



Love Immortal

Kelly Wallace

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Chapter One

Theron Ambrose pulled his sleek, black Ferrari to the side of the curb when he found her. Night's shadows were deep, the only light coming from the golden glow of the street lamp. She was sobbing mournfully on the front stoop of an old brick apartment building in this city of North Hollywood, California.

He switched off the purring engine, rubbing his hands briskly together in both eagerness and anticipation. This was one of those *huddled-masses* he was always so pleased to encounter. They never gave him any trouble. Were always willing to go along peacefully. He was their salvation. Their light at the end of a dark, dismal tunnel of grief. He had the power, and he used it to his advantage.

Some would say he was evil. Others, a saint. But he was neither one nor the other. He was merely a man. A unique man with a unique hunger. A hunger that needed to be sated nightly.

With long, silent strides, wearing darkness as his cloak, he went to her. Theron stared down at flaxen hair and a slight figure clothed in aged jeans and a crimson blouse. No more than twenty, he guessed this one to be. At such a young age what demons could possibly haunt her? What emotional trauma had her so utterly grievous? A lost lover? The death of a cherished one?

With a sad shake of his head, he knew it didn't matter. Not to him. Whatever her sorrows, he would ease them all. He would give her the strength to carry on. In return, she would give him something far more precious. A small sacrifice that would allow him to rise with the next moon and start the hunt all over again.

Long, fine fingers reached out to caress a tear-wet cheek. "Don't cry, little one. I'm here to help you." His voice projected sanctity, the promise of refuge.

Startled to find that she wasn't alone, the girl's head jerked up. She opened her mouth to say something, but Theron placed a soft palm over her lips. "Words aren't necessary," he whispered. "Come." He took her by the hand. The woman rose to her feet. "I will take away your pain." He passed a hand over her face. Her eyes closed briefly. When they opened again they were glassy and distant.

Together they strolled to his waiting car in the warm spring air. When they were both settled in he started the engine, pulled away from the curb, and drove down the lonely street. Ultimate destination: His hilltop lair.

* * * *

Theron fed until the raging hunger in him was appeased. He felt drowsy with satisfaction as he lifted his lips from the warm, pulsing throat of his prey. The woman lay there on his bed, partially undressed and in the induced trance-like state he had put her under.

He gazed down at her full breasts and lowered his face, rubbing his cheek over one soft mound. A small groan spilled from his lungs as he took a nipple into his mouth, savoring the feeling as it grew rigid under his tongue's manipulations. He suckled the rosy peak for a good while before switching to the other. He slid his hand along her

ribcage and cupped the fullness of her free breast, his fingers kneading the plump flesh.

Theron felt his erection pressing hard against his slacks, throbbing with each quick heartbeat, luring him to take advantage of her pliant body. Instead, he became very still, closed his eyes and inhaled a long, shaky breath that filled his lungs and cleared his head. Exhaling slowly, he looked up at the ceiling as he took control of his emotions once again.

Passing a gentle hand over her eyes, Theron commanded her to sleep then rolled off her weakened body.

She was drained temporarily. A few hours of deep sleep would replenish her lost strength. Later he would drive her back down to the city, bid her to forget him, to forget her sorrows, whisper a joyless farewell and return home alone ... just as he always did.

Unfortunately, his lifestyle didn't afford the luxury of a life mate. His laugh was low and wry. He'd most likely outlive her. Choosing a solitary existence was his decision. One he was most comfortable with. Never would he give up the life he had claimed so long ago for feeble things such as love, passion, and a few decades of life.

In one swift movement he was off the bed, readjusting his burgundy silk shirt. He was satiated, yet slightly edgy. This was his second feeding from the same body. Tomorrow he would have to start the hunt all over again.

A rueful smile slid across his lips as he viewed the sleeping form on his bed, covering her so that temptation was out of view. Brokenhearted women were obscenely easy to take.

