



THE
ENDOWED

TIANNA XANDER

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THE ENDOWED

BY

ΤΙΑΝΝΑ ΧΑΠΘΕΡ

DEDICATION

To my readers: Everything about my worlds is written with you in mind. Your letters to me and your impatience for certain characters to get their stories are priceless. Thank you.

CHAPTER ONE

Tori watched him walk by. This was the seventh time in three days. “He’s definitely major eye candy.” She sighed wistfully, watching his long-legged stride eat up the sidewalk. He was alone this time, but the absence of his almost constant companion didn’t detract from his good looks or her desire to stare. It merely allowed her to breathe easier without them both hogging up all her oxygen and making her heart race.

Thick, ebony hair brushed his shoulders as he turned to look across the street. She knew the aroma of grilled sausage wasn’t the reason he crossed the road toward the hotdog vendor.

The thought made her shudder because she knew what he was going to do. He was going to feed. Tori felt his hunger. It wasn’t a mere discomfort or a slight grumbling growl. It was something dark, an insidious craving deep inside him that was so intense it almost made her hurt.

She watched as he stopped to talk with the man, leading him to a darkened corner and

bending close as if to whisper in the vendor's ear. A soft breeze tugged at her hair, bringing with it the aroma of cooking sausage and hot dogs. The smell made her want to retch. How could she think of food when he stood so close drinking another's blood?

How could she want them so much knowing what monsters they were? It didn't seem to matter what they were or what they did. Nothing stopped her usual reaction whenever they came near.

Desire gripped her, as always, despite his horrible hunger. Tori's stomach clenched like it always did when he and his buddy were around. She never felt the same with them as she did with the others of their kind and she wasn't sure why. What made them different? What made her want them both with a longing she couldn't deny or control?

How did they put up with it night after night—constantly waking to the horrible thirst that wouldn't go away until they'd quenched it on some poor unsuspecting soul?

Oh, they and their kind may be eye candy, but they paid a horrible price for those tall, dark good looks that never aged. Tori had been watching them, secretly lusting after them for the last twelve years. She didn't notice the difference at first. They'd just been two more handsome men to her

fourteen-year-old eyes.

The day Tori turned sixteen, she'd seen it though. Almost to the very minute of her birth, she'd felt it. Something in her changed, opening her mind to the monsters that roamed these streets. Something drew her toward them as they went out to feed. They'd called to her, to anyone, to come to them and let them feast on human blood.

The first time she felt the call, she was unable to resist. The first time, she'd walked to them both like a zombie, exposing the slender curve of her throat. She stood in the dark shadows of the street, offering herself to them like some ancient pagan sacrifice.

What horrified her was that she'd wanted it, wanted them to bite her neck and take her blood.

The one she watched tonight, with a mixture of fascination, horror and desire, took one look at her and sighed. *"You're too young."* He almost sounded disappointed, even acted as though he didn't want to let her go. He leaned down and inhaled her scent deeply as she screamed a denial in her mind. Her body had wanted them, yearned for them with a desire that she couldn't deny. All the while, her mind screamed, *No!*

"One day you shall nourish me, but not this night."

It nearly broke her heart when he spoke those fateful words and set her away from him. He then

turned toward his companion. It was almost as though they spoke to each other with that once-knowing look between them. Without a backward glance, they walked away, leaving her both relieved and disappointed.

Now, even though Tori knew she was immune, she still felt the pull when he and his friend called to others. She always felt it—that compulsion they used to draw their victims to them to feed, to drink their blood.

Tori closed her eyes, attempting to think of something else. The last thing she needed was to draw his attention and for him to realize she knew what he was, what he wanted, what she would have so willingly given to him and his friend ten years ago. Of all the bad things men could be, his kind was the worst...vampire.

“Watchin’ Mr. Thang again, Tori?” her friend, Gina said as she walked up behind her, slapping a hand to her shoulder.

Tori jumped, then turned to her and frowned. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she denied, busying herself by straightening the magazine stand. Sometimes she hated filling in for Mrs. Rogers when she volunteered for bingo. Tori loved the old sweetheart, but her little stints at the magazine stand left her open to all sorts of undesirables. She glared toward the man in question for a moment, then sniffed and looked

away.

Gina referred to both of the men she lusted after as Mr. Thang because they didn't know either of their names.

"Right," Gina laughed. "You watch that man and his friend walk by this stand every night you're here." She picked up a gossip-rag and made a face. "Bat-monkey? Girl, puhleeze!" She set the paper down and turned toward Tori. "And I've seen your eyes doing the hoochie coochie on both of their butts when they walk past the diner, too." She wagged her eyebrows playfully.

Tori felt the blood rush to her face, heating her cheeks. Gina was right. She watched both of those men more than she should. More than was smart, too, most likely.

Gina tapped her long, blood-red nails on the most current issue of a tabloid. "Why don't you just ask one of them out and get it over with?" She laughed at Tori's panicked expression and shrugged. "Suit yourself. I'm going over to *Casa del Diablo* tonight. I have a lot of excess energy I need to work off." She danced in place for a minute.

Tori shuddered at the mention of the club. "I wish you wouldn't go tonight, I—"

Gina laughed and held up her hand. "Let me guess. You have a *feeling*? Please, girl. I already know what you're going to say." She reached out

and patted Tori on the shoulder. "I love you like a sister, but one thing I *don't* need is another mother."

Tori sighed. "I know I can't stop you, but I wish you would think this through. There's a *reason* they call that place *Casa del Diablo*, Gina, and it's not for the video games."

The local bar drew some of the strangest people Tori had ever seen. Goth men and women hung out there with the hopes that they would meet a real life vampire. What scared Tori was that she had a feeling they may just get their wish.

"Don't worry about me, hon, you have your own worries. Here comes Mr. Bodacious again and it looks like he has eyes only for you. And it's about time he noticed you, too. I'm off to the club. Wish me luck on finding a hottie like your friend or his buddy." Gina winked, wiggled her fingers and walked away, her hips swaying from side to side in a blatant invitation. "Just think, if you're lucky, you could have them both," she said over her shoulder just before she disappeared around the corner.

Tori scowled. *Gawd. Does she have to wiggle her ass like that?* She shook her head, surprised at herself. What in the world? Was she jealous now? Good grief! She shook her head, again. Heaven knows she didn't even want anything to do with either of those men. She just couldn't help looking

while they were around, that's all.

Bending down, she began to straighten the magazines, clearing her mind of all thoughts of supernatural beings. Instead, she concentrated on reading the headlines to keep from betraying herself to him.

She felt the vampire walk up behind her. It was as though a broad circle of energy surrounded him. The moment he got close, she felt his aura brush hers. Lightning shot down her spine. Electrical current passed between them, causing her aura to jump and spark. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled and she began to stand. To ignore him, would give her away. Tori didn't know how she knew that, she just did.

"Excuse me, Miss?"

His voice was just as deep and smooth as she remembered it. Like a shot of well-aged scotch. It burned through her mind, making a slow circuit over her body, causing heat to pool low in her middle and goosebumps to rise on her flesh.

She stood abruptly, banging her head on the underside of the table. "Ow! God that hurts." She straightened slowly, rubbing her head. At least it gave her an excuse to keep from looking up into his swirling black and gold eyes. He reached for her. She stepped back quickly.

He chuckled. "I don't bite." Then he winked. "Hard."

Ha! Yeah, right. Tori looked up through her lashes. “Can I help you?” She knew she had to put something, anything, between them to keep from looking directly into his eyes. She had dreaded this moment since the day she turned sixteen when they rejected her. She knew she couldn’t give herself over to him or his usual companion. The thought of being someone’s food made her skin crawl.

He could kill her, probably *would* kill her if he found out what she knew. His eyes narrowed to mere slits and he looked at her, *really* looked at her, for the first time in years.

“Do I know you?” he asked, his head tilting to the side. He reached up to push the hair from her face.

Tori flinched.

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

The expression in his eyes seemed so real, so sincere, part of her wanted to believe him, but how could she? He was one of *them*. He drank blood to survive. Both he and his friend fed off innocent humans, calling their victims to them like cattle to slaughter.

He placed a finger under her chin, applying gentle pressure, forcing her to look up. If she resisted, he would know. If she looked into his eyes, he would know. Whatever move she made, she was either dead or at the very least, dinner.

Well, she refused to go out meek and frightened. Tori raised her chin and met his gaze, her own defiant.

The man stared deep into her eyes and obviously realized she couldn't be mesmerized this time. She hadn't been susceptible to any vampire's siren call since he and his friend had set her aside all those years ago. Either they had accidentally made her immune to their mind control or her mind had just grown stronger. Whatever it was, she was glad to know she'd never fall under another vampire's spell. Even if it meant her death.

"Who are you?" he asked as he leaned closer and sniffed the air near her neck.

She pulled away from him with a grimace. "I don't see how that's any of your business." Turning, she walked back to the stand's opening and reached up to pull the metal front down, determined to try and ignore him until he decided what to do with her.

It was past time to close and she needed to be inside somewhere secure. The other vendors were already gone and it wasn't safe to be out on the streets alone. She looked over her shoulder at the vampire who regarded her with more than curious interest and shook her head with a sigh. It was too late to worry about that now.

He reached out, grabbed the large metal door

and pulled it down, holding it against the bottom of the stand while she locked it in place. Tori straightened and he grabbed her arm in an unyielding grip.

"You may be able to get away with saying that to me, but others will consider you a threat." A muscle jumped in his jaw as he looked her up and down. "Who are you?" he asked again.

Tori refused to turn and face him. She even tried to jerk free before she turned her head, then glowered up at him when his grip held fast. How could she turn and face him when she knew what was coming, what he wanted? "Tori," she began, then took a deep breath. "Victoria Sheridan." *The others would consider her a threat? Did that mean he didn't?*

He bent, sniffing the air around her. "We have met before."

Tori swallowed thickly, her gaze darting everywhere but his face. Every time she looked into his eyes, she saw the raw desire there and it frightened her. *He* frightened her. Very gently, he tilted her head back with his thumb, forcing her to look up at him as his eyes bored into hers.

"You know when. Tell me."

Tori jerked again. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't break free. "I don't have to tell you anything," she gritted out between her teeth. She averted her gaze, didn't dare even peek into

his probing eyes.

"No, you don't," he breathed into her ear as he put his face into the crook of her shoulder. "But there are ways to make you tell me. Ways I don't think you will like." Bending, he licked her neck.

Tori felt her pulse jump and bit her lip to keep from moaning. She didn't know if it was from fright or sexual arousal. Sensual heat pooled in her groin and her panties grew wet. Hell, it was time she faced the fact that she'd lusted after this man *and* his friend since she was fourteen. Tori couldn't help but stare every time either of them grew near.

If she were truthful, she'd admit she wanted this man inside her since the day she turned sixteen. Even though she knew he was a vampire and drank blood to survive. How sick was that? She didn't even want to contemplate how perverted she was to want them both.

"Besides," he added, "if you don't tell me, I can't protect you. You may fall into the hands of someone less...desirable," he whispered the words close to her ear.

That smooth, deep voice did things to her insides that should be illegal. Little streaks of lightning shot through her blood and invisible tendrils of desire winged their way through her traitorous body straight to her groin as she fought desperately to keep her emotions under control.

Tori bit her lip, fighting the urge to press back

against his hard frame as he stood behind her, his body heat radiating into her. She could feel the hard, sculpted muscles of his body against her back as he held her. What was she thinking? She knew what he was. He was reading her mind now. He had to be. He was doing everything she ever fantasized about, everything she ever dreamed of. Her neck tingled where he'd licked her. What would it feel like to have him feed from her? Would it hurt or would it be like in the books she'd read and movies she'd seen? Would he give her an orgasm just from the feel of his teeth sinking into her neck? He pushed his lower body against her bottom, the hard ridge of his sex riding in the cleft of her behind almost made her groan.

"Why don't we go somewhere a little less conspicuous?" he whispered.

His breath fanned her ear, causing a tremor of desire to skitter over her skin as he turned slightly and directed her to look across the street.

He motioned to a man and woman, both dressed in Goth style, their black vinyl clothing shining brightly in the dim glow of the streetlights. They were the epitome of the kind of people who hung out at *casa el Diablo*. "Do you see that couple over there?"

"Yes." Tori nodded, fighting the urge to press back against him and ride the tempered steel of his rigid cock. How in the world would she ever

keep him off her if they went somewhere more private? She was almost ready to jump him.

"They are hunting." His right hand slipped lower, cupping her bottom as he kept his left arm lodged firmly under her breasts. "And they don't care if they cause pain and sometimes...most times, their prey doesn't survive."

Tori inhaled sharply, pulled her head up from where it had fallen back onto his shoulder and tried to focus her gaze. He'd given her a choice. She could go with him to some place more private or he would leave her alone with those two beasts on the prowl. She closed her eyes and licked her suddenly dry lips. How did she get into these situations? "And if I agree to go with you, how safe will I be?" She half-turned in his arms, darting a look toward his too-handsome face.

"Do you really have a choice, Victoria?" he whispered, leaning closer.

His breath brushed against the side of her cheek, causing gooseflesh to rise on her sensitive skin as her eyes glazed over with need. She shook her head, trying to clear it.

Glancing at the demonic-looking couple across the street, she made her decision. "I suppose not." She had to look at this logically, if he planned to hurt her, would he really care if the others did? "Better the devil you know." She sighed, resigned to the fact that, like it or not, he was her only hope

of surviving this night.

"You know, it's funny you should say that." As he smiled, he showed his sharp incisors and his eyes began to glow a strange iridescent red.

Tori fought the urge to scream. She'd never seen them like this. She always knew they weren't human, but it was still quite unsettling to see the proof of it.

"Come, they have marked you." He put his arm around her waist as he turned away, pulling her with him.

* * * *

Angelo moved quickly, pulling Victoria along with him, hoping to escape the area before the others caught up with them.

It didn't surprise him that he would find a woman who interested him just as she interested two of the worst of his kind. Only moving quickly and blurring their departure would save them and that would only work if the two were far enough away for him to lose them. Somehow, Angelo didn't think luck was on their side.

He knew the couple following behind them and he would like nothing better than to put the two out of everyone's misery, but had no idea what the council would say about it. Too many of their kind already said he took too much upon himself as

council elder. He couldn't, in good conscience, end their existence without at least one other council member available to bear witness.

Do you have need of me, old friend? Ricardo reached through their mind link.

Angelo realized his emotions were roiling more than he first thought if Ricardo could feel them with the entire town between them. He and Ricardo had a connection Angelo couldn't explain. It seemed as though his best friend was the only person who understood how he felt, the burden he carried as elder. How others of his kind didn't see the rogues as a threat, he would never understand.

I am fine. Thank you for asking. He glanced at Mykaylia Drahnsky and her adopted brother, Antoine. *It's the Drahnskys again. I'm not certain, but I believe Mykaylia is the instigator here.* He rubbed the back of his neck as he thought about what he'd heard of their discourse. *I heard them as they terrorized the vendor across the street before they noticed my companion. She was attempting to coerce Antoine into inappropriate behavior.*

It's no matter which one is responsible for initiating their activity. They are both guilty. Shouldn't both of them pay the price for their crimes?

That was the problem. It was a crime, but it was also an addiction. Those of his kind who liked the adrenaline-laced blood were like drug addicts. They needed help and Angelo wished to see they

got it if they desired to change. Those who didn't wish to change deserved quick justice to protect the humans.

Listening to them as they approached, Angelo could hear Antoine attempting to turn her away. Mykaylia wouldn't listen. She stubbornly followed, telling Antoine he would participate because she wished it.

Angelo shook his head. Any male worth being called one of The Endowed would have stood up to her and told her he wouldn't participate in the heinous acts she found so entertaining.

Instead, Antoine meekly answered, "Yes, Mykaylia. As you wish."

You know we cannot kill them without another council member present. You also know that I do not pass judgment on individuals without irrefutable evidence. Death is permanent and I will not knowingly cause the demise of another without good cause.

I know this, Angelo. That is why I wait for your call. I shall come if you need me.

Ricardo withdrew from their mind link, leaving Angelo to deal with the siblings as he chose. Angelo was about to turn and lead Victoria West, toward his home, when the brother and sister caught up to them. He felt them as they moved silently behind them with their preternatural speed.

* * * *

Tori glanced up toward the man who led her away from those who planned to make her their dinner. She could sense the evil emanating off one of them. She wasn't sure why, but the woman wanted her dead. She felt it.

"Hello." A strange, female voice came from behind them.

Tori stiffened.

"I wonder why they didn't respond, Mykaylia." The new, deeper, voice was mocking. "You don't suppose they know what we are, do you?" He chuckled as he moved up beside her.

Reaching a hand out, he trailed a finger down Tori's bare arm and she barely managed to repress a shudder.

The woman chuckled. "We can't have *that*, now. Can we?"

Her husky voice grated, she most likely drew her prey with that voice. Men would think it was sexy, but Tori could actually feel the underlying menace in her tone. Men wouldn't see it. They wouldn't hear it. They would merely see a small, beautiful woman. Tori saw more. She heard more than the softly spoken words. The woman's voice held menace and the promise of death.

"If *they* know, they could tell the whole population about us." The woman began to walk

around them. Startled, she stopped. "Angelo, we didn't know you returned." She placed a suddenly trembling hand against her neck. Her tone changed from derisive to alarmed. What little color she'd had in her cheeks drained from her face as she stared up at him with obvious apprehension.

Tori noted that her companion, Angelo, still held her close beneath his arm, his hand gripping her shoulder tight. Looking up, she kept silent, knowing anything could set the other two off. While her companion looked very strong, it would be two against one and she didn't want to take any chances with either of their lives.

Angelo smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes, which glowed with more than retribution. "Yes, I can see that. I wish I could say it is good to see you, Mykaylia." He turned to the other male. "And, Antoine, what a surprise it is to see you haven't yet snipped the apron strings that tie you to your sister. By the way, my name *is* Angelo, but you two can call me Don Rigatti." He looked the woman up and down with obvious disdain. "What are you doing in my territory?" He bit the words out, his gaze still holding that strange red glow.

Tori glanced at Angelo and marveled that she felt no fear. She had the insane thought that after all these years she could finally put a name to that

aristocratic face. She looked at him, wondering if his glowing eyes meant he was ready to fight.

"Calm down, Angelo," Antoine said. "You can't leave for nearly a year and not expect someone to hunt your turf."

"Yes," he growled, obviously upset that the other man called him by his given name again. "I can."

When he released Tori, it was so sudden that she staggered and almost fell. She watched in horror as he grabbed the other man by the throat and lifted him from the ground with one hand.

"Leave this place and do not return," Angelo said with a growl, then smiled coldly. "Or I will end your existence."

The man swallowed with visible difficulty and held his hands out to his sides. "Sure, Angelo, sure. My mistake, it won't happen again." His voice was gruff, raspy, as he tried to talk while being suspended by his neck.

Tori looked on with horror. Part of her wanted to run from them all, but the other sane part knew if she did, the woman would realize she wasn't under Angelo's thrall. Mykaylia, no doubt, would be on Tori in a minute, sucking her dry. Tori squeezed her eyes shut and told herself if she got out of this alive, she'd never set foot outside after dark again. She reluctantly opened her eyes and watched the man's feet dangle a foot from the

ground as Angelo's arm held him up over his head, his lips pulled back in an inhuman snarl.

"What do you want, Angelo?" Antoine laughed, obviously nervous. "Blood?"

The man looked frightened. His gaze darted from Angelo to his sister, then back again. Tori wondered if he expected the woman to do something to save him.

Angelo looked thoughtful. "Hmm... Not a bad idea." His mouth opened wide, his teeth gleaming in the flickering light from a nearby streetlight.

Tori's eyes widened as she saw his bottom teeth lengthen. She didn't know they could do *that*. Before her eyes, her handsome vampire turned into an even bigger monster.

"Ang—Don Rigatti," the woman cried. "Please don't kill my brother."

The woman backed up a pace. She didn't seem so eager to kill now. It made Tori wonder exactly who Angelo was in the vampire community that two other vampires should be so frightened of him. Was he really so strong that two others couldn't overpower him?

Angelo turned, slowly lowering the shaking man to the ground. The odd glow was gone from his pupils and his teeth looked normal again. "Take your sister and go, Antoine. Do not hunt here again."

Antoine bent over, gasping, gulping air. He

coughed, holding his neck. His sister bent toward him and wrapped a soothing arm around his shoulders.

Angelo sighed. "Stop the theatrics, Antoine. You don't need to breathe any more often than I do." He turned to Tori. "Come, Victoria. We have other business to attend to." He took her arm and led her away, leading her into the strangely welcoming darkness.

Tori didn't know what to think. He fought for her. He could have let the other two take her, but he'd stopped them. She shook the feeling of awe off, remembering he hadn't done it for her, but to protect his territory, to protect what he deemed as his. It was too bad she fell into that category.

* * * *

"What do you suppose *he's* up to?" Antoine asked, rubbing his sore neck. He followed the couple with his gaze as they walked down the dimly lit sidewalk. "I didn't even know he'd returned from overseas."

Mykaylia, her gaze still locked on the couple as she ignored her brother's coughing fit, shrugged. "I don't know, but I do know I'm sick and tired of him pushing us around. He leaves for years on end, expecting people to stay away from his territory." She made a face. "Someone needs to

teach him a lesson."

Her brother laughed. "Would that someone be you?" He shook his head. "Your aspirations are too high, sister. I'm sorry, but I don't think I relish the thought of seeing *you* hoisted into the air by your pretty neck."

"Shut up," she growled. "I'll find someone just as strong, stronger even, and he'll regret ever laying a finger on you."

CHAPTER TWO

Ricardo had watched the exchange between the others while he lurked in the shadows across the street.

Mykaylia and her brother, Antoine, had been a thorn in their sides since their turning, over two hundred years before. Whoever their sire was remained a mystery and he or she, should be shot. There was no worse crime among their kind than turning humans and leaving them to fend for themselves. It bred bloodthirsty vampires. Turning a Sentinel was the exception to the rule and even then, they must train to feed.

Angelo's annoyance hadn't surprised him. The man hated for other immortals to harm those under his protection. This was his home now. This part of the city belonged to him as thoroughly as if he owned every building, every blade of grass. Angelo was their protector and those of the supernatural community knew that. Here, his

word was law. Those who chose to live here knew hunting prey in the thirty square miles that surrounded his home was off limits without Angelo's express permission.

Keeping to the shadows, Ricardo stayed silent, masking his presence from the others. He couldn't hide from Angelo if he wanted. The rogues just occupied the other man so thoroughly that he obviously didn't detect Ricardo's presence. Besides, he didn't want to interfere. Angelo knew what he was doing. Ricardo just wanted to remain close in case his friend needed him.

He stared at the young woman beside Angelo with awe as they walked toward their home. She'd aged beautifully, had grown so lovely it almost hurt to look upon her.

It was amazing how his cock swelled at just the sight of her. Her wonderfully sweet scent wafted over, carried on the breeze, making him harder than he'd been in more years than he cared to admit.

The feeling was strange since sex didn't have the power over Angelo or himself it once had. After years of compelling women for their favors, they decided it really wasn't worth the effort.

The two of them spent the last few hundred years merely existing together, trying to get the council to realize that humans needed their protection, not their disdain.

Yet, even after so many years, there were still those who felt humans were here to nourish them and nothing else. If someone killed as they fed, they immediately burned and buried the victim, giving no thought to the person's family or friends.

Ricardo followed Angelo and the girl to the house, waiting until they were inside before he left to hunt his own prey. Since they were safe for the time being and he needed to feed, he left them to their privacy. With luck, Angelo would convince her to stay with them.

They needed her. Ricardo hadn't realized how much until he'd seen his best friend and her together. They made a handsome couple. Ricardo smiled at the vision. They would make an even more attractive triad.

Neither he nor Angelo had been with a female since Lysandra. His smile faded as he thought back three hundred years. That fateful night had changed them all for eternity.

Putting the morbid thoughts behind him, Ricardo headed toward the nearest bar, looking for sustenance. Alcohol didn't affect his kind. Besides, there would be a lot of people there and he was thirsty.

* * * *

"Where are you taking me?" Tori shivered. The shock of what she just witnessed was too much for her mind to bear. It was beginning to shut down and she didn't want to be at his mercy when it did. It didn't matter that he'd saved her from the others. He looked at her as his property. She didn't dare begin to trust him. Not yet.

"To my home." He looked down at her and frowned. He lifted his hand, gently brushing the hair from her face. "You don't look at all well." Cool fingers rested against her forehead.

Her gaze met his as she stared up at him, unable to voice her concerns at first. Tori merely stood and gaped at him for a good minute before she blurted, "What do you expect? I've nearly been eaten, I watched someone else almost get their throat ripped out and now it looks as though *I'm* back on the menu again." Her teeth began to chatter as she slid closer to shock. A car horn sounded in the distance and she jumped.

Angelo lifted her into his arms and began to walk.

Tori didn't struggle. It wouldn't do her any good anyway. Hell, she'd just seen him lift a man at least a foot off the ground with one hand. He wasn't going to let *her* go unless he wanted to. She tried to ignore his dark good looks, how his spicy, citrus scent made her heart race and her womb clench.

He leaned his head closer. "Did you know that when we are this close, I can read your mind?"

Tori blinked. *That's just great! How many times have I admired his butt since he accosted me at the magazine stand?*

Angelo chuckled. "About a dozen times." He nuzzled her ear as he walked.

His breath stirred the hair at her temple and tickled her ear. His lips brushed her cheek, sending a zing of desire coursing through her. Gooseflesh rose on her skin and every erogenous zone she had stood at attention and clamored for more of Angelo's regard.

Tori's nipples hardened, her panties grew wet and she fought the need to turn, wrap her legs around his waist, pull his lips to hers and have her wicked way with him.

"And you have no idea how much it pleases me to find that you find me and my companion attractive. Ricardo will be pleased to hear this as well."

"Oh, God." She put her face in her hands. "Can things get any worse?" Yes, they could. Heat began to pool in her tummy as his breath tickled her ear. Something she didn't realize lived inside her lifted its head, wanting more of Angelo's heated caresses. *Why do I feel this way toward them? Why don't I ever feel this way toward a nice, normal, safe man whom I can have children with? Why them*

and why now?

"Because you are a Sentinel."

She did her best to turn in his arms, needing to look at him. "A what?"

"You are a Sentinel. A direct descendant from an immortal before he was made like me," he explained. "A Sentinel can feel and identify us through a blood bond." He looked thoughtful. "Of course, there are those who become slayers." He shrugged. "Usually a Sentinel helps protect us or they become one of us if they are given The Gift."

Tori gaped at him. "The Gift? You people call *that* a gift?" Her mouth dropped open in surprise. She slapped her hand over her mouth and clamped it shut. After making sure something totally stupid wouldn't come flying out, Tori dropped her hand and stared up at him. "Besides, I'm no immortal. I'm sure I would know something like that."

"Of course you aren't. The immortals have all interbred with humans, diluting their blood until they are no more. There are only the Sentinels left."

"And what about this gift thing you're talking about? I think it's a pretty creepy word to call something like vampirism."

He just gave her an indulgent smile. "It is a gift to be allowed to become one of us. We believe we are gifted. All those of The Endowed are gifted."

He smiled and winked. "In more ways than one."

"Is that what you think?" Tori realized her mouth was hanging open again and snapped it shut. She wasn't touching that last statement with a ten-foot long cattle prod. *Endowed indeed*. At least she was learning something. *If Angelo and his friend do plan to kill me, I won't die ignorant*.

He sighed. "I'm not going to hurt you." He bent his head, his straight nose brushing the hair near her temple. "We aren't going to hurt you."

Tori shivered at the contact and fisted her hands to keep them in her lap. Her fingers itched to see if his hair was as soft as it looked. At that moment, she wanted nothing more than to sink her fingers into his hair and pull his head to hers. Taking a deep breath, she sighed, knowing she would never have the courage to make the first move. A part of her wanted him so much she almost wished that he *would* read her mind.

"Perhaps I am fated to protect you. Perhaps both Ricardo and I were meant to protect you." He leaned down to take another deep breath. "Have I told you how much I love the way you smell?"

Ignoring his question, she focused on what he said before. "Why do you think you two were meant to protect me?" She looked into those dark fathomless eyes, wondering why he'd paused. "What if it's me who is supposed to protect you?"

What in the world was she thinking? An hour

ago, she didn't want to know he and his kind existed. Now she was contemplating being his bodyguard. Was she going insane?

Angelo shook his head. "I do not think that is the reason the fates brought us together." He looked thoughtful.

"Do you always talk so weird?" Tori gave him a small smile, finally beginning to relax. He spoke so formally sometimes. It was as though he couldn't decide in which century he was. His manner of speech was a mixture of the old and new and that was rather charming. It made her wonder exactly how old he was. The man was very old if the way he spoke was any indication. She believed him when he'd said he wasn't going to hurt her. If he wanted to kill her, he could have done it at any time over the last mile or so he'd carried her. His body stiffened as though she'd just insulted him.

"I *am* very old, how do you think I should speak?" Still looking at her, he raised his brow. "It's difficult to remember to talk like a human. I have spent my life speaking this way to my people. I rarely associate with your kind other than to feed." He smiled again, showing her his perfect white teeth. "And that rarely needs much interaction."

Tori ignored that sexy look. It was driving her crazy. Besides, he was probably *way* too old for

her. "Why are you telling me this? I could use this information against you."

"Yes, you could. But you won't."

The look he gave her could melt glass. "How do you know that?" She crossed her arms over her chest. "It could happen." She stubbornly raised her chin.

He shook his head. "Victoria, you have known about Ricardo and me for years and the only danger I have been in from you is being ravished." His lips twitched as he obviously fought the urge to grin.

Her cheeks heated and she looked away. "It's not my fault, it's that vampire compulsion thing you have going all of the time."

"But it doesn't work on you," he reminded.

She sighed. Well, so much for *that* excuse. Tori sat cradled in his arms and let him carry her. What else could she do? Angelo was bigger. Even if he wasn't part of the legion of the damned, he still would have been stronger than she ever aspired to be. Tori marveled that the undead could be so warm. She barely stopped herself from slapping her forehead. Of course! He just fed.

Angelo choked. "Excuse me, Victoria, but I take exception to you including me within the ranks of the legion of the damned."

Tori stuck her nose in the air. "Then quit reading my mind. It's rude." Looking away, she

crossed her arms and watched as they passed unfamiliar landmarks while he carried her through remote back alleys. “Exactly *where* are you taking me?”

Angelo looked down. “It took you long enough to ask. You aren’t very observant, are you?”

Tori felt herself blush to her roots. Her face burned hotter than the hell she’d thought spawned his kind. What could she say, *I’m sorry, Mr. Vampire, but I was so turned on I didn’t notice you were carrying me through a part of town I know almost nothing about?*

There was a reason she didn’t know much about this part of town. It was where many of *them* lived, existed, whatever. She’d been here a few times with her mother when she was younger, but after she turned sixteen, she couldn’t come back without risking discovery.

Angelo made an abrupt right, walking through a wrought iron gate into the front yard of a huge house. He carried her up the steps onto a wide wraparound porch, which held two rocking chairs and a swing.

She laughed. “You actually own a rocking chair?” She clapped a hand to her mouth to stifle a giggle when she imagined him using one. Well, he *was* ancient. Angelo barked out a laugh that, if she wasn’t mistaken, startled them both.

“I think I should inform you that you are

correct in your assumption." He leaned closer, his breath fanning her cheek.

His sensual mouth hovered near her lips as he gave her a scorching look.

"I *am* ancient." He chuckled. "I'm so old I'm practically dusty."

Tori shivered. Every nerve ending in her body screamed for his touch. She barely stopped herself from reaching out to pull his head down to hers and kiss him senseless. Instead, she swallowed around the lump in her throat and looked down.

"Why do you fight it?" He breathed in her ear.

She felt her eyes widen. Was that his tongue in her ear? She shook her head and gulped in air. He had to know what that did to her. Tori pulled away. "It's unnatural." She hoped it sounded firm, but something told her it came out sounding sexy and breathless.

"Ultra feminine," Angelo said, lowering her to her feet.

Her rubbery legs threatened to collapse. His hands stayed on her hips, massaging lightly. "Girlie," she retorted.

"I like girlie." He smiled. He released her long enough to pull a ring of keys from his pocket and unlock the door. "It gives me the chance to look manly." He reached around her, pressing his hand to the small of her back.

Ha! As if anything could make him appear any

more masculine than he already was. She had her doubts. "I thought vampires had special powers, like being able to control things with their minds." She frowned at his hand on the knob.

"No. Most of us can only control *people* with our minds. For them, everything else requires hands." He shoved his keys back into his pocket.

"You said *for them*, not for us," Tori said, watching him through narrowed eyes.

Angelo gave her a blank look. "I did?" He opened the door. It swung open quietly on well-oiled hinges.

Tori wasn't sure why, but she'd expected it to creak and sound spooky. "Um." She leaned forward and peeked in through the doorway. "Is there anything I should know about before I go into your house?"

He glanced at her and raised his brow. "Such as?"

She shrugged. "Like, if I go inside, am I giving up any rights?"

"Of course not." He frowned. "Why would you ask that?"

She shook her head. "Just something I read once. I just wanted to make sure there wasn't some sort of moldy old rule that declared once I enter your home I belong to you or something equally archaic." She craned her neck to look around him, trying to see into the dim interior.

He snorted. "If *that* were the case I'd need a much bigger house."

Tori felt a spurt of jealousy charge through her and unconsciously bristled. "You've had *that* many female companions?" She was horrified by the possessiveness she felt, accompanied by the overwhelming urge to crack him over the head with something. Hard.

Angelo chuckled. "Actually, no. But I do have parties from time to time." He stepped into the house, extending his arm in invitation. "The thought that all of my female guests could have become my property just by entering my home is a bit disturbing."

"Oh." Tori followed him through the doorway into a huge foyer. She could believe he gave parties. It was obvious someone built the place with that in mind. She barely stopped herself from gaping at the large, three-tiered chandelier over her head. About five feet in circumference, its glowing bulbs and rows of crystal icicles sent shards of colorful light dancing in every direction. A long hallway to the left led to a glass-enclosed ballroom. Angelo pulled her through it and into the garden.

Tori gasped when they walked out onto the dimly lit patio. It was beautiful. Like something out of a Victorian novel. She bit her lip. Her host was like *someone* from a Victorian novel.

Angelo mumbled something.

"Excuse me?"

He sighed. "Nothing." He stuck his hands into his pockets and moved to stand in front of a concrete bench. "Come, sit." He waited for Tori to seat herself before he joined her. "I must think of a way to protect you."

Tori took a deep breath, inhaling the mixed scent of roses, gardenias and night-blooming jasmine. "I'm fine, Angelo, really." She leaned her head back.

He closed his eyes and shook his head before he began to pace. "You don't understand. Because you were with me, the other two will have marked you for death."

"But why?" Tori cried, "I didn't do anything to them." She shook her head, trying to figure out just when her life had turned into a bad B-movie senario.

"No, but I did and you witnessed it. Their pride will not suffer your continued existence."

She began to shake again. "They...they'd kill me for that?"

Angelo nodded and ran a hand through his hair. "Victoria, tonight they were going to kill you for dinner. The reasons don't matter to them. If you'll forgive the pun, they come from a bloodthirsty bunch that never should have been offered The Gift."

She buried her head in her hands. The Gift. The Endowed. They were both insane terms for such horrifying things.

Angelo wrapped his arm around her, drawing her under his shoulder. "There's no need to worry, I will keep you safe." He rocked her gently in his embrace.

Tori relaxed in his arms, thinking of the irony. Here she was, held by a vampire and trusting him to keep her safe when two hours ago she would have run screaming in the other direction if she'd thought it would do her any good.

"Would you care for a drink?"

She nodded, her head rubbing against his shoulder. "Yes, I think I may need one." She stood and leaned back, stretching.

Angelo stood and held out his hand. "I have some well-aged scotch." He grinned at her and winked.

Her cheeks burned and she closed her eyes. He really *could* read her mind and that just wasn't fair. She took his hand and he led her unerringly through the darkness.

When they reached the house, Tori gaped up at the sprawling three-story home. She hadn't noticed its size when he'd carried her to the porch earlier. *This isn't a house. It's a mansion in every sense of the word.* She walked through the door behind him into a giant room filled from floor to ceiling

with books. Angelo led her to a leather-upholstered chair in front of a fireplace almost big enough to stand in.

"Make yourself at home while I get you a drink." He strode over to a large bar in the corner and turned. "What would you like?"

Tori, taking him at his word, kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet beneath her. "What have you got?"

He opened the small refrigerator. "There's beer, wine coolers, cola and a diet cola. In the ice box." He turned toward the shelf next to him. "I have liquor here in the cabinet if you require something a bit stronger." He moved toward the shelves on the wall behind the bar lined with what appeared to be every type of liquor imaginable.

She smiled. "That's okay. A wine cooler would be great. I don't suppose you have a *Bahama Mama*, do you?" she asked hopefully.

Angelo stopped mid-stride. "A what?" He shook his head. "I don't think so." He returned to the refrigerator. "I have a strawberry daiquiri though, sorry."

Tori sighed. "Figures, I can't find them anywhere anymore." She grinned. "Now I can say I've really looked everywhere. I'll take the daiquiri."

"One wine cooler coming right up."

Tori looked at the liquor lining the walls. "I

didn't know vampires drank."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Obviously."

"But I thought you couldn't —"

"Consume food like mortals?" Angelo handed her the drink.

"Well, yeah." She sniffed it and took a small sip. "Not bad." She watched Angelo prepare himself a drink, waiting until he took a seat in the chair opposite her.

"That was a rumor we started. We can eat, drink and be merry with the best of them." He paused, looking thoughtful. "I know this is a delicate subject, but we need to discuss sleeping arrangements. Obviously it would be better for us to sleep in the same room, but I can see how that may distress you."

He didn't know the half of it. Sleep in the same room with him...with her traitorous hands wanting to play patty-cake all over certain delectable parts of his anatomy? Tori set the glass bottle down with a trembling hand and fisted her hands in her lap. What would it be like to run her hands over his hard-muscled flesh? She shook her head. She *had* to convince herself to stop thinking about those things. He didn't want her. If he did, he wouldn't be sitting across from her like a gentleman. He would be kissing her, fondling her, pulling her down onto his —

"Please stop," Angelo said, shifting in his seat.

"I do want you, Victoria. Very much." He lifted his head, looking up, his expression harsh. "Don't tease me like that." His eyes, filled with desire, were a swirling gold. The little flecks of color in his dark eyes glittered like gold dust in the sun. They were beautiful. Then they flashed that strange, frightening, glowing red color. "It could prove dangerous." The last was almost a growl.

Damn. Tori forgot he could read her mind. She felt her cheeks heat again and got angry with herself. She hesitated just a moment before she stood and moved closer to his chair.

If she were to be completely honest with herself, she would have to admit she'd been half in love with this man and his friend since the night she'd turned sixteen, when they both refused to take advantage of an innocent, impressionable child. Oh, she hadn't felt like a child then. She'd been so sure she was a grown woman at sixteen. Tori could have cried when they set her aside. By refusing her, he and Ricardo gave her time. Time to grow, time to realize what she felt was no mere infatuation, whether she thought them monsters or not.

She stood in front of him, looking at him for a moment, asking herself whether she really thought him a monster. Could the man sitting in front of her with his head in his hands be the kind of fiend vampires of legend were supposed to be?

No, she decided. He was nothing more than a very lonely man required to consume a very strange liquid diet. She only hoped Ricardo was the same. Taking the opportunity to have some alone time with Angelo, Tori gently rested her palm against his shoulder and waited until he looked at her.

"Yes?" Angelo sat back with his arms on the chair, his knees spread.

Tori looked down at him, gazed into haunted eyes that had seen too much, lost too much, over the years. Tears streamed down her face. Stepping between his legs, she took him into her arms, his head resting between her breasts. She slowly lowered herself to his lap. Then doing what she'd dreamed of nearly every night for the last ten years, she brought her mouth to his lips and kissed him. She moaned deep in her throat as his mouth opened under hers, his tongue delving into the dark recesses, dominating her, driving her to a place she'd never been. His was a dark world filled with lust and raw sensuality. By returning her kiss, he welcomed her into it. Her blood grew hot, molten, as liquid heat pooled between her legs.

Angelo's expertise turned her kiss from sensual into something completely sexual and erotic. Fisting his hand in her hair, he tilted her head back, deepening the kiss, the warm velvet of his

tongue caressing hers. Then without warning, he released her hair abruptly and wrapped his arms around her. His hands splayed wide across her back.

Tori felt...cherished. His lips slid over her neck like warm silk. Her stomach clenched with desire this time, not from fear. Liquid heat continued to pool low in her middle as he teased her lips with his and gently suckled her tongue. She never guessed, never knew, kissing could be like this.

Angelo pulled back, his breath coming in short gasps. "It's been a long time for me, Victoria. I don't know how long I can stay in control." He ran a shaking hand through his hair. "We should choose a room for you. Before we do something you will regret." He lifted her from his lap, keeping a hand on her swaying frame while he stood.

Tori was glad for the support, knowing she would have fallen without his help. She bit her lip and glanced nervously around the room. If she planned to change her mind, this was her chance. Lifting her eyes to meet his unblinking gaze, she couldn't stop herself from blurting, "Make love to me, Angelo. Show me what I have been waiting for all of these years."

He didn't need a second invitation. Angelo scooped her up in his arms and carried her through the house at an incredible speed. The

paintings on the wall were a blur, the stairs nothing but an illusion as he carried her to his bedroom. It didn't matter that she couldn't see the interior of his home. There was time enough for that later. At this moment, all that mattered was being with him.

* * * *

Angelo dipped his head, kissing Tori as he carried her into his room. Her slight weight felt so right in his arms. It was as though she was made for him, for them. Still, he wasn't sure he had the right to take her life from her. He would never harm her, but he knew once they made love he would never let her go. Was it fair to take what she offered without warning her of the consequences?

He set her down in front of the king-sized bed and shoved his hands into his pockets, determined to give her a second chance. "This is your opportunity to leave if you have changed your mind." He stepped back, extending his arm, indicating the area behind him. "There is the door. You are welcome to walk through it."

Angelo said the words, knowing she would leave. What human woman could ever willingly want to make love with a monster? His body ached for her. Would always ache for her. In all of the centuries of his existence, no one had ever

made him feel the way she did, just by living. "I do not want you to feel forced."

Ric? He reached out, using his kind's telepathic ability. *Do you remember this one? Do you think she could be one or both of our bellacara?*

There was nothing to do but wait for Ricardo's reply as Tori laughed softly, obviously nervous, then walked around the sparsely furnished room. Angelo couldn't help himself for he needed to know what was on her mind as she strode around his bedroom, her face serene. He gently slipped into her mind, needing to know how she really felt.

Tori was amazed at how sterile his bedroom looked—at least she assumed this was his room. It appeared to be the master suite. There were no pictures and very few personal items. She strolled around the room, her fingers caressing the gleaming furniture and wondered absently if there would be clothes in the closet if she looked.

Angelo couldn't help but read her thoughts, even after he attempted to give her privacy. He tried not to for she was right, it *was* rude though countless centuries of believing it was his God-given right was hard to change.

"Forced? You wouldn't force me." She stopped in front of him, raising her hand to his cheek. "I know here." She placed her other hand on her chest. "If I asked you to stop, you would. I trust

you."

A strange feeling lodged in the center of his chest at her words. Speaking her thoughts aloud only made them that much more precious to him. "How can you trust me when I don't even trust myself?" Angelo barked a laugh. "I hardly dare to believe what you are offering me." He smiled ruefully. "It makes me wish I could mesmerize you and I haven't wished for anything in centuries."

I have a memory of our first encounter with this one. Ricardo finally answered. It was as though he, too, wanted to see and feel her reaction. *It was ten years ago. I thought you remembered as well. I knew she'd grown to adulthood, that we could finally claim her. I just had no idea where to find her. Why do you think I wanted to return? She was here and finally old enough to mate. Besides,* Ricardo added. *We terrified her. I'd hoped she would have outgrown her fear of us. She was barely more than a child when we first met. We have drawn many children to us by mistake. Though our young Victoria could not know this, what makes us different from those like Antoine and his sister, is that we do not feed from them.*

I would feed from an animal before feeding from a child, Angelo replied, trying to keep the telltale scowl from his face. The last thing he needed was for Tori to think he was angry with her.

As we both would, old friend. Ricardo's answer came sure and fast. *I shall join you as soon as my*

work is done. Perhaps she will welcome me into her life as well.

We can only hope, Angelo said, just before he withdrew from their mind link.

Angelo returned his full attention to Tori as she looked up at him, a frown marring her beautiful face.

"Why do you wish you could mesmerize me?" she asked, ignoring the reminder of his immortality.

He shrugged. "If I could mesmerize you, I could guarantee your pleasure."

Tori tilted her head, obviously confused. "But wouldn't a willing partner be better? Knowing the person is with you because they want to be?" She licked her lips, turning her gaze toward the floor. "Knowing the pleasure you give them is real?"

Pain flashed through him, taking him by surprise. "A willing partner would be wonderful." He sighed wistfully. He looked at her through eyes he knew must reflect his longing for her. "But who would willingly desire a monster?"

In all of his long existence, no one had willingly succumbed to his or Ricardo's attentions. No one wanted to be with them. Everyone feared them. Even most of his own kind gave them both a wide berth. Angelo couldn't help himself and slipped back into her mind.

Tori squeezed her eyes shut, feeling ashamed.

She had named both Angelo and Ricardo monsters. She'd been wrong. The man standing before her was no more a monster than any other man.

"I'm not."

He paced the room in front of her, obviously reading her mind again. Tori wanted to be angry with him for that, but couldn't bring herself to feel the emotion.

"I don't kill without a damn good reason and I have never intentionally hurt a woman or child. My apologies for invading your privacy."

* * * *

Tori looked up at him. "Then you aren't the fiend society has named you. That I once named you." She turned her back, wrapping her arms around herself. "How can I say this? Maybe the best thing for both of us would be to just spit it out." She glanced at him and laughed. "You know, if you just read my mind again it would be so much easier." Pausing, she took a deep breath before continuing, "Angelo, I—"

The crash of breaking glass interrupted her. She stepped closer, wrapping her arms around him, instinctively looking to him for protection. She felt the odd comfort of his arms surrounding her, wrapping her in an embrace that made her feel

safer than she had in years.

It was strange to feel so safe in his arms. For years, she'd feared him, feared both of them even as she lusted after them. Now she stood in Angelo's home, his arms holding her tight, and felt safer than she could remember ever feeling in her life.

Angelo pulled back just enough to look deep into her eyes. "Stay here and lock the door behind me. No one can get into this room, but Ricardo and me." He paused for a moment. "I have just contacted Ric through our mind link. He will be here soon. Never fear, love, there is no way anyone can hurt you as long as you stay here. Do you understand?"

Angelo stared into her eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

Tori felt the push of compulsion. Past experience told her it wouldn't work. However, something told her it would if she relaxed and let it. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and reached for the calming place in her mind. It loosened her up enough to allow Angelo to protect her the only way he knew how.

"You will stay here. Do not open the door for anyone. Ricardo and I can get through the door without your assistance." The words were heavy with Angelo's compulsion. "Do you understand?" Angelo asked, pressing a soft kiss against her forehead.

"Yes," she replied, almost involuntarily. Fighting the urge to go with him, Tori watched as he turned and left the room. She didn't want him to leave her here, even through the power of his compulsion.

What was that noise they'd heard? It sounded

like a window breaking somewhere downstairs. Tori figured it was too much to ask for it to be the work of vandals. Somehow, she knew it wasn't. Someone was trying to get to her, or him, or both of them.

Crossing to the large four-poster bed, she sat down. Her heart raced with fear, her stomach clenched, making her feel ill, as she wondered who or what it was. Could it be Ricardo? Could he have come home, perhaps dropped a glass?

Leaning against the large post, she wrapped her arm around it, rested her head against the gleaming dark wood and stared at the door. The muffled sound of footsteps moved slowly through the first floor below her. Someone was downstairs walking through the house, but she had no way of knowing who it was. Was it Angelo or Ricardo or could it be the other two vampires they met earlier?

Tori wasn't insane, she was in no hurry to renew *that* acquaintance so she stayed right where she was. Sitting with her hands in her lap, she tried not to fidget. After a couple of minutes, she stood and paced to the door. Placing her palm against the cool wood, she worried about the two men she'd come to care so much about.

How many times had she tried to put a name to their aristocratic faces? None of the names she'd guessed fit them as well as Angelo and Ricardo.

Her hand slid down the smooth surface of the door before she let it drop to her side.

Turning, she made a slow circuit of the room. It was nearly as anonymous as he was. She could find nothing that stood out, nothing that identified itself as belonging to him or his friend. Tori paused. Did they even share a bedroom? Were they lovers and if so, how did she feel about that?

Shaking off the inane thoughts, she went back to her slow perusal of the room. How did they continue living such a nameless existence year after year? More importantly, why did they choose to live this way? Tori raised a trembling hand to her mouth as realization struck. Because *they* labeled themselves the monsters she once believed them to be.

Tori padded to the door opposite the one Angelo exited through. Cautiously, she opened the door a crack to reveal a large bathroom. The huge skylight in the ceiling allowed the light from the full moon to wash the pale tile in a silvery glow.

The tub in the corner dominated the room. The faucet gleamed, the moon's soft light shining softly against the chrome. Tori opened the door wider and stepped into the room. She reached out and felt against the wall until she found and flicked a switch. A row of eight clear, round bulbs illuminated the floor covered in cream marble tile.

Double pale blue sinks sat in front of a wide mirror, their chrome faucets arcing high above the basins. White porcelain handles with brass trim told her they weren't there for function alone. Whoever designed this house did it with love. Every room she'd seen was perfect in its shape and décor. Pale blue countertops matched the sinks and the rugs on the cream marble floor.

Sighing, Tori wished she could take a bath in that beautiful tub, but didn't dare with the threat looming so close. Who knew if they would have to run again?

Flipping the light switch off, she left the room bathed in darkness as she turned and wandered back to sit impatiently on the bed. Angelo would be back soon, she hoped as she leaned back, her hands sliding over the smooth, burnished gold satin spread. Tori smiled, wondering if he would bring Ricardo with him.

It didn't take long for the unfamiliar worry to begin to eat at her again. Her stomach clenched with fear. She was so afraid something would happen to them out there, putting their lives on the line while she stayed here safe in this room.

"Dammit!" Standing, she began to pace. She hated this. Hated how he'd left her here in this room to wonder if he would prevail over their pursuers. Whether he would return to this room or die trying to protect her. Not knowing what

was going on was driving her mad.

Shoving the tip of her thumb between her lips, she nervously bit down on the nail, then scowled and drew it from her mouth. "You're not starting that bad habit again." It took years to get herself to stop her incessant nail biting. In fact, for the first time in her life, her nails actually looked good. Tori refused to let this situation turn her into a nail biter again.

Things were so quiet. She held her breath for a moment, listening, trying to hear what was going on downstairs. Wrapping her arms around her middle to try to tame her roiling stomach, Tori paced the room, wondering what happened to Angelo. Walking to the door, she pressed her ear to the cool wood and frowned. Silence was the only thing she heard besides the frantic beating of her own heart as she stood with her ear practically glued to the door, listening for some sign of life.

What now? Did she just stay here and wait for someone to come up here and either save or murder her? Should she be proactive and try to find her own way out of here?

After striding to the balcony doors, she flung them open only to see she was on the third floor. With the home's twelve-foot ceilings, there was no way she was jumping over twenty-four feet to the ground. She wasn't a coward, but she wasn't crazy either.

The sound of the door opening had her turning to face it. Tori released a relieved breath when Angelo walked through the door, Ricardo close on his heels.

"Are you okay?" Taking her upper arms in his hands, he looked her over. Probably to make sure she was all right.

Ricardo strode over to the balcony and leaned over the rail to look at the gardens below.

If Angelo thought it was rude that his friend didn't introduce himself, he didn't say anything.

"I'm fine, Angelo." Tori leaned to the side and looked over his shoulder to the closed door. "Are they gone?" She knew her voice sounded hopeful and didn't care. The last thing she wanted was to die and never find out what it was that drew her to these men so inexplicably, why she'd watched them all these years with such yearning. Hell, she'd watched them so much even her best friend knew she had the hots for both of them and that was just sad.

A crash from downstairs drew their attention. Apparently, the intruders weren't gone after all.

"They have gained entrance to the kitchen, Angelo," Ricardo said, surprising her.

It was the first thing she'd heard him say since the night she'd turned sixteen.

He glanced at her, his lips quirking up at the corners before he winked. "Welcome, *bella*. I have

missed you all these years."

Ricardo remembered her? Tori wondered if that was significant. Another crash brought her thoughts into focus. There was someone or something after her. She had no time to linger. She shifted her gaze to look into Angelo's eyes and tried to keep her fear from showing. "I guess they decided to stick around, huh?" Her smile wobbled as she tried to hold it in place.

There was more noise from downstairs and it grew louder. Whoever it was, headed up the stairs, then apparently thought better of it and tromped back down them in a rush.

Angelo looked over his shoulder at the door, then turned back to her. "Look into my eyes, Victoria. Allow me into your mind so that I may protect you from what is to come."

Tori shook her head. "Tell me. I don't want to be left in the dark."

Angelo chuckled. "You choose the most interesting phrases." He shoved a hand through his hair, his expression changing to one of remorse. "I don't wish to frighten you and I may have to do things that will." He paced away from her. "Please let me protect you."

Ignoring Angelo's grave expression, she walked over to him, wrapped her arms around his waist and reveled in the warmth that radiated from his lean frame. "You are already protecting me. Don't

hide what you are. I need to know." She pressed her face against his sternum. "I want to know you both. Every part of you." She looked up, her gaze searching. "I want to know what you two are, what you can do."

"Why?"

Because I love you. It feels like I've loved you both forever, Tori screamed the confession in her mind. Her gaze shifted between the two of them and she bit her lip. What could she say? Part of her wanted to spend the rest of her life with them. Could she? Could she really change that much and let these men have dominion over her life, over her?

Ricardo held out his hand. "Don't worry about these things now, we must go."

He watched her, his face unreadable. He looked down at his outstretched hand, watched as she placed her smaller one into it. His fingers closed around hers. Tori felt the warmth of her skin sliding against his. His touch sent heat spiraling through her body.

Her womb clenched and she wanted him more than ever. What was it about these two men that made her heart race and her blood turn hot? She knew she shouldn't think about such things now. They needed to run. Tori knew she shouldn't be staring at him, contemplating what it would be like to have Ricardo make love to her. To have them both make love to her, for these two men to

need her as much as she'd needed them all these long and lonely years. It was a bit disconcerting to realize just how much she wanted—needed—them both.

Until tonight, Tori fully expected to spend her life alone, never to know the touch of a man because she would have no other than one or both of the men standing before her now. And having them seemed impossible before tonight.

For years she'd called them monsters when they were more man, had more gentle souls than some humans she knew. Whatever it was that made a good man good lived in these two men's hearts. Somehow, she'd known that all those years ago when her heart decided she would have one or both of them or no other.

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Ricardo caught his breath when their hands touched, then felt a tightening in his groin. It was something he'd never experienced, just by touching a woman's hand before. He looked into her beautiful emerald green eyes. She gazed back, nervously licking her lips. Her heart pounded. He could hear it. The cadence was loud to his ears. Was it from fear or arousal? He wasn't sure.

Pulling her gently into his embrace, he closed his eyes for a moment and held her as if she were

the most precious woman on the planet. Perhaps she was. Only the gods knew why she stirred his passions when no others had in all of the long years past.

For centuries, Angelo and he had walked the Earth alone. Each had only the other for company as if waiting for something. Had they been waiting for her? He inhaled her sweet scent deeply and shook his head. It didn't matter. She was theirs now. His eyes grew moist and he blinked. He couldn't be succumbing to something as decidedly human as tears.

Angelo pushed them closer to the rail. "Go. Take her to safety." The other man's eyes burned with intensity.

"But—"

"I'll hold them off and meet you down the street." Angelo turned to Tori. Reaching up, he pushed her hair behind her ear and gazed down into her eyes, his thumb tenderly stroking her cheek. "Go with Ric. He'll keep you safe." He smiled. "Besides, you should get to know him." He looked back up at Ricardo. "Now go!"

"Close your eyes," Ricardo said, looking down into her upturned face. "I don't wish to alarm you."

She obediently closed her eyes, looking for all the world, like a trusting child.

He sighed in relief. How would she take flying

through the air, even for such a short distance? Ricardo held her tightly. There could be no mistakes. He would not drop her. She could not be injured, even by accident.

Using the abilities he'd been born with, Ricardo raised them above the railing on the third floor balcony and lowered them slowly to the ground. He released her as soon as her feet touched the flagstone in the garden and waited for the inevitable shock.

Tori opened her eyes, meeting his gaze. She bit her lip, obviously nervous. Her body trembled beside him.

"Don't tell me we just flew." She raked her hand through her golden shoulder-length hair, then wrapped her arms around herself. "How much more can you two do that the others can't?"

Ricardo took her by the arm and started walking. "Not here, Victoria. It is not safe for me to answer your questions here." He looked over his shoulder. "It won't take them long to realize we are no longer in the house and...we have to meet Angelo. The last thing I want to do is inadvertently make him come looking for us. The man has a temper like you wouldn't believe."

They heard the sound of glass breaking and a muffled explosion rent the air.

He turned with her as she spun around to look and they watched as orange flames licked up the

side of the once beautiful house.

"Oh, no," she cried, looking up at him. "Your house!"

Ricardo reached out, turning her away from the horrible scene. The house had been his home as much as it was Angleo's. They built it together, fully intending to spend their lives with each other. They weren't lovers, but friends. Best friends and nothing would come between them. Years of isolation and sharing everything, including their women, made them closer than others could only dream of being.

"It is only things, Victoria," he whispered in her ear. "Do not fret so about things." He refused to feel pain for the loss of their house, their home. He pushed the thoughts to the back of his mind. It had been his favorite residence, but they could build another. They could replace things. He could never replace Victoria and Angelo.

He shrugged, hoping the movement looked careless. Ricardo did care about the centuries of memories there, but he could not put a value on their lives and refused to try. He knew Angelo felt the same. They walked slowly away until Angelo joined them, moving to her other side, flanking her for protection. With Tori tucked under his shoulder, he hoped they looked like a small group of friends out for a moonlit stroll.

"Where are we going?" Tori asked.

He liked the way she felt about their home. Perhaps she would feel the same about the others. Perhaps she would put her female touches on them and finally make them all homes, instead of houses they merely resided in.

Ricardo loved the way she wrapped her arm around his waist, her other around Angelo's, as she walked with them, keeping up the pretence for prying eyes. He loved the sensation of his arm over her shoulder, gathering her close. He practically reveled in the warmth they shared...and her scent was to die for.

Was this strange sense of inner comfort what the others felt when they finally found someone to share their lives with and was it the thing that kept them from going rogue? It had been so long since he felt any tender feelings for anyone that he'd forgotten what it was like. "Someplace where we can keep you safe." His words were short. His gaze darted around them, looking through the darkness, watching.

She frowned. "Do you think they know we escaped?"

* * * *

"They must know. They would have heard screams had we been trapped inside," Angelo said as he gazed down at her, trying to keep the

emotion from his eyes. "People left to burn to death, scream hideously. I pray you never have to hear it." He had and he would never forget. Even after centuries had passed, he couldn't forget.

Tori watched him with knowing eyes. "What's the matter?" She pulled her arm from around his waist and rested her hand on his arm.

He looked down at her fingers curled so trustingly around his wrist. She trusted him not to hurt her. She trusted him not to let her come to harm. Her faith in them both humbled him. He could only wonder what it made Ricardo feel. Would either of them ever earn the trust she so easily gave? Would they ever be worthy of it?

"Nothing." He shrugged, beginning to pull his arm from beneath her hand. "Memories." He sighed. Closing his eyes to block out her disbelieving look, he reveled in the warmth he felt when her fingers tightened around his arm, not letting him remove it easily from his grip.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, Angelo always looking nervously behind them as he waited for the other shoe to drop. He knew the invaders didn't believe they'd been in the house. He heard them searching the shrubbery outside the windows before they became silent. They tracked them now. Their pursuers were near if they had resorted to using a telepathic link while searching. They obviously didn't want to give

away their position. They must be very close. He stopped Tori, jerked her arm roughly, turning her to look at him. "You must allow me to compel you."

"No," she replied simply.

Her glance briefly flicked down at her arm where he knew he gripped it a bit too tight. Still, she said nothing of it, just stood there gazing up at him with so much trust in her eyes it made him ache.

"If I'm going to even contemplate having any type of relationship with you two, I need to know everything you can do. Everything you are."

"You must." His eyes blazed, his teeth lengthening in his mouth.

* * * *

Tori's eyes widened and she let out a nervous laugh. "Either you're getting ready to protect me again or you're really pissed. I can't keep letting you get away with this." She sighed. "Just one more time, you two. I can't be with you if I can't see who you really are."

She refused to use the word *what* again. Angelo and Ricardo were men. She would *not* think of either of them as anything less. Closing her eyes, she envisioned a heavy door opening in a house with no windows. She opened her mind to him

and he immediately took control.

Tori blinked. "What happened?"

Angelo stood from where he sat on the edge of the bed. "You were under my thrall." He shrugged. "We brought you here using an old method. It is very fast, but sometimes very frightening." He shoved his hands in his pockets and walked to the window.

Sitting up, she looked around the room. It was more impersonal than Angelo's bedroom. Something told her they were in a hotel. "Where is Ricardo?" she asked when she peeked past Angelo into the dark and empty bathroom.

"He's gone ahead to be sure the way is clear. We plan to take you to another of our homes, but he wants to be sure it's safe first."

She cast a glance down at her feet. One of them had even thought to fashion shoes for her. Funny, she hadn't noticed that when they'd practically run away from the house. She closed her eyes and sighed. She was in way over her head.

Tori went into the bathroom. She gazed around. Yes, this was definitely a hotel. The towel holders on the wall held four thick white bath towels, two hand towels and two washcloths. She leaned against the door for a minute with her eyes closed, trying to get her bearings.

Lifting her head from the door, Tori looked

around. The dark blue tile gleamed, a contrast to the white countertop and white sink. A large tub sat in the corner boasting water jets she knew would relax her tired and strained muscles.

Straightening, she walked toward the center of the room and decided that no matter what happened she wasn't going to let Angelo or Ricardo down. They both needed someone and she was bound and determined that that someone would be her.

She approached the huge tub, flipped the lever for the plug and turned on the water. She turned toward the built-for-two shower behind her and began to undress.

"I hope the water heater will hold up to this," she mumbled as she reached into the shower. It may be a nice hotel, but she wasn't sure how large it was. She turned the handle. Water shot out of the multiple jets and she climbed in to lather herself down, recognizing the scent. Angelo and Ricardo smelled just like this. Somehow, she knew they had provided the soap. It looked too expensive for the hotel to have supplied it. Tori smiled. It was funny how she never imagined a vampire needing to shower, but he'd obviously beat her to it.

She quickly stepped from the shower and into the spacious tub. The water was just deep enough. She reached over and turned on the jets. Tori

turned the cold water off, leaving the hot to run at a slow trickle. She leaned back and relaxed.

“Are you awake?” Angelo asked from the doorway.

Instinctively covering her breasts, Tori opened her eyes and looked up at his reflection in the mirror. “I thought you weren’t supposed to cast a reflection. How am I supposed to convince you two that you’re not at all attractive so I can keep you all to myself, if you can see just how handsome you really are?” She pouted. Though she supposed it wasn’t too far of a stretch to believe they could tell each other they were practically god’s gift to women.

He leaned against the doorframe and grinned. “You already have *me* all to yourself and I’m sure Ric feels the same way.” He crossed his arms over his chest, not taking his heated gaze off her.

Tori turned to look at him over her shoulder, hoping it was a seductive pose. “Well, are you just going to stand there and watch or are you going to join me?” She stood slowly, revealing the slender arch of her back and the full curve of her bottom. She watched with smug satisfaction as Angelo’s gaze devoured her, growing even darker with desire.

A faint red glow glinted from the dark chocolate depths. Tori smiled softly, walked to the

other side of the swirling water and turned to sit. Spreading her legs, she showed her body to him, allowing him to look his fill. She felt so decadent, so wild, just sitting there like that and letting him look. Tori couldn't look away when he gazed into her eyes and walked toward her.

Angelo held her nearly mesmerized as he unbuttoned his shirt, deliberately revealing every delicious inch of the muscular chest Tori dreamed about nearly every night. Finally, she would see his perfection, feel the heat of his skin rubbing against her sensitive breasts like she imagined.

He reached down and pulled his shirt free from the waistband of his slacks. Then after unbuttoning the cuffs, he let the azure silk shirt slide down his arms to puddle at his feet. His eyes still locked with Tori's, he reached for his belt and paused, his expression asking.

Tori broke eye contact then. She let her gaze wander down to his waist. Looking at his hands still hovering over his belt buckle, she unconsciously licked her lips.

Angelo heaved a sigh and slowly slid his belt through the buckle, his every movement arousing her more. Her face felt hot, flushed. Her damp hair hung over her shoulders, framing her high, firm breasts. Tori worked hard to keep her body looking like this and it was about time she was able to show it off.

She stood and water sloshed over the side of the tub. Her lips parted and she nearly panted as she watched. Her nipples tightened when his gaze lowered to look at the dusky pink tips. Tori fought the urge to cover her breasts, refusing to let fear or embarrassment stop her now. Tilting her head back, her chin jutted out, almost as if she were daring him to look.

"You are so beautiful, Victoria." Angelo's gaze wandered over her bare body. "Sit back down and let me look at you," he whispered, his hands still on the waistband of his slacks.

Again, she sat on the small ledge inside the tub and leaned back to watch as he looked his fill. Aware of the mounting tension between them, Tori tilted her head to the side to see him better. "Are you going to just stand there staring?" She softened her words with a smile. "Or are you going to show me some of that famous vampire libido?" She looked down at his crotch and licked her lips.

He kicked off his shoes and removed his pants quickly.

Tori blinked. "Umm... Were those attached with snaps or something?" She smiled. "That was quick."

"Yes, it was," he growled. "But it is the only thing about this night that will be." He stepped into the tub, towering over her, his cock jutting out

in front of him.

Tori stood, moved toward him and buried her face in the crook of his shoulder, her hand lifting to trail across the muscular expanse of his chest, over his bare arms and shoulders to circle the nape of his neck. The soft hairs tickled her fingers just as she thought they would. "I'm so glad you're safe," she said as she wrapped both her arms around him and laid her head against his cool shoulder.

"We can't stay here long." He pulled back a bit to look at her. "There were—"

"Shh..." she interrupted, pressing her fingers against his lips and he kissed them. "I don't want to know right now. If we don't have much time, let's not waste it talking."

He nodded in understanding and, wasting no more time, bent to kiss her.

Standing on tiptoe, Tori wrapped her arms tighter around his neck and thrust her fingers into his raven hair, marveling that it was as soft as it appeared.

Angelo buried his face in her neck, and for a moment, Tori fought a reluctant tremor of fear. She relaxed in his embrace when he kissed her, sliding his lips up to her ear and back down to her shoulder. Tori let her head fall back. *To hell with it. If taking my blood feels like this, I may let him have it all.*

Angelo's hands slid down her back, cupping her bottom. He raised her a bit, grinding the lower half of his body into her pelvic bone. Tori was nearly as mindless as he was. He pulled back and buried his face between her breasts, kissing the sides, nuzzling his face against her cleavage.

Her legs gave out when he took her nipple into his mouth and laved the tight bud. She wrapped her arms around his head, thinking she may never let him go. If he stopped, she may just die. She'd never felt anything like it before. Tori was barely able to put one cohesive thought together, but she was able to wonder for a short time if she should tell him she was a virgin.

"I have to tell you something." She moaned when he picked her up, one hand on either thigh, and wrapped her legs around his waist. "Oh, God, Angelo. I don't know if we can do this," she sobbed when she felt his shaft brush her most intimate spot. *God this is going to hurt.*

"Relax, *mi amore*, it will only hurt for a moment," he said, before he kissed her again. He carried her out of the tub and into the bedroom. Laying her on the bed, he stood above her, his gaze devouring every inch of her exposed flesh. "No one has ever given me the gift you are giving me this night."

Tori swallowed. "You mean no one would make love with you because you are a vampire?"

Angelo shook his head. "No. I mean, no one has ever gifted me with their innocence before." He frowned. "I have had many...encounters, but all of them were, shall I say, experienced? And I had to use a compulsion on every one of them."

"Oh." Tori blushed and looked away. She wouldn't have to tell him after all. Was it that obvious?

Angelo tucked his fingers under her chin and lifted.

Tori fought her discomfort and forced herself to look into his decadent, dark chocolate eyes.

"Never be ashamed, Victoria. It is an honor to know you are gifting me with your trust." His dark gaze lowered to her lips. "It is a true accomplishment to remain untouched for so long in this time." He leaned down and kissed her softly. "I am surprised to find that you are still an innocent."

Tori pulled back slightly and gave a shaky laugh. "Well, you shouldn't be. You're the reason I'm still...intact." She looked down and licked her tingling lips. How could she think with him so close, his heart beating next to her ear and his arms wrapped so tightly around her? Why was she even talking? She'd finally gotten her chance and she was going to mess it up by talking too much.

He frowned. "I don't understand."

She sighed. "You wouldn't. You don't even remember. You know you've met me before. How, because I smell familiar."

He nodded. "Yes. I knew we must have met somewhere before, but I can't recall when that was."

"Ricardo remembered. He said as much back at your house when he first arrived."

"I heard," he said dryly. "There just wasn't time to inquire as to what he meant. I just know that I would remember meeting such a beautiful woman."

"I wasn't a woman, Angelo."

He snorted. "I will not believe you were a man, even with the marvels that today's medicine has gifted us with."

"I was a child, you dolt." She grinned. "When I first turned sixteen, you came into my neighborhood. I watched you walk down the sidewalk. So tall..." She sighed, looking at his six-foot-four frame. "You and Ricardo were the best looking men to ever walk down our street. I was fourteen the first time I laid eyes on the two of you."

"Fourteen? We didn't take your blood," he denied.

Tori shook her head. "No, you didn't. Two years later, I was out with some friends and I disappeared. They found me ten or fifteen minutes

later at a café about a quarter of a mile away." She looked down at her feet and blushed. "I told them I got lost. That I didn't remember how I got there, but I did. You were out hunting then, too, only that time I couldn't resist your call. I stumbled toward you like some oversexed zombie. You took one look at me and told me I was too young. Then much to my disappointment, you sent me away. I was devastated. I vowed then that if I couldn't have one of you, I would have no man."

Angelo reached up to cup her cheek. "And this shames you?"

Tori squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. "It doesn't shame me. I'm just glad that I have you now. I was afraid I would never have the courage to approach you."

"You may not have. It was I who approached you, remember?" Angelo smiled.

"You know what I mean."

"I do," he agreed. "Now, are we going to talk all night? If so, we should leave and do it elsewhere." He glanced over his shoulder at the clock. "As a matter of fact, we have stayed here too long as it is." He waved his hand and clothing appeared on their bodies. They were dressed identically, black on black.

Damn! She'd run her mouth too long. When would she ever learn to shut up? "How did you do that?" Tori asked, looking down at the clothing

she wore. "And why are we dressed all in black?" She looked around and realized they were standing. "How in the hell do you do that?"

Angelo smiled. "Ancient vampire secret," he said, with a very bad Chinese accent. Then he growled low in his throat and added, "The better to hide us in the darkness, my dear."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't *even* start that big bad wolf crap on me. I'm on to your games." She smiled and leaned into him. "Admit it. You're just a big pushover."

He looked down at her, his eyes showing his feelings to anyone who took the opportunity to look. "Only with you, Victoria. Only with you."

"Do we have a minute for me to use the bathroom?"

He nodded. "A minute, but no more. You must hurry."

Quietly opening the door, Tori left the bathroom and walked toward the window. The lights were off and Angelo stood with his back to her, his arms on either side of the frame as he leaned forward, his forehead resting against the cool glass. The poor man looked so alone, so lonely. Walking up behind him, Tori laid her hand on his back. He straightened and turned, wrapping his arm around her, drawing her near. "You're lonely, aren't you?"

"Don't be ridiculous." He snorted.

Tori wasn't fooled. She rested her cheek against his chest and smiled. You are. I can tell." His arm tightened just a fraction before he stepped away from her, a faraway look in his eyes. Then he shook his head.

"We must go. Now. Our assailants have found us again. They are in the elevator. They have killed the room-service attendant bringing your dinner."

Tori looked up at him with frightened eyes. "Where can we go that they won't find us?" Would they never lose the brother and sister who wanted her dead? Would she live the rest of her life constantly looking over her shoulder, wondering if that day was the day she would die?

"There is a place, but you must allow me to compel you again." He looked down at her, his face unreadable. "Ricardo is there, making sure it is safe."

"No." She shook her head. "I told you the last time, I was only going to let you do that one more time."

"We do not have time to argue, Victoria. I *need* to be able to do this."

"Absolutely not." She felt the brush at her mind and envisioned the door slamming shut. It was as if a windowless room completely closed off from his mind. Angelo took her hand and looked down at her through his magnificent mahogany eyes.

"I regret that this may frighten you, but it is the only way to guarantee your safety."

Bending, he scooped her into his arms and carried her from the room. He set her down on the balcony and took a deep breath. "Please, don't be frightened." He reached out, touching her cheek lightly.

Tori watched him shift shape with a mixture of fear and fascination. She fought the urge to scream when his body changed and contorted. Her beautiful vampire had turned into a real monster. The red and green scales that suddenly covered his body shone with a strange, unearthly iridescence. Fear clogged her throat as she looked up at him. *Holy crap! He's a dragon. How did he do that? Could they all do that or was it something only he and those like him could do?*

The dragon looked at her with sad eyes as it picked her up with one giant paw, jumped into the air and turned south.

"How did you—" Her eyes wide, Tori felt it as her brain finally protested the shocks she'd experienced in one night and she lost her grip on consciousness.

Tori opened her eyes and blinked. The stone walls looked thick. The four-poster bed with the heavy curtains hanging around it reminded her of something out of a King Arthur movie. It looked

like an antique. She pushed herself up on her elbows. "Where in the hell am I?" she whispered, looking around the huge room. She lifted her hand and brushed the hair from her face.

"We are at our home." Angelo pushed away from the wall and stepped a little closer to her. "Ricardo and I have lived here for many years."

How could she do anything but admire the fact that he seemed comfortable anywhere they went? She frowned when his words sank in. Looking around, she asked, "I thought the first house was your house." She stood to wander around the room. "How many houses do you have?" She trailed her fingers over the smooth surface of a walnut dresser.

He smiled softly, watched as she surveyed the room. "We have several. Remember, we have lived many years."

Tori rolled her eyes. Figures, not only was he gorgeous, he was loaded to boot. Now she'd have to worry about whether he thought she was after him for his money. She suppressed a smile. *Which is worse, wanting him for his money or his body? Would he rather feel like a sugar daddy or a piece of meat?* Tori realized she liked the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled. It told her he was a man who liked to have a good time.

He inclined his head. "I suppose you could say I'm loaded. It doesn't take long to amass a fortune.

If you know how." He moved closer, his eyes warming into dark chocolate pools. "And I suppose I don't mind being referred to as a piece of meat as long as I'm *your* piece of meat."

Yeah, and it doesn't hurt to be able to manipulate the minds of your competitors either, I'll bet.

He nodded. "It does help, but it is not wholly necessary."

Tori glared at him. "Will you please stop reading my mind?" She slammed the door of her mind closed again, wondering absently how long she'd left it open.

What if she were to think something really outrageous, like how much she'd love to cover him in chocolate and lick it off him like an all day sucker? Scolding herself, she tried to censor her thoughts before he read them.

Angelo shifted and gave her a scorching look. "Be my guest. It sounds like fun."

"Arrgh." She stomped over to him. "I thought you had to be close to read my mind?"

He shrugged. "I did, until I had been in your mind several times. Now that I know the pattern, it is easy to slip in and out." He frowned. "I haven't spent so much time with a human in centuries."

Tori snorted. "Is that supposed to be some sort of backhanded compliment?"

He stuck his hands in his pockets. "Call it what

you will, but I have not found myself in the company of one such as you for so long it bears thinking about."

"One such as me?" Tori smiled. "I love the way you talk." *I love everything about you.* The thought came unbidden and she didn't have time to censor it. Tori covered her face, hoping he hadn't heard that particular bit of rambling.

She watched as he wandered over to the table in the corner. Some loose, slut-like part of her she didn't even know existed wanted him to pick her up, dump her on the bed and have his wicked way with her. She wouldn't have complained.

Tori stood still, watching the muscles of his rear bunch and release as he walked away. She licked her lips, looking up to inspect his muscular shoulders. When he turned, their gazes met and she blushed. The corners of his mouth tipped up. He knew what she'd been doing, what she'd been thinking. *How embarrassing!* She looked away, her face turning red.

"Why are you embarrassed? There is nothing to be ashamed of in finding another attractive." He looked her up and down. "I find you equally attractive. Beautiful even."

Tori felt his gaze like a touch. Heat pooled in her middle and she bit her lip hard to keep from making a fool of herself. How many times had she watched that perfect body? How many years had

she tortured herself with her look-but-don't-touch rules where he and Ricardo were concerned? There was no use in trying to hide her attraction now. She would never choose to go back to her old existence where she could only watch them from a distance, never touching them, never again knowing the warmth of their embrace.

Tori waited for him to come to her. He didn't, he merely stood staring at her as if she were something forbidden that he coveted, but could never have. What changed between here and the hotel? Had he changed his mind and didn't want her after all? "Angelo, I—"

* * * *

"Don't say it," Angelo said, approaching her. If she voiced her desires, he might not be able to walk away from her...and walk away he must. They couldn't bring her over without her consent and they couldn't have her and leave her human. If he knew one thing about himself, he knew that if he made love with this woman he would never let her go. How could he tell her if she stayed with him, made love with him, she would be his forever? Holding up his hand, he tried to make her understand. "If you say it, I won't be able to stop myself from making love to you, this night."

"But I *want* you to make love with me." She

looked up at him. Her tongue darted out from between her teeth and trailed along her upper lip.

She looked so sexy it made his gut clench and his balls ache with the need to thrust his cock so deep inside her she would scream his name again and again.

Angelo shook his head. "Not tonight, you don't. I haven't fed." He ran his hand through his hair. "If I feed in the throes of sexual frenzy, I could kill you. If Ricardo were here..." He let the words trail off, knowing Ricardo would stop him, keep him from taking too much, but his friend had stationed himself downstairs, knowing he wanted, needed, this private time with her...to explain. They couldn't have her, couldn't be a family together, no matter how they all felt.

"I trust you, Angelo." She walked up behind him and put her hand on his back.

He turned, pinning her with his stare. Her eyes were wide with a deer-in-the-headlights look. "Perhaps you do trust me, but I don't trust myself."

"Why?"

He shifted slightly and her hand slid from his back. "I don't wish to talk about it." He walked to the window and looked out through the darkness. How could he tell her he'd killed a woman—the only other woman in all of these long centuries who had stirred something more in him than the

need to feed?

Lysandra had been beautiful, a Goddess among women. He'd loved her from the first moment he laid eyes on her. She had scorned him. Wished him to the devil she claimed spawned him, but he couldn't leave her as she begged him to. Then he'd been too weak.

He'd been different then. Very different. Unable to stop himself, he'd looked into her beautiful blue eyes and mesmerized her, compelled her to his bed and she obeyed—not because she wanted to, but because he'd forced it.

She undressed herself, her eyes glazed with compulsion, not desire. After he watched her lay down on his bed, like a sacrifice waiting for slaughter, he took her. He took her innocence, her blood and ultimately, her life. Angelo had never allowed himself the luxury of taking any woman he felt other appetites for since then.

Turning, he looked at Tori. She was beauty personified. Long golden hair framed her face like a halo. Expressive emerald eyes always told him what she felt, whether she chose to voice it or not. Damn. He couldn't do to her what he'd done to Lysandra. He would kill himself first. Angelo clenched his fists at his sides. He would not feed from her. It would be his undoing and *her* death. After he lost control all those years ago with the one woman he never should have had to compel,

Angelo knew beyond a shadow of doubt that he would lose all pretence of civility, of being human, if he took Tori now.

Closing his eyes, he refused to turn when he heard the rustling of bedclothes behind him. The urge to spin around, walk to that bed and take her was overwhelming. He fought the urge and lost. She had her back to him. Her clothing lay neatly folded on the chair near the bed. She crawled under the thick comforter, resting her bare body against the silk sheets he knew covered the oversized bed. He squeezed his eyes shut and suppressed the urge to groan.

God help him, he was losing the battle—knew it even as he walked toward the bed. He tried to stop, but his feet continued to carry him closer to her. He, of all people, was under compulsion—Tori's. He felt the cool air brush his sensitized skin and was shocked to find he was naked. He looked down at his exposed body and wondered when he'd wished his clothing away.

Tori turned and looked at him. She smiled softly when she saw his nude body and moved to the middle of the down-stuffed mattress. She threw the covers back and invited him into the bed.

Angelo was powerless to resist. The strange compulsion still held him within its grip. He lowered himself to the sheets warmed by the heat

of her body, then looked into her eyes and was lost. He knew this was inevitable. Even Ricardo knew. It was why he'd left them alone.

Tori leaned forward and cupped his cheek. She placed a soft kiss upon his lips and he growled with satisfaction, returning her kiss, thrusting his tongue into her mouth, savoring the sweet taste of her.

"Yes, Angelo," she whispered against his lips. "Please."

Angelo knew she didn't know what she was asking for. She knew the mechanics of it, but the feelings Angelo stirred within her were something totally foreign to her. He felt it in her mind. She tilted her head back as his lips trailed to her neck. He kissed her ear, suckled her lobe and ventured lower to the swell of her perfect breast.

* * * *

Tori nearly cried out when he took the hardened peak into his mouth. He suckled gently, nipped at the hardened bud lightly with his teeth, alternating from one to the other. She moaned his name, threaded her fingers through his thick ebony hair and pulled him closer. If she could have pulled him into her very being, she still wouldn't have had enough of him.

Angelo cupped her breast with his hand,

squeezed as he held her in his mouth, then let his hand trail down her body to the apex of her thighs. He couldn't believe his good fortune to find such a woman as she. Placing his leg between hers, he pushed gently until her legs parted for him. First testing her moisture with one fingertip, he inserted another, his fingers alternately plunging inside and circling the tight bud of her aroused clit.

Her head thrashed about on the pillow and he kissed her as she moaned through her first climax. Still, Angelo was determined to bring her more pleasure. He wanted her mindless. If he could do anything for Tori, he would give her the most beautiful first time he could. Angelo continued to massage that sensitive part of her while his fingers still slid in and out of her virgin channel.

* * * *

God, it felt good. Tori didn't know what else to do but arch into his caresses as he continually massaged her clit. His hands worked magic on her fevered body. They *were* magic. She screamed his name when he brought her to another shattering orgasm.

Tori was certain she'd go mad when he moved lower, settled between her thighs, his mouth closing over her erect clit. He suckled her, his

fingers buried deep in her channel. The warm velvet of his tongue sliding over her engorged nub caused her hips to jerk, her legs to stiffen, as her inner muscles spasmed, tightening on his invading fingers.

Slowly, he removed his fingers, replacing them with his tongue. Driving it deep inside her, he lapped up the slick fluid that proved her desire. Her head dropped back and she screamed a third orgasm to the world.

She had barely returned to earth when she felt him move up between her legs and push the head of his erect penis against her. Her legs opened wider to accommodate him as he pushed his thick cock into her drenched vagina. He slid into her slowly, stretching her, taking care not to hurt her. Suddenly, there was a sharp pain and she cried out.

* * * *

Angelo leaned down and kissed her deeply. "It will soon ease and then you will feel no more pain. I shall take you to the stars," he whispered in her ear, his breath coming in short pants. "I will try not to lose control, but if I do, you must use this," he said, fashioning a dagger with the power of his mind.

"If I feed and do not stop, you must use this

against me.” He handed her the glowing knife. “It is not like other daggers, this can kill me with one blow anywhere on my person. I have infused it with the power to take my life, should you feel that yours is in danger from me.”

Angelo’s teeth began to lengthen in his mouth. It was a measure of his desire for her that he lisped a bit as he talked, unable to control the need to feed even as he spoke. He pulled slowly from her tight sheath and again buried himself deep.

Tori cried out, cradling his head to her as he finally gave in and sank his teeth deep in the soft flesh of her neck. She screamed another release, still holding Angelo’s head to her where he fed with the unbridled frenzy of a man too long denied.

“I trust you, Angelo,” she whispered, feathering her fingers through his hair just before her body went limp.

CHAPTER FOUR

Angelo returned to himself at those whispered words of trust. He lifted his head. Blood trickled from his lips. The two puncture wounds on Tori's neck were still open. The fresh blood moved sluggishly from the wound as if there wasn't much left to force its way from her body. He looked at her pale face. Her closed eyes and the golden lashes that framed her beautiful green eyes fanned her white cheeks.

"No!" he cried, then lapped at the wound, using his immense power to heal it instantly. His eyes filled with tears at the thought that he'd killed her. She'd trusted him and he'd killed her. He buried his head between her breasts and, for the first time in millennia, cried.

She is fine.

Ricardo reached through time and space to contact him, obviously feeling his pain. *You stopped in time.*

Angelo shook his head. *It's Lysandra all over*

again. You never should have left me alone with her. He despised himself for his weakness that just may cause the death of another woman he loved. Angelo stared down at her still form, her lashes making dark gold crescents on her cheeks. One of her hands moved. It slid from the bed beside her pillow, over her shoulder and chest, then finally into Angelo's hair and he stilled.

What's the matter, Angelo? Please, tell me what's wrong. Did I do something to hurt you?

Tori lay still, her eyes still closed, but she was moving. She held his head loosely against her chest, which now, he realized, rose and fell regularly. Angelo rolled off her, bringing her up against him as he rolled to the side. He cradled her in his arms and thanked the gods that she'd survived. "Sleep now, love." He pressed a kiss to her forehead and pulled her against him. "Sleep and tomorrow we'll talk about you not using the knife on me like I instructed." He should spank her pert little ass for that, but thought as he reached down to rub her rear, he was too damned glad he hadn't killed her.

Angelo lay beside her, playing with her hair. He was unable to sleep and watched her, making sure her breath didn't stop, that it grew stronger with each inhalation, that her heart grew stronger with each beat. His throat grew thick as he thought about her bravery, her selflessness. Even

when he'd almost killed her, she gave him her trust.

She'd been able to do what he'd thought impossible and reached him as he fed. Tori sated the hunger and reached the inner beast as he fed in the throes of sexual frenzy. What did it mean that she could reach him when he the beast was so deeply entrenched within him? Angelo lay wondering as the night turned to day and she began to stir beside him.

* * * *

Tori opened her eyes and blinked at the brightness. The sun shone through the thick-paned windows, the curtains of the bed still parted from the night before. She looked from the strange wavy glass of the windows to Angelo's sleeping form and squealed. Jumping up, she pulled the heavy velvet drapes closed with an audible snap. Angelo's eyes flew open.

"What the hell?"

"Thank god you're still alive. The sun didn't hurt you did it?" she asked from her position over his body like a protective drape.

Angelo chuckled. "Of course I'm still alive." He looked to the light seeping in through the blinds.

"Don't," she cried and covered his eyes with her hand. "I'm trying to keep it off you. Can you

feel yourself heating up anywhere?"

He nodded. "Yes, I can." He smiled. "I'm heating up all right, but not in the way you've imagined."

"Are you uncomfortable?" She raised her head to look into his eyes.

"Most decidedly so." He grunted. "Do you think you could move your knee a bit to the right? It's pressing into a sensitive spot."

She raised herself up on her knees to try and pull the drapes around the bed tighter.

He grunted again. "Please, stop," he said, pulling her back down on top of him. "Before you either kill me or unman me. Just lie still for a moment," he breathed into her ear.

Tori lifted her head to look into his eyes and smiled. "I'm glad I got you covered in time," she said, looking around the interior of their little cocoon. "Do you think it's safe for me to get off you?"

Angelo nodded. "Yes, Victoria, it is certainly safe enough for you to release my family jewels from where you have them pinned to the mattress," he wheezed.

Understanding dawned and she rolled off him so quickly she was sure she'd injured important parts of his anatomy on the way. "God, Angelo, I'm so sorry," she said contrite.

He wrapped his arm around her, dragging her

close. "Do not worry about it, my heart." He reached up, turned her face to his and kissed her.

"Hmm. I love the way you do that," she said, licking her lips and smiling. "I don't know if we should start anything though. The sun is climbing higher in the sky. Don't you have to sleep soon?" She watched him with wide eyes, expecting him to drop into the vampire sleep of the dead at any moment.

* * * *

Angelo smiled slightly. "What do you think happens after the sun rises?" He couldn't stop himself from asking. He knew what she thought. What she was sure was going to happen to him. However, he was having too much fun to give up now. Fun was something he'd had too little of over the last few hundred years.

Tori rolled up onto her side, her elbow on the mattress, and rested her head on her hand. "Well," she said, then licked her lips. "Don't you like die for the day or something?" She smiled. "I half-expected you to expire on the spot as soon as the sun rose. She looked at him and tilted her head. "But I can see that you can at least take the early morning hours."

Angelo pushed himself up into a sitting position. The sheet dropped, pooling down

around his waist. He flipped the drape open.

Tori jumped up and gasped. "What are you trying to do, kill yourself?" the last came out as a near screech.

Reaching out, he caught her as she leaned forward to close the drapes again and almost fell. "If the sun would hurt me, I would sleep in the dungeon."

"Do you mean to tell me you don't drop dead in the daylight?" She pouted a bit. "And here I was looking forward to telling my gorgeous vampire to drop dead every morning."

He chuckled. "You can still tell me to do so, but don't be disappointed if I do not comply. Those of my kind who have reached my age or older needn't sleep at all unless we expend a lot of energy." Any more action between these sheets in the next few hours would qualify him for an entire night of rest. The thought was intriguing. He hadn't slept since his last battle over twenty-five years before. The change would be welcome.

"Though if I turn you, my dear, I could tell you to do so every sunrise." He grinned. "I can hear myself saying it now. I shall kiss you like this." He kissed her. "Then," he added, lifting his head and glancing toward the window. "I shall wait for the first glimmer of the sun's rays over the horizon before I say, *drop dead, gorgeous*, and you will comply."

"Turn me?" Her eyes widened. "I'm not sure, Angelo..." Stilling, she put her hand to her throat and said with a squeak, "Wait a minute. You have a dungeon?" Then she looked at the wall over the head of the bed, obviously noticing the stone wall for the first time. "Where—" She swallowed. "Where are we?"

Angelo grinned at her delayed reaction. "I think the more important question for you to ask is *when* are we? The where is rather common. We're in my villa in Italy. The year is a bit more difficult to explain."

CHAPTER FIVE

“‘U’h...the year?” Her eyes glazed over a bit as she took in the information. “Not only have you taken me to another country, but you’ve taken me to another time?” Her gaze darted around the bed before she looked out through the opening of the drapes. “Then, um...when are we, Angelo, and why did you think it necessary to bend the fabric of time to bring me here?”

“Because Mykaylia and Antoine cannot follow us here without help.” He climbed out of the bed and walked to the window. “I thought it best to remove you from their reach.”

“Well you certainly did that.”

Angelo felt her walk up behind him. He smelled the scent of her renewed arousal as she wrapped her arms around his waist. Fissures of pleasure rippled up his spine at her touch. He closed his eyes, reveling in her scent, the feel of her head resting between his shoulder blades and

the brush of her silk soft hair against his skin. What could he possibly do to keep her in his life, to convince her to stay with them, to become like them?

He immediately thought of Ricardo and wondered if he had the right to keep her here with him while his friend saw to their safety. Ricardo had known he needed this, that he needed to tie her to him, but had been unable to do so. Her scent wrapped around him and he inhaled deeply. What should he do? Should he leave and allow Ricardo to visit her? Would it be too much too soon?

Taking a deep breath, he turned and wrapped her in his arms. "I love the way you smell." He leaned down and buried his face in her hair. His cock twitched and grew, wanting another round of lovemaking, but he knew she wanted answers. She deserved answers. How could he give her anything less when she'd braved the night with him, even knowing what he was?

"I love the way you smell, too." She pressed her face against his chest and inhaled deeply. "You smell of the forest." She frowned and sniffed again. "And some...elusive spice I know I've smelled before, but can't name," she said before she pulled away and gave him a narrow-eyed look. "Don't think I've forgotten that you're supposed to tell me how you do what you did and

why."

Angelo stifled a grin and reached out to pull her back into his arms. "I haven't forgotten, love." No, he hadn't. How could he forget something as important, and as terrifying, as that?

After all these years, he'd finally found someone who wanted him, even knowing what he was, and he would most likely lose her when he told her what he had to say. He wasn't sure he had the right to make that decision for him and Ricardo alone. It was why he'd hedged until now, but it seemed she was through waiting for answers if the look on her face was any indication.

"Come. Let's sit on the bed." Gently, he tugged her toward the bed and its huge mattress, tempted to take her mind off the subject in other ways. He would not make love to her again until he told her the truth. All of it. Regardless of how he felt or what he felt, she deserved that much at least. He only wished Ricardo were here to help soften the blow. After sitting on the bed, he pulled Tori into his lap, wrapped his arms around her and dressed them both with a thought.

He stared at her for a moment, startled at her unusual beauty in the sapphire dress he'd fashioned. Shaking his head, Angelo brought his thoughts back to the present, to what she both wanted and needed to know.

"It all started a few millennia ago." He ignored

the widening of her eyes. He'd admitted to her that he was old, dusty even, but he wondered what she would think of him when she found out exactly how old he was. "Several thousand years ago there were two kinds of beings on the Earth. What you would most likely call angels and demons. Neither of them were quite what you've been told. The angels came from a different place, a higher plane of existence, just as the demons had. Though both species came from a higher plane, they came from different planes and met here."

He ran his fingers through his hair and tried to think of a way to make her understand. "There was no all-powerful being who directed either species. No god and no devil. They were just two separate groups of individuals with certain supernatural characteristics." Pausing, he glanced at her to be sure she understood his explanation so far.

"And?" she prompted.

"Our people are descendants of them." There he'd said it.

"You're...you're... Are you descended from the angels or the demons?" She stared up at him, her expression pensive.

Her body grew stiff on his lap as though she intended to flee if she didn't like his answer. Good grief! Had she no faith in him even after what

they'd shared? "I'm descended from both." He didn't miss the split second of shock that flashed across her face. "They stayed here for several years before others of their kind came and forced them back where they belonged. A precious few hid and remained. They bred and..." He paused to take a deep breath. "Creatures like me are the product of their *aberrant* behavior."

He didn't see it as aberrant. How could two people falling in love, regardless of their backgrounds or race, not want to be together? His parents had loved each other and they had finally returned to their respective planes to protect him and others like him. They may have been pure bloods of their respective races, but they were *not* immoral. Far from it. Tori rested her head on his shoulder and he looked down with surprise.

"Aberrant behavior?" She sighed. "Do you consider what we've done bad?"

"No, never." How could he when it was the most wonderful experience of his life? He could only hope she felt the same about Ricardo, about their sharing her, because he knew there was no way he could keep her and live his life in happiness if she couldn't accept Ricardo as well. It would kill him to let her go, but it would also kill him to leave Ricardo with no one.

"Then why is what they did immoral?" She gazed up into his eyes.

Hers filled with tears that spilled out and slid down her face like silver threads on her creamy cheeks. "That kind of love is so precious, so rare. You can't ignore it. You can't call it bad, immoral or aberrant. It's the most pure thing in the world, possibly the universe and in all planes of existence, regardless of what their people thought." Sucking her bottom lip into her mouth, she bit down lightly and frowned before letting it slip from her teeth. "Why do you suppose they thought it was wrong? Didn't they love, couldn't they love?"

Angelo shook his head. "Their people knew no emotions. It was only when they came here that they realized they could feel. After staying here for several months to study this plane, they realized they had emotions. Most of them returned to their own worlds, intent on ridding themselves of their unwanted feelings. When they returned and the others did not, teams were sent to retrieve them.

"Those originally left behind, refused to return and hid themselves deep in the ground, hoping the others could not find them. There they stayed until the teams finally discovered them and forced them home." He looked down, took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. "They left their children hidden deeper in the Earth. They didn't tell their people we existed and we were left here

to fend for ourselves, to learn to live here among humans and keep our species secret."

"Why didn't they all stay once they discovered their feelings?"

He shrugged. "Some think those who returned were recalled before their emotions were fully developed and new teams were sent. With the others who came here, it was easy to determine how long one could stay without developing emotion. And without emotion, following orders was no hardship."

* * * *

"No it wasn't." Ricardo strode into the room. "I thought you'd like to know that your other self left for England several months ago and your people are glad to have you home. Apparently, there's been some issues with the people in the village.

"Perhaps you should send a courier to England to..." He cleared his throat and glanced at Tori, unsure of how much Angelo had revealed about the extent of their power. "To inform him that you are here. You don't want to surprise your people with him appearing here any time in the near future."

Turning, he faced Tori fully and took a good long look at her. She didn't seem ready to run from them, but sometimes looks could be

deceiving. Several hundred years ago, he'd assumed Lysandra had loved them both enough to overcome her fear of what they were. Perhaps she had, but her mind could never seem to wrap itself around the fact that the both of them wanted her, needed her and intended to share her.

It was his fault Lysandra was dead. Certainly, Angelo had played a part...but it was *his* fault his friend lost control. What Angelo hadn't told Tori was that they were both there. They both took her and they'd both fed from her. Since he was older, it was just like Angelo to take full blame for every mistake they made.

Ricardo disagreed. The blame belonged on both of their shoulders. They had both been arrogant fools who thought they could force her compliance by placing her under compulsion. It was only through his studies over these last centuries that he'd learned a human mate had to be claimed one at a time and in full control of their faculties in order to survive the claiming.

It was Tori's acceptance of what they were that saved her life. The elemental laws of claiming a mate was imprinted on them before birth and was something that ensured they could not force a human to mate. He wasn't sure which side of their ancestry it came from. They were all descendants of both. Those who had achieved procreation with their own kind took them back to their own

worlds. They'd left the hybrids, the *mutants*, here because there was nowhere else for them to go.

He'd long ago released the rage at an unknown people who took his parents from him. He'd been just a child when left behind. Angelo had been an adult male who had taken on the responsibility of many of their kind. Nurturing them and raising them into the men and women they were. All of them would die for Angelo and Ricardo had stayed with him, knowing that somehow, their fates entwined.

He realized now what they missed when they met Lysandra so many years before. She was beautiful with her sapphire eyes and easy smile. It was just too damn bad they hadn't seen the religious fanaticism that had ultimately caused the end of her life. Had she been able to see past what the damned priests had drummed into her mind, perhaps she'd be alive today.

Ricardo took a deep breath and released it, knowing he had to absolve himself and Angelo of their guilt. All three of them had played a part in Lysandra's death. Had she not teased them, flirted with them, then refused them, perhaps things would have been different.

Looking at Tori sitting on Angelo's lap, her head resting against his shoulder, brought it all back. Ricardo's stomach clenched at the thought that she hadn't refused Angelo, but could still

refuse him. What would he do then? He couldn't force her. He knew he would kill her if he tried.

Just as Angelo had fed too much those many years ago, so would he. Even now, his body burned with the need to have her writhing beneath him, moaning his name, but he knew he must wait. If he made love to her now, he would want to feed and, if he fed, he would kill her. Just looking at her told him Angelo had almost lost control and fed too deeply. To take more blood from her now would surely end her life.

* * * *

"Hmm..." Tori frowned, still a bit confused. She looked everywhere except at their faces, thinking. They were angel-demon hybrids. That still didn't explain why they needed blood to survive or how they could bend time or whatever it was they did to bring her here.

She glanced around, marveling at the large fireplace, the huge armoire that stood in the corner in place of a closet and the four-foot thick outer walls. Hell, the window casement could have been a bed. Just plop a mattress on it and you wouldn't need the lovely four-poster, though the bed was a bit bigger. Angelo may call it a villa, but it still seemed like a castle, no matter how she looked at it. Hell, this room was almost as big as her

apartment.

Striding to the window, she climbed onto the casing and looked down over a beautiful garden filled with a plethora of foliage. The only flowers she thought she recognized from here were the roses that seemed to grow in large abundance, though she wasn't sure. The glass was thick and wavy in most places, distorting the view.

She ignored the strange pull of the two men and stayed at the window, her forehead pressed against the cool glass. The thought that she could have both of these men came unbidden. It was almost as though they'd implanted the knowledge into her brain. Smiling slightly, she acknowledged the fact that it could all be wishful thinking. Just wanting them both could have put the fanciful thoughts in her head. What would she do if they both wanted her? *Faint, most likely*, she thought wryly.

What should she do? Should she allow them to take over her life the way it seemed they wanted, or should she insist on returning home? She'd already lost her job. The restaurant didn't take kindly to missing a shift without calling in. A no-call-no-show was grounds for immediate dismissal. She bit her lip.

She *was* with a vampire who could time travel. If she asked, would he return her to her own time to get to work before her shift started? Did she

really want him to? Would they just sit in this room or would they interact with people while they were here? Couldn't her presence in this time change history as she knew it? What if she inadvertently caused the demise of her own ancestors, which would mean she could never be born? God, this whole business made her mind spin and her head ache.

Bowing her head, she rubbed her temples in an effort to remove the ache that settled between her eyes and branched out to encompass her head. Holy cow! She'd never once entertained the idea of time travel. Having read about it in many romance novels, she was certain that, while romantic, the whole idea of living in the past was horrifying. The thought of no running water, no antibiotics and no Internet was enough to make her beg them to return her to her home, regardless of the danger. Only two things stopped her and they stood across the room silently letting her exorcise her own demons. Tori almost giggled at that thought. Exorcising her demons...

She turned away from the window and faced them, knowing that she'd take them both if they would have her. She wasn't sure how a three-way relationship would work, but she knew she wanted one with them. If forced to choose between them, she wasn't sure she could. Tori only hoped they could share her. They'd put her

in this damned mess, they could damn well make it a nice mess to be in.

Lifting her chin, she glanced first at Angelo, then at Ricardo. Swallowing thickly, she cleared her throat and asked the question that had been burning her tongue since Ricardo walked into the room. Taking a deep breath, she raised her right brow and fisted her hands on her hips. "So how does this work, boys? After I regain my strength, do I get Ricardo to myself for a little while or am I going to have you both together?" She frowned at their shocked expressions. "Because I'll tell you right now, I've spent the last ten years lusting after you both and I'm not prepared to give either one of you up now."

Tori swallowed thickly, a knot forming in her tummy. She could hardly believe what she just said—to these two staid ancients no less. What in the name of all that was holy had come over her? She wanted nothing more than to cover her face with mortification and beg them both to forget what she just said. Instead, she alternately stared them in the eyes and continued, feeling more brash and brazen than she ever had in her life. "Perhaps ten years isn't long to you two, but to me it's a lifetime."

A lifetime denied the pleasure of their company, denied the intense joy of knowing she'd found the one man—or in her case, two—who

could make her life complete. She met Angelo's gaze. "I love you. As ridiculous as it sounds, I've loved you for years, but..." God this was going to make her look like such a hussy. Tori shifted her gaze to Ricardo. "I love you, too." She looked down at her feet, unable to meet their gazes. "I've wanted you both for ten years. I think I've loved you almost that long."

How could she ever explain how she felt? Shrugging, she raised her hands, palms up. "Don't ask me how or why." Her eyes filled with tears and her chest constricted with emotion. "I don't know the answer. I only know I don't feel complete without you." Taking a deep breath, she sighed before she looked at Angelo. "The last several hours in your company have been the happiest in my life."

There. She'd said it—finally gotten it all out in the open. If the two of them thought her too young or too fickle to know her own mind, she'd just have to convince them otherwise. Tori only wished she knew how. Pressing her lips together, she waited for a response, expected one even. What she didn't expect was for Ricardo to walk to her, sink to his knees and press his cheek to her stomach.

"You humble us." He gestured to Angelo, including him in his statement. "We are both awed by your courage and acceptance."

CHAPTER SIX

Two days had passed. Two days they'd spent in this time hiding from their enemies. Angelo fought the urge to slam his fist down on the desk. Not only would he startle Tori, he would most likely break the damned thing. It wouldn't be the first time. He took a deep breath and tried to keep his emotions and body under control.

His body ached with the need to bury himself into Tori's moist heat, but he also knew they must await the return of her strength. Even then, it would be Ricaro's turn to spend time with her.

The ache in his balls was painful to say the least. He wanted nothing more than to thrust himself into her tight sheath and drive them both over the edge of certain ecstasy until they both screamed their release to the very heavens. However, it wasn't to be.

Angelo slanted a look in her direction and tried to keep his lascivious thoughts to himself. It didn't

seem to matter what time of day or night it was or what she wore. Every time Tori walked into a room and her sweet scent reached his nostrils, he was lost. Libidinous thoughts ran rampant every moment he spent in her company and, the more he tried to control them, the worse they became.

What in the hell was wrong with him? He and Ricardo had learned much over the years. They studied the journals of those who had come before them. Their parents left what they could to make gaining knowledge for their survival easier. Still, even those rare and valuable texts didn't answer all of the questions.

He knew they must each take her once, then claim her together for Tori to bear them children. They must imprint their DNA upon her equally. Otherwise, she may only bear one of them children, if at all.

After Lysandra's death, Angelo tried not to think of what it would be like to have offspring of his own. Now that Ricardo and he found Victoria, the old thoughts, the old dreams and desires resurfaced and he found he wanted children more than he realized.

Glancing up, his gaze zeroed in on Tori as she continued to wander around the room, examining the books on the shelves, a frown on her face. He couldn't seem to get enough of looking at her in the long gown she wore. She may hate it, but he

couldn't help think how beautiful she looked in the smooth emerald green satin.

Fighting a smile, he pretended not to notice her consternation. "There are several books in English over there." He waved toward a smaller bookcase in the corner. "I don't know that you will understand much. The language has changed much over the years."

"Hmm..." She began to wander over to the shelf he indicated. "I think I could understand Shakespeare. Are we too early even for that?" she asked as she perused the shelf. "You know, one of you could just pop forward and grab a few good romance novels for me."

"You know we can't do that. If someone saw you with them we could be burned at the stake as witches or heretics." He sighed and rubbed his face, knowing a woman as active as a twenty-first century female must have something to do or go mad with boredom. They had to get her back where she belonged before something happened to change the course of history. Standing, he smiled and held out his hand. "Would you like to go for a ride?"

"Ride?" Her eyes wide, she looked down at herself, grabbed her skirt and lifted it up until her calves showed. "On a horse...in this?"

Angleo hoped two days was enough of a rest for her because he was about to assign Ricardo a

very difficult task if her strength hadn't returned. God knew he couldn't do it and keep his hands off her. It would have to be Ricardo.

"Perhaps Ricardo would take you for a ride. He could hold you in front of him and take you to the village. You could see what life here is like and get out into the fresh air as well." Later they would have to leave because these backward people would never understand their three-way relationship. Sighing, he pulled the cord behind the desk and waited for the servant to appear.

"Yes, Sir?" The maid bobbed a curtsey.

"Send for Don Ricardo." He glanced at Tori and gave her soft smile. "The *signora* wishes to see the village."

"As you wish, sir." She bobbed another curtsey and hurried from the room.

If any of his servants noticed a difference in his speech from one of his visits to the next, he couldn't be certain. Angelo knew his speech patterns must be different with the influence of modern speech. He'd noticed a few of the servants looking at him strangely after giving them orders. He only hoped they chalked it up to his being in another country. At least he was quite sure they didn't believe it was from living in another century.

Angelo found he could time travel quite by mistake. Others of his kind didn't have the

journals he did. Selfish or not, he'd hoarded them throughout the long centuries lest they fall into the wrong hands. Too many miracles lay at the tips of their fingers and, for some, the temptation to use the powers for evil would be too great.

The part of their nature that was *Anglecle'* could handle it, even embrace it and use it for good. However, there were some, who took after the other side of their heritage and channeled the darker powers of the *Demanide*. It was those whom he kept the journals from reaching, those who would use the power of time travel and inter-dimensional travel for evil or their own gain. People like Mykalia and Antoine who killed for fun just because they could.

Angelo rarely put himself in a position of protecting humans. He wasn't stupid. People may dream of their superheroes, but if one should ever surface, he had no doubt that it wouldn't take long for the poor bastard to go under the knife in the name of science.

Instead of placing himself and others of his kind in harm's way, he decided a long time ago that as long as the rogues weren't drawing undue attention, they could do as they pleased. Humans had made their beds by targeting anyone who was different and killing some of his friends—human friends—and, as far as he was concerned, now they could lie in it. However, those like Antoine

and his sister, *if* they were truly related, made the top of a very short list.

"Did you need something?"

Angelo glanced up to see Ricardo leaning against the doorjamb, an eyebrow raised in question. Tilting his head toward Tori, Angelo gave him a grim smile and indicated the account book in front of him. "Tori is feeling a bit..."

"Crazy, nuts, like if she doesn't get out of here, she'll scream her freaking head off?" Tori said, striding toward them with a strained smile pasted on her face.

Ricardo bit his lip, obviously knowing better than to laugh. "And this requires my attention because..."

"Because I told her you'd take her for a ride. She's going stir crazy in here and since she doesn't have a habit." He shuffled the paperwork in front of him. "I suggested that you may not take offense to riding her on your lap."

* * * *

Ricardo's cock hardened at the thought. He'd like to ride her all right, but was she recovered enough to risk it? He glanced toward Tori and almost gave in regardless. "Are you feeling...up to it?" He knew she'd understand the unspoken question.

"Yes." She blushed prettily as she clasped her

hands together and glanced down at the floor.

If she only knew how arousing he found her shyness. Her obvious discomfort only made him want her more and more. Shifting to make himself a bit more comfortable in the tight breeches that were fashionable in this time, he tried to keep his erection from embarrassing her further. After all, the last thing he wanted was for her to hesitate. He knew just where to take her to begin her riding lesson. "Go get yourself something to cover your head and a wrap. I'll have my horse saddled and await you in the front hall."

Tori bolted from the room.

He almost laughed at her eagerness. Was she eager to be alone with him or was she just that desperate to get out of the house? Turning to face Angelo, he sat on the edge of the chair in front of the other man's desk. "Is my horse being saddled or should I see to it?"

"You'll have to see to it. I didn't assume you wouldn't already be occupied with other matters."

"Okay." He stood. "I'll send Antony to the stables."

A lump formed in Ricardo's throat when he spotted Tori at the head of the stairs. She was a vision no matter what she wore. Watching as she made her way gracefully down the stairs, he moved closer and took her hand as she descended

the last few steps. Tucking her hand in the crook of his elbow, he leaned down and winked. "Shall we begin, *signora*?"

Another becoming blush dusted her cheeks as she nodded. "I am very prepared, Sir."

Ricardo couldn't help the surge of pride that washed through him. Their mate was one of the bravest women he'd ever met. She'd faced killers, the unimaginable magic of their kind and time travel. It was a miracle recent events hadn't turned her into a raving lunatic. "Shall we go then?" He led her through the door Antony held open for them and out into the bright light of day.

"You know," she said, her voice low. She glanced around for a moment, then licked her lips. "It still feels weird that you can go out in the sunlight. I always thought—"

"I know what you thought," he interrupted. "We perpetuated that belief because we knew if others saw us in the light of day they wouldn't believe we were those who preyed on the populace at night."

Ricardo led her down the steps and, grasping her wrist, lifted her onto his horse. Silver Striker was a fine and fast horse, but he was also gentle. In fact, Striker was the best trained horse he'd ever had. Taking the reins from the stable boy, he patted the horse on his velvety nose. "It's good to see you, old friend. I wish I had one just like you

where I live now." That was not to be. Striker would die here in this time, never leaving offspring and his amazing intelligence would be lost for all time.

"Hold," he instructed the animal, then handed Tori the reins. After climbing onto the destrier's back, he took the reins and gave Striker a long low whistle. The horse immediately turned toward the gate and headed out at a good pace. "Where would you like to go?" Ricardo said the words in Tori's ear and grinned as goose flesh covered the skin on her upper arms.

Shrugging, Tori leaned back against him and sighed. "I don't care as long as we can spend a few hours without having to stare at those damned stone walls."

Ricardo spurred the horse into a canter and headed off to a nice secluded place where he knew they could spend the afternoon alone.

There was a cave on a hillside near the villa on Angelo's property and it would be a wonderful place for them to while away a few hours. The feel of her body pressing against his made his cock pulse with anticipation and his heart race faster than the pounding of the horse's galloping hooves. Hell, he'd free himself, raise her skirts and sink into her slick channel while they rode if he thought he could get away with it.

Suppressing a groan, Ricardo almost gave in to

the urge to do just that, but instead waited, knowing the anticipation would only make their encounter much sweeter for each of them. Tori lifted her face into the breeze, obviously relishing the feel of the wind on her cheeks. Her hair fluttered behind her, a cloud of blonde silk that brushed his shoulders and cheeks. The scent nearly drove him over the edge and he spurred the horse faster, unable to keep the anticipation from driving him onward toward their private destination.

The cave, well hidden in the depths of brush, would serve his purpose and, with his powers, he could create the illusion of a grand bedroom complete with the silks and satins their mate deserved. Concentrating on the decorations he desired, he pulled the horse to a stop and dismounted, still holding Tori in his arms. The desire to keep her near grew greater as they approached the cave.

Her breathing grew shorter, erratic, as he carried her toward the cliff wall and the cave. His only thought was getting her deep in the depths of the cave so he could strip her bare and drive his cock into the moist warmth of her woman's channel. Ricardo's head nearly buzzed with the need as he parted the brush with his mind and strode into the darkened cave.

"It's cooler in here," she said shivering, her

words breathless.

"Yes. It will be warmer where we are going." He would see to it. The pool in the chamber that awaited him would soon warm and they would bathe in privacy after he took her.

"I can't see."

Her voice trembled a bit, reminding him she didn't yet have the increased night vision of one of his kind. She would soon, if either he or Angelo had anything to say about it. She belonged to them now. She'd accepted them and, he thought grimly, if she survived his claiming, they would all become one. After the three of them bonded and Tori became one of The Endowed, she would be very hard to kill.

His heart raced and his breathing became labored as he carried her deeper into the cave. He wanted to run, to rip her clothes from her body and bury himself so deep inside her neither of them would know where she left off and he began, but he knew he couldn't. He needed to prepare her for Angelo and him to take her together. Hell, just the thought of them both buried deep inside her, as close as two heterosexual men could get, set his cock throbbing even harder.

When they finally reached the chamber he sought, Ricardo set her down slowly, sliding the length of her over his front. She shivered in his embrace and he again fought the urge to take her.

It took every bit of control he possessed to keep from driving into her hot, wet channel and finding oblivion in the pleasure of her body.

Fashioning a fully furnished bedroom suite with his mind, he lit the chamber with the many candles set on the furniture that graced the chamber and walls. He would spare nothing for this woman's comfort.

* * * *

Tori glanced up into Ricardo's face, nearly taken aback by the raw desire etched into his features. His eyes fairly glowed with need as he looked down at her in the flickering candlelight.

Her breath caught in her throat. She wasn't sure if it was from the beauty of the crystal-lined cave with its candlelight glistening off the walls as though reflecting from sparkling diamonds or if it was the man before her. He stared down at her, his expression filled with such desire she wasn't sure how she would ever fill his needs.

Reaching up, she cupped his cheek. "I think," she paused in an attempt to gather her courage. "I think I'm ready, Ric." Blushing, she lowered her gaze to the center of his chest and added, "If you still want me."

"Still want you?" Tilting her head back with his finger beneath her chin, he looked deep into her

eyes. "I want you so badly, I shake with it. I fight myself every minute of every day not to take you, throw you down on any flat surface and drive my cock so deep into you you'll never get me out."

Tori's heart swelled with the knowledge that he still wanted her, needed her in his life. She didn't know what she would do if one or both of them changed their minds and decided they didn't need her. It would most likely kill her.

She moaned when his lips covered hers, his hands caressing every part of her aching body. Shivering with need as he loosened the fastenings on her gown, Tori reveled in his attention to detail as he kissed every newly exposed bit of flesh.

When he ducked lower and took one newly exposed nipple into his mouth, she gasped, holding his head to her breast. The myriad of sensation flowing through her had her knees feeling like melted butter and her insides churning with heat and need. Nothing mattered at that moment except for the sensations rocking through her as his hands skimmed lightly over her flesh and his mouth took her to the edge of ecstasy.

Before she knew it, she was on her back on the bed with Ricardo's head buried between her thighs. Hot breath stirred her lower lips as he slowly pushed one finger inside her slick depths. Heat burned her middle as he licked her, his tongue sliding through her wet folds. Nothing

could have prepared her for the onslaught of sensation that followed when he suckled her clit into his mouth.

Screaming, Tori reached down, grabbed his hair and held him to her as she came. How would she survive this? She lay panting on the bed, wondering how she would keep her sanity with these two men who could so easily bring her such pleasure. Ricardo rose above her, his breath sending tendrils of delight over her flesh. He pressed his lips to hers in a long, drugging kiss.

He pulled back. "Roll over, love. I need to claim you differently than Angelo. I must prepare you for the last step."

The last step? The thought made her shiver. She wasn't sure what he meant by that, but didn't really care right now. All she cared about at this moment was having Ricardo's cock inside her, driving the intense need from her body.

"Raise your hips."

He placed a pillow beneath her as she did. Caressing her buttocks, he worked two slick fingers into her tight back hole.

Wriggling, Tori could only moan in mindless pleasure. Part of her had been frightened, leery of what she knew must happen. Still, another part of her reveled in the fact that soon she would belong to Angelo and Ricardo so thoroughly nothing would ever part them again.

Writhing on the bed beneath him, Tori couldn't help but push back against his hand after he inserted a third finger into her ass. If he didn't put an end to her suffering soon, she'd surely lose her mind. "Please... I can't stand it anymore."

He stopped suddenly and pulled his fingers from her. "Didn't mean to hurt you."

Tori almost laughed. Almost. "You aren't hurting me." Why did her two men only read her mind when she didn't want them to? "I can't take not having you inside me anymore. I want more. I *need* more."

Light dawned in his eyes as he finally realized what she wanted. "As long as you're sure you're ready."

"Darlin', I've never been so sure of anything in my life."

"Try not to tense up," he said, moving to press the head of his cock against her buttocks. "I want to go slow and I don't want to hurt you. This will be much easier if you can relax."

Tori felt him lean down just before his lips grazed the small of her back. She did tense up a bit when he rose up again and pressed the large head of his shaft against her anus. The tips of her breasts rubbed the soft sheets beneath her and she groaned. The mixture of the sensations bombarding her was almost too much to bear. It was as though someone drew a line of fire from

her breasts to her innermost core.

With a groan, Ricardo pushed forward, working the tip of his large cock past the outer ring of her anus. He moved slowly, working his cock deeper and deeper until Tori felt the warm press of his balls against her hard clit.

"God you feel good. So hot and tight." He groaned, his hands massaging her hips. "Are you okay?"

Tori could only nod because the words just wouldn't come. Torn between pleasure and pain, she knew they had to do this and she needed to reassure him or he would stop. She only hoped he didn't choose this particular moment to read her mind again.

Ricardo began to move again. Slowly at first. He eased in and out of her in an unhurried rhythm. The light brush of his balls pressing against her clit with each stroke, drove her closer to another climax.

Finally, Tori's repeated cries of pleasure must have caused him to lose control. He began to thrust harder and faster. Reaching around her, he buried his fingers between her legs and stroked her clit. Tossing her head back, Tori came violently as he continued to pump into her hard and fast until he came, shuddering above her as he sank his sharp teeth deep into her shoulder at the crook of her neck.

After he pulled his mouth from her flesh, Ricardo leaned back, pulling himself from her ass. "I'm glad I took you that way. It is difficult to take too much blood like that because it doesn't flow as easily when taken from behind." His breath came in violent gusts as he lowered himself over her, kissing her shoulders and back before rolling to the side and pulling her into his arms.

Tori woke to the eerie sound of silence. Stretching, she realized she was alone before she even opened her eyes. Warmth radiated from her right and she glanced over to see a steaming pool of water that looked so inviting. She crawled from the bed to investigate.

Clean, folded towels sat on the edge with a note, written in a large, scrawling hand. *I've gone to see to the horse. Take a bath if you wish. I will return shortly.*

Smiling, she realized he must have wanted to give her privacy for her bath. The slight trepidation of being alone that she'd been previously unaware of plagued her as she lowered herself into the warmth of the steaming pool.

Lying back, she floated in the warm water and let her mind drift off as she reveled in the bath he had to know she would enjoy. After two days of bathing in a tub with her knees in her armpits, this was pure heaven.

Tori barely became aware of the distant voices until she recognized one of them. Splashing from the water, she'd barely had enough time to pull her dress over her still wet body before three people appeared before her.

Two of them she knew. The other was a stranger and, by the looks of him, he could stay that way.

His eyes were pure black pits that didn't reflect any emotion, any light. He stared at her, leaving her feeling as though Satan himself regarded her with that unfeeling gaze. Her mind, sluggish at first, registered her visitors, but it took a moment for her to react to their presence. When she did react, she immediately reached out to her men.

Oh, my God! It's Antoine and Mykaylia. They're here with another and I'm here alone. She screamed for Ricardo and Angelo in her mind. Did they hear her? Did they really care or had she been nothing but a way to while away the time for the last few days?

Shame on you for thinking such things. Take a deep breath now. You must breathe. Think. Let them believe you are alone. I am coming, love.

The sound of Ricardo's voice was soothing enough to slow her breathing. She knew what he wanted and tried to stay calm. At least two of the people before her liked adrenaline laced blood. Intellectually, Tori knew she needed to remain

calm to keep her blood less palatable to them.

Slowly backing away, she felt for the post on the foot of the bed behind her and leaned her hip against it. "I'm not alone you know. Ricardo will be here any minute."

"Ricardo doesn't scare us," Mykaylia said with a sneer. "Angelo doesn't scare us either." She flicked a glance at the newcomer. "With the help of our new friend, we'll make quick work of the both of them."

Somehow, Tori doubted that. Even now, she could *feel* the woman's trepidation. Something scared her. She wasn't sure what it was, but Tori knew the other woman's bravado wasn't real.

"Get her and let's get moving," the other man said. "The last thing I want is to get caught here."

Antoine moved forward in a blur of motion and grabbed her arm. "You're coming with us now, sweet." He grinned evilly. "Don't fear. We have a wonderful party awaiting us and you're the guest of honor."

Tori shivered with disgust at the brush of his hands on her skin. Part of her wanted to tell them Ricardo was just outside and coming fast, but she didn't want to give them that much of a warning.

"Ah ha." Mykaylia laughed gleefully. "She thinks her heroes are coming to rescue her again." The woman's pretty face twisted with menace. "Don't count on it. Our friend here took care of

them for us." She indicated the strange man who stood silent. His brooding face gave no indication of how he felt about the situation at all. Reading that implacable expression was like trying to find the story in a new ream of blank paper.

Antoine's grip tightened and he pulled her down a long tunnel leading in the opposite direction that Ricardo and she entered through earlier.

Where are you?

Nothing but silence greeted her as they dragged her from the cave and Tori wondered if she'd imagined the love the other two claimed to have felt for her. A part of her felt ashamed of her doubt.

* * * *

"Who's with them?"

Angelo shrugged. How the hell was he supposed to know? It was an ancient, that's all he knew. Only the ancients could time travel. Only those born in the first or second generation had that ability. Unless they were born of a union between two who were direct descendants. They didn't mate among their own kind often, but it happened occasionally. "It's an ancient or a true-blood. Other than that, I have no idea."

"Shit." Ricardo paced back and forth. "Do you

suppose they took her forward again?"

"You know they took her somewhere hard to find." He frowned, wondering how they'd found them.

"Who would have known we could bring her here?"

"I think I know who was with Antoine and his sister and where they have gone." Angelo grinned. "And if I'm right, we have little to worry about. Let us go and be sure. If I'm not correct, we have little time to lose." Angelo was almost positive he knew where she was now. If he were correct, he would owe someone big time for saving Tori.

It hadn't taken more than an hour to find them. Tori was bound and gagged, her gaze shooting daggers at her three captors. Angelo wanted to laugh. Their mate was unmatched in courage. She would bear them wonderfully strong children.

Antoine lounged back on a long sofa, Mykaylia near his feet, grimacing at the sight of his long legs stretched out before her. Another male leaned negligently against the wall opposite them as though watching all three, not just Tori.

"I don't know why we can't just kill her now and get it over with. She's frightened. I can smell it." Mykaylia was always impatient. That should have told the person who brought her and her

brother over to The Endowed much.

"Not frightened enough," the other said. "I want her so scared she's practically wetting herself, otherwise, what's the point? Blood is blood, but from a truly terrorized person it's a delicacy."

Boy, you can lay it on thick, Franco. Angelo watched the other man, hoping he was here to help and that he hadn't gone rogue after all.

Franco stiffened with surprise, then suddenly relaxed. *If you guarded your mate more closely, I wouldn't be here acting the criminal with these two idiots. Come and end it. I'd rather not kill these two, but I will if you can't scare some sense into them.*

Angelo stepped from the darkness and Mykaylia gasped. She didn't make it to Tori before Ricardo inserted himself between them.

"I don't think so," Ricardo said, his expression grim. "Go sit down before Angelo sits you down."

"You can't talk to me like that. You two are the ones outnumbered here."

Ricardo just raised a brow. "Are you sure? Perhaps you should be more careful in how you choose your friends. You never know how many of the ancients know and care for one another."

She gasped and glanced back. "Franco?"

The other man shrugged and gave her a half-smile. "You wanted someone to help you kill my brother. What do you expect?"

"Your brother? Why you lying piece of shit! You told us you'd help us kill him."

"Of course I did. Did you think I would just let you leave and find someone who *would* help you?" He shrugged. "He's my brother, sweetheart. Even your dubious charms fail in the light of that."

Myakylia ran to him with a screech, her fingers curved over, claws shining from the tips. She meant to tear him apart.

Reaching out, Franco tried to stop her before she hurt him, but his brother was there first. Taking her head into his hands, Angelo twisted violently and cut her jugular with a sharp talon.

"Finally. I'm finally rid of that crazy bitch." Antoine looked up at the rest of them, his expression lighter than Angelo remembered ever seeing it before. "I never really wanted to do all of those things, kill all of those people. He looked down at his feet, obviously ashamed. "She turned me and I had to do as she wished. She somehow forced my compliance. I couldn't refuse her, no matter how hard I tried."

"She was your sire. As such, she had complete control over you. Had you been her mate, it would not be so," Franco said, his hand on the Antoine's shoulder. "Come, I shall teach you our ways. I'm sure she did little to help you become a true member of our race." Franco looked up, his gaze

meeting Angelo's, his eyes unreadable. "Take care of your mate, brother. I look forward to meeting her properly one day." He raised a brow. "I'm sure you can keep her from harm's way without me."

Angelo nodded. He didn't say a thing. He knew when someone was reprimanding him and right now, his younger brother was telling him he'd made a mess of things. They never should have left Tori alone until they knew the danger was past. Mistakes were unacceptable. Ricardo and he both were at fault for their own lackadaisical attitudes.

Looking at Ricardo and Tori, he watched as the other man helped her to her feet. The ropes that bound her were gone, no doubt thrust into oblivion by Ricardo's magick. "Come," he said, holding out his hand for Tori to take it. "Let us go home."

* * * *

Home. It sounded nice but to which home did they plan to take her? Tori smiled. It didn't really matter as long as they were together. She shivered at the thought of the bloodthirsty glint in Mykaylia's eyes when they'd taken her from the cave. The other woman was mad. Someone needed to put her down like the rabid animal

she'd become. Tori only wished it hadn't been Angelo. She could feel his remorse even now. Tori rested her hand on Angelo's arm. "She would have killed me, you know."

"I know," Angelo replied with a sigh. "I didn't wish to kill her." He turned his tortured gaze on Tori and sighed. "You must fear me now." He pulled his arm from beneath hers. "You needn't touch me if the act is abhorrent to you." He turned away. "I've never harmed a woman before." He gave a short bark of laughter. "Listen to me lie." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Not on purpose anyway."

Tori could believe that. His reaction was all the proof she needed. "Lysandra is in the past. You all made mistakes. Even she made mistakes. She made the mistake of thinking you two were something to be feared instead of two lonely men to love."

Moving behind him, Tori wrapped her arms around his middle and squeezed. "I see the gift God has given me. You aren't animals and you aren't something I should fear." Releasing him, she walked around his front to face him as Ricardo did the same.

Reaching up, she grasped his face in both hands and tilted his head down so their gazes met. "You two are the men I love and trust with my heart. I trust that you two will love me, care for me and

see to my needs once you bring me over to your world."

The surprise in his eyes was evident and nearly made her smile. "Yes, I'm willing to become like you. I can't imagine my life without you in it. I want to spend eternity loving you two...making love with you two."

Angelo reached out, wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her to him. "Are you sure?"

He gazed into her eyes. After seeing something he obviously liked, he smiled before he captured her mouth in a drugging kiss. His tongue swept inside her mouth, sliding sensuously against her own.

Ricardo moved up behind her, rubbing his body against hers. This was what she wanted, needed, in her life—her two men loving her. Nothing else really mattered.

In a blink, they were gone from the place where Franco had taken her, where Mykaylia lay dead in a heap, and in a bedroom she'd never seen before.

With the huge bed in the corner and stone cobbles beneath her feet, she guessed they were back in Angelo's villa. What time they were in didn't matter. The past, present, future...nothing mattered, but the fact that the three of them were together and that her men obviously had her pleasure on their minds.

The bed dipped as they lowered her onto the

mattress, then joined her there. Placing his hand on the rise of her hip, Angelo brushed his hand up to cup her suddenly naked breast. Goose flesh rose on her skin as Ricardo's breath tickled her ear.

The warmth of their hands left a trail of fire in their wake as they caressed every curve, every slight indentation. Tori's body began to burn slowly from the inside out as they each cupped one of her breasts and blew warm air over the hardened peaks.

Ricardo kept eye contact as he leaned down to kiss her as his hand closed over her breast, his thumb softly grazing her nipple as Angelo drew her other nipple into the warmth of his mouth.

Her entire body trembled. Was it anticipation or fear? She wasn't sure which. Was she ready to do this? Could she follow through with this huge step in their relationship? Tori knew they wanted to love her together as well as make her like them. Her body grew more pliant, her breath coming in short, shallow pants as they continued to caress her body with their hands and mouths.

The soft hairs of their bodies brushed against her, making her tingle all over. Her body felt liquid, almost as though she'd melted as their hands skimmed over her flesh. She was already creaming. She could feel the moisture sliding from her body to coat her bare thighs. Tori felt Ricardo's breath on her neck as he moved to breathe in her

scent.

"I love the way you smell," he whispered just before he thrust his tongue in her ear and made her squirm.

She whimpered softly as he blew gently on her collarbone, the warmth of his breath stirring her blood. Her hands fisted in the sheets as Angelo moved between her thighs. His breath on her skin almost drove her insane with need. Her back arched, almost of its own volition. Her hips rose off the bed, searching for his lips and tongue.

What in the world was she doing? She wasn't some kind of freak, some kind of nymphomaniac. She had morals, not to mention a healthy sex drive. What was it about these two men that made her want sex with such abandon that she'd forget everything her parents had taught her as a child?

A part of her wanted to stop them, but the part that loved these two men knew she couldn't. They needed her at least as much as she needed them and she didn't have the heart, or the will, to tell either of them no.

The feel of Angelo's mouth at the center of her very being was her undoing. Reaching down, she fisted her hands in his hair, trying to pull him inside her as his mouth worked delight-filled miracles on her aching flesh. Ricardo's mouth and hands worked at her breasts as Angelo's mouth continued to eat at her core until the world

exploded around her and she fell fragmented into an abyss of ecstasy that she'd never dreamed existed before now.

Angelo slid up to her side. "You're so beautiful when you come, Tori," he breathed against her cheek just before he pressed his lips to hers.

Tori tasted herself, the flavor tangy, as he thrust his tongue into her mouth.

Angelo ended their kiss and rolled her over onto Ricardo who now lay on his back. "Straddle him, love, and put him inside you."

Tori moved over Ricardo who smiled up at her and winked his encouragement. Reaching down, he helped her position his shaft so that it entered her channel as she slowly lowered herself over him.

Goodness, he felt huge this way! She bit her lip, knowing if he made her feel this full, the two of them together would nearly rip her apart. Still, she'd agreed to this and Tori meant to follow it through.

Tori moved over him, raising and lowering herself a few times, reveling in the sensation of his hard cock rubbing her in all the right places. She leaned forward when Ricardo raised himself up and took an already hard nipple into his mouth and suckled.

It was then that she felt the warm, slippery oil sliding over her rear entrance. Angelo inserted

first one, then two fingers into her, preparing her for his cock. Would she ever be truly prepared? Could she? The questions bounced around in her consciousness for just a moment, until he removed his fingers and replaced them with the large, wide head of his hard cock. Forcing herself to relax as he pressed forward, Tori moaned as Ricardo suckled her neck, just below her ear. Angelo's breath came in short gusts as he pushed himself slowly inside her back hole.

After what seemed an eternity but could have only been a few seconds, Angelo finally had his cock seated deep in her ass and Ricardo withdrew, only to return with a strong thrust that left her gasping for breath. Then Angelo withdrew and thrust back inside her. They repeated the process until they worked out a mind-blowing rhythm of one thrusting while the other withdrew.

All too soon, Tori felt her orgasm building. The heat built until she could barely stand it. She couldn't think, couldn't speak. Hell, she could barely breathe and scream as they took her over the edge and both sank their teeth deep into her neck.

Euphoria stole over her as they continued to pound into her until they each bit their own wrist and dribbled the blood over her skin and into her mouth.

"Swallow," Ricardo commanded, "or our blood

will absorb into your skin and turn you into a mindless slave."

Tori opened her mind to his compulsion, followed his order and swallowed. She wanted this. She wanted them forever and knew the only way to have them was to become as they were. A part of her looked on in fascinated horror at what she'd allowed, another part of her rejoiced in the knowledge that she would soon be one of *The Endowed* and would forever hold a place in their hearts.

"We both love you, Tori. Don't you know that?" Ricardo cupped her cheeks and met her gaze. "Why do you think we've protected you, come after you, bound you to us?"

Angelo withdrew from her body, practically collapsed on the mattress next to them and smiled. "I think I've loved you since you stood up to Mykaylia that first night. When you showed more courage than any human I've ever seen and pretended to be under my thrall." He sighed. "I've never known a woman with so much courage."

"Nor I," Ricardo agreed. He tucked her head under his chin and held her tight. "Never doubt our feelings for you, *bellacara*, our beautiful love. You're our life."

And they were hers. How would she ever show them how much she loved them? She didn't think it possible.

"You already have, love," Angelo said, reminding her that he could read her mind. "You've allowed us to love you and bring you into our lives." He glanced over her shoulder and smiled softly. "The sun rises and you must sleep. When you rise we will show you all of the wonders of our kind, but for now, my love..." he paused, then grinned. "It's time to drop dead, gorgeous."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tianna Xander is an eclectic author of numerous paranormal, sci-fi, time travel, romance erotica books. Gaining inspiration for her characters and dialogue through her family and her addiction to the internet, she never fails to amaze readers with each new book she creates. As a reading junkie herself, Tianna has no problem reading whatever is available at the moment from romance novels, murder mysteries and encyclopedias to books on solar energy.

Tianna's life wouldn't be complete without a "happily ever after" of her very own. She resides in Michigan with her husband, two children, three cats, two dogs and an intimidating bunny. Never one to fail to give credit where it's due, she commends her family for their constant support. After writing many books and receiving rave reviews, her family is just as proud of her. Always full of ideas, Tianna rarely puts the pen down, so readers can look forward to many more exciting stories in the future.

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