His lips caressed the soft, plump outer edges of her tits. His fingers itched to grab her ample breasts and pluck at the nipples until she

begged him to enter her, but he swore he was going to take this slow, no matter how loudly his cock was protesting.

Nic wanted to be as gentle as he could. In their shared dreams Jenna often praised his gentle touch, his romantic actions. In their dreams, gentleness had been possible; in real life it was another thing entirely. Nic had never been a gentle lover; in fact he preferred it hard, hot and fast. As primal an act as sex could get. After all, he'd reasoned, he was Vampire. How much more carnal did one get?

Tonight, for his One, Nic forced himself to slow down. His mouth slid across one nipple, scraping a fang along the very tip. Jenna's chest heaved and she threw her head back at the touch. She arched beautifully into his mouth, the sweet fire of her blood teasing his senses.

Slow, he reminded himself. Keep it slow... He learned every part of her breast, circling the entire globe with devouring lips and savoring tongue. He sipped at her nipple, first just the tip, then he opened his lips, tasting more of her silky skin, and finally taking as much of her into his mouth as he could and driving her mad with his relentless suction.

One hand glided down her ribs, along the rise of her plump belly. He wanted to sink into her and never resurface. Skin never felt so satiny under his fingers. A woman's soft gasps never contained such music. Her body jumped every place he caressed, begging for more of his touch.

Nic's palm found Jenna's inner thigh. His mouth went to her other breast to suckle, his hand traveled along the crease, moving ever closer to her sheath. The tip of his finger traced along the plump lips of her labia, the slick moisture coating his fingers.

"Damn, baby, I could fuck you right now. You're so ready for me." He moved his finger over her, rimming her tiny, fluttering opening, soaking in her whimpers of pleasure.

Slow, dammit, he reminded himself again. Keep it gentle. He was going to make her come first, let her pleasure fill the ache within him, stoke the fire burning him up.

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Jenna knew this couldn't be a dream; her dreams never felt this good. Her dreams didn't make her feel so alive. Nic was still the gentle lover of her dreams, but now his touch took on a desperate urgency that was all too real and all too compelling. She pushed her hand into his long hair. Locking the long strands between her fingers, Jenna led his lips back to her nipple, where he plucked it with his lips, scraped it with his fangs.

His hand traced her plump lower lips, mapping them with his fingers, splitting them apart with his thumb. His middle finger stroked maddening circles around her entrance, rimming her opening with a light touch, whipping her body toward madness. Jenna's hips rose, begging for him to enter her, plunge his finger in deeply, fill her up. She wanted him to slide into her and fuck her *now*, but he ignored her silent pleas. He was relentless with his hand, pushing that maddening finger just inside only to retreat, drawing out her creamy arousal.

"Baby, so fucking wet." His voice was barely audible. He'd rested his forehead against her breasts and tipped his face down so he could watch his hand on her pussy. No, she realized, he was watching his hand *in* her pussy, staring at her like he was in awe of her body's reaction to his touch. Jenna's whole body burned with her rosy blush.

Any embarrassment she experienced at her moist state died a quick death as Nic finally pressed his thick finger fully into her. He slid it back and forth, the friction

intense, and when she arched against him begging for more, he pulled out and added a second finger, leisurely exploring her channel. She wiggled, moaning and crying with his increasing strokes.

His busy fingers found a spot within that shot pure fire through her, causing her to scream aloud. The sensation was so new, unlike anything she'd ever experienced.

"Oh, God..." His eyes glittered up at her, lightning flashed from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. "Oh, Nic..." He kept his finger on that spot, drinking in her wild response.

"You like that, hmm?" He dipped his head, lapping softly at her nipple without taking his eyes from hers. "Move your hips for me, Jenna. Ride my hand, my fingers. Watch me, Beloved."

He brought his free hand to her clit, his fingers sliding easily around the tight bud. Her legs trembled when his thumb and first finger pinched her tight cherry. The sensation was too much. Jenna couldn't stop the cries rippling from between her lips. Nic captured those cries in his mouth and stroked faster. She was going to die from the ecstasy his hands were giving her; she was going to go up in flames. A hot spot started deep in her core, a sweet burn that began slowly branching its way out.

Her legs drew up, her muscles clamping down hard around his taunting fingers, and liquid heat poured from her. Her cry was one long, pure note, filling the air as her orgasm shook her from the inside out.

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Nic sat up, yanking at the buttons on his jeans. He fucking needed her now. She was so damned responsive to the slightest of his touches, her body taking what he gave and asking for more. He licked her juices from each finger and his palm while he ripped his boxers down with his free hand.

His cock finally sprang free; he was so hard he hurt. Grabbing the pulsing head, he stroked up and down his shaft, trying to calm the ache enough to make it last. Jenna watched him licking her taste from his hand, then her eyes darted to his dick. She licked her lips, like she wanted to eat him alive. His hand swept through the pre-cum on his engorged head.

"See what you do to me, Beloved? I knew it would be this way with us, Jenna." Reaching out his free hand, he cupped her cheek, sliding his thumb over her soft, red lower lip. All the while her eyes stayed glued to his hand on his cock.

"I haven't been able to get hard for anyone else since I started dreaming of you. You are the only one who does this to me now, Jenna." Her tongue touched her lip, causing a lash of fire on his balls.

"No more nights spent jacking off to our dreams," he groaned. Her mouth formed a perfect little "O", and Nic smiled. She was going to use that supple mouth on him later, but not now. Now, he was going to be inside of her tight walls.

"Spread your thighs for me, Beloved. Let me see all of you, wide open and ready to take me."

With an uncertain look, Jenna brought her knees up, planted her feet on the bed and allowed her legs to fall open. Her glistening wetness was exquisitely displayed for Nic's hungry gaze.

"Put your hands above your head, Jenna. I want you stretched out for me when I feast on you."

He saw her uncertainty fade under his ravenous stare. He let go of his cock and guided her hands, wrapping her fingers around the bars at the head of the bed. Her breasts stuck out proudly, her nipples tight, shiny and red from his mouth. Nic's stomach clenched hard as she gazed up at him with all the trust in the world. He'd been desired by women before, but not like this. Not with the kind of need written across Jenna's pretty face.

He positioned himself at her entrance, stroking his cock once. His hands curled around her knees, opening her up wider and pushing them toward her chest. Nic was large, and even though Jenna was slick and ready, he knew it was going to be a tight fit.

Slowly he slipped the full head of his cock through her opening and into her tight passage. He hissed between his teeth as her pussy wrapped tightly around his aching dick, and her gasps filled the room.

"Oh God, Jenna. You are so. Fucking. Tight." He threw his head back, his mouth open as he tunneled deeper into her. It was an erotic fight, her body adjusting to his length and girth. She was sucking him slowly within her walls, and he was her willing prisoner.

Finally he was seated fully inside her, and Nic paused, clawing at the memory of sanity and control. Her voluptuous hips began to push up into his, and Nic began the slow, torturous process of dragging his hyper-sensitive cock through her clenching folds without losing all control. He called on all the restraint he could muster. Her body was fucking incredible, all soft curves cushioning his hard lines.

"Wrap your legs around me, Jenna," he breathed. His mouth moved to her ear, hovering there as he tried to slow his harsh breathing.

Her mile-long legs wrapped over his hips, drawing him even deeper into the haven of her body.

"How do I feel to you, Beloved?" She moaned in answer and he moved deeper, in and out. "Tell me," he demanded as he shifted, grinding his pubic bone over her swollen mound.

"Oh, Nico," he thrust hard when she spoke his name, wondering if the sound of his name on her lips would ever fail to arrow straight to his dick. "I feel so full, Nico." She cried, raising her hips to meet him, "But I need more."

"Like this," he asked, thrusting hard twice. Her body tightened on him.

"Yes," she hissed, "but more, harder, Nico. I need you harder."

He gladly answered her plea.

The rhythm he set had her nails scraping down his back. She thrashed from side to side. *Damn*, was all he could think. *Fuck, she was a wild one*. Nic loved every second of the hungry pleas pouring from her ripe body and luscious lips.

"More," she screamed, biting at his chest. Nic pumped harder now, letting loose the careful control he'd been fighting to keep. He leaned forward, licking her face, her neck. Her hands tangled in the long ends of his hair, tugging his body into a tense arch over her, and her eyes raced over him, zeroing in on the place they were joined like a laser beam.

The sight of them together wrenched a gasp from her lips, and her inner muscles fluttered over the length of his cock. That was all it took.

Throwing his head back, Nic slammed deeply into her. Jenna screamed as her orgasm pounded through her, taking her breath away. She surrounded him, held him tight inside of her as he pumped once, twice and on the third howled Jenna's name and came

as he'd never come before, his seed shooting almost violently from his body and into hers.

She touched his face, gentling his frantic pace.

"What are you doing to me, Nic?" she whispered in wonder.

Nic's hand slid beneath her nape, bringing her up to him and into his kiss.

"I'm loving you, Jenna. Like you should be loved. I will always take care of you. You will never have to be alone or afraid again." Even though he'd come, his erection had barely subsided. Now he continued a gentle pulse of his hips, savoring the warm clasp of her tight sheath around his needy cock

"Why, Nic? Why would you do this for me?"

Nic sighed. She didn't understand the bond they shared. How could she? She was human. How could she know she was now a part of his very soul?

"Jenna, I knew I loved you with our first dream. I would do anything for you. Beloved, I live for you, I would die for you. You and I have become one whole."

"You've given me so much," her eyes were wide and hazy, filled with awe and wonder. It humbled him, to see this woman, his One, the only one who could ever touch his soul, so amazed at his devotion. He buried his face in her neck, inhaling her sweet peaches-and-cream scent. He couldn't bear to meet the questions in her eyes. He felt so unworthy of her.

Her hands stroked up the length of his back, and he arched deeper into her. She murmured his name, dragging her nails down his spine. His mouth opened over her throat, her pulse a drumbeat in his ears. She tasted so sweet.

She tangled her fingers again in his hair, tugging his head up to meet his eyes. Nic tried to bury his disappointment. *This is about loving asshole, not feeding.*

He could see his reflection in her eyes. His face was flushed, lips full and slightly parted. His fangs showed, just the tips peeking from behind his upper lip. Did she feel his need? Her slight nod didn't convince him and he turned his head aside. He'd promised himself not to ask, to wait until she was ready to offer with an open heart.

"Nico," her voice was a hushed whisper, hoarse from her long convalescence and her cries of rapture. "Let me give this to you." He shook his head, trying to break away from her eyes. "Then give this to me." Her hands were relentless, one locked in his hair, the other guiding him back to the crook of her neck.

He managed one last try.

"Are you sure, Beloved?" Her answer was clear when she tilted her head to the side, revealing her racing pulse. Unable to deny either of them any longer, Nic sliced cleanly through her vulnerable flesh. His lips clamped soundly around his bite, and her body convulsed as another orgasm her.

A torrent of raging pleasure rose in him, and to his utter astonishment he ejaculated again into her tight body. Again and again he shot into her tight pussy as her sweet, slightly metallic taste flooded his mouth. He sucked gently, taking just enough to sate his need. He withdrew his fangs and ran his tongue gently over the bite, erasing the blood but not the scars his teeth left. Everyone would now understand that she was under his protection. She was his mate, his One.

Shifting his weight to the side, Nic sank to the bed beside her, immediately pulling her into his embrace. He nuzzled her neck, trying to identify the emotion floating through him as she sighed and relaxed into slumber in his arms. *Peace.* Nic was at peace for the

first time in over four hundred years. Savoring the feeling, he closed his eyes and let sleep take him.

Chapter Five

Jenna awoke to the smell of food. The tantalizing aroma of broiling steak and spicy herbs dragged her from the most amazing dream. Slowly, reluctantly, she opened her eyes, before letting out the breath she'd been holding. It wasn't a dream; she was really here, in this place with Nic.

His scent was all over her and the sheets. She buried her nose deeper into the pillow, muffling a giddy squeal as she drew in his essence. Jenna's body heated as memories of their lovemaking flashed across her mind like a slideshow.

It was mind-blowing, carrying her away to a place so filled with pleasure and peace and contentment that all her problems ceased, for a brief time, to exist. Her father and his evil scheming, her sisters and their unknown fates, all forgotten for a moment in time. There was nothing except Nico.

She remembered her problems now, though. Jenna sat up, thinking of Rowan. Had her middle sister escaped? Had she waited for Jenna at the diner? When Jenna failed to meet her, had Rowan tried to contact her? Where was she now? Each question was more alarming than the last.

Throwing back the covers, Jenna started to stand, intent on finding a shower and then her sister. Every muscle in her body protested, particularly the muscles along her inner thighs. A giggle rose in her throat. Her aches and pains weren't left over from her attack; they were left over from her night of endless sex with Nic.

Four was definitely the number of times it took to make her body sore.

The door to the bedroom opened and Jenna snatched the covers up to her chin as Nic entered, bearing a tray of food. He was still gloriously naked. Jenna's cheeks heated as her eyes traveled the length of his body. Damn, he was beautiful to behold.

He caught her staring, and wiggled his eyebrows.

"Like what you see, Beloved?" His smile revealed two rows of even white teeth. His fangs were gone, but the mere memory of them dragging lightly over her flesh made Jenna shiver.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Nic placed the tray across her lap. Relieved, she let herself be distracted by the food. Her mouth watered as she spied the thick steak, potatoes and huge pile of vegetables. Usually a chicken and fish kind of girl, Jenna was surprised to find she actually craved the large piece of steak.

Her stomach growled in demand, and Jenna flopped back onto the bed, dragging the pillow over her face in embarrassment.

Nic laughed, easily taking it away from her, fluffing it up and tucking it behind her as a back rest.

"I figured you would be starving this evening," Nic sliced off a bit of the meat and speared it with a fork. "It's been five days since you have eaten anything solid." He put the tender meat in her mouth. Closing her lips around the fork, she moaned as she chewed. Food never tasted so good.

"You need to eat all of this. Your body is low on iron, and you need the protein." Jenna had another one of those hot flashes when she remembered just why she was low on iron. She wasn't into pain, but Nic's bite was a dark ecstasy she'd never dreamed

existed. When his crystalline gaze flared hot, Jenna knew he was remembering, too.

Nic chatted companionably with her as she ate. He smiled often, the total opposite of the stereotypical brooding Vampire. He enjoyed feeding her, leaning forward to lick a dab of butter from her lower lip so that they both shivered.

When her plate was empty, Nic offered her a glass of ruby red wine. Jenna took it and drank the glass dry. He widened his eyes comically and snatched the glass away from her.

“Whoa, Beloved, not so fast. I want you comfortable and content tonight, not drunk!” He put the empty wine glass on the tray and left the room, returning moments later with a large pitcher of ice water and a new glass.

“Try this instead,” he said, filling the glass and giving it to her. Jenna drank it down just as quickly as she did the wine.

What in the world was wrong with her?

“I’m sorry,” she said after Nic filled the glass again. “I don’t understand why I am so thirsty.”

Nic’s hand cupped her cheek; it was becoming a familiar gesture.

“You are dehydrated. You were unconscious for several days, and of course after last night, I would imagine you have worked up a mighty thirst.”

Jenna tried to look away, overwhelmed by everything that had happened to her since her escape. She hated the fact she’d been so helpless, and was torn between arousal and embarrassment by the way she’d forgotten everything in the fire of Nic’s touch. He forced her to look at him.

“Tell me what you are thinking,” he commanded gently.

Jenna tried to gather her thoughts. “I don’t like that I’ve done nothing since I woke up to find my sister.” Nic nodded encouragingly, so she added, “And I’m not crazy about being so helpless.”

He stroked his long fingers through her tangled hair. “We don’t yet know there’s a reason to worry. And even if we did, you know there was nothing you could have done for her, not without being recaptured yourself. If she is in trouble, she will need you to be strong for her, and only now are you beginning to regain your strength.” He cupped her cheek again.

“I don’t see you as helpless, Beloved. Any other woman would have died in that alley. You fought for your life, and survived when even our most gifted healer doubted that you would.” Nic closed his eyes, seemingly overcome by the memory of her injuries. “Don’t feel ashamed, Jenna, not for anything that has happened.”

Jenna’s hand covered his. “Did you know I was real and not a figment of your imagination?”

“I did,” he said, leaning back on the headboard and pulling her into his arms. “I’d been restless, unhappy for a long time. I’d been searching for something, for a reason to continue this existence that had become so sad and stale.”

Jenna sent him an alarmed look. The idea that he’d been unhappy, so alone, broke her heart, but his implication that at one point he no longer wanted to live petrified her soul.

He kissed the top of her head comfortingly and continued.

“I’d returned to Italy, searching for some sort of fulfillment, and that’s when I had the first dream.” He shook his head with a wry smile. “You were so familiar to me. I used

all my resources to search for you, but you eluded me at every turn.” He tapped her nose chidingly. “I’d come home and was about to ask my friend Sebastian to help me in my search. He’s a security expert, and has some talent in finding people who don’t want to be found.”

“I don’t understand why you would search for someone you dreamed about.” Especially someone as insignificant as herself. She had so little to offer. She’d never been away from home, never been out of the watchful influence of her father and his minions. Hell, even her education had been tailored to his fanatical beliefs.

“Jenna, I am Vampire. You know this. In four hundred and fifty years, no woman has called to my soul as you did in our dreams.” Nic shifted so that they were both sitting up, facing each other on the wide bed. “What you may not know is that we are told that our One is nothing more than a myth. Those who believe the universe has deemed one person to belong to us are considered fools. I believed a true mate was nothing but a legend designed to give us the hope to continue on. But then I saw you. You are that One, Jenna.”

He tapped her mouth closed with a finger under her chin.

“I fell in love with you in our dreams, Jenna. But when I found you in reality,” he paused, his eyes burning into hers with an intensity that sucked the breath from her lungs. “Beloved, you don’t just *own* my soul, you *are* my soul.”

“But I...” Nic cut her off when he crushed his lips to hers in a short, rough kiss.

“There are no buts in this, Jenna. We are meant to be together, and that is that.”

“It’s that simple for you?”

He dazzled her with another smile. “Where you are concerned, it is that simple.”

Placing a chaste kiss to her forehead, Nic pointed to her full glass. “Finish up. When you’re done, the shower is through the door there.” He waved his hand in the direction of the bathroom. “I have some phone calls to make.”

Jenna sat for several minutes after he left her, considering everything he’d said. She was every bit in love with him as he claimed to be with her, although she hadn’t said the words. She wanted to belong to him, and she wanted him to be hers. She could, she realized, spend every moment second guessing her luck at landing here, in her sweetest fantasy. Or she could enjoy this gift God had given her. Gee, she mused, difficult choice.

Jenna took a bracing breath and headed for the shower. Her muscles could do with some hot water.

The hot spray felt wonderful on her skin, pounding on muscles that were tense and achy. Standing under the water, her mind went back to the previous night in Nic’s arms. He had touched and tasted every inch of her skin, barely allowing her to touch him. His control was too thin, he’d said. He’d lose it entirely if she explored him the way she wanted to. That was something Jenna intended to remedy as soon as possible.

Her nipples rose as she ran the soapy cloth over them, remembering how his hands on her breasts were pure magic. Soft and tender one minute, rough and demanding the next.

He’d kept her on edge the whole night, showing her the real meaning of anticipation. The plush cloth slid over her thighs as image after image of Nic flashed behind her closed eyelids, his every whisper and cry. The beautiful, graceful arc of his body over hers, the feel of him coming in her. Even now, as her sore body eased, she was wet, not just from the shower but from the desire Nic inspired. Dropping the washcloth, Jenna dipped her

fingers into the well of her arousal, slowly pumping, imitating Nic's thrusts.

Suddenly the shower door was wrenched open, catching her by surprise. Nic was standing there, tall, proud and very naked. His cock jutted out from his body, as erect as if he hadn't spent the night sunk deep in her welcoming body. He was breathing heavily and his eyes were blue flame. He stepped inside, pushing her against the wall with his chest, laying the flat of his palms on the stall, caging her in.

"Jenna, the scent of your arousal reached me all the way in my office. I can feel your desire in every part of my body," Nic growled.

"I'm sorry?" She was stammering, but the feel of him pressed all up against her, slick with the soap and water that cascaded over them utterly stole her mind. She yelped as his mouth crashed into hers, his fingers plunging deep into her pussy.

"God, woman you are killing me. How the hell can I get any work done when all I can think about is fucking you?" His fingers left her and were replaced by the head of his rigid cock. He hooked one arm under her thigh, dragging it high up on his hip. Once he'd taken aim, he thrust, deep and true, filling her so completely that they became one being.

"Not deep enough," he managed to get out before hooking his other arm around her free leg and hoisting her up.

"Nic, no, I'm too heavy," Jenna tried protesting, scrabbling against the marble wall for balance. He only grinned darkly at her, and she watched in fascination as his fangs descended.

"I'm Vampire, Beloved. You weigh no more than a feather to me." Her back hit the shower wall hard as Nic impaled her. His grip tightened on her thighs even as his mouth sought her nipples.

*

The dusky peaks of her tits cried out for his mouth to take them. Spreading her legs even wider, Nic leaned his upper body away from her. The position opened her up so that he rubbed over her clit with every powerful thrust. Her breathless cries just spurred him on.

His hands slid up her thighs, cupping her generous ass. Moaning against her pillowy breasts, he sucked her nipples deeper. Her arms clung tightly to his neck; Jenna pulled him back up against her and nibbled the column of his neck. Fire shot down his spine as her tongue dance along his throat.

"Jenna, Beloved, bite me." He his voice deepened with the need to feel her bite. He sounded desperate, but he didn't care. He didn't care about anything but the sharp heat of his One sharing the visceral pleasure of the bite.

Moaning with the pleasure of his thrusts, his guttural commands, Jenna found the pulse in his neck, opened her mouth wide and sank her teeth in.

"Fuck," he bellowed as the sensation shot through him like molten lava. "Harder! Dammit, Jenna, bite me harder!" His ragged cries bounced off the walls of the shower stall as he pumped furiously in her.

She didn't hesitate. She bit down hard. It wasn't enough to break the skin, but Nic knew he would carry her mark upon him, that was all it took to send him over the edge.

His cry of triumph, his trembling body brought Jenna to orgasm. As she came, her muscles clutched him deep in her womb. Ecstatically, she bit his neck again in the same spot, and Nic was lost in the firestorm of orgasm.

An endless time later, Nic set her on her feet, leaning in and pressing full length

against her trembling body. He was having a difficult time controlling the shudders racing through his own frame.

He was completely undone, Nic realized. He found himself dropping to his knees at her feet, pressing his cheek into her soft tummy. She stroked slowly through his long hair, and he tilted his head to look up at her.

Her head was tilted back against the wall; the water from the shower left drops like diamonds glistening on her pale skin. Her face was so serene, her expression so full of sensual satisfaction and contentment that Nic wondered how he'd survived four hundred and fifty years without her.

He needed to get himself under control. Jenna made him lose track of everything around him. There was only her, the need to protect her, take care of her, and love her. Her scent, her taste, her touch. It bordered on obsession, this addiction to have her, to keep her with him always. It pulled Nic in too many directions, distracting him. Need wasn't something he'd understood before now. He could only hope that time would help him sort through all the foreign feelings he now carried. Otherwise he was afraid he might just fly apart into a million tiny, confused pieces.

*

Jenna opened her eyes and looked down into the achingly beautiful face of her destiny. His eyes, surrounded by long, dark lashes, spiky with water, were deceptively young and vulnerable.

Gently she pushed him back from her and reached around him for the bottle of shampoo sitting on a built-in ledge. She poured a pool of the amber liquid into her palm and the stall was immediately flooded with his scent.

He made a movement to stand, to take over, and she shook her head.

"Nico, let me have a turn caring for you." She wasn't surprised in the least when her voice sounded as young and vulnerable as his eyes looked. After a long hesitation, he nodded, bowing his head to give her access to his fall of silky hair.

She worked the soap into his hair, massaging his scalp until his head tipped back and his eyes closed in pleasure. His low purr of pleasure flooded her with warmth. Not the sexual inferno he stirred in her so easily, although that wasn't far from the surface. No, this warmth filled her heart until it overflowed from her eyes, tears mingling with the water from the shower.

They exchanged no words, there was no reason to. Everything they needed to say to each other was shared through touch, through the words in their eyes in this quiet moment.

She rinsed his hair, stroking over his neck and shoulders, and he rose to kiss her gently. Dipping his head, he kissed his two marks on her neck. A shock skittered down her nervous system as his tongue made contact with the two small pin pricks.

*

Nic turned off the water, shaken to the core. Wrapping her in a wide, plush bath sheet, he lifted her effortlessly out of the tub.

"Come, Beloved, we have a lot to do tonight. Starting with finding out where your sister is."

He'd been on the phone with Aidan when Jenna's warm scent drew him into the shower. The Dragon told him that Bas had located Jenna's sister, but he wouldn't say where the woman was. Instead, he insisted that Nic bring Jenna to the club that evening.

He'd said there was good news, and very bad news, and then refused to give Nic any more information. Nic knew it must be bad, indeed, if Aidan was keeping his mouth shut about it.

Chapter Six

The club was empty. It was early Monday evening and Club Smoke wouldn't open again until Wednesday night. Jenna had heard about the place, this club where humans went for a wild night of fun where creatures not entirely human played. Now in the cool evening twilight, it was hard to see the allure. The walls were dark and scarred with stains and scuffs. The wooden floors were polished, but looked dull from thousands of dancing feet.

Nic led her across the dance floor, his boots echoing in the empty room. She pulled at the simple black sheath she'd found in the closet Nic had designated as hers. The dress was beautiful, but covered much less of her than she was used to with its short, sassy hem and strappy, sleeveless top.

Everything in the closet had been chosen to flatter her figure and coloring, and everything was a perfect fit. The idea of Nic knowing her exact dress size made her cheeks blaze. It didn't matter they'd made love yesterday and today, that he'd seen every inch of her skin. Something about him knowing the number brought up old insecurities.

"Stop it," Nic turned around to face her. "I can feel your apprehension." He caressed her face. "Aidan won't bite. He's not Vampire, Beloved," he sent her a playful wink. "Besides, he helped save you as well."

Jenna blushed a darker shade of red. "Vampires aren't the only things out there that bite, Nico," she muttered, avoiding his eyes. "Anyway, that's not what's bothering me."

"*This* Vampire is the only thing that will be biting you, Beloved, ever. And I love that you call me Nico," he dropped a kiss on her nose, "but that is not going to distract me. Tell me, what is it exactly that has you so tense?" His eyes narrowed with concern.

Jenna shook her head and buried her face in his chest. He embraced her tight, automatically and without hesitation. His thoughtless affection warmed one of the cold, frozen places her father had left in her heart.

"Jenna?" His voice deepened commandingly, and embarrassed as she was, she couldn't suppress a little shiver of reaction.

"You're going to think I'm crazy," she mumbled, mortified that she'd even brought this up. Why did he have to be so perceptive when it came to her?

Nic held the back of her neck and gently forced her to look up at him. "Jenna, I am your mate. Let me be the judge of your sanity. Now what the hell is wrong?"

He'd gone all dominant on her, and she couldn't refuse him. "I'm embarrassed that you know my size, okay?" Her hand flew up to cover her mouth, but it was too late. The words had already been spoken. Oh yeah, mortified didn't even begin to cover it.

To add insult to injury, her Vampire broke out in a smile. No, in a huge grin. She stiffened as she realized that he was trying to control his laughter. When he ultimately failed, Jenna wished for a hole to open somewhere and swallow her up.

"I'm glad you find it so funny, *Nic*." She pushed against his chest and slapped him hard on the arm. Her embarrassment was gone, burned away into flaming temper. Yeah, she was well and truly pissed. Opening herself up to him was hard enough; Nic finding her insecurities funny humiliated her.

"Oh no, you don't," he said when Jenna tried to break his hold. "I am not laughing at

you, Beloved. I am laughing at all the fools who ignored your beauty and left it for me to enjoy for eternity.” Nic raised one elegant hand and tipped her chin up to catch her with his crystalline eyes. “Now, I will tell you this once. After today, if you ever bring this up again, I will turn you over my knee and paddle your ass, then fuck you so hard you won’t be able to leave our bed for a month.”

Jenna stopped fighting him; he still wore a huge smile exposing his teeth and fangs. God he was beautiful. He leaned down, kissing her lightly and then rested his forehead against hers.

“Jenna Stone, you are the most stunning woman in the world. No other has ever tempted me the way you do. No woman will ever make me feel the way you make me feel.” His hands slid down her back and cupped her ass, drawing her against his impressive erection. “There is no female, human, Vampire or other who can make me hard, Beloved. Only you. I love every curve on your gorgeous body. You were made to take me inside you, you fit me like a tight fist.” He lowered his head, laying a line of soft, wet kisses along her neck. She didn’t even try to suppress the shiver. Jenna wanted more, hell she wanted to go back to the penthouse and jump his preternatural ass right this instant.

She yelped as his hand smacked her behind soundly.

She sputtered, “You just spanked me!”

“Oh, Beloved, there is plenty more where that came from. Never doubt that I worship you or your perfect body.” He placed a wet, open mouth kiss to the side of her neck, drawing the delicate skin against his teeth until she knew he’d left a mark. Another mark.

She was smiling when he took her hand again and said, “Come on, let’s go find Aidan.”

*

Nic’s cock throbbed almost as much as his temper. Jenna’s self-esteem must have taken a lot of blows over the course of her life. He wished she could see herself the way he saw her. When her lips were pouty from his kisses, her nipples rigid from him teeth and tongue, she was truly the most unbelievably exquisite creature ever sculpted by God’s hand. And if her outer beauty weren’t enough, her inner beauty shone even brighter. The way she laughed, the fear in her eyes, they all called to his soul.

She remained silent as he walked her through the Employee’s Only door. He slowed, remembering the last time he walked this same path. She’d been in the alley then. He refused to dwell on that nightmare. William Stone would receive his due, but first they’d get her sisters to safety.

When they reached Aidan’s office, a loud female moan stopped Nic from barging right in. A familiar loud female moan. He heard Jenna’s sharp intake of breath as she caught sight of the tableau in front of her. Nic mentally rolled his eyes. Of course Aidan wouldn’t feel the need to close the door; like most Night Creatures, Aidan had no inhibitions whatsoever about sex.

Jenna was human and Nic knew humans tended to be a lot less open when it came to sex. She didn’t back away from the open door though, and Nic could smell the sweet scent of her arousal. She’d already been almost as turned on as she was irritated and embarrassed after their confrontation on the dance floor. The erotic scene being played out in front of them was tipping her over the edge from titillated to enflamed.

Perhaps it was time to see just how daring his One truly was. While he'd never allow another to touch her, there were many games he and Jenna could play that involved having others in the room...

There was only one light on in the office. Aidan was seated at his desk, his head buried between Chandra's slim thighs. The Vampiress propped one suicidally high heel on the arm of Aidan's chair, the other was tucked along the outside of his thigh on the seat. They made a gorgeous picture, pure carnal beauty as the sounds of Aidan's wet mouth and Chandra's raw groans filled the hallway.

Nic moved Jenna so that she stood directly in the doorway with a perfect view of the action. He pulled her back against him, guiding her hands back until her palms were flat against the wall on either side of his hips. She had yet to utter a word; the sex in the other room held her enthralled. Nic brought his hands up her sides, sliding them under her full tits. He worked them over with his palms, slowly letting them fall into his grasp.

His mouth skimmed her neck. "Tell me Jenna, do you like what you see?" He licked at her ear as he pressed the iron bar of his cock into the soft cushion of her ass. Fuck, he wanted her right now, while they watched Aidan and Chandra.

"Oh, yes," her answer was a drawn-out sigh.

"Lean back into me, then, Beloved." He kept his voice low, but Aidan raised his eyes to them. They sparkled and Nic made out his friend's raised eyebrows and devil-may-care smile before he went back to work on Chandra's slit.

"He knows we're watching," she whispered, her voice quivering, caught between desire and panic.

"Yes, Beloved, he does. He's going to give us a show," Nic smiled dryly when Aidan once again looked up and met his eyes. "He likes performing for an audience."

Nic leaned forward, running his tongue along the line of her jaw. "We can turn around and leave right now if you don't want this, Jenna."

She stiffened when Aidan stood, wiping Chandra's juices from his face with a casual swipe of the back of his hand. The Dragon was naked, his thick cock standing out proudly. He brought two fingers up to his mouth and sucked them. Nic wondered if his intention was to arouse Jenna, or terrify her. Fucker probably wouldn't care which, as long as he got a reaction.

Jenna finally shook her head. "No Nic, I don't want to leave," she whispered faintly. A tug in Nic's stomach made him fight the desire to take her back to the privacy of the penthouse and ravish his woman. The rest of him wanted to bask in this moment, to soak in the eroticism of bringing his woman to pleasure while another male watched, knowing he'd never touch her.

He gripped her thigh; she wasn't wearing anything but a pair of sheer black panties. They drifted easily to the floor, and her bare skin flowed beneath his hand like warm satin. His palm moved to cup one full cheek, kneading it. He intercepted Aidan's appreciative look as it traveled over Jenna's body, and sent him a smile full of big, pointy teeth. The Dragon grinned back and turned back to his own partner, shoving his fingers roughly into Chandra's cunt. She cried out and tried to push herself up from the desk.

"Back down, Chandra," Aidan ordered as he brought his other hand up and stroked his hard length.

Nic bit the back of Jenna's neck. Her hands were still braced against the wall. "Don't move your hands, Beloved. Keep them on the wall."

One hand went to her breast, kneading it, pulling the tip between thumb and forefinger. He rolled it hard and Jenna moaned involuntarily. This brought the attention of the two lovers on the desk flying to Nic and Jenna.

Nic felt Jenna hold her breath as the woman peered at them. Chandra's eyes narrowed, her face drew up in a scowl, before Aidan jerked her attention back to him.

"Eyes on me, Channy," he growled, thrusting his fingers hard into the woman's sheath, drawing a long, shrill scream from her arched throat.

*

The woman on the table orgasmed long and hard against the man's hand. *This must be Aidan.* Jenna thought. *The Dragon.* Damn, was every man Nic knew gorgeous?

This one was a few inches taller than Nic, with a much broader build. He must spend hours in the gym. His long dark auburn hair went well down his back; at present it was in a single braid as thick as her fist that hung over his shoulder.

Jenna wanted to be appalled at the display before her, but she wasn't. She was so excited that she thought she might just melt into a puddle of need at Nic's feet.

Nic opened his jeans, pulling out his cock. Lifting Jenna's dress in the back, he slid himself between her legs. Her hot cream coated him as he moved forward, gliding effortlessly through her swollen folds. He ran himself against her outer lips, prodding lightly against her opening before pulling back to stroke his helmeted head over her clit.

She knew she would explode as soon as Nic slid his wicked cock into her. He was teasing her now, even as she pushed back into him. He stilled her with his bite on the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder.

"Soon, Beloved, soon," he promised, his breath heavy at her neck. He was as turned on as she was. She pressed her thighs tight around him, squeezing his burning cock between her legs. He moaned and jerked gratifyingly.

The auburn-haired giant helped the woman up from the desk. She pulled her micro mini back into place before sinking to her knees. Jenna's own would have buckled had Nic not chosen that moment to spear into her welcoming pussy. She stumbled forward under the force of his thrust, and he wrapped one arm around her, pulling her back against him.

"Hands on the wall," he hissed, and she fought to stand upright, to obey him, even as liquid fire ran through her veins. Still she couldn't take her eyes off the couple as the woman opened her mouth and took in the Dragon's thick cock.

Entranced, Jenna watched as the woman swallowed him to the root. It was an act she hadn't shared with Nic, at least in reality. Aidan helped the woman along, moving his cock back and forth into her mouth. His own hand slid under his dick to play with his sac.

Jenna sucked in her breath as Nic found her clit. He rubbed it ever so slowly, his cock moving in short shallow thrusts. His mouth opened and he bit down, finally abandoning his light, teasing nips and sinking his fangs in deep, feeding from her.

Aidan looked up from the woman going down on him and straight at Jenna. He kissed the air and winked at her before throwing his head back and coming with a roar.

Nic sucked long on her neck, sending Jenna into her own spiraling release, shattering her world into a thousand pieces. He fell right along with her, jerking and moaning against her neck.

Pulling out, he spun her around, pressing her to the wall and kissing her with bruising force.

She thought she heard a British voice whisper, "Beautiful," but when she swung her head around Aidan was busily zipping up his leather pants. Nic held her close as the woman made her way out the door.

The slim blond stopped when she reached them. Venom dripped from her lips when she spoke.

"Hmm, Nicky, is this the one taking my place?" She leaned forward and sniffed. "Common human," she sneered. "Smells like food."

Nic held Jenna tight. "Chandra, she is ten times the woman you will ever be."

"Looks more like twenty times..." was as far as she got before Nic's hand slipped around her throat and pinned her against the wall.

His eyes glowed blue flame as he spat, "Don't ever make this mistake again, Chandra. Do not ever disrespect my One."

Jenna touched his arm, and Nic let the Vampire go. Chandra turned acid green eyes on Jenna and hissed, "Your One! Give me a break, Nicky. No one believes those stories anymore. Finding some mysterious 'One' is no more than legend."

She turned and walked down the hall, leaving her anger filling the small space like a toxic cloud. Jenna felt a mixture of fear and jealousy. She may be a stone bitch, but Chandra was pretty much the picture of feminine perfection. And Nic had been with this woman in the past.

He zipped his pants, turning back to face Jenna. Once again he read her face easily. Nic grabbed her chin.

"Jenna, it was more than a year ago, and it was nothing but sex. She meant nothing more than physical release back then, and she means less than nothing to me now. Do you understand me, Jenna? Nothing." Jenna nodded, but didn't speak.

There were more important things to discuss. Now was not the time to deal with any insecurity on her part. Finding Rowan took precedence over all else.

When she went to move into the room, Nic grabbed her elbow, swinging her around. "Jenna, tell me you believe me."

"I'd tell him you believe him, love." The red-head had taken a seat. "He's a mite testy when you don't give him what he wants." The Dragon grinned with wicked amusement. "Besides, darling, he's telling you the truth. Chandra's a good enough fuck, but she also happens to be one crazy female."

Jenna looked at the handsome English man. He was leaning back in his leather chair, arms behind his head.

"That didn't seem to stop you from fucking her, did it?"

He only laughed. "Yes, well, unlike our Nicky, I am not mated nor do I ever plan to be. *I* can afford crazy."

*

"Your father captured Rowan half a mile from the house," Aidan informed them once Nic had seated Jenna in front of his big oak desk. Nic bit back an oath and held Jenna's hand tightly. Her fear skittered through his body as if it were his own.

"Oh, no," she breathed.

"Well, you have to admit," Aidan smirked, "she's not the most likely candidate to escape on foot from a group of trained soldiers."

Nic stiffened, his body going taut with rage. Aidan's cutting comment about Rowan was designed to goad...both of them. Nic would deal with him later, after they decided

how to rescue Jenna's sister.

His One's body shook for a second before she took a deep breath and calmed herself, sloughing off Aidan's words.

Nic admired that about her. After all she'd been through, she didn't dwell; she moved beyond the pain and fear and confronted the problem. Jenna didn't realize the strength she carried inside of herself.

Nic looked her deep brown eyes. "Beloved, Rowan will be fine. We'll make sure of it."

She stood and wrapped her arms around herself, turning away from the two men. "I wish I could believe that. He'll kill her, Nico, if he hasn't already."

"I have to disagree with you there, love." Aidan offered. "You girls seem to be very important to your father's image."

"I appreciate the sentiment, Aidan, but you don't know my father. You have no idea what he is capable of."

"I know he's a bloody bully, who thinks he can legislate us out of existence," the Dragon retorted, showing a bit of his notorious temper.

A change came over Jenna; her body temperature rose as she walked to the desk, laying her palms flat on top. She leaned over Aidan and met his eyes squarely. Her voice was flat and emotionless. It only served to emphasize the passion burning in her eyes. "You have no fucking idea what he has done."

Aidan merely shrugged. "We have pretty good intelligence, love. I have three folders full of data on your father and his organization, and that doesn't even touch what our other Vampire has collected," he referred casually to Nic's Blood Brother, Bas.

He flopped three manila folders on the desk in front of her. Jenna opened the first one, scanning the contents. She smiled tightly, then swiped her hand across the desk, sending paper scattering on the carpet.

Nic almost choked, not sure whether to laugh or cheer. For the first time since he'd known him, Aidan had no comeback, no smart retort. Had a woman ever done anything except come on to him? He would have enjoyed this little exchange even more if Jenna hadn't been livid.

*

Jenna stalked back to the front of the desk. *Arrogant, smug bastard!* He was fucking clueless, and she was itching to smack that superior look on his face. It would serve him right if she let him take her father on with his pitiful lack of information. If Rowan's life hadn't been on the line, she might have done just that.

Damn Dragon thought he knew all there was to know about her family! He didn't and Jenna was more than happy to fill him in.

"Oh, Aidan, my father doesn't want to legislate you out of existence." Her voice was silky with menace. "He intends to utterly obliterate your society, keeping a few choice specimens as *pets*." Nic exhaled behind her, but she kept her focus on the disbelieving male on the other side of the desk. "Would you like to know exactly how my father plans to bring this about?" She moved away from the desk. Her anger was like a living, breathing monster, dogging every step she took.

"Imagine you're three stories underground." Her voice took on a faraway quality. "You're strapped to a cold steel table. The setting is clinical with all the latest and greatest medical equipment surrounding you. You watch as a man approaches you. He

holds a syringe filled with liquid. Not just any old drug, this is liquid silver.”

Nic swore, but Jenna continued. “He places the needle into your arm and shoots a very tiny amount into your blood stream.”

She walked to stand behind Nic, needing his warmth to keep her from breaking down as flashes of the torture rooms ran like a film reel in her head.

“The silver travels through your bloodstream. It’s not enough to kill you. No, that would be too easy. And that would teach you nothing. No, they inject you with just enough to keep a Vampire or Were in agony for hours. Can you feel it? Writhing around in pain that’s kindred to having your body burning from the inside out...” She gripped Nic’s shoulders. She hated sounding this way, this bitter and hateful.

“If it appears that you are teetering on the edge of death, you receive a transfusion of fresh, whole blood. That counteracts the affects of the silver poisoning, just enough to keep you alive, to make you strong enough for the next set of tests. Then they take you back to your tiny concrete cell. You get to wait there, rest up for tomorrow when it starts all over again and again until you are delirious, confused and broken.” Jenna took a ragged breath. “Is any of this in your *files*?”

Aidan’s eyes flicked from Jenna to Nic. It was clear from the troubled expression in the Dragon’s deep blue eyes that he *hadn’t* known about the basement level of the compound that had been Jenna’s home.

Jenna walked to the open doorway; she had to get out of this place, away from this arrogant, condescending male. All the oxygen was being sucked from her lungs. “I didn’t see that in your *files* anywhere,” she spat the words out scornfully. “You have three folders on my family. My father has a library, massive volumes on each and every Night Creature, species, magic, strengths and weaknesses at his disposal.”

She made it out into the hallway before her composure shattered. Backing into the wall, she slid down the concrete, collapsing on the floor. Guilt wrapped itself around her; it was a frigid blanket.

“Hey, pretty girl, you okay?” She couldn’t look up. Facing anyone at the moment was impossible.

“We haven’t been introduced. I’m Sebastian, but you can call me Bas.” The voice was gentle, smooth and comforting.

She looked to her left. Another hunk was sitting next to her. This was her freaking lucky day. There were no bad gene’s floating around this side of town, were there?

She must have said that out loud because he laughed and said, “You haven’t met everyone yet.”

Bas wasn’t as tall as Nic. He was leaner in build with short black hair and a sleek black goatee. His ears were pierced, three gold hoops through each one. He wore a black leather jacket and pants. His light grey eyes pinned her with a sympathetic expression.

“You were there that night, too, weren’t you,” she asked curiously.

“Yes, I was.” He smiled, and it was a surprisingly sweet expression. “You’ve a remarkable will to live, pretty girl.”

“Beloved, are you all right?” Nic asked as he hunkered down to her level. Taking her hands in his, he kissed each knuckle.

Jenna nodded silently. All three of them knew it was a lie.

“Aidan and I need to have a little chat. Bas will wait with you until we’re done, won’t you?” Nic sent the other Vampire a telling look, and Sebastian rose to his feet in a

lithe, graceful movement.

“I am ever at your service, Nic,” he murmured smoothly, but Jenna thought she detected a tiny wicked glimmer in those calm gray eyes.

Jenna waved her hand at Nic; she was through speaking to Aidan tonight, and had no desire to speak about him, either.

“Go on then, Nic. I’ll take care of your pretty One,” Bas said offering Jenna a reassuring grin.

Nic nodded and turned back to the office with a grim expression. The door slammed shut behind him and angry male voices soon rattled the walls of the spacious office. A loud thump made Jenna jump.

“What the hell?”

“Um, let’s take a walk, shall we?” Bas offered her a hand and helped her to her feet. Two loud grunts followed by glass breaking had Jenna trying the doorknob. The door was ominously locked.

“What the hell is going on in there?” she yelled, pounding on the door. Bas took her hand in his.

“Jenna, this is something they have to get out of their systems.”

“To hell with that. I won’t allow Nic to get hurt.”

Bas laughed. “Jenna, you are precious. Nic doesn’t deserve you. He’s a Vampire, pretty girl. And a male. This is how we settle things. Aidan won’t hurt Nic any more than Nic hurts him, and Nic will heal fast.” Bas gently turned her away from the office as a roar shook the door.

“In fact,” he added with amusement, “I think Aidan just may be on the losing end of this little chat.”

Chapter Seven

Closing his hand over hers, Bas led Jenna back out into the bar area. He seated her at a table and excused himself.

Moving to the bar, he got himself a beer and Jenna an orange juice. She still looked very pale to him. Dark circles and worry lines marred her pretty face. Nic was one lucky bastard. Bas smelled the sex lingering on her skin, and felt a moment of surprise when his cock stirred.

It had been years since he'd felt even a tingle of sexual awareness. He frowned. Fuck, it had been decades since he'd really wanted to get laid. Something about Nic's little mate stirred him up, though. Probably just his connection to Nic. By sharing blood, they'd become closer than friends, closer even than brothers. Bas was certain that his odd, out-of-character attraction to Jenna was just a residual effect of his bond with Nic. Besides, though Bas had always been an equal opportunity lover, his usual preference was usually a good bit harder, broader, and less female than Nic's pretty little One.

He moved back to the table and set the glass down in front of her. She picked it up, wrinkling her nose.

"I would rather have what you're having."

"I'm sure you would, but your body is still healing."

"How do you know that? I feel fine." She sulked, taking a sip of the juice.

Bas touched the side of his nose. "You'll find that most of us have exceptional noses. Some stronger than others, but we can pick up most things."

His chuckled when his comment brought a flush to her cheeks. His fangs elongated. Holy Hell, he was flirting with her! More incredible still, he was aroused by her. Bas hadn't been with a woman in over a hundred years, or with a man in half that time. Shit, if Nic ever recognized Bas's infatuation with Jenna, he'd kill him. The only reason he trusted Bas with her at all was because he'd been celibate for so long, and when he hadn't been, Nic knew he preferred men.

"You're Vampire as well?" she asked when she spied the fangs.

"Yep."

"And Aidan?"

Bas shook his head. "No, our pompous Brit is a Dragon."

Jenna leaned forward, the fight going on down the hall momentarily forgotten. "Damn. I knew that. I thought they only lived in Europe. I didn't know there were any in the U.S. My father would love to get his hands on a Were-Dragon."

"It's true most live abroad," Bas explained, glad for the distraction from the low musky scent of the sex she and Nic had just shared. "But more and more of the clans have been coming to America in recent years."

Another roar blew through the halls of the bar. The worry on Jenna's face had Bas reaching over to clasp her fingers. Her warmth seeped into his skin. He wanted to pull his hand back and press it to his mouth, but refused to, continuing to hold her hand.

"They'll be all right, pretty One. This isn't the first time they've disagreed, and I'm quite sure it won't be the last."

"Is this how you always handle disagreements?" Jenna's eyebrows rose, giving her a

delectable skeptical expression.

“We’re warriors here, not politicians. We handle things the old-fashioned way and beat each other senseless.” Bas couldn’t help himself; he reached out and touched her silky hair, rubbing the strands between his fingers.

Goddamn it, he was losing his fucking mind.

“Sebastian.” Oh, shit. He’d been distracted enough by his odd attraction to Jenna that he’d failed to hear the end of the fight down the hall. Now Nic stood beside the table, directing his cool stare to Bas’s fingers in Jenna’s hair. Shit, shit, shit.

The Vampire’s voice was deep with amusement and... something else. “If I didn’t know better, I might be upset to see you with your hands on my woman.”

Jenna jumped to her feet, and Bas snatched his fingers back as Nic slid his arm around her. Meeting his eyes over Jenna’s head, Nic said, “You better go pick Aidan up off the floor.”

*

Jenna was appalled as she inspected Nic’s face. The cut above his eye had already stopped bleeding, but it had left a streaky scarlet path down his temple.

She laid one hand along his cheek, trying to find a place to touch that wouldn’t cause him more pain. She couldn’t stop her soft sound of distress from escaping as she pressed a feather-light kiss to his split, swollen lower lip.

“Stop it, Beloved. I am fine.” Nic shrugged irritably away from her sympathetic fluttering, finally capturing her hands and raising them to his mouth. When he kissed her fingertips, she made an irritable noise of her own.

“Nic, you could have been hurt.”

“Do you have so little faith in my abilities, my One?” He stroked her knuckles as he spoke, and she tried valiantly to ignore the little sparks that skittered through her at the contact.

“In my head, no. But I absolutely couldn’t stand for something to happen to you. Especially when you’re fighting because of me!” Jenna flushed; no one had ever fought for her, let alone just because someone made a nasty remark to her. Her father certainly never interrupted one of his cronies when they made off-color remarks about her.

Nic kissed her tenderly on the mouth, rubbing her lips with his, whispering, “I will always fight for you, Jenna. Always.” Gently he opened her mouth, exploring the recesses within, sealing his promise with a kiss that all but melted Jenna into a puddle of gooey lust and love right there on the floor.

“Get your fucking bloody hands off of me, Bas; I can damn well walk on my own.” There was a lunging crash, and Jenna broke the kiss to peer around Nic as the other two men entered the dance area.

Aidan had clearly taken the worst of the beating they’d inflicted on each other. He was holding his ribs, his right eye was swollen, and there was blood drying under his nose. The Dragon jerked away from Bas’s supporting arm when he noticed that he had Nic and Jenna’s attention, and promptly staggered into a chair.

Behind Aidan and Bas six more men entered the room, all of them massive in build, all dressed in black. Jenna shivered at the menace that followed them into the room.

Nic tightened his arm around her as Bas opened up the conversation.

“Once I discovered that Rowan Stone had been recaptured by her father, I knew that your One would need to retrieve her.” Jenna cringed as growls and hisses filled the room.

Bas continued, "So, knowing you would be here tonight, I arranged for my Alpha team to meet us here as well. Based on the information we've gathered, and what I've heard from Jenna's conversation with Aidan tonight, we can assume that Ms. Stone is being held on either the second or third sub-level."

"Probably the second," Jenna interjected. "My father likes to keep his more dangerous experiments on the third sub-level. The second is for recalcitrant daughters, and for "pets" that need discipline."

"Pets?" One of the large, dark and scary men asked.

"Pets," Jenna confirmed. "Pet Vampires, pet Weres. My father keeps pets." She could see the men were all as sickened at the idea as she was herself, and a moment of shame that she shared the blood of such an evil being.

The tall, dark and scary one who'd questioned her leaned over his chair back and offered her his hand. "I'm Mikhail," he said. "I've tangled with your father more than once." Jenna gave an inner groan as he clutched her hand in a crushing grip. If he'd faced off with her father in the past, he was sure to hate her just by association. "I don't know how the hell you managed to escape him with your life, but you definitely have my respect." Jenna's eyes widened as he proceeded to demolish her preconceptions. "And, little girl, we will see your sister free of that bastard, begging your pardon, no matter how we have to do it."

Bas smiled, and Jenna got the distinct impression that both she and his team-member pleased him.

"Jenna, can you give us a detailed layout of the house and its subterranean levels?" She nodded quickly. "Good. Mik and his team will leave ahead of us. Tonight, in fact. They will infiltrate the grounds, and when it's time for us to come in they'll be in place to cut the alarms and take care of the outside guards."

Bas's security knowledge was incredible; he obviously knew exactly what he was talking about as he gave the group of men instructions.

"Jenna will lay out the house for us, and give us whatever information she has about Stone's security, but you'll need to do a little recon. Check out locations of security, log comings and goings of security and medical staff. And of anyone else, for that matter. I figure we have two days max to gather all the information Jenna can't provide."

Jenna was fascinated as she watched the men. None of their expressions changed; they remained calm, cold and aloof. Her father's troops would surely come out on the losing end if they tried to engage these men.

"Any questions?"

A tall blond in dreadlocks waved his hand. "Yeah, what if Stone is there? Can we kill the motherfucker?"

Bas looked to Jenna. Did she want her father dead? She didn't know; he needed to pay for all the hell he'd rained down on all the Night Creatures, and on his own daughters. But could she be the one to sign his death warrant?

Bas noted her silence, and turned back to the blond warrior. "It's your choice. If you take him alive, he will go before the Council, not the human court system. Either way William Stone will be a dead man."

Jenna wanted to feel remorse, wanted to feel hurt that these men wanted their revenge written in her father's blood, but she only had to close her eyes to picture Rowan, broken and bleeding from one of his punishments, or to hear the agonized screams of

creatures begging for mercy or death.

No, William Stone deserved whatever justice these men meted out to him.

“Aidan, you and Nic will come with Kane, Abel and myself,” Bas continued.

Aidan held up a hand. “Sorry mate, you’re going to have to count me out of this one.”

Jenna laid her hand over Nic’s arm, patting it lightly. He took a breath and gritted out, “What the hell is that supposed to mean, Dragon?”

“You want me to risk my ass to help out the offspring of William fucking Stone. I don’t think so.” The look he shot around the group held as much pain as it held anger. “No fucking human has ever come to *our* rescue. The bastard wants to pen us in like animals. Where’s the Goddamn outcry for *our* missing people? There isn’t any, mate, and I’ll tell you this: that man will not stop at anything to get her back once he knows she’s still alive.” As he pointed to Jenna, a tiny shock physically shot down her spine. Nic hissed in her ear, his heart rate increased as he pressed into her back.

“Fuck you, Dragon,” Nic growled low. “Jenna is not her father, and if you ever speak about her in such a way again, I will finish what I started today.”

Aidan growled right back at him, flipping him off as he stalked out of the room. “Fucking women,” he roared as he disappeared through the employee’s door.

Bas scanned the rest of the men. “Anyone else who wants out, move your ass now.”

A lump formed in Jenna’s throat as the other men stood in place. These strangers were willing to put themselves in danger for her. To help rescue her sister, her best friend, from hell.

Strangely, she wasn’t angry with Aidan. His pain was written on his face as clearly as words in a book. No, Aidan had every right to stay out of the rescue attempt. She didn’t blame him, and she suddenly needed for him to know it. Even if he’d most likely shoot her gesture down in a blaze of glory.

Turning carefully in Nic’s arms she placed her hand on his chest, kissing the open collar of his shirt. “I need to go talk to him.”

“Not while he’s being such an asshole,” Nic snarled. “Stay away from him until he remembers he’s not the monster Stone would like to paint him as, Jenna.”

“Oh, stop it. Didn’t you see his face, Nic? He’s obviously in pain. You can’t be mad at him for not coming with us.”

“He’s supposed to be my friend. If he were going to rescue his mate’s sister, he knows I would be right there fighting by his side.”

“Nico,” she sighed. “You are an amazing and generous man.” She smiled when he lifted his brow. “But this isn’t anyone’s fight but mine. I won’t condemn someone for not joining a suicide mission.”

“*Our* fight, Beloved. This is *our* fight. Go then, talk to my asshole friend. If you’re not back in five minutes, though, I am coming to get you.”

Jenna pressed her mouth firmly to his pulse point and left Nic to follow Aidan.

* * * *

He was sitting at his desk, his head in his hands. “I don’t want you here.”

Jenna moved forward anyway. “Too bad. I’m not leaving until I say what I came to say to you.”

He lifted his head, his eyes piercing her with menace. “Fine. Say whatever it is you

need to say, and then get the hell out.”

“I don’t blame you for not wanting to go.”

“How very fucking noble of you.” Aidan left his seat and stalked to the liquor cabinet, pouring himself a shot. He tossed the drink back and quickly filled the glass again.

“Why do you hate me so much?” Jenna knew her father despised her because she didn’t fall in line with him and his ways of thinking, but besides being born a Stone, she couldn’t think why this Dragon would hate her so much. Before he’d been dismissive of her, but now Aidan’s hate was like a living, breathing thing, ready to explode at any minute.

“It’s not just you,” he relented enough to admit. “I hate all humans.”

His pain gripped her by the throat as for a split second raw emotion passed over his handsome face.

Jenna went with her instincts and approached him. She placed her fingertips on his forearm. “What happened to you?”

His eyes locked on the place where she touched him.

“They took something from me,” he whispered as he moved away from her. “Go to your man, and leave me alone with my good friend here.” He held up the bottle of scotch.

“I’m sorry Aidan, for all the pain you were caused. I would take it away if I could.” Jenna fled the room before her tears fell, never seeing the tortured, wounded look the Dragon sent after her.

*

The orders were given, and Bas’s team would meet back at the bar in two night’s time. Nic was more grateful to his Blood Brother than words could ever say. Unlike Aidan, Bas hadn’t even waited to be asked. He’d simply seen what needed to be done, and then did it.

But Nic had one more favor to ask of his oldest and best friend. He hated doing it; he knew Bas was barely hanging on, fighting the depression and ennui of hundreds of years, just as Nic had been before he’d dreamed of Jenna. He didn’t show it, not in word or deed, but it was there just the same, deep in his eyes, just out of reach, a loneliness of the soul.

Nic thought of Bas’s reaction to Jenna. Perhaps what he was going to propose would be a benefit to Bas, too. Perhaps Jenna could act as some small balm for his soul until Bas found some peace of his own.

“Sebastian,” he caught the older Vampire’s arm as he walked by. “I must ask something of you, my old friend.” Bas grabbed the stool next to Nic.

“You sound so serious. You know you have only to ask and it’s yours, Nic.” Bas’s automatic “yes” without even knowing the question only deepened Nic’s appreciation for his friend.

“I want you to become Jenna’s Guardian.” Nic noted the flicker of sadness in Bas’s eyes. The other Vampire didn’t look surprised in the least, though. “You are the only one I trust to ensure to her safety.” He met his friend’s eyes. “This time I understand what I’m asking of you, Sebastian. If you choose not to do it, I will understand.”

“Try not to act like anymore of a jackass than you absolutely have to, Nicky. You know that I wouldn’t allow you to ask anyone else.” Bas’s cocky smile faded into a serious expression. “You honor me, my friend,” he said as he stood and grasped Nic’s

shoulders. "I consent to take the blood of your pretty One into myself, and to become her Guardian in your absence." Bas released Nic and gave him a little shove toward Jenna as she returned from Aidan's office. "Now let's get moving. We've got a shitload of work to do, and only two days to do it in."

*

Nic was silent as he led the way back into the penthouse. Jenna understood something important was about to happen, something that made both men silent and somber, but she'd be damned if she understood quite what that something was. Nic only told her that he couldn't do his job, couldn't fight for her sister, if he was consumed with worry for her safety. He'd said he needed to know that she'd be cared for if something happened to him, and that Bas, his Blood Brother, was the only one he trusted with her life.

They entered the living room, and Nic led her to a comfortable chair, seating her elegantly. Pulling up a matching ottoman, he sat facing her. Bas perched on the arm of her chair. Jenna squirmed a little, unwillingly aroused by the natural pheromones the two men surrounded her with. Both Vampires drew startled breaths, and she felt their gazes, blue ice and gray fog, snap to her face.

She shifted again, uncomfortable, and finally said, "I'm sorry. Jeeze." She flipped a hand at the two men. "But can you blame me? The two of you are sending out enough little sex germs to arouse the entire WNBA!"

Bas threw his head back and laughed, sounding more free and uninhibited than she'd heard him sound all night. Nic just groaned humorously and buried his face in her lap, shoulders shaking. She noticed his laughter died a quick death, however, when she automatically twined her fingers through his silky hair.

*

"You, my friend, are one lucky son of a bitch," Bas laughed at him, and Nic had to agree. His One was beautiful, courageous, sexy as hell, and she made him laugh. More, she'd returned laughter to Bas's eyes, and Nic hadn't seen any emotion stronger than mild curiosity there in decades.

As he tried to bring himself under control, *little sex germs?* he studied his Blood Brother. Bas looked at Jenna with an appreciation that went beyond the aesthetic. He looked at her as though she was a woman he wanted. It was unnerving, and a bit surprising. In the centuries they'd spent together, Bas had taken lovers of both sexes, but he'd always gravitated toward men. That was one of the reasons Nic had been able to trust him alone with Jenna.

There was no one else in the world Nic would trust with Jenna's safety, with his very soul, but the sharing of blood was a very sexual experience. The bond was always stronger when the blood was filled with adrenaline, and the quickest and safest way to get Jenna there was through arousal. Seeing the speculative gleam in Bas's eyes was worrisome, because as liberal as Nic might be, he would not, *could* not share his woman. While he knew Bas understood, he was afraid his old friend would be hurt in the process.

Once the laughter died down, Nic took Jenna's hands in his own. Meeting her eyes he said, "You've heard me refer to Sebastian as my Blood Brother." She nodded and he asked, "Do you understand what that means?"

"I gather that it means you share a closeness that's more than friendship," she answered hesitantly. "I'm not sure if it means you've shared blood by choice, or if you

were sired by the same Vampire, though.”

Nic nodded, and began to explain.

“You know that I am very old. Sebastian is even older than I.” Jenna flicked a glance at the Vampire sitting on the arm of her chair. Intellectually she understood that he was centuries old, many centuries apparently, but like Nic, he looked no older than a man in his middle thirties.

“When I was changed my sire, Phaedra, abandoned me. I’d made a pretty plaything, but a fledgling Vampire was far too high maintenance for her.” His words were bitter, but his tone was not, a dichotomy that confused Jenna a bit.

“Do you hate her for that? For changing you and then leaving you on your own?”

“I did, Beloved, for a very long time.” Nic tilted his head considering. “I’ve come to realize that by leaving me as she did, Phaedra did me an enormous favor. If I’d been with her, Sebastian would never have found me.” Bas snorted dismissively. “And,” Nic ignored him with the ease of long practice, “if I’d stayed with her, I’d not have been fit to be with you, Beloved.”

“Nic, cut the crap and finish your explanation.” Bas acted just the slightest bit uncomfortable with Nic’s story, which made Jenna insanely curious to hear the ending.

“Yes, Nico. Finish your explanation.”

Nic’s eyes flared briefly at her use of their special name, then he continued.

“Sebastian found me living no better than an animal on the street. I was utterly ruled by my Thirst, but hadn’t the skills to provide for myself.” Nic shook his head in memory. “By the time Bas found me I was pitiful.” He trailed off, and Bas reluctantly took up the narrative.

“Not so much pitiful,” he countered, “he was ill. He’d been subsisting on the blood of animals and diseased beggars and such. He was so malnourished, I have no idea how he’d managed to survive.”

Nic continued his story. “He fed me. Every night, often several times a night, Bas brought me willing blood donors. But my body was so damaged that I didn’t get well. Finally he brought me to Elena.” Nic blinked, realizing that Jenna hadn’t actually met Elena while awake.

“Elena is a healer, a very powerful and gifted woman. She told Bas that the only way for me to heal was by taking the blood of another Vampire. Phaedra was nowhere to be found, of course.”

“By this time,” Bas took up the narrative again, “I’d come to see how strong a soul our Nic has. And I’d definitely come to see what that shallow bitch had seen in him, and that his beauty was deeper than that angelic face.” Nic snorted and fidgeted uncomfortably. “I could not let him waste away.”

“Bas offered me his blood, understanding full well what it meant.” Nic shook his head. “I, on the other hand, understood nothing.” He turned to Bas, “You got lucky, my friend. I could so easily have destroyed us both.” When Jenna looked confused Nic explained, “By sharing his blood with me, Bas connected us forever. Blood to blood, soul to soul. If I’d been a different sort of man, I’d have pulled him into the abyss with me.

“This bond, along with our friendship, is why I would trust Bas with my life.” He sent the other Vampire a small smile. “It’s why I *have* trusted him with my life on more than one occasion. But now I choose to trust him with something even more important.” He brought her hands to his lips, kissing each knuckle softly. “I am trusting him with my

very soul.” Jenna’s big brown eyes widened, the green flecks seeming to glow.

“I’ve asked Bas to take your blood tonight.” Before Jenna could voice the protest he saw in those eloquent eyes, he continued. “By sharing your blood, Bas will be able to find you, no matter where you are. He’ll be able to sense when you are in distress or danger.” His grip tightened on her hands, and he drew them to rest over his heart.

“Beloved, I need this. I need to know that no matter what you will always be protected.”

Jenna studied him for a long time, then turned her gaze on Bas. The other Vampire met her eyes solemnly as he spoke.

“What Nic has asked is a great honor. I would do it for him, simply because I love him.” Gray eyes flickered over Nic, bringing a wave of affection and appreciation for his friend.

“But I would do this thing for you, too, Jenna.” Bas touched her cheek. “You are a remarkable woman, pretty One, and I am honored to be one of your Guardians.”

Something in his words, or perhaps in his eyes, reassured Jenna. She turned back to Nic and nodded slowly.

“I understand,” she said. “But...” she trailed off, blushing.

“But what, Beloved?” Nic asked, concerned.

“It’s just...” she trailed away again, then looked over at Bas. “It’s nothing against you,” she equivocated quickly. “In fact, I don’t think I could let any other Vampire bite me, even if Nico asked it of me. But,” her eyes flicked back to Nic. “All he’ll be sharing with me is blood, right? Because I don’t think I can...”

This time Nic interrupted her before she could trail off. “Beloved, even for your protection, even with my best friend, I could not share your body. Never worry about that.” He released one of her hands and cupped her cheek. “You are mine, and I could never allow another to make love to you.”

Bas hastened to add his reassurances. “Jenna, I will have to touch you as a part of the ritual. And to make it most effective, you will need to be aroused. But I swear to you I will not betray your trust.”

Their words comforted her, because she turned back to Nic with a decisive nod. “Okay, then. What do we do?”

Nic smiled. While this night wasn’t about sex, per se, he knew that the sex would be amazing. “You relax. Bas will get you a glass of wine while I prepare the room.” He stood and she looked toward the door on the other side of the room.

“The bedroom?” she asked faintly.

Nic’s smile grew. “Oh yes, Beloved, the bedroom.”

Chapter Eight

Jenna gulped down her wine like it was water, and held up her glass for more. Bas smiled as he refilled it, then reached out to toy with one silky curl.

“You really don’t need to worry, pretty One. I won’t hurt you, and I won’t take advantage of the situation,” he winked playfully, “no matter how much I might want to.”

He took her now empty glass and placed it on the mantle. Grasping her hand, he began to lead her into the bedroom.

“Besides,” he added as they crossed the threshold, “if I *did* make a move, Nic would rip my throat out before you even realized I was hitting on you.”

“Damn right I would,” Nic agreed. His deep voice sent little tremors of anticipation through Jenna’s body. He moved forward and very deliberately removed Jenna’s hand from Bas’s and finished leading her into the room.

Looking around, Jenna caught her breath. Nic had scattered thick, scented candles on every flat surface in the room. The lights were off and the room was lit with a shimmering, golden glow. Shadows danced on the walls from the wavering flames. The scents of vanilla, cinnamon and amber filled the air until Jenna felt almost giddy with each breath.

The bed looked huge and inviting. Nic folded the satin duvet down to the foot of the bed, an acre of scarlet satin sheets exposed. At the foot of the bed, just off to one side, he’d placed a comfortable wing-back chair which she supposed was for Bas.

Nic faced them, eyes glittering like diamonds. Cupping Jenna’s face in that familiar, comforting gesture, he spoke, and his words branded her, every bit as important and binding as a wedding vow.

“Mine to keep.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead, and Jenna shivered at the rush of his breath stirring her hair. “Mine to protect.” He kissed her cheek, pausing to run his tongue along the trail of a tear she hadn’t even realized she’d shed. “Mine to cherish.” He repeated the caress on her other cheek, and Jenna caught back a sob. “Mine to love.” Nic pressed a warm kiss to her trembling lips, and Jenna thought her heart would overflow.

Nic finally pulled back and gave her a slow, sexy smile. Stepping toward Bas he spoke again, his voice husky with emotion.

“Blood of my blood,” he pressed a light kiss to the slighter Vampire’s forehead. “Brother,” he kissed first one cheek, “and friend,” and then the other.

Bas studied Nic, an enigmatic look in his storm-cloud eyes. Slowly he reached up and cupped his friend’s face.

“Blood of my blood,” he whispered, reaching up to press a light kiss to Nic’s forehead. “Brother,” light kisses feathered over Nic’s cheeks. Jenna could see that both men were as deeply affected by the ritual as she was. Eyes met and held, blue and gray, and they held whole conversations without saying a word.

“Friend,” Bas finished, and pressed a slow, soft kiss to Nic’s lips. When he pulled back the two men studied each other for a moment, and then Nic wrapped one hand around the nape of Bas’s neck and pressed their foreheads together.

“Thank you, my friend,” he murmured.

Bas nodded solemnly, and turned to Jenna. “Blood of my blood,” his voice was low and smooth, his lips silky as he kissed her forehead. “Sister,” he whispered kisses over

both cheeks. "And friend." He ended his pledge to her with a soft kiss on her lips, and tears trembled on her lashes again.

Jenna reflected, once again, that no one had ever loved her the way Nic did. No one ever put her needs first, let alone her desires. With Nic, Jenna knew she would be forever safe, forever cherished. And now she had Bas, too. She didn't know how she'd gotten so lucky, but as she caught his face in her hands and held him to her, lengthening the kiss, she knew she would never take this feeling for granted.

Smoothing her tear away with his thumb, Bas smiled into her, then moved to sit in the waiting chair.

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Bas sprawled in his chair. The taste and dampness of both Nic's and Jenna's kisses tingled on his lips, and he let his leg fall to the side, making more room for his suddenly functional dick.

It had been decades since he'd craved sexual fulfillment. Now, in the space of a few hours, every latent sexual desire he'd ignored for so long flared to swift and painful life.

It was confusing. He'd loved women, and loved them well, but Bas always recognized that his preferences leaned toward men. So the flicker of electricity that jolted him under the eyes of Nic's pretty little One was both surprising and unwelcome. His Blood Brother could never share her, and Bas would never expect him to.

More confusing was the fact that seeing Nic with Jenna, seeing him through Jenna's eyes, and reliving their past opened Bas's eyes for the first time in years to how beautiful the other Vampire was. Nic's beauty was transcendent, and reached clear to his soul. Bas found himself wondering if the stirrings he felt were for the woman or for Nic. Or for some weird alchemy created by the two of them together.

All he knew for sure right at this moment was that his beautiful friend and his beautiful One were moving to the bed, and suddenly his tight leathers were two sizes too small.

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Jenna felt Bas's eyes on them as Nic drew her toward the bed, but then Nic kissed her, and she couldn't feel anything except him. It was almost embarrassing how easily her body caught fire for him. With the lightest butterfly wing brush of his lips against hers, she was ready to melt into him like an ice-cream cone in the sun.

He was giving her a lot more than a butterfly wing brush right now.

His lips moved over hers like warm velvet, his heat radiating into her body as he crowded her against the high side of the bed. Jenna moaned into his mouth, loving the feeling of being surrounded, overwhelmed by his strength.

He cupped her jaw, the steely strength in his fingers emphasizing how fragile she really was. She loved when he touched her face, loved the way it made her feel, like he was claiming her all over again. Now he used his grip to tilt her face, to urge her lips to part for his tender assault.

His tongue dipped into her mouth, stroking along hers and teasing her into a hot, slick duel. She was breathing him in, and becoming intoxicated with it.

Ever so slowly he eased his hand from her chin to her throat, wrapping his fingers around the slender length like a warm, flexible collar. After a moment he let his hand drift lower, spreading his palm wide over her collar bones, her chest, finally slipping down to cup her breast.

Jenna gasped into his mouth, crying out as his fingers caught at her nipple through the thin fabric of her dress and bra. He drank in her cry and began a rhythmic plucking that drew still more needy sounds from her throat.

Nic's hands continued their downward slide, gripping her hips firmly and turning her to face the bed. Once he'd guided her hands to the mattress, leaving her bent slightly in front of him, arms straight and braced on the bed, he moved to the zipper on the back of her dress.

He drew it down slowly, pausing to press hot, wet kisses on each inch of skin revealed. By the time the dress was completely undone and falling down her shoulders, every inch of her back had been branded by his scorching lips, as if an electrified wire had been dragged down the line of her spine.

He stood, dragging his tongue in a slow, scalding sweep back up the length of her back. His breath stroked over her, another rush of wet heat. Jenna couldn't catch her breath; it dragged in with jerky, ragged gasps. Once he'd reached his full height, he drew her into a standing position and turned her to face him.

Those beautiful, elegant hands rose to her shoulders and he eased her dress and the straps of her bra down her arms. She had a moment of *déjà vu* as the dress caught on her hips, and saw in his eyes when he sensed her second of insecurity.

Giving her wicked smile, Nic tugged the dress and her panties over her hips, dropping to his knees at her feet as her clothing hit the floor

"Lean down," he commanded, and Jenna immediately obeyed, bracing her arms once again on the mattress.

"Beautiful," he murmured, gazing up along the line of her soft, pale body. He cast a brief glance in Bas's direction. "Is she not the most exquisite creature you've ever seen?"

Bas's eyes burned a path up her body as he answered, "Oh, yeah. Fucking perfection."

Jenna thought she should be embarrassed, or at least uncomfortable. Her lover had her draped over the side of the bed like a blanket, and his best friend was touching her every curve and hollow with his eyes. But somehow, she wasn't the least bit self-conscious. Instead, the heat in their eyes made *her* hotter.

While she'd been analyzing her reaction to Bas's obvious appreciation, Nic had been busy stripping off his shirt and then lifting her left leg to hook her heel on the bed frame. He caught her attention when he pressed against that knee, opening her wide to his glittering gaze.

Nic drew her attention back to Bas, and now she watched him as he watched Nic run his hands up her inner thighs. His face was a mask of arousal, flushed and yearning. She had time to see the flare of heat lightning in his eyes before Nic slid his thumbs along her labia, splitting her open like a ripe, dripping peach.

"Oh, fuck," he groaned, and lunged upwards, burying his face in her pussy. His tongue slid out to flicker against the mouth of her sheath. The erratic caress sent little shocks of reaction through her inner muscles.

He took his time, cruising every valley and fold of her pussy, stopping periodically to rim her opening. He teased her with soft little licks and surprising, stinging nips, until her hips were arching wildly, and she could do nothing but beg for fulfillment.

"Not yet, Beloved," he murmured against her sensitive clit, and his words were another caress.

Her hands fisted on the bed, wadding the slick crimson sheets. “Nico, please,” she groaned, desperate for some sort of relief.

“What do you need, my love? Ask and it’s yours.” He never lifted his mouth from her pussy. At the foot of the bed, Bas leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, watching every move they made.

“I need to come, Nico.” Her universe narrowed to those few things, Nic’s mouth on her flesh, his velvet voice in her ear, Bas’s eyes. Jenna thought if Nic didn’t finish her off soon, she might explode into a million tiny, famished pieces.

“How do you need to come?” Nic asked. “Do you need to come on my mouth?” he laved her clit with a long, sucking lick.

“Yes, God, do that again,” she panted.

“No, wait,” he demurred. “Maybe you need to come on my hand.” Two of those long, strong fingers slid into her grasping sheath. Jenna heard her scream as if from a great distance as Nic scissored his fingers inside her.

“Nic, anything,” she sobbed. “I’ll do anything, just make me come.” Her words trailed off into a long whine as he fluttered his fingers, finding that magic spot just behind her clit that sent fireworks sparking behind her closed eyes.

“Should I?” Nic’s voice was playful as he addressed his friend.

“Oh,” Bas’s voice was smooth as cream when he answered, “she’s been so good for you.”

Jenna dragged her eyes open and fought to focus her eyes on Bas. He’d slid to the edge of his seat, and had tossed his black silk shirt to the floor, baring the ripped expanse of his torso. Each muscle was lovingly delineated, creating a work of masculine art that almost rivaled Nic’s beauty in her eyes. He was clearly enjoying the show, because his cock was like a huge iron bar stretching against the snug leather of his pants.

“Make her come, Nicky,” Bas rasped. “I want to see all that creamy white skin flush with her pleasure.”

As Bas spoke, Nic thrust his fingers higher, harder, and caught her clit lightly between his teeth before sucking hard. The universe exploded and the world dropped away.

When her mind started working again, she was lying in the center of the bed. Nic was naked and lying between her legs, shoulders wedged under her thighs, propped on his elbows as he leisurely lapped at her flowing nectar.

In the time it took her to assess the situation, Nic had her flying again.

“Touch yourself,” he said against her weeping pussy. “I want to see you play with your nipples.” When she moved her hands slowly to cup her breasts, then hesitated, he encouraged her. “It’s so fucking pretty when you touch yourself, Beloved. So hot when those slender, delicate fingers pinch your pretty nipples.”

Bolder now, she caught her nipples between her thumbs and forefingers, gasping as the sensation joined Nic’s renewed licking and sucking, drowning in the sensations until her entire body, every inch of skin, was one giant erogenous zone.

“I can’t take much more, Nicky.” Bas’s voice was closer. Jenna looked up to find him hovering at the foot of the bed. His hands wrapped around the footboard so tightly his knuckles went white, and the heavy wood groaned in his grip.

Nic pulled slowly away from her, and Jenna quickly reached down to tangle a hand in his hair.

“No,” she moaned. God, he was so beautiful with his crystal blue eyes, and her juices gleaming on his face.

“Oh, Beloved, I’m nowhere near done.” He began to crawl up her body, pausing to dip down and rub his face over her belly, smearing her with her own cream. It shouldn’t have been, but somehow the act was wildly sexy.

He kissed her when he reached her mouth, tasting of love and lust and her sex. His face was taut, his eyes blazing. All the while he’d been torturing her, he’d been driving himself to the point of madness as well. Fitting himself between her thighs, he banded one arm under her back and rolled. Jenna blinked, pushing up to find herself astride Nic’s powerful body.

“Take me inside of you.” His words commanded her, but his eyes begged. Jenna shifted awkwardly, finally finding her way to her knees, hovering over Nic’s reaching erection.

“Take me,” he repeated, reaching out to grab her hand and wrap it around the base of his cock. “Guide me into your soul.”

Such beautiful words, such a tempting command, but for the first time Jenna had him in her hands and at her mercy. Instead of guiding him to the mouth of her vagina, she shifted back, sitting on his thighs and wrapping both hands around his satin and iron length.

“You feel so amazing,” she breathed as the satiny skin slid over the iron-hard muscle beneath it.

“Fuck, Jenna,” Nic gasped out, arching uncontrollably into her hands. “Put me inside you.” He reached up and captured her hands in one of his. “I can’t take anymore, Beloved, put me inside you before it’s all over for me.”

She loved that panicked, pleased look on his face. Loved the feeling that for this one second she was his equal, as powerful as he.

His fangs dropped, as he tossed his head back they pressed into his bottom lip. She wanted to suck that lip. She wanted to feel his fangs drag over her lips, over her throat.

With a cry of surrender she steadied his cock, rising to poise herself over it. She meant to drop down on him, to take him in one long slide, but she was too tight, he was too big. Instead she inched down him, taking him in painfully slow increments, feeling him delve into her sheath, stretching and stroking with every breath.

Throwing her head back so her hair swished over her shoulders, Jenna screamed out the ecstasy of feeling her man fill her to overflowing.

*

Nic writhed against the unbearable pleasure. Each thrust in was like delving into a hot, tight fire. With each withdrawal she clenched down on him, trying to drag him back to her plush liquid heat.

He gritted his teeth, clinging grimly to his control. All he wanted was to let go, to pour himself into his woman, his One, and rock them both into oblivion. But they had an agenda.

Bas moved closer, crawling across the bed to kneel on wide-spread legs behind Jenna. He reached out, and Nic could see the slight tremble in his fingers before they skimmed down Jenna’s arms. She jerked at the contact, and Nic surged against her, digging even deeper into her clinging pussy, giving a feral grin as she melted back into arousal.

Bas was right behind her now, knees tucked between Nic's. He skated his long, slim hands up the length of Jenna's body, pausing to cup her breasts, tweak her nipples. She arched into his caresses, and Nic groaned at the sight, and at the way her hot, velvet sheath tightened on his cock.

Bas was looking over her shoulder, watching his hands as they kneaded her breasts, devouring the way her nipples scrunched down like little rubies between his fingers. Then he looked up and met Nic's eyes. For once those dreamy, storm-cloud depths were sharp and clear. Nic could almost smell the ozone of the lightning he saw in his friend's gaze, and it sizzled down the length of his body to ignite at the spot where Bas's knee nudged against his balls.

"Fuck," Nic gasped, digging his hands into Jenna's soft hips. Jenna rode him relentlessly, eyes closed, clearly lost in the ecstasy of the moment.

"Beloved," he needed to see those beautiful eyes, needed to connect with her. When her eyes slid open, the simmering passion he glimpsed there was almost his undoing.

Then those long, elegant hands moved again, as Bas stood tall on his knees, pressing full-length against the back of Jenna's body. Her eyes slid shut again, and she let out a choppy moan as he placed one hand palm down on her abdomen. The hold allowed him to share the rhythm she'd set as she rose and fell on Nic's cock, and also let him press her back against his own dick. Looking at his friend's face, Nic could tell that Bas found that soft, cushy ass every bit as alluring as Nic himself did.

As if the sight of that pressing hand weren't enough, Bas's other hand coasted up Jenna's chest, collaring her throat. Jenna let her head fall back onto his shoulder as Bas gathered her silky hair in his fist and smoothed it down over one shoulder.

And, ah, fuck, the long, sweet line of her neck was exposed. Her pulse throbbed visibly under the delicate skin, and Nic had to throttle the urge to rear up and sink his teeth into her, marking her more clearly than ever as his.

Bas was cupping her jaw now, turning her head sharply to the side. His eyes took on an almost metallic, glazed cast as he gazed down at her throat. Nic recognized that look from countless shared hunts and shared lovers.

Bas undulated against her back. She pressed back into the caress, and Nic knew that Bas had shifted his leather-clad dick to ride the crack of her ass. When she clenched down on Nic, Bas hissed right along with him, and Nic knew that she'd squeezed them both with those amazingly strong little muscles.

Eyes glazed and heavy-lidded, mouth flushed and open, Bas leaned over her shoulder and ran his tongue along the line of her throat. Jenna shuddered and raised one arm to reach behind and tangle her fingers in the longer, top layer of Bas's hair. Nic shuddered, too, as her inner muscles rippled over the length of his shaft like playful little fingers.

Nic knew the moment was coming. Coming soon, because he and Jenna were on the fine line between pleasure and torment. Bas read that knowledge in his eyes, because he hovered over Jenna's pulse-point and raised a brow at Nic.

"God, yes, do it," Nic whispered, and Jenna echoed his words, slamming her hips hard against Nic's pelvis.

Bas leaned in, eyes locked with Nic's, and whispered against her neck, "Blood of my Blood," before his fangs sliced through her vulnerable flesh.

Jenna let out a scream that held the entire gamut of emotions from ecstasy to agony,

and began to convulse around Nic. Nic arched sharply into her, nearly lifting her off her knees as his orgasm took him, body locked inside Jenna's warmth, eyes locked inside Bas's stormy gaze. With each deep draw of Bas's lips on Jenna's flesh, she tightened more around Nic's pounding dick. With each convulsive squeeze, Nic shot more, deeper into his woman's welcoming body. It was like a never-ending circle of draw and release, a climax that had no ending and no beginning.

Nic knew the exact second when their explosions set off Bas's. The older Vampire's eyes lost focus, slid closed, and his head rose from Jenna's throat. Grasping her hips just over Nic's hands, Bas dragged her tighter to his groin and, head falling back to bare the long alabaster line of his own throat, he gave a guttural growl that stirred things low in Nic's balls, and sent Jenna into another hard climax.

He had a brief moment to appreciate his friend's beauty as he arched his upper body away from Jenna, grinding his cock into the crevasse of her ass, before Jenna's body and Bas's eyes threw him into a final maelstrom of sensation.

Chapter Nine

Jenna stood surrounded by a cluster of dark angels gathered in the hallway of Aidan's club. Two days of planning had gone by in a blur. She had drawn maps, given Sebastian as much information on the lower levels of the compound as she could think of, and prayed.

Her father's home was quite ingenious. From the outside it appeared to be a quiet and peaceful manor, but inside it was a labyrinth of twisting halls and tunnels.

Surrounded by a thick, lush forest on three sides, the front opened to a long winding drive which was gated near the front of the road. Guards patrolled the grounds at random intervals all day and night, but in his arrogance, her father didn't bother to check up on his men. Over the years they had become lazy.

Jenna knew the flaws of her father's security as well as she knew the forest around the house. She and her sisters had played in those very woods under the watchful eyes of a security team.

As his daughters grew to women and stopped haunting the woods, security there became sparse. Her father no longer thinned the trees and brush, preferring to let it become overgrown, impassible.

In the year before her escape Jenna had begun wandering the thick forest again, discovering where the natural paths and impasses were. It took her several months, but eventually she'd known the lay of the forest as well as when she'd been a child. Eventually her bodyguards tired of following her on her long walks, leaving her to wander in peace, making notes and maps, traveling as close to the highway as possible without setting off the alarms that ringed the property line.

She'd given Bas every detail she'd engraved on her mind, and now as she looked at the men surrounding her, she prayed it was enough. These men, who owed her no allegiance whatsoever, were willing to risk their very lives to help get Rowan away from her father.

Nic pulled her into his arms. He needed her touch constantly, and she certainly had no complaints about that. With each touch he poured his strength into her, and she had the feeling that tonight she'd need that strength more than ever. She squeezed his waist to gather her courage before stepping into middle of the semi-circle the group had formed.

She looked each and every man in the eye as she turned to face them. A group of warriors, she thought. Her warriors; brave and honorable men standing before her ready to do battle.

"I don't have the words to express my gratitude to each and every one of you. Thank you seems so inadequate. No matter what happens tonight, I am forever in your debt." Jenna forced back her tears, even smiling a little as the big bad men in front of her squirmed in discomfort at her declaration.

Slow clapping filled the silence.

"Pretty speech, luv, but don't fool yourself into thinking they're doing this for you. They only want the chance to string up dear old daddy." Nic went rigid at her side, a growl rumbling in his chest. She poked at him sharply and swallowed the lump in her throat.

Abel, the giant blond Wolf turned to where Aidan leaned in the doorway from the offices, lounging negligently with his arms folded across his chest.

“Don’t be an asshole, Dragon,” he said mildly. Shaking his long blond dreadlocks back over his shoulders, he turned to address Jenna.

“We’re going to your father’s prison tonight to rescue your sister. Period.” The others nodded their agreement.

Kane, the dark Wolf who was Abel’s twin, flashed a chilling grin and added, “Of course, that doesn’t mean that if we see him we won’t kill him and consider it our hazard pay.”

Jenna forced back her tears again, and nodded.

The Wolves parted reluctantly as Aidan pushed away from the door frame and approached her. Kane and Abel stood at her back, a daunting, heated bulwark. Nic flanked her on the right, Bas took up a position at her left, presenting a united front that had the Dragon raising his eyebrows in amusement. Jenna was fairly certain she was the only one to notice the flash of hurt in those indigo eyes. She stepped away from her honor guard, shoving at Nic irritably when he tried to move along with her.

“Take this.” Aidan pressed a small, cold gun into her palm. “If I’m following you on this fool’s errand, I’m not letting you go in there unarmed. We don’t leave for another hour. That should give Nic enough time to show you how to shoot to kill.”

“If I hugged you now, you’d bite my head off, wouldn’t you?” Jenna asked, proud that she kept the tremor out of her voice.

Aidan gave her a fierce scowl and muttered, “I don’t suggest you try it,” and just like that the tension in the room was broken.

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Nic stood, shaken, as Bas stepped forward to clasp Aidan’s forearm firmly.

“It’s about fucking time you came back to us,” the other Vampire muttered.

Nic stepped forward, taking his turn to welcome Aidan back.

“I think this was harder for you than I realized,” he told the Dragon softly. “You honor me.”

Without letting go, Aidan gave him a smile full of sharp teeth.

“I’m doing this for your woman, asshole, not for you. She deserves better than a judgmental prick like you.”

Nic pulled back to search the Dragon’s turbulent eyes.

“Why the sudden change of heart?”

Aidan shrugged. “Don’t bloody well know, mate. Maybe it’s because she isn’t like any human I’ve ever met. Maybe it’s because she didn’t throw me to the fucking wolves when I refused to bloody help.” The words “unlike you, my so-called friend,” remained unspoken.

Nic didn’t miss the slight, and while he knew he couldn’t have reacted any other way, he felt a moment of guilt at the pain he’d apparently caused his friend. Jenna had recognized something in Aidan that Nic had not. The Dragon carried a secret pain he’d never shared with Nic or Bas, but Jenna had picked up on it with one sweep of those compassionate eyes.

“Is this a fucking *joke*?” Chandra’s shrill voice pierced the room. “I heard rumors, but I knew they had to be false.” Nic frowned as the blonde Vampiress spewed her venom.

How the fuck had she found out about tonight's mission? He shot a questioning look to Aidan who just shrugged, looking as baffled as Nic was.

The blonde woman shoved her way into the center of the circle, spinning around to look at each man as they glared back at her.

"You would risk your lives for a human female? One who has been in our world for less than a week? One whose father has murdered, kidnapped and tortured those like us?" Her lip curled up as her fangs slid down, her red-tipped nails formed claws at her sides.

She turned to Aidan, crossing her arms.

"I forbid you to help this human cow."

Nic choked back snort at the look on Aidan's face. The Dragon looked at Chandra as if she'd grown a second head. One that wasn't pretty.

"What the fuck are you talking about, woman?"

Chandra propped a hand on her slim hip.

"Aidan, lover, don't do this. Come home with me. I will keep you occupied while the rest of these fools get themselves killed."

The Dragon started to laugh, bringing an ugly, mottled flush to Chandra's face.

"Have you lost what little mind you once had?" he choked out. "Fuck, woman, you don't have any claim on me. We screwed. That's it. Now go *away* like a good little fuck toy."

"You bastard," she screeched, raking her nails down the side of Aidan's neck.

"She'll get you all killed. You fucking fools, go ahead die for your fragile little human."

Nic's eyes caught fire. Chandra had been riding the edge of his patience for a long time, and by insulting his One, and doing it repeatedly, she'd toppled over onto the wrong side.

He stepped toward her, but Aidan beat him there. The Dragon shoved her hard, but she'd seen him coming and was ready for him, shoving back. Steadying herself, she pushed past the men, leaving as abruptly as she'd arrived.

Nic turned to Jenna, whose eyes were wide as she watched the blonde slam out of the club.

"Wow," she murmured, beginning to laugh as she melted into his arms. She cast another look at Aidan, who was glaring back at her. "I guess I owe you another thank you," she giggled at his smoldering look.

"Do not," he retorted, stalking off toward his office.

Nic grinned down at his woman, stroking her cheek, savoring her soft scent. Placing his forehead to hers, his lips brushed hers.

"My little warrior woman," he teased. "Come, then. We have less than an hour to get you comfortable with your weapon..."

* * * *

The drive to Stone's compound was made in silence. Nic and Jenna sat, pressed close together in the middle seat of the van. He pulled her tighter against himself, trying to blot out the fear with the warm crush of her in his arms, the silk of her hair against his lips, the sweet scent of her skin.

She nestled closer, burying her face in his neck, and Nic thought she might be doing the same thing.

Nic met Sebastian's eyes over her bent head and sent him a speaking look. Jenna's

safety was their first and last priority. Bas nodded silently. With Jenna's blood coursing through his veins, he would be able to protect her almost as well as Nic could.

"Jenna," his voice was gruff with suppressed emotion. She tilted her head up. Her hair slid over his jaw like silk as her whiskey brown eyes connected with his. "Stay behind me, Beloved, no matter what happens."

"What if we can't find her, Nico? What if we do all of this for nothing?"

"We will find her." He left no room for doubt because he sensed his One needed his strength. "We will find her," he repeated, "but not if I am too busy worrying about you to look." Her brows drew in a little, but she didn't argue. Nic hoped that was a good sign. "I need you to promise that you will stay behind me, that you will listen to and obey me," he sent a narrow look to the Vampire sitting on Jenna's other side and snickering quietly, "and Sebastian while we are in there."

He didn't even try to keep the slight grin off his face as her nose crinkled up at the word obey. On her other side, Bas started to laugh outright.

"Wow," she retorted tartly, "if I hadn't already known you were straight out of the sixteenth century that would have totally given it away." Nic rolled his eyes as laughter from the front seat of the vehicle joined Bas's laughter along side of them. After a while, though, he turned serious eyes to her.

"I would not survive if something happened to you, Beloved. Promise me you will let us keep you safe." He leaned down, punctuating his demand with a stinging nip to her lower lip.

She made a low sound, returning the caress with one of her own, and in spite of the tense situation, an arrow of heat shot straight to Nic's balls.

"I promise," she spoke softly against his lips, "but you have to promise me the same thing. I'd rather die with you than live without you, Nico."

He captured her hand, buried his face in her palm, darting his tongue out to sample the sweetness cupped there, buying time until his emotion-clogged voice would cooperate again. "Then we shall both have to be careful, Beloved. I intend to spend the next fifty or so years memorizing every inch of you, and the fifty years after that letting you memorize every inch of me, so we definitely have something to live for."

She kissed him again, a warm, damp brush of her lips over his, and laid her head back against his chest. His brave warrior woman. She was so gentle, so kind, but her inner strength called to Nic. Made him want to take her far away from this place. He wanted to hide her away somewhere and bury himself inside her welcoming body. Since that wasn't an option, he settled for pressing her cheek closer to his chest, right over his heart.

They rode that way until Kane, the big Were who was driving, looked into the back seat. "We're here," he rumbled.

The doors whooshed open, but before Jenna could scoot out of the van, Nic cupped her face between his hands, pulling her into one last, desperate kiss. He needed to burn the taste of her, the feel of her, onto his lips. Into his soul. He kissed her slowly, with hot, languorous strokes of his tongue as if they had all the time in the world.

He finally pulled away when Bas maneuvered smoothly around them and dropped to the ground. "I love you, Jenna Stone," he muttered roughly against her damp mouth. "I have loved you from our first dream, and the more I know you, the more I find to love." He saw his reflection in her eyes, and marveled at how beautiful he was to her. "With

every breath in my body,” he pledged, “for all of eternity, I will love you, my One.”

Jenna gave him a fierce look, and reached up to cup his face, mirroring his hold on her. “And I love you, Nicolas Alero. And I intend to spend all of eternity proving it, so stop acting like we’re not coming back.”

Her words soothed something ragged in his chest, but didn’t quite still the gnawing in his gut. They’d infiltrated Stone’s fortress so easily. He had a very bad feeling that something was about to go very wrong.

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Jenna let Bas help her out of the truck. He gave her a gentle squeeze and a reassuring smile as she stepped into the circle of very large, very scary men. She was terrified, but kept her face perfectly neutral, a talent she’d honed at her father’s knee. Her fear would only worry Nic and distract him, and they had a difficult enough task ahead of them without him being caught up in taking care of her.

Kane parked half a mile from the property, where the van was camouflaged by the thick trees and woods that bordered three sides of the Stone compound. Her father liked to keep his borders well defended.

Aidan, Bas and Nic were joined by the two Werewolves, Kane and Abel. The bothers were big as houses and looked meaner than any creature she’d ever seen, except maybe Aidan in a temper. She tried to be comforted by the fact that she was entering her father’s house surrounded by these feral male animals. She knew that, Blood Bonds aside, any one of them, maybe even Aidan, would storm to her defense at the first sign of trouble.

The heavy weight of the gun Aidan had pressed into her hand before they left tugged at her pocket, a reminder of yet another defense.

In this crowd of flaring testosterone, Bas was the undisputed leader. He appeared so elegant, so classy and cultured that it was a bit of a shock to see the Alpha male his smooth façade masked. His usually tranquil face was grim, and his eyes lacked their usual smile as he addressed the group.

“Shoot to kill, my friends. Stone’s people would just as soon kill you as capture you if you give them the chance. We’re using conventional weapons, guns are best. If you have to use your knife, you’re too damn close to them. Get in, get Rowan Stone, and get the fuck out.” It went without saying that if they found any of Stone’s “pets” they would be taking them along as well.

Jenna touched the gun in her pocket like a talisman. Nic had spent time showing her how to fire the weapon, coaching her on how to deal with the recoil. *Take a breath, aim and squeeze as you breathe out, Jenna. Do not hesitate, not even for a second.*

She shuddered in revulsion at the thought of taking another life, but these would be her father’s men, her father’s creations, stone cold killers, every one of them. These were the men who’d imprisoned her and beaten Rowan bloody on a regular basis, and they wouldn’t hesitate to kill her, so she couldn’t hesitate to shoot first. Like Bas said, shoot to kill.

Jenna closed her eyes tight, sending up a prayer that they would succeed tonight, that Rowan was alive and whole. Maybe they would even find Erin as well, and somehow bring her with them.

Someone was holding a radio, and there was a brief, muted crackle, then a deep voice said “Go.” Guns were drawn, and Aidan commented softly, “It’s time, boys and

girl.”

Bas led the way, then Nic followed, gesturing her to fall in behind him. The Wolves ranged behind her, falling on either side. Aidan had her back, and as irrational as it was, she trusted him to be there.

With every step closer to the house, Jenna’s steps grew slower; her breath began to jerk in her chest. She’d vowed never to return to this hellhole, and nothing short of Rowan’s rescue would have made her break that vow. She choked back her dread, taking in the few lights on the grounds. All appeared quiet.

There was a basement window propped a scant inch open, and they all shimmied through it, weapons at the ready. Nic lifted Jenna to the floor, and she marveled at how silent and graceful these giant Night Creatures were. Their movements were a deadly beautiful ballet.

Chapter Ten

“Okay, our little walking map, where do we go from here?” Aidan’s voice was strained under his customary flippant tone, and Jenna knew he didn’t want to be here.

“There’s a set of stairs down this hallway on the left. There should be two guards there; one of them will have a complete set of keys to all the cells.”

Bas nodded at Kane and Abel, and they slipped silently from the room. Moments later the Wolves carried two still bodies into the small concrete room and quickly relieved them of their weapons and the wallet of key cards clipped into one guard’s pocket. When they didn’t bother to bind or gag them, Jenna knew the guards wouldn’t be abusing any more Night Creatures.

Bas led the way into the hall, Nic behind him. Jenna stayed to the rear as promised, letting Nic and Bas take the risk of walking point. The Wolves ranged behind her, a rear guard. Dryly, Jenna thought she was like a princess or a precious politician, surrounded by the Secret Service. They quickly reached Aidan, who had the double doors leading to the second level open. A wide staircase was lit by low lights in the ceiling. Guns at the ready, Aidan took the first step down.

Behind them came the distinctive snick of an opening door. A man in a white lab coat stood framed in the threshold.

“Jordan,” Jenna breathed, instinctively taking a protective step toward him. Dr. Jordan Baker, her only ally, stood stock still with shock. His eyes met Jenna’s and a small smile lifted his lips. With a satisfied nod, he slipped back into the room he’d just exited.

“I’ll get him,” Bas muttered, but Jenna grabbed his arm.

“No, Bas, he’s a friend. Leave him be.”

“Pretty One, we have no friends here,” the Vampire told her somberly. “If I don’t stop him now, he’ll warn them.”

“He won’t, Bas. I’d bet my life on it.” Jenna realized that was exactly what she was doing, betting her life and the lives of every man with her. But, “He is as much a prisoner as I was.”

“Take care of him,” Nic said as he led Jenna forward, “one way or another.”

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Bas backtracked to the room Jordan had disappeared into. He was surprised that it wasn’t locked. He was even more surprised to walk in and find the man sitting calmly behind a desk. A pair of wire-rimmed glasses perched on his nose. Bas tilted his head to the side as a shiver of *something* ran down his body. He shook it off. Ridiculous. It couldn’t be anything but his recently reawakened libido and the presence of a beautiful man.

“Stand up, Dr. Jordan. Let’s go.” He moved just enough to put the doorframe at his back, and kept at an angle to the room, preserving his line of sight to the hallway. The other man just looked at him.

“It’s Baker,” he finally said. His voice was rich, melodic. Bas shot him a frustrated, questioning look. “My name,” he explained. “I’m Dr. Jordan Baker.”

“Look, Doc,” Bas snapped, “It doesn’t matter in the least to me what you’re called. My Blood Sister doesn’t want you dead. That means you’re coming with us.”

Jordan raised a startled eyebrow at Bas's claiming of Jenna, but almost immediately his face smoothed out, slipping back into his previous blankness.

"While I appreciate the sentiment, I'm not going anywhere." The doctor dropped his gaze, and Bas couldn't help but notice how the light picked amber highlights out in his deep brown hair. "I assume you're here for Rowan," he added, some emotion finally entering his voice. Somehow the urgency didn't comfort Bas. "You have to get her out now. I don't think she'll survive another beating. Save *her*, Vampire. I'm not your problem."

Bas's stomach knotted into a mass of confusion. This stranger sat, head bowed, lines of pain adding years of fatigue to his striking face. It just didn't make any sense. The man wore a lab coat; clearly he worked in this house of torture. So why did he look as if he would welcome death?

"You're wasting my time," Bas growled, pushing all the turmoil this man stirred up in him aside. "Jenna wants you. I won't even pretend to understand why," which was a lie, he realized. Dr. Jordan Baker stirred up feelings in Bas that were unfamiliar and unwelcome. "But she does, so shut the fuck up and let's go already."

Jordan met his eyes briefly, and Bas found himself lost in their fathomless black depths. "Jenna is a good person," he murmured, "a pure soul. She can find it in her heart to forgive even me."

When the doctor stood, Bas automatically leveled his weapon at the man, aiming for his heart. Instead of the fear he expected, Jordan's eyes almost glowed, radiating a peace that brought Bas's confusion and anger back in a heartbeat.

By the time the other man stood in front of him, Bas's confused emotions were nearing the boiling point. He'd dropped the gun back to his side, but now Jordan reached out, wrapping his hand over Bas's on the grip. Perhaps he should have been alarmed, or at least on his guard, but at the other man's touch a jolt of electricity shot through Bas until there was nothing but the feel of this stranger's flesh, his clean, spicy scent, the darkness in his eyes.

Jordan pulled the gun back up, placing the barrel under his jaw. "Do us both a favor, Vampire, and just kill me now." Those black eyes held all the seething agony of the pits of hell. "I'm every bit as much a monster as William Stone, and despite Jenna's willingness to forgive me, there's nothing here worth salvaging."

Jordan wore his despair like a blanket. His pain was a living, breathing thing, and Bas became lost in it, entranced by it. Most humans held on to their fleeting lives with clutching hands, meeting death kicking and screaming. Not this man with his warm, steady touch and his tormented eyes. Again, Bas lowered his gun.

"Please," Jordan reached out to close both hands over Bas's on the gun. "I'm so fucking tired." He dropped to his knees at Bas's feet, and the Vampire was flooded with an unwanted montage of images, Jordan naked at his feet, feeding his thick cock into the doctor's smiling mouth, the curve of his spine as Bas took him from behind.

"Jesus," Bas stepped back, away from temptation.

"I'm tired," the doctor repeated, still holding Bas's hand, gun pressed to his forehead. "Tired and sick and too fucking cowardly to end it myself."

Bas shook his head, pulling his hand free. He knew he should do it. Jenna's pleas aside, he didn't know this man, couldn't trust him. And yet something about this man called to him. A longing, a loneliness that Sebastian understood only too well.

When Bas made no move to harm the man, simply stood watching him, the doctor opened his eyes.

“What are you waiting for? Do it!”

“Jordan Baker,” he spoke slowly, tasting the name in his mouth. “I have no intention of killing you. Jenna has asked for your life, and I’ll not deny her.”

Jordan’s eyes went savage as he lunged for Bas’s gun. In less time than it took to plan the motion, Bas had him flattened on the floor, pinned by the arm he’d dragged up behind the other man’s back.

The doctor fought hard, throwing elbows and grunting out obscenities until it became clear that he wasn’t going anywhere. And with every thrash, Bas cursed himself as his cock went painfully hard between one breath and the next.

Finally, Jordan stopped his struggling, and twisted his head to meet Bas’s eyes. Bas’s gaze went stormy, every particle of his being focused in on the awareness in Jordan’s eyes. Something passed between them in that instant, an understanding beyond words or logic.

“I will not kill you,” Bas emphasized, unconsciously pressing harder into Jordan’s body, pressing his cock into the hard curve of his ass. “Do not ask it of me.” *Because I couldn’t do it.*

“I can’t go with you,” the other man muttered without taking his eyes from Bas’s. “If you won’t fucking kill me, then you’d better get back to your friends. There is no way William Stone will sit back and lose one of his daughters, let alone two of them.”

His words and some shadow that moved under the surface of his gaze put Bas on red alert. He pushed up to his knees, grabbing the back of Jordan’s lab coat to jerk him upright as well.

“What do you know?”

“Nothing concrete, but the guards talk, and I’m pretty invisible here. There’s a rumor that Stone has a plan to get his daughter back.”

Bas ran the probabilities through his head. “Fuck,” the ease of their infiltration of the compound suddenly made sense. “It’s a trap.”

They were walking right into Stone’s hands. Bas lunged to his feet, and was halfway out the door before the doctor steadied himself on his wide-spread knees. He hesitated for a second, torn by his need to take this man with him, and his need to get to his friends.

Jordan knelt, head down, and spoke. “Just go, Vampire. There’s nothing anyone can do to save me.” When Bas hesitated a second longer, sweeping his eyes one last time over the doctor’s lean body, Jordan looked up with blazing eyes and yelled, “Get the fuck out of here!”

It felt, irrationally, like ripping out his own heart, but Bas turned and darted into the hallway. He was greeted by gunfire and Jenna’s panicked scream, but all he could see was a pair of burning black eyes.

*

“Fuck,” Nic roared as all hell broke loose. They were surrounded, guards pouring into the hallway from all directions. And they were wearing gas masks.

Before he had time to make sense of what he was seeing, Nic was choking on the thick, white smoke that filled the hallway. His eyes streamed with the acrid burn, and he turned to see Jenna cover her mouth with one arm, fighting for untainted air.

He swept his arm back, flattening her against the wall as a gas-mask wearing soldier

came after her from behind. The soldier's lunge carried him past Jenna and straight into Nic's arms. The man's neck snapped surprisingly easily. Nic grabbed the mask off the dead man and placed it on Jenna's face.

Aidan's battle cry filled the hallway, and Nic braced for the inevitable electrical storm that followed when the Dragon took on his fighting form, but it never came.

Pressing his back against Jenna, who was flattened against the wall, he aimed and fired off six quick shots, dropping four men and wounding two others. Jenna's hand dug into his waist, and he had a flash of remorse that she would see him like this, as a killer.

Then he turned his head for a brief glimpse of her face, his breath backed up in his chest. She was fierce, white face and blazing eyes, the deadly little handgun braced on his shoulder as she took aim, downing another of the guards.

His warrior woman. Fuck, he was as hard as a rock.

"What the hell happened?" Bas shouted, sliding up next to him, gun drawn.

"Trap," he snarled back. "I can't find Aidan. I can't see a Goddamn thing." The smoke was an effective screen, hobbling Bas's men and shielding Stone's.

"Where's Jordan, Bas?" Jenna popped her head around Nic's shoulder to pin worried eyes on Bas.

"Sorry, pretty One." Bas didn't look up as he answered, just kept steadily picking off one after another of Stone's men. "He respectfully declined your invitation." He missed a shot and swore harshly.

"You didn't hurt him?" Jenna's urgency was clear. Bas shot her a sizzling look, and in spite of the situation, Nic raised an eyebrow at the exchange.

"No, Sister-mine. I left him in the same shape I found him." Bas frowned and resumed his systematic massacre of Stone's soldiers. "He's dying all right," he muttered softly, "but not by my hand."

This was a topic that Nic definitely wanted to pursue, but at another time. Right now he had his hands full as another of Stone's men reached him, catching him in the face with his rifle butt.

The impact knocked Nic away from Jenna, and he hit the floor. Before he could rise, there was a popping sound and the giant guard fell on him, limp, knocking the breath out of him.

The impact dazed him enough that it took a second for the pain to register.

He tried to catch his breath, and heard a low gurgling sound. Fuck it all, something was lodged in his chest. He clawed the guard off him, and as the body fell with a limp thud to the floor, Nic wrapped shaking fingers around the stake that was wedged between his ribs. As his dying act, the guard had propelled the stake into Nic's chest with his falling body. The weapon had missed his heart, but the ominous sucking sound warned him that it had punctured his lung.

The weapon burned in his hand, and he forced his eyes to focus on it. Not wood, something else. Something that tilted the world and turned the blood to fire in his veins.

He reached behind himself, clawing with his free hand for the wall. He needed to get to Jenna. Before he could do more than drag himself to his knees, he was face to face with another of Stone's soldiers. Another big, hybrid bastard.

The man smiled, his eyes bright with malice and insanity. He held another of the odd stakes, and wagged it at Nic mockingly.

"Do you know what this is?"

“It’s a fucking stake, you stereotypical bastard,” Nic snarled. He had a second of satisfaction as the man’s smile twisted into a look of utter rage, then the stake was pressed up against his ribs on the opposite side from the first.

“Oh,” the soldier crowed, “it’s not just any stake. This is one of Mr. Stone’s new toys.” The sharp end of the weapon dragged over Nic’s torso, slicing through his shirt and tracing a line of agonizing fire across his skin.

“No, Vampire scum, this stake is an alloy of pure silver and several other minerals designed to burn you up from the inside out.” He poked Nic teasingly. “See, your blood corrodes the metal shell, and pretty soon, whoosh! The yummy liquid silver center is flowing through your veins.” Seemingly oblivious to the fighting going on around them, the soldier carefully positioned the stake against Nic’s chest, lining it up to meet its mate at a right angle. With a homicidal grin, he thrust it between Nic’s ribs.

“You’re gonna die slowly, Vampire. And painfully.” He leaned over and whispered into Nic’s ear. “And while you’re burning away to ash, I’m gonna be fucking that traitorous cow Stone calls a daughter.”

The stake slid through muscle and between bones, puncturing Nic’s other lung, and sending a screaming song of pain through him.

Time stopped for a moment, there was nothing but pain. Then with a roar of sound, the world started back up. The sadistic bastard crouched over him was laughing, and then he wasn’t. A tiny hole bloomed in the man’s forehead, and he toppled almost gracefully to the floor, landing on his fellow Vampire slayer. Jenna stood over him, gun pointed at the fallen guard with braced arms, eyes glassy with terror.

Blackness beckoned, but Nic refused to close his eyes. He didn’t want to die; not now, and not like this. Not in this madman’s house of horrors as his One looked on helplessly.

He tried to say her name, but the words choked off in a fountain of blood. Not enough time. Never enough time... The world went dark.

*

Jenna was oblivious as the gun dropped from her numb fingers. She ripped off her gas mask and flung it to the floor, blind to anything but Nic, lying cold and still at her feet.

“Oh God, Oh God, Oh God,” she chanted as she skidded to her knees beside him. “Don’t you dare die,” she growled, knotting her hand in his hair.

There was so much blood pouring from around the stakes, pooling under him. And it was so dark, almost scorched looking.

She stared at his chest, willing it to move, to give some sign that he was still breathing, still alive. Finally she detected movement, a slight, shallow breath. Pause. Another, shallower breath.

Jenna, Beloved, she could almost hear him. *Go to Bas; let him take care of you.*

“To hell with that, Nic Alero!” She ripped off her sweatshirt and wadded it around the stakes, trying to staunch the blood flow. “Nobody’s taking care of me except for you! If you don’t want me to spend the rest of my life alone and miserable, then you’d better not give up on me, dammit.”

The sweatshirt was already wet under her hand, soaking up each drop of life that flowed from Nic.

“Sebastian,” she screamed, praying he could find her through the din of bullets and

choking smoke.

She crouched over Nic, feeling his life seep between her fingers, and searched the haze for Bas. When he appeared, he looked like an avenging angel, his long leather trench coat rippling behind him. He was a dark warrior coming to their rescue.

“Oh, Christ,” he bent down and examined Nic’s wounds, then looked up at Jenna. “This is really bad, pretty One. We need to get him the hell out of here.”

“He’s going to be all right, Bas. Please tell me he’s going to be all right.”

Bas grappled with Nic’s limp body, hoisting it over his shoulder in a reverse fireman’s carry.

“He will if I have anything to say about it.”

*

“Man down, let’s roll,” Bas yelled into the grey haze. There was a fury of gunfire behind them and one of the Wolves ran past Bas and Jenna, taking up the lead position.

Handing her his gun, Bas pulled Jenna along by the arm and they ran up the stairs. They rounded the corner and almost flattened Jordan, who was once again standing in the hallway.

The Wolf, Abel, growled viciously, raising his gun, and Jenna cried out, “No, don’t shoot him!”

Bas couldn’t tear his eyes away from Jordan as the doctor grabbed her hand. Shooting a quick glance at the soldiers who’d escaped, Jordan muttered, “Follow me,” and ran down the hallway, pulling Jenna along with him. Shifting Nic on his shoulder, Bas followed.

Jordan ran back the way they’d come, making a sharp right turn into a camouflaged doorway. Jenna was panting, fighting gamely to keep up.

“Where are we?” she gasped when Jordan paused to work a combination lock on a heavy steel door.

“Your father has done a lot of construction down here. New and improved lab space and cells. Secret tunnels and escape routes.” The lock clicked, and Jordan leaned into the door, forcing it open just enough for the fugitives to squeeze through. “This tunnel lets out just inside the front gate. I’ll set the alarm from inside, give you about five minutes to get off the property.”

“Why the fuck should we trust one of Stone’s men?” Abel growled.

“You shouldn’t,” Jordan answered. “But I’ve never betrayed Jenna or Rowan, and I’m not betraying you now.”

“Enough,” Bas said shortly when the Wolf would have argued. “Nic doesn’t have time for this debate. Let’s move.” He pushed past Abel, and began herding Jenna through the door with his body. Before they passed through the opening, Jordan reached out and touched her cheek.

“You didn’t get to Rowan, did you?” The grief in his eyes showed he knew full well what that meant. Jenna shook her head, unable to speak.

“I’ll do what I can for her,” he promised, and some of the suicidal fury subsided in his eyes.

“Let’s move, pretty One,” Bas broke in. He couldn’t tolerate Jordan’s hand on her cheek, the obvious affection between the two of them. Once Jenna was in the passageway, he stopped and met the doctor’s eyes one last time.

“Come with us.” The words burst out without his permission. He ached to touch the

doctor's face the way the man had touched Jenna's. The sad tilt of Jordan's smile and the bleak light in his eyes told Bas that the doctor knew. Maybe even felt it, too.

"I can't go," he replied softly. "Even if it had been a possibility before, I can't leave Rowan here without any allies."

"You aren't safe here," Bas tried one more time. "Don't make me leave you behind." He was oblivious to everything but Nic's weight on his shoulder and the burning depths of Jordan's eyes, so he didn't see the significant look that flashed between the Wolves, or Jenna's slowly dawning comprehension.

"I'm a dead man already, no matter where I am," Jordan answered in that same quiet voice. He reached out, tapped a series of keys on the alarm pad, and shook his head.

"You've got five minutes to get off the property." He looked at Jenna, standing pale and mute in the tunnel. "Take care of her," he said, and with a last, lingering look he turned and ran.

The Wolves slipped into the tunnel, Kane taking the lead and Abel bringing up the rear. He pulled the door closed behind them with a soft clunk, and they began their race through the dark, never slowing until they made their way up the steps and into the clear night air.

Chapter Eleven

The ride back to the penthouse passed in a blur of trees streaking the dark outside the windows, Bas yelling into his phone, calling for as many blood donors as could be rounded up and for Elena to meet them. At some point one of the Wolves had pulled off his shirt and wrapped it around Jenna's blood-streaked body. Until that moment, she hadn't realized she was clad only in her jeans, her bra, and her lover's blood.

They entered the penthouse at a dead run. Jenna found herself weaving through a crowd of people, twenty or more, as Bas rushed Nic into the bedroom, where Elena had already set up her work area.

Elena ignored Bas and Jenna entirely, running her hands along Nic's body while four very young women, each dressed in a flowing white muslin robe, moved in and began removing his ruined clothing.

Jenna lunged toward the bed, desperate to do something to help her lover, but found herself wrapped in a pair of warm, irresistible arms.

"Let me go," she gritted out as Bas held her tight. "I promised not to leave him."

"Shhh, pretty One." She struggled for all she was worth, but Bas's arms were like living steel, and there was no escape. "Let the Healer do her work." His voice was meant to be soothing, but Jenna heard the tension and worry underneath.

Somehow his vulnerability broke through her frantic rage, and she shifted in his hold, wrapping her arms around his waist to comfort them both.

"She'll save him, won't she?" Jenna hated the doubt in her voice. Now wasn't the time to lose faith. Nic needed her to be strong.

"If anyone can, it's Elena," Bas replied. "She saved you when I was sure it was a lost cause, and Nic is much stronger..." He trailed off as the girls attending Elena formed a circle around Nic, fingertips touching his body as they harmonized in a low, soothing chant. The healer skimmed her glowing hands down the length of Nic's body. When she reached the two stakes, still embedded in his chest, sparks shot from her palms.

Without opening her eyes, the healer tilted her head toward Bas. "Have we enough donors? He will need much blood."

"Twenty here," he answered, "and more on call if they are needed."

The healer nodded. "Call them."

* * * *

Though Bas still held her back from the bed, Jenna was grateful that he'd stopped trying to pull her from the room. Elena and her apprentices had labored over Nic for hours, their bell-like voices raised in healing songs as Elena passed burning sweet grass and other healing herbs over Nic's still body.

At long last Elena turned her peaceful gaze to Jenna.

"You have been very brave, child," the healer began, but Jenna shook her head in denial.

"It's not bravery. I simply will not allow him to die."

Elena smiled.

“Come, sit behind him.” The apprentices lifted Nic’s upper body gently, and Jenna slid behind him, wrapping his too-cool form in a supporting embrace. Elena met her eyes seriously. “We must transfuse him,” she explained. “Your father’s weapons have filled his body with silver, and it is like an acid, eating him from the inside out.” Jenna flinched at the description, imagining his pain.

“We will remove the polluted blood,” Elena continued, “and replace it with blood that is clean and wholesome.”

“Give him my blood,” Jenna whispered. “Let me help.”

Elena laid one gentle hand over Jenna’s where it rested on Nic’s chest. “Oh, my dear, you will help. He cannot take your blood yet, his ability to metabolize it is compromised.” Jenna whimpered with the realization that her father had not only nearly murdered her lover, but had stolen her ability to heal him.

Elena sensed her distress, because she spoke firmly, demanding Jenna’s complete attention. “You cannot give him your blood, but you can give him your strength. You are his soul, his reason for living. Remind him of that, that he has something to fight for.”

Elena nodded to Bas. “Bring in the first.”

Bas left the room, and the healer took a wicked looking athame and opened Nic’s wrists, laying them over two wooden bowls. The blood flowing from his veins was dark and black looking. An acrid odor filled the room.

Bas returned, bringing a massive Vampire with him. The Goliath knelt by Nic’s head and tore at his wrist with his teeth before one of the girls could offer him the athame. Once his blood was flowing freely, he placed his wrist against Nic’s lips.

A shiver twitched over Nic’s cool body as the clean, healing blood hit his tongue. Unconsciously he wrapped his lips around the wound, and Jenna took a ragged, relieved breath as she saw his throat begin to work.

All the while, Elena bled Nic, stepping in often to reopen the wounds on his wrists as they began to heal. After a time she stepped in and gently broke the seal of Nic’s mouth on the giant’s wrist. Nic didn’t wake, but his brow wrinkled, and his head turned as if to follow the source of nourishment.

Another donor entered. And another. Elena reopened Nic’s wrists. Coaxed his polluted blood into the wooden bowls. As the color and texture of Nic’s blood lightened, his skin began to heat. Soon he was feverish in Jenna’s arms, body moving restlessly in her embrace.

The ritual continued for hours as Elena and her apprentices fought to cleanse Nic’s system.

Finally Nic’s blood flowed fresh and red. Elena dismissed the donors and gently eased each stake from Nic’s chest as Jenna held him. There was a long, breath-stealing moment as bright blood bubbled from each puncture, and then Jenna let out a low moan of relief as they began to slowly seal, knitting his skin to together in thick red puckers.

Jenna held him anxiously, stroking his matted hair.

“It’s time to wake up now, Nico. Open those blue eyes and give me hell for worrying about you.”

Nic remained as still as death.

“The crisis has passed,” Elena comforted her. The healer deftly eased Jenna from the bed. “Your man is strong, and he has much to live for.” Her lips whispered over Jenna’s forehead, leaving a strange tingling in their wake. Slowly the tingles crept down her

body, spreading warmth and well-being through her from head to toe.

When Jenna looked at her in wonder, the healer just smiled at her, looking for the entire world like a child with a delicious secret. She turned to Bas with a sharp snap of her fingers.

“Sebastian, take your sister to the kitchen and get her fed.”

Jenna shook her head in protest. “Oh, no. I’m not going anywhere.”

Elena tapped her chin and retorted, “You will do him no good if you fall over from hunger and exhaustion. Do as I say.”

Jenna looked to Bas, who simply shrugged.

“I haven’t found a way to deny her in almost six hundred years,” the Vampire told her helplessly.

* * * *

Bas put his hand at Jenna’s back to lead her through the crowd gathered in Nic’s living room. She was frighteningly pale, and streaks of blood stood out garishly on her creamy skin. She appeared alarmingly fragile, with her wide brown eyes slightly glassy, her slender hands shaking, but she still stopped with a word of thanks for each of Nic’s donors. Her warmth and genuine gratitude won over many of the more skeptical Vampires, and by the time he’d led her into the kitchen, Bas was satisfied that she was well on her way to making several strong alliances.

Bas fixed her a sandwich, but Jenna just picked at it.

“Now, Jenna,” he began teasingly, “you’re going to make me think you don’t enjoy my cooking if you don’t eat something.”

She sent him a dry look. “I don’t think slapping turkey cold-cuts on slices of bread counts as cooking.” But, to his relief she took a bite.

He was about to respond when a shriek split the air.

“Where is he?” Chandra flew into the apartment like an avenging fury.

“Oh, fuck,” he muttered and darted out of the kitchen, catching the blonde Vampiress by the arm before she could barge into Nic’s room.

“Chandra,” Bas whispered, “he’s asleep. He’s going to recover, but not if we subject him to a bunch of hysterical scenes.”

Every eye in the room was glued to them as Chandra stood, bosom heaving like a tragic heroine. When a fat tear began to tremble on her lower lashes, Bas drew in a deep breath. Of course this wasn’t going to be easy.

She turned her beautiful blonde head toward the kitchen doorway, where Jenna had propped herself. Jenna, Bas was proud to notice, was watching Chandra with a bland expression as she munched on her sandwich.

“*You*,” Chandra howled, breaking free of Bas’s grasp. “You stupid, fat, human *cow*. This is all your fault. Nicky wouldn’t be almost dead if it wasn’t for you.” Her eyes were poisonous green flame and her fangs dropped menacingly as she hissed at Jenna. Her long red nails became razor-sharp talons as she lunged at Jenna. Bas wasn’t sure if she’d intended to bite her or claw her, but it became a moot point when Kane and Abel stepped in front of Jenna, creating a solid wall of Wolf.

Chandra stopped, looking at the brothers in disbelief. “What, is she fucking the Wolves now too?”

Bas’s anger at the Vampiress rose as Kane answered. “She doesn’t have to fuck us to

hold our respect, unlike some people who can fuck you unconscious, and are still nothing but gutter trash.”

“You mangy son of a bitch,” Chandra launched herself at Kane, who easily caught her by the arms and held her off. The woman went crazy, snapping and clawing like a rabid animal. She tried to leap over the two Wolves, causing Jenna to take a wide-eyed step backwards. That was the last straw, as far as Bas was concerned. Stepping up behind the writhing woman, he grabbed a handful of blonde hair and flung her to the floor. Before she could spring back to her feet, he was on her, fangs extended, ready to do some biting and clawing of his own.

“You dare,” he hissed against her cheek, “to enter Nic’s home, to attack his chosen mate, his One.” He pulled back, and from her sudden stillness, he knew Chandra saw lightning and destruction in his gaze. “You could die for this insult, foolish female.”

“No!” Chandra raged in his hold, and Bas clamped down on her wrists. “There’s no such thing as some fairy tale One. And if there was, it wouldn’t be her. Not some useless human being.” Her eyes shone with tears, and with madness. “Nicky isn’t hers. He can’t be. He’s *mine*.”

*

Jenna stood, peering around the wall of Wolves in front of her and had the fleeting thought that this was as good as a night at the movies. If the blonde bitch hadn’t been calling her every filthy name she could think of, Jenna might even have been amused.

Somehow the Vampiress slipped one hand free, and Bas ducked as she tried to claw his face. Grabbing her wrists, he pinned her to the floor again and spoke in a low, vicious hiss.

“You are going to leave this place now, Chandra. You will never return. You will not speak to or about Jenna; you will no longer be welcome at Club Smoke.” He shifted both of her hands to one of his, and grasped her chin, digging in with his nails when she resisted. “Do you understand me, Chandra? If you so much as raise an eyebrow in Jenna’s direction, I’ll take you before the Council, and petition to have you exiled.”

The Vampiress writhed and squealed her rage. Bas had one last thing to say to her. “But it won’t matter if you’re exiled. The first dirty look you send his One, Nic’ll rip your heart out with his bare hands.”

“You bastard,” Chandra’s voice had gone shrill, her beautiful face an ugly mask of hatred and disbelief. “What is wrong with all of you? Has she cast some kind of fucking spell over your cocks?”

Jenna’d, had about enough. She fainted to the right, and when the Wolves shifted to block her, she darted around to the left until she stood over where Bas held Chandra pinned to the floor. She wanted to feel sorry for the other woman. God knows she wouldn’t react well to another woman staking a claim on Nic. But looking into that venomous face, all she could summon up was disgust.

“Look,” she said firmly. “I’m sorry you believe that I stole Nic from you. But the truth is, he was never yours in the first place. If he’d loved you, even a little, he’d never have come to me.” Jenna almost wondered how she was in one piece. Chandra’s eyes sliced over her like razor blades. “Now get over it, and go away before you make things even worse for yourself.”

“You stupid bitch,” Chandra breathed. “This is *so* not over. I will destroy you for this, if it takes until the end of my life.” She narrowed her eyes on Jenna’s face. “And I

will live a very long time, human.”

“Enough.” All eyes flew to Nic’s doorway where the healer stood, her tiny body dwarfed by everyone else in the room, but still managing to radiate pure power.

“Sebastian, remove yourself from her.” Bas jumped off of her and stood between the Kane and Abel, who were attempting to reform their protective wall around Jenna. She was having none of that. Nothing was going to stop her from seeing Elena deal with Chandra.

The Vampiress had risen to her feet and was smoothing her hair back and tugging at her postage-stamp of a skirt.

“Thank you so much, Elena,” she gushed as the healer approached. She cast a hate-filled look at Jenna. “Perhaps you can free our men from this human’s spell.”

The healer gave her a pitying look. “You will listen to what you have been told, female. For too long now your vile little spirit has corrupted this community. No more. I myself have already convened the Council to discuss your expulsion. You are poison, Chandra, and must be removed before you infect anyone else with your selfishness.”

Chandra’s ingratiating smile faded with each calm word from the diminutive healer. By the time Elena finished speaking, Chandra’s hands had once again knotted into claws. Jenna gasped in horror as, hissing, she lurched at the healer, clearly intent on raking her nails down her gently lined face.

The healer said nothing, her expression never changed. She simply raised one hand, palm out toward the rabid Vampiress, freezing her mid-lunge.

“You silly, stupid girl. Better than you have tried to best me and failed.” With her raised hand, Elena held Chandra enthralled. “Now, I am less compassionate than Sebastian. You have one hour to gather what belongings you can, and then leave this town.” Chandra’s face contorted, but she still could not speak or move.

“If you choose to defy me, you will not have to worry about Nicolas or the Council.” Those calm eyes spun dreamily with more power than Jenna could comprehend. “There will be no place in this world or any other where you can hide from me.” Elena made a flicking gesture with her upraised hand, and Chandra staggered. “Now, be gone with you.”

“You are all insane,” Chandra spat, stumbling to the door. “You can burn in hell, every one of you.” As the elevator doors closed her out of the room, Jenna and the surrounding Vampires and Weres all turned astonished eyes on Elena, who calmly turned and walked back into Nic’s bedroom.

* * * *

Eventually Bas bullied Jenna into the shower, and when she came out the apartment was blessedly silent and empty, save for Bas who was lying on the leather couch, one arm draped over his eyes. He looked as tired as she felt.

“I couldn’t get your doctor friend to come with us.” His usually mellow voice was dull with fatigue. Jenna sat on the floor by the couch, leaning her head on the cushion near his hip.

“There’s nothing you could have said to convince him,” she replied sadly. “He would never abandon Rowan, and even Erin, in that place.” She slanted him a curious look. “You seem more upset about leaving him behind than I’d expect. After all, you don’t know him. And he works for my father.”

Bas didn't answer, and didn't meet her eyes. After a moment he sighed and said, "Aidan is missing; he never came out of your father's house." He ground the heels of his hands over his eyes, and Jenna could feel the misery he was trying to rub away.

Jenna swallowed back her own misery. There was simply no energy left for tears. That damned Dragon. He'd tried like hell to get out of going on the rescue, but in the end he'd been there for his friends. For her. And his reward was to be trapped in the clutches of a man who would perform God-knows-what evil experiments on him.

"We'll regroup and go after him. I called Remy while you were in the shower. The Dragon King," he added at her puzzled frown. "Things are in motion." He sighed again and dropped his hand to twine absently through her damp hair. "What a complete fuck up. I'm sorry we couldn't find your sister."

Jenna couldn't stand the guilt in his voice. She thought that maybe Bas was the strongest of them all, but he was also the most sensitive. She recognized his weary expression, the hopeless guilt in his eyes, and leaned into his caress.

"Sebastian, you did all that could possibly be done." She raised a hand to his jaw, compelling him to meet her eyes. "My father is an evil, corrupt son of a bitch. He doesn't follow any rules but his own. There's nothing for you to apologize for."

The hand in her hair lifted to cover hers. He gripped her hand hard, and she could practically feel him drawing strength from the clasp. "I'll go back, Jenna. I swear to you I'll go back, and I'll bring them all out."

"You absolutely will," she agreed. "Just not tonight." Jenna shifted to her knees beside the couch and folded back the sleeve of her robe. If she'd had any doubt about what she was about to do, the blind need in his eyes would have put it to a quick death.

"Tonight you need to rest, and to feed." She offered him her wrist, and smiled when his eyes locked on the faint blue veins. "Take what you need, Sebastian."

Those stormy gray eyes snapped up to meet hers. "Not without Nic here," he protested.

"Don't be silly." Honestly, for a man almost six hundred years old, he could certainly act dense. "What do you suppose Nic will say when he wakes up and discovers I didn't take care of his Blood Brother?" When he still hesitated, she added, "Besides, who will drag the insane, jilted lovers off me if you're faint with hunger?"

Bas snorted, tried to choke it back, and then collapsed against the arm of the couch and let the laughter take him. Jenna sat back, grinning as some of the tension melted away from his face.

Bas sat up, Jenna's cheek in one unsteady hand. "My brother is a lucky man. Thank you, Jenna."

He took her hand in his and placed a tender kiss on her pulse point before sinking his teeth in. Jenna closed her eyes as Bas slowly drew nourishment from her. It wasn't sexual, really, more nurturing. When he'd taken what he needed, he ran his tongue lightly over the punctures to start the healing process.

Jenna brushed her hand over his hair and gave his hand a little tug. "You can't sleep here," she chided him. "Go rest in the spare room. We'll talk about our next step tomorrow night."

Bas nodded, but he didn't rise. Glancing down as she rose, Jenna saw the heavy length of his cock clearly outlined by the supple leather of his pants. Deciding discretion was the better part of valor, she bid him a quick goodnight and slipped into Nic's

bedroom, where she curled around her lover to wait for him to wake.

Chapter Twelve

The soft sigh of warm breath over his nipple lured Nic from sleep. He kept his eyes closed and just savored the thump of her heart against his ribs, and the knowledge they'd both escaped Stone's compound alive. Or nearly so. The more alert he became, the more he remembered about the battle.

Reaching up with his free hand, he ran curious fingers over the slightly raised flesh where the two poison stakes had been removed. He thought he might have scars, and found the idea somehow satisfying. He'd fought for his woman. It was only right that he carry these scars as badges of honor.

Jenna shifted, muttering in her sleep, and he gathered her warm body closer. He smiled just a little when he realized they were both naked. Convenient. He drew his thumb over her lush lower lip, and she sighed. Her lips grazed his chest, and Nic hardened instantly.

Sliding his arm out from under her, he gently pulled the blankets away from her body. She glowed in the dim light. He drank in the sight of her, knowing he could spend a hundred years gazing at her and never tire of it. A sudden rush of urgency, delayed adrenalin, he supposed, grabbed him. All he knew for sure was that he needed her. Needed to taste her and touch her and reassure himself she really was safe, and his, and that they were together.

His mouth watered as he took in the small patch of curls between her thighs. Pushing up to lean over her, he gently pried her legs apart. When she only mumbled some more, Nic chuckled to himself. Breathing in the sweet, spicy aroma of her sleepy arousal, he used his thumbs to split her plump lower lips open for his mouth. Leaning in, he swept his tongue from her clit to her entrance, gathering her sweet taste on his tongue.

Rich honey, spicy and satisfying exploded on his tongue. He moaned against her, and at the vibration she lifted her hips, pushing that blooming pussy harder against his mouth.

Nic was happy to oblige, lavishing small, feathery strokes teased the center of her pleasure, then moving his tongue downward, tracing tiny circles around her weeping opening.

"God, Nico, what are you doing," she moaned. She didn't open her eyes, merely reached down to tangle one hand in his long hair. He thought she might still be more asleep than awake as she wiggled in his hands.

"I am tasting my woman. Memorizing how sweet you are." He laughed as her eyes popped open, and she gasped at the sensation of his warm breath puffing over her sensitive flesh. *Now* his One was awake. Giving her a wicked look, he bent his head and treated her to a luxurious stroke, then speared her soaked entrance, fucking her with his tongue until her hips thrust upward, begging for a deeper penetration.

"Oh God, Nico, don't stop," she gasped out as he delved even deeper into her honeyed depths.

"Open your legs for me, Jenna. Let me see you all wet and hot and waiting for me." She immediately planted her feet on the bed and moved her knees wide apart for his viewing. It rocked him, the way she was so eager to please him. Even better, she was

eager to let him please her. Her insecurities had melted away, and she'd become the fierce, strong Valkyrie he'd always known she could be.

She gave a low, sighing moan and wrapped her hand more tightly in his hair, pressing him harder against her pussy. He rolled his eyes up, needing to see her face, and got lost in her glowing gaze.

She reached down with her free hand and cupped one full breast. As he watched avidly, she squeezed the heavy globe, moving her fingers to pull at her nipple. With each teasing tug, she wriggled against his mouth a little more.

"Fuck, Jenna, I'm so hard for you." His lips wrapped around her clitoris and sucked it deeply.

"Nico!" Her voice was a frantic cry, and she arched sharply into the caress.

"Does it feel good, baby?" he purred against her labia, blowing hot breath over her straining pussy. "Tell me, do you like it as much as I do when I eat you like this?" His tongue slid from her clit to her ass, rimming the small rosette.

She writhed against him, frantic moans ripping from her throat.

Nic pulled back a little. "You must answer me, Beloved. I shall think you want me to stop if you don't answer me."

"No," her voice was almost guttural with her pleasure. "Don't you dare stop. Right there, God, it feels so good."

That was all the encouragement Nic needed. He continued to lick the small pucker as he slid one hand up, letting one long finger tease her opening. He swirled his finger around and her tiny hole fluttered around it, gripping tight.

Ah, fuck. He plunged his teasing finger into her grasping passage. She was made for him. The way she responded to his lightest caress, her pussy clutched at him, sucking him in.

He added another probing finger, and twisted his hand. When she was jerking in his hold, he scissored them apart and brought his tongue back to her clit. She screamed, and he eased off. He didn't want her to come just yet.

"Play with your nipples more, Jenna. I want to see you roll them between your fingers."

He hissed as she licked both thumbs and forefingers before grasping her nipples. They slid easily between the moistened digits.

"Pull them away from your body," he ordered as his tongue flicked roughly over her clit. Pulling his fingers from her pussy he dragged one wet finger downward and placed it at her ass. His tongue whipped into her hole, lapping at her cream as his finger pushed into the vise grip of her ass.

She cried out, a low, ragged scream.

"Play with your clit, Beloved, and I will make you come." His finger worked deeper into her tight back entrance, moving in circles to relax the tight barrier.

She pushed rhythmically against his touch, fucking his mouth and his finger. He needed some relief of his own, and began grinding his hips on the bed. One of her hands crept down, fingers teasing her clit.

"Oh, fuck, that's it. Touch yourself, baby. Make yourself as crazy as you make me." He matched the movement of his finger, which was now buried fully in her luscious ass, to the movements of her fingers on her clit.

With each dip of his tongue into her waiting sheath, he pulled out more sweet cream.

And with each dip, her hips rose, fucking his face as she moaned his name over and over.

“Nic, oh God, harder Nic...I need to come. You’re making me come.” He plunged his finger in harder, setting up a blistering rhythm, his tongue as deeply into her entrance as he could get.

She screamed, piercing the room with her cry as her muscles tightened on his hand, his tongue. She clamped down tight, clutching his thrusting finger, and flooded his mouth with her honey as the orgasm rocked her. It lasted forever, and when she finally stilled, Nic collapsed on her damp, gasping body.

*

Jenna hadn’t quite returned to earth when Nic pushed up on his arms, lifting so he was wedged between her trembling thighs. She squealed as he thrust unceremoniously into her still twitching pussy.

He groaned as he worked slowly in, his mouth capturing hers in a soul-searing kiss that curled her nails around his shoulders. She dug in as Nic’s head drooped, his hair like raw, damp silk over her shoulders and throat.

“Oh fuck yes, Jenna. Mark me, Beloved.” He buried his face in the curve of her neck, his breath sending shivers over the sensitive skin there. His mouth ghosted over her skin, licking at her collarbone as he worked his cock even deeper inside of her.

She could feel him holding back, waiting for her to catch up, but that’s not what she needed. She didn’t want to go slow this time. Jenna needed him inside her where he belonged, hard and fast and furious. Needed his strength to wash over her. She let her nails rake down his silky back and shoved her hips hard against his.

“How the hell did I survive four hundred years without you, Beloved?” he grunted, hitching her thigh up high on his waist.

“Don’t know,” Jenna panted, biting at his chin, his jaw line, the pulse point in his neck as she urged him to move *harder*. “You might have to survive another four hundred years without me if I have a heart attack and die because you won’t fuck me harder,” she wailed as he kept his strokes slow and easy.

Finally, in frustration, she sank her teeth deeply into his chest, just below the nipple.

He jerked when she clamped down, grunting, “Fuck, Jenna,” and his arms slid under her shoulders before his cock dug deep.

God, it was perfect, it was exactly what she needed. Nic holding her, his cock pounding into her, almost bruising in its force, marking her as his.

“Bite me, Jenna. Bite me hard.” His voice was raw, as if he were holding back screams. Jenna smiled darkly and dug her small teeth in, biting him and sucking hard on his delicious skin. She marked him with her small mouth and a secret thrill shot through her as she saw a deep, purple bruise bloom on his neck. *Mine*, she thought.

His cock pounded her, and she loved every punishing thrust. When he butted up against her cervix, she gave a scream of pleasure and pain and convulsed around him again as his shout joined her.

It wasn’t enough. She needed to touch him. He’d never let her explore to her hearts content, and she was determined to change that right now. She set her palms on his chest and pushed. He groaned, grinding his hips into hers, sending sparks from her clit through her entire body, but she refused to be distracted.

“My turn,” she growled, shoving him up and off of her. He let her do it, but his eyes were an icy blaze warning her she was only getting her way because he let her.

When he was kneeling on the bed, Jenna smiled. “You’ve had your turn, now I need to explore what is mine.” His eyes flared even hotter at her words, and he let her push him over, so he fell onto his back. His legs fell apart, one straight and the other bent and listing to the side as Jenna knelt between them.

God, what a beautiful man. And every amazing inch of him was hers.

She ran her hands up the insides of his thighs, shivering along with him as she came to the silky skin where his thighs met his groin. Dropping to her stomach between his legs, she propped herself on her elbows and wrapped both hands around his wet, straining erection. Her fingers didn’t quite meet around his girth. Oh, damn, no wonder he filled her to the point where pain and pleasure bled together and she couldn’t tell where one ended and the other began.

She smoothed her hands over him, sliding in her own moisture. She slipped one thumb over his tip, swirling through the pre-cum weeping from the slit.

He growled, muscles hard as rock. It was more than obvious he was hanging on by a thread. His head dropped back, neck and arms corded with tension as her tongue whispered out, sampling his cum, getting buzzed from the mingling of their flavors.

His hands threaded through her hair, urging her to take him deeper. Jenna wouldn’t be rushed. She took her time, licking the entire length of him, up and down, back and forth, bathing every inch of his cock with her mouth.

“Beloved, if you don’t take me in I’m going to combust,” Nic barked harshly between clenched teeth. She took a moment to appreciate how gentle his hands were in her hair, while his arms were corded so tight with tension they literally vibrated.

Rewarding him for his restraint, Jenna leaned down a little further, licking over his tight ball sac, running her tongue over the hardened texture. She slid even further down and gave him the same dark kiss he had bestowed on her earlier.

His hips spiked upwards and he stopped forming coherent words. His guttural grunts and curses were music to her ears as she played with him, torturing his body. He twisted in her grasp, tunneling his hands deeper into her hair, dragging her tighter against his straining body.

He howled with pleasure when she finally rose and took his shaft into her mouth, swallowing as much as she could in one smooth motion. She sucked hard; her cheeks hollow as her tongue teased the nerves underneath his cockhead. He pumped quick, shallow thrusts into her mouth and Jenna relaxed her jaw to give him further access.

The slightly bitter, salty taste of his pre-cum was the sweetest of aphrodisiacs. Their combined flavors blew her mind. Jenna couldn’t get enough. She let her head drop down further, lashing her tongue over the thick veins that laced the surface of his cock. When the tip of his cock nudged the back of her throat she tightened her lips on him and swallowed again and again. His groans only spurred her on, and she reached one hand down to cup his balls, rolling them between gentle fingers, as her other hand crept under him until she was pressing lightly with her thumb at his anus.

*

“Enough,” Nic roared as he jerked himself out of her mouth. “Your mouth is a wicked, wicked thing, Beloved,” he growled as he slid out from under her and pressed her down, flattening her, on her belly, against the bed.

He grabbed a pillow and stuffed it under her stomach as his hands yanked up her hips. Spreading her cheeks wide, he took a moment to set his cockhead against her

opening, and speared into her. One hand gripped her shoulder, the other clenched on her hip as he pounded into her body. Her incredible ass jiggled with every thrust.

Nic's vision became hazy as he lost all sense of control.

"Mine...Mine...Mine..." he didn't realize he was saying the word out loud. He was blind to everything but the feeling of her pussy clutching around him as he tunneled in, gripping and clinging as he pulled out.

He ate her up with his eyes, taking in the graceful line of her spine, the perfect globes of her ass, the tempting crevasse between those full cheeks.

Licking his thumb, he set it against her tightly furled asshole and began a slow push inside.

"Niiiiic," her long, drawn out shriek was like a lightning bolt to his balls. He let go of her shoulder and ran his hand underneath her belly, finding her heated bud, distended and plump. He pulled at it, stroking it like he would his cock. She shuddered in his grasp.

"Oh, God. Fuck me, Nico, make me come." Her voice was ragged from her screams of pleasure, and shot him higher and harder inside her.

Finally, unable to bear any distance between them at all, he slid his free hand up, across her upper body, drawing her to her knees until she was seated on his thighs, his cock spearing her onto him like a living spike of pleasure. He cupped her jaw, turning her head to the side, and leaned over her, setting his fangs against her pounding pulse.

"Yes," she hissed. "Take all of me. Take me into you, just like you're inside me." Her words shattered his control, and his fangs sliced deep. His first deep draw on her throat sent her over the edge, her vaginal walls crushing his pulsating cock, catapulting him into his own orgasm. He jerked inside of her, shooting his seed into her sucking depths until she overflowed, their combined wetness sliding down until his thighs were slippery, his balls were bathed in liquid heat. And still she convulsed around him, wringing out every drop of cum until he had to lower her to the bed, collapsing over her back, shuddering in the aftermath.

* * * *

When Jenna was aware of anything, it was the pain of over-exerted muscles. She had no idea how long she'd slept, but her body was singing a song of piercing pain. She smiled a little bit without opening her eyes. She felt Nic's possession on every inch of her body, and she loved it.

Nic had her wrapped tightly in his embrace, his chest smooth and warm under her cheek. He returned her smile against the top of her head.

"My Lady is awake." She smiled wider at the familiar rumble. He hadn't called her that since their last shared dream, and she suddenly realized she'd missed it.

"I don't know how after what you just did to me. I can't move."

Nic chuckled in her ear. "Actually, it's what I did to you yesterday. You've slept an entire twenty-four hours."

Jenna jerked her head up, meeting his eyes. "You're kidding!" When he shook his head, an arrogant smile spreading across his beautiful face, she began to giggle. "Well, I guess we've discovered how many times it takes to knock me out cold."

"I believe this time it took five. Of course we can always try for six."

Jenna smacked his chest and shook her head frantically.

"Don't you touch me," she told him fervently. "Everything aches, and if you don't

wait until I've had a very long, very hot bath, we won't be trying for *anything* until I have a couple days to heal."

Nic trapped her hand in his and kissed each fingertip.

"Beloved, you have only to breathe to make me hard. I cannot help it." He brushed her hair away from her flushed face and added, "But I never willingly would truly hurt you, so you mustn't allow me to push you farther than your body can go."

Scooting up, Jenna wrapped her arms around his neck, nestling her head against his shoulder. "You only hurt me in the best possible way, Nico. And once I've had a few hours to recover, I want you to hurt me again."

They lay quietly, cuddling, for a while. Eventually the events of the night of the botched rescue attempt began creeping in, filling Jenna with a sense of dread.

She sighed and asked, "Have you been up yet?"

Nic kissed her brow and responded, "I've talked to Bas, yes. I know Aidan did not leave the compound." He shook his head grimly. "Stupid, fucking Dragon tried to take on Stone's army single-handedly. Bas has reason to believe he's alive and being kept at the compound."

Jenna's description of her father's pets swam through both of their minds.

Jenna's lips trembled. She knew all too well the hell Aidan was most likely experiencing.

"Nic, I'm so sorry. This is entirely my fault."

Nic sat up, his hands capturing her face, his expression utterly forbidding.

"Never *ever* say that again, Jenna. Any fault lies with William Stone. And we know Aidan and your sister still live. We will bring them home. We are more familiar with Stone's compound, and we have help inside now. Real help."

"Jordan," she breathed, feeling a flicker of hope.

"Jordan," Nic confirmed. "Your Doctor contacted Club Smoke yesterday evening. He's feeding Sebastian what information he can. Not only that, but the Dragon King himself is here. It might take a while, but when we go for Aidan and your sister, we will be better armed, better prepared, and we will bring them home with us."

Jenna pressed her lips to Nic's jaw, letting his strength flow into her, wrapping her in his warmth.

"I don't know what I ever did to deserve you," she whispered, "but I've got you now, and I'm not ever letting you go."

Nic only smiled dropping his head to let his lips take hers, tracing their plump curves with his tongue. His finger skimmed her cheek.

"Beloved, don't you understand? By saving you, I saved myself. Without your love, your warmth, my soul would have died. I would have had no choice but to walk into the sun lest I become the monster your father calls me." He pressed his forehead to hers. "It is I who does not deserve you. And I have no intention of ever letting you go, either."

Jenna pulled him closer and smiled.

"I guess this means we're stuck with each other." She whispered against his lips. "I love you, Nicolas Alero. I'm so glad we saved each other."

He couldn't speak, there weren't enough words in the world to express the love welling up inside of him. So he laid her back gently and went about showing her with his body what his words could never say.

The End

About the Author:

Violet Summers is a married mother of three beautiful children, including one set of twins, one rambunctious puppy, and one husband, except when she's a single mom of one spoiled teenaged God-child and three spoiled kitties. Both of Violet's personalities are very busy!

No, Violet has not suffered a psychotic break yet (though she may after dealing with creating web pages and MySpace accounts). Violet is actually the writing team of Sierra Summers and Violet Johnson.

Both women read voraciously, and in a multitude of genres. Sierra classifies them as "readers, as opposed to readers of romance. This means when we write, we're as concerned with the story as we are with the sex." That said, Sierra has been known to boycott books where the characters haven't "done the deed," by page 125.

Sierra and VeeJay live in Southeast Michigan, and the spice of the Metro-Detroit area often flavors their work. "Why look for a more glamorous setting," VeeJay asks, "when we've got the beautiful, re-vitalized Downtown area to draw from?"

Violet Summers writes in a variety of genres, from contemporary to paranormal; from soft BDSM to fantasy. The two things all her stories have in common is their deep emotional and their scorching erotic love scenes.

Sierra and VeeJay love to hear from their readers. You can contact them at VioletSummers@yahoo.com

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