This particular part of California provided plenty of the melancholy souls to perpetuate his immortal existence here on Earth.

A thought and a glance caused the electric wall sconces by the bedside to flicker and die, enveloping the room in a shroud of blackness. With new vigor in his step he crossed the floor, alive with the particular strength that came with the sacrament. The finest, most pure narcotic of all had rejuvenated him: Blood.

Sending a brief image through his mind of the door closing behind him, he stepped across the threshold. Once on the other side, the lock clicked into place without so much as a touch from his hand.

Theron's senses were still full of the woman. Her scent, the feel of her supple body beneath his, her soft moans of complete surrender as he bit into her neck, his teeth puncturing the delicate flesh. Running a tongue over his lips, he savored the remaining traces of her flavor. The essence of life. His life.

Making his way across the large foyer, he went to his study intending to catch up on the stock market before having to take the woman back to her apartment in the city. Theron felt the new blood coursing through him with each step he took, feeling infinitely youthful and not even close to his true age.

He closed his eyes for a moment in bliss. Being a vampire certainly had its rewards. Living forever. Infinite power. A whole other plane of existence above the humans of the world.

His expression immediately turned grim. A life such as his had drawbacks, he reminded himself as he entered the plush room. Having to hunt every other night wasn't always as easy as he wished it to be. The women were sometimes difficult to locate, even with his keen sixth sense. Not all victims were as willing as the one he had now, though he always left them in much better condition than when he'd found them—missing a pint

or so of blood, but that was easily replenished.

Sighing, he turned on the table lamp and picked up the *Wall Street Journal*, sat in his favorite overstuffed chair, and hoped that tomorrow's search wouldn't prove to be too taxing.

* * * *

Theron awoke the next evening feeling both tense and eager. The night of the hunt always brought to him such mixed emotions.

Throwing back the covers, exposing his nude body to the cool night air, he rose from the bed. His bare feet settled into deep pile carpet, slapping softly on ivory tile as he went straight to the bathroom for a shower. With a slight thought sent in the direction of the light, the room was instantly illuminated.

A brief flick of his fingers had the shower on in the next moment, steam rising as he stepped in under the heated water.

Letting the warmth seep into his bones, water sluicing over his taut body, Theron wondered what woman his instincts would lead him to this night. Would she be blonde and voluptuous? Thin and brunette? Would her eyes be blue or brown? Or would she be a redhead with green eyes? His pulse jumped at the visions his mind conjured up.

Theron did have a preference for redheads. Not a carrot-top with freckles, but hair a deep-amber color. Her skin would be fair and smooth as alabaster. He continued to let his mind spin the well-worn fantasy as he soaped, shampooed, and rinsed. Her eyes, they would be emerald windows to her soul, and in those eyes he would see her love and acceptance for him and what he was. His dick stirred to life and his heart beat too fast in his chest.

He reached down and grasped his cock, which was hard as steel. With long, smooth strokes he let out a deep sigh of ecstasy as his blood pumped quickly through his veins, pleasure coursing through every cell of his body. Leaning his forehead against the cool tile, he closed his eyes and inhaled a shaky breath, running his thumb over the sensitive tip. Lord how he craved this woman. Craved her to the very depths of his soul.

No trance would be placed on her, for she would give of herself willingly. And Theron would take all she offered. That and more.

He envisioned her lying on his bed amongst a cloud of pillows. Her smile wicked and welcoming as she beckoned him to love her. Lurid scenes passed before his mind's eye and he pumped his hand faster, raising his face to the cascading water above. With his other hand he cupped his balls squeezing in a rhythm that matched his stroking hand.

He imagined his dream woman opening her silken thighs to him, baring herself, perfectly pink and oh, so wet. In his mind he slipped between her legs, his eyes taking in every inch of her before his lips and tongue followed suit. He inhaled deeply, glorying in her scent, licking her, bringing her to climax as no man had done before.

Just as she peaked, crying out his name, he raised himself up and over her body, sliding his cock deep inside. Oh, but it felt so good being gripped by her. Feeling the warmth of her pussy, her slickness, as he drove in and out with unrestrained passion. He bit into her shoulder and she clung to him tightly, whispering words of lust in his ear that urged him on.

Theron moaned as he approached sweet release. His movements became faster, his breathing ragged, and with one final squeeze he came with a gasp, spilling the contents of

his desire ... and no recipient to share it with.

In the next heartbeat Theron cursed, wrenching the ancient yearning from his mind and body. He picked up the bar of soap and threw it against the wall of the shower and swore blackly, watching the beige oval as it bounced off, hit the tub, and slid past his feet, traveling down to the drain to sit there. His erection quickly faded, though the yearning lingered.

Never could he meet up with this woman, for she was his nemesis. The woman who would bring about his very demise. The woman who would cause him to relinquish his immortality with her sensual words and drugging kisses. The woman who would have him believing in the charade called love.

The woman he had avoided for nearly three hundred years.

Theron bunched his hands into fists and shut his eyes tightly once more. He would continue to avoid her until this world ceased to exist.

Pushing those thoughts away with a chafing sigh, he turned off the water manually. Stepping onto the cream-colored bath rug, he grabbed a towel and briskly dried himself off. Hunger gnawed at his belly, bringing him back to reality and his mission. There was no room in his life for such frivolities as love and sex, only hunger, power, and eternal life.

"Never forget that, Ambrose," he warned his reflection that stared harshly back at him from the foggy mirror.

* * * *

Thirty minutes later Theron stood on the cliff in front of his Hollywood home, dressed to kill. He smiled at the thought. *Kill* wasn't the exact word, but he was most definitely dressed to attract the opposite sex. He wore a black torso-hugging knit shirt that stretched tight over his biceps. Theron worked out vigorously each and every day. A small laugh passed his lips. Women did seem to like a bit of muscle on a man. His pressed slacks were the same rich black as his shirt. Equally dark leather loafers graced his feet. His ebony hair was brushed back from his forehead, accentuating his midnight eyes. Theron made the most of his looks and took pride in his appearance.

Where would fate lead him tonight? His eyes narrowed, taking in the lighted city below. He breathed in the fresh spring air and the scent of all living things. A cool breeze caressed his face.

He lifted his head a bit and turned slightly to the east. He inhaled, bringing the night air deep into his lungs. He raised an eyebrow, gaze lancing a distant point. "Ah, there you are, my sweet." His heart pumped fast and heavy. Succor was only minutes away.

* * * *

Theron depressed the button to his left, the window sliding down to let in the sounds and smells of Hollywood Boulevard. The scent of garlic and peanut oil drifted over him as he passed a Chinese restaurant. He did so like this area. He had not once had an empty hunt since moving out here nearly five decades ago. If there was ever a place that attracted tourists and beckoned would-be starlets, it was this city.

Keeping his eagle-like vision attuned to the people bustling about even at this late hour, Theron recalled how thinly populated the United States had been over two hundred

years ago. He'd quickly gone back to roaming Europe and Asia, not venturing into the U.S. again until the early nineteen hundreds.

With his next breath, instincts told him to take a right at the upcoming stoplight. While he waited for it to turn green, a heavily made-up prostitute rapped on the passenger side window.

"Hey, baby," she spoke through the glass in a voice Theron imagined she thought was seductive. "I can take you around the world for a hundred bucks."

Theron let the window slide down slightly. "No thank you," he replied with a plastic smile. "I prefer to take my trips solo."

"Come on." She produced a very pouty bottom lip covered with a thick layer of gloss. "I'll make it worth every penny."

He shook his head and took off once the light had changed, leaving the hooker yelling a few choice expletives after him. Theron only smirked, knowing that his expensive car often attracted such vermin.

He could never afford the price he might have to pay, though money was not the problem. His bank account was quite impressive, his wallet heavily padded. His special talent of clairvoyance made playing the stock market most lucrative. No, the price he was talking about was threat of disease. Not once had he touched tainted blood, he refused to start taking such risks now.

Two blocks later the woman in the microscopic skirt and ample bosom was completely forgotten as Theron frowned. He had lost the trail completely and was becoming edgy. For some odd reason his senses were off kilter this evening. The woman should have been incredibly easy to locate, yet he found himself driving another three blocks before intuition told him to take a sharp right.

Turning the wheel quickly, the headlights bounced off a brick wall ahead of him and to each side. Theron cursed under his breath as he discovered he had turned down an alley. Stepping on the brake, he stopped and tried to clear his mind.

"Where are you?" he said aloud to the emptiness around him, his flat palm beating an impatient rhythm on the steering wheel.

Several overly filled garbage cans lined one of the walls to his left. His vision was captured by the sight of a cat standing on the edge of one of the beat-up containers, rummaging through its contents, searching for any morsel of food to appease its hunger. Theron knew how the poor feline felt as his own stomach twisted tight.

Shifting the car in reverse, he quickly started backing up, his yearning to feed clawing at him with a vengeance. In the next instant he heard a sickening thud as he struck something.

"Damn!" He rested his head against the leather-covered steering wheel, letting out an irritated breath through clenched teeth. "What now?" This night was certainly not going very well.

He glanced up at the rearview mirror, hoping to see whatever he had hit get to its feet and walk away. All was quiet and dark.

Theron climbed out of his vehicle to check the damages. He rounded the back of his car, his blood running icy as his eyes took in the heap of blue cloth laying so still on the asphalt. He swore again, loathing the fact his hunt was put on hold. He was already feeling the strains of withdrawal as his body felt weaker and his nerves were nearing their breaking point.

Soon he had his emotions under control. Though it was most unfortunate this had happened, he would take full responsibility. He would call for an ambulance, or take the wounded soul to the hospital himself, and pay for any and all medical bills. After all, he wasn't a cold, unfeeling monster ... just a hungry vampire.

With the toe of his left shoe he nudged the body lying there at his feet. "Hello?"

As he fully expected, no answer came.

Theron looked around and saw that the street he was on was deserted. Thankfully, no one had seen this. He didn't want to be detained longer by a police inquisition.

He sighed heavily and crouched down next to the victim. "Hello?" he called out again. "Can you hear me?" Gently, he checked for any broken limbs. Finding none, he gave a slight push, causing the person to roll onto their back. Dim streetlight shined down, making the face visible to his concerned gaze. It was a woman, no more than thirty, he guessed.

Theron bent his head down to her chest, trying to detect a heartbeat. Yes, she was alive. Her heartbeat was faint, her breathing shallow, but she was alive. Relief swept over him. He'd never killed in his life and was most grateful his record was still spotless on that account.

Along with this relief, Theron also detected changes in his body as he felt her soft breasts beneath his cheek and inhaled her delicate, feminine fragrance. His dick stirred to life and he instantly admonished himself for such physical reactions. Not only was this woman not the one he was looking for, but she was also comatose!

He derailed his odd response to her by checking the pockets of her jeans since she carried no purse. He found nothing, except for the fact that he was growing hard at her nearness. He counseled himself with the very real reason that he had not fed yet and wasn't feeling like himself.

Concentrating, Theron tried probing her mind, seeking any bits of information as to who she was. His effort was fruitless. He detected no personal identity. The only thing he had encountered in the dark recess was a deep well of sadness, of hopelessness, depression, and a sense of wandering.

Theron blinked the feeling away as he looked down at her with a frown between his brows. He refused to probe further. Her problems were none of his concern. So, she was a mystery. As was his strange reaction to her.

"Let's get you to the hospital, shall we?" He debated on calling an ambulance, but didn't want to be held up any longer than he already had been. If he took her there himself it would be that much quicker. As soon as that was accomplished he would continue on with his previous chore.

With very little effort, Theron lifted the unconscious woman into his arms and headed toward his vehicle. Her head lolled against him, quickly heating his chest where her cheek lay so softly. A small moan seeped through her lips; Theron's steps faltered as the sound skimmed along his nerve endings. Yes, the sooner he got this woman to the hospital, the better.

Using a bit more energy than he could afford at the moment, he had the back door open with only a thought. Theron leaned over, ready to lay her across the back seat, when she let out another low moan. He glanced down just as her eyelids fluttered open, revealing a pair of emerald eyes. The glimpse was brief, less than a second before they closed again, but it had been enough.

Theron stood up very straight and very still. He had found her. Not a woman to satisfy his appetite for a few nights, but the woman of his dreams, his heated fantasies, his nightmares.

A ripple of terror raced up his spine and settled in his brain. His first taste of real fear in nearly three centuries.

Theron didn't know how long he stood there within the yawning mouth of that dark, dank alley carrying his very future in his arms. If he left her here she would surely die. Years of medical training in the Orient told him she had a concussion, perhaps other physical damages, to what extent he wasn't certain of yet.

Common sense told him to drive her to the nearest hospital and be done with her. Instincts told him to leave her here before it was too late. Before he ended up throwing away all he had fought to hold onto for so long. But a haunting voice in his empty soul called out with an alien need. A need only this beautiful stranger could fill. A need that, if satisfied, would ultimately lead to his downfall.

His decision was quick to come and not at all surprising. He would take her to his home. He could help her more quickly than any coven of doctors could. And, mostly, he would be given the opportunity to see why exactly this woman haunted him so, refusing to let him live in peace.

* * * *

Once Theron arrived home, he was angrier with himself than he could ever remember being. What the hell was he doing bringing her to his home?

Theron gave a soft snort as he shut the motor off in the driveway and killed the headlights. He knew damn well what he was doing, even if he was too big a coward to admit it aloud. He was taunting fate.

Exiting the car, he opened the back door, and reached in to retrieve the woman. He made his way up the walkway, lights along either side of the path coming on instantly with each heavy footstep. The front door flew open ten-feet before Theron ever approached it. He had more energy than usual.

His smile was caustic. Normally he would be much weaker than he was now, especially since he was far behind on his feeding schedule.

As he walked through the front door, every light in the house ignited. He heard the wooden barrier shut behind him with a mighty bang. A leaden feeling settled within his soul as he realized that any normalcy he'd ever had in his life was about to take a swift deviation from this night forward.

At first Theron thought to put the woman in the room next to his, but decided against it at once, taking her to one of the upstairs bedrooms. He would feel much more at ease having her convalesce in an upstairs room. The knowledge took the edge off him only slightly.

A small smile stole across his lips as he walked through the doorway and set the woman on the queen-sized bed, atop the carnation-pink comforter. He had done all of the decorating in his home, and thought that once she became conscious she would most probably appreciate this room. The various pastel shades, white wicker furniture and variety of plants brought about an instant aura of peace and well being.

Although at this very moment those were the last emotions coursing through him.

With measured movements, Theron went to the hand-carved armoire and retrieved a

deep-green nightgown in the silkiest of satin. Walking rigidly back over to the bed, he debated whether he should manually dress the woman or simply turn his back and let his powers do the work. He threw the gown on the bed, looking down at his hands, which were shaking so badly, and turned his back on his unconscious houseguest. Closing his eyes, he inhaled a few deep breaths and whispered a calming mantra. Once he turned around again she was dressed in the garment and beneath the crisp, cotton sheets.

Theron sighed heavily as he saw the mane of auburn hair splaying over the pale pillowcase. How many times had he fantasized about burying his face in that hair and breathing in her scent? Of wrapping the silken strands around his fist while he drove into her backside with unbridled fury? “Too many to count,” he murmured, pushing some hair from her forehead, wincing as he saw the large, purple lump above her right eyebrow. No wonder she was unconscious. She would have been better off if it had bled. It would have relieved some of the pressure.

He went downstairs to his bathroom and took one of the amber glass bottles from the medicine cabinet, grabbed a few cotton balls, then was at her side again a moment later. As he stared down at her with a perpetual frown on his face, he tried probing her mind once more. For a brief second sensuality bobbed to the surface. He inhaled a sharp breath at the feeling but just as quickly it was erased, replaced with one of misery, of fear, of intense depression as her mind swam in and out of darkness. This woman wanted to die. And, heaven help him, the way he felt at the moment, he wished she would.

Theron shook his head free of the fatal thought. He could not, would not, let her die. Probably for the fact that he had fought for his own life for so long, he could not sit back and let another perish.

Opening the cap on the bottle, he poured a bit of the strong-smelling liquid onto the cotton. Gently, he stroked on the medicine that would have her contusion healing much more quickly than was normal.

She moaned softly, turning her head as the cool liquid touched her flesh. “Don’t worry,” he whispered. “I’m here to help you.”

Yes, he would tend to her injuries since he was culpable in having harmed her in the first place. He would heal her. And while she was here he would use every moment to delve into her mind and soul. He would unlock the mystery of why she possessed the fate of his future—a mortal woman of all things!

He wondered again, why her? What set her apart from all of the other women in this wide world for all of these generations?

He ruminated over her personality. What would she be like? Sensual and provocative? Sassy and flirtatious? Innocent and naïve?

Theron gave a harsh laugh that bore no amusement. Of course she would be all of these women. All of them and more. A complete woman that would have him feeling like a complete man for the very first time in his long, long life. A total woman that would tempt him into doing what no other woman had tempted him to do before ... making love ... falling in love.

He set the bottle and cotton on the oak nightstand. Pulling over the rocker, he settled himself into it, his intense gaze never leaving the woman. His questions would be answered very soon. His only hope was that he would be coming out of this thing unscathed.

Theron waited at her side until the hunger within him was unbearable. Reluctantly,

he left the room and went to his own to freshen up. He still had a few hours before daylight. He had to make the most of them.

* * * *

A quarter of an hour later he stood at the edge of the cliff once more, trying to get the female in his home out of his system. In just a matter of hours, even in her unconscious state, she had imprinted herself upon his senses. His body still burned where he had held her. Her womanly scent still filled his nostrils like wisps of the headiest incense. The sound of her voice, those insignificant moans, still resonated within him like a sacred chant. Thankfully he hadn't tasted her, if so, he'd surely be lost.

As these wild thoughts spun around his mind, the wind picked up and shifted slightly. Theron's mind was captured by a vision deep in the city below that he couldn't physically see, but was there nonetheless. A seductive smile curved his lips and his houseguest was momentarily forgotten as his senses encountered another woman. Not a mystery woman, not his fate, but the woman who would satisfy his appetite tonight. Perhaps tomorrow as well.

With quickness in his step and not a single look over his shoulder, Theron got back in his car and headed for Hollywood Boulevard once again.

* * * *

When Theron returned, only moments before dawn, his hunger had been physically satisfied, yet irritation burned in him. He flung the car door open with rage.

"I should have brought the woman here, dammit!" *Kept her for the two feedings, as was the norm.* Yet something prevented him from doing so.

No, he thought with disgust at his sudden mental weakness, it was *someone* who prevented him from doing so.

He had resisted bringing the other female home with him. For some reason it just didn't seem right to have two women under his roof at the same time. Why? He didn't know or understand the foreign feeling, but it was there inside of him. So he had resorted to locating the mournful soul, pulling into a secluded area of a nearby park, and had taken her there.

Theron snorted in loathing as he slammed the door in back of him, shooting a bolt of energy at the metal object. What he had done tonight, taking the woman in his car, was no better than what a sneaky, lust-filled youth would do.

"And why?" He interrogated himself as he made his angry, confused way up the brick path, jerking the front door open before he ever reached it. Lights stuttered on and off in the house as his pent-up energy ran rampant, seeking an outlet.

Was tonight's odd behavior due to the fact that a perfect stranger lay in his upstairs bedroom? A stranger with whom he felt an immediate linkage when her green eyes had fluttered open for that brief second in time?

Yes, he confessed.

He stalked through the door, closing it behind him with a loud bang.

Usually after a feeding he'd feel quite serene and energized. Tonight, however, he was tenser than he could ever remember being. And it was all *her* doing.

On the way to his room the staircase caught his eye. If he followed, it would lead

him to her.

He bypassed the steps, going straight to the workout room, intending to sweat away some of his frustration at being in this predicament. One that he'd put himself in, he thought bitterly. But just as he crossed the threshold—his sights set on thirty minutes or so on the rowing machine—he stopped. Bracing his hand against the doorframe, eyes closed, head thrown back in self-reproach, he blew out a surrendering breath.

It wasn't her fault he was in such befuddled straits. He was positive that she had no idea what she represented to him: Failure, ruin, perhaps his very death.

She was badly injured because of him. He had no right to simply leave her unattended so he might avoid facing her. She needed him.

Turning on his heel, he placed an unsteady hand on the glossy wood banister and made his way to the room she occupied. Though she was in a physically impaired state due to his careless actions, he already showed signs of mental wreckage because of her presence.

When he entered the room the lamp immediately flickered to bright life. He had only left her alone for a few hours, but what he saw made his heart clench with guilt. She lay on the floor amidst tangled sheets, incoherent, yet weeping softly and mumbling unintelligibly.

The satin gown had twisted up around her waist, revealing her softly rounded buttocks to his heated gaze. Try as he might, he couldn't turn his head away. He scowled down at her, a part of him wanting to wrap her up tighter than a mummy. Yet another wishing to devour every inch of her with his lips and tongue, to spread her thighs and taste her until he was satisfied, to bury every inch of himself between her luscious ass cheeks and explode deep inside of her.

Another sight caught his attention. There on her back he saw the beginning of a bruise the size of his forearm.

He grimaced as he crouched down and prodded the area. It was hot and swollen. Instincts told him that she had obtained spinal damage along with the concussion. Damn! Though nothing permanent, it did mean she would be here longer than he had at first anticipated. With that knowledge he closed his eyes in remorse, a deep sigh filling the air around him.

When he opened them again he saw her groping around, searching for assistance. Her legs remained motionless. Theron forced himself into the role of medical practitioner and pressed on her thigh muscles, her calves, her feet. There was no reflexive movement at all.

His expression turned grim as he tried to predict how badly she was injured, while thoughts of the effect she would have on him and his existence pushed him to the point of insanity.

For now, he shoved the dread away, adjusted the gown, and lifted her in his arms. Her eyes flew open, wide yet unseeing, pupils dilated. She clung to him, wrapping her arms around his neck, whimpering against his chest, frightened. *The poor fool*, he thought. The only entity she should be frightened of was the very being she was cleaving so despondently to.

His jaw clenched tightly as did his groin. He desperately wanted to pry her off him, but she seemed so afraid. Laying aside his trepidation and lust, he held her for awhile, taking the opportunity to enter her mind.

He was there with her, in the front seat of a car, riding along with three other people at night. She was drowsy. A blond man approximately her age sat beside her. He appeared to have had far too much to drink. Two older people, a man and a woman, sat in the back chatting about the day they had spent at a friend's home.

Bright lights came directly toward them; a truck had swerved onto the wrong side of the street. Theron detected that the driver had fallen asleep. There was a chorus of screams. The woman he held in his arms had opened her eyes in the next nanosecond. His own head jerked back at the vision of the impact, feeling as if he was physically there.

The next instant he was with her in a hospital, her head bandaged and she was crying, asking the doctor standing near her bedside what had happened to her parents and fiancé.

"I'm sorry, Miss Nolan—Leah," the older man corrected, aiming for a more personal tone. "They didn't make it," was his solemn reply.

"But, they're all I have." Her words were spoken on a heart-wrenching sob.

"I'm sorry," came the feeble answer once again. "You were the only one wearing a seat belt." The doctor turned, looking uncomfortable about delivering such grievous news, and hurriedly left the room.

"It was all my fault," she whispered, staring blankly at the drab, pink door, her tears falling faster.

Theron had to blink several times to bring himself back to the present. When he did, he too shed a tear for her. Never had he felt such utter desolation from a human being in all of his life. Such utter grief. Such feelings of misery and solitude.

The melancholy women he encountered on his bi-nightly searches were all suffering from broken hearts, not shattered lives.

He held her, Leah Nolan, closer to his chest, trying to absorb some of her turmoil, knowing that he could never do such a thing as erase the all-consuming pain and guilt he had just witnessed. She had lost everyone who mattered in her life, she believed it was her fault, and these were the feelings that left her lonely, empty and wandering.

He possessed hypnotic powers, yes. Powers that could make one forget even their own name, but they weren't strong enough to make one forget such despair.

He possessed the knowledge to mend a thousand fractured bones, but had no idea where to begin in the area of this woman's fractured soul.

"Ah, Miss Nolan," he whispered against the top of her head, staring off across the room. "What brought you to me? What unseen force had you step behind my car this evening?" He breathed in the scent of lilies and breathed out a shuddering sigh of trepidation. Her arms loosened from around his neck and her head rolled backward. She was unconscious once more.

Laying her back on the bed, Theron stared down at the woman, his body trembling. "What am I going to do with you?" he questioned softly.

Covering her back up, he darkened the room and left her sleeping. Taking the steps two at a time, he went to the workout room, shed his shirt and Italian loafers then sat down on the rowing machine. Gripping the handles tightly, he began the powerful, rhythmic movements, hoping that sweat and hard exercise would erase the barrage of emotions Miss Nolan's presence pummeled him with.

Lust, fear, curiosity, rage; all filled his body to overflowing.

He had always been a disciplined master of his emotions, never allowing a woman to

affect him in any way, aside from the occasional bout of curious desire. Those incidents had been extremely mild compared to what he felt while holding the delicate yet fully rounded Leah Nolan in his arms.

No woman had a right to smell so intoxicating, feel so exquisite. No woman had a right to be damned beautiful.

Adjusting the tension at the front of the machine, he pulled back on the tightened handles, gritting his teeth as he continued the steady back and forth rhythm until sweat covered his entire body and the stress in his mind finally waned a bit.

Sensing that dawn was already upon him, he levered himself to his feet, trudging into the bathroom for a much needed shower—cold.

* * * *

When Theron emerged from the icy water, he felt somewhat better. At least the yearning in his body had subsided, though his brain was still muddled.

He slipped into navy silk boxers, uneasy about sleeping in the nude as was his custom. Catching sight of his reflection in the full-length mirror that hung on the back of the bathroom door, Theron frowned at himself. “What’s gotten into you, man? Are you going to let a woman you only found hours ago turn you into a lust-crazed lunatic? Turning your life upside down? You haven’t survived all these years just to give up now, have you?” he interrogated himself. “The only way you will meet your demise is if you are to give in to the intense feelings she instills within you. You’re made of stronger stuff than that.”

He pointed an index finger at the reflection. “Now listen here, you will tend to her injuries, but you will *not* feed from her and you will *not* make love to her, understand? And when she is well enough, you will send her back into the world.” The tone in his voice was harsh, and a twinge of guilt stabbed through him as he remembered her sadness at having lost the only people in her life. The episode seemed quite recent.

His black gaze grew piercing on himself. “Her past and future are none of your affair, Ambrose. You can heal her broken body, but that will be the extent of your charity. Is that clear?” He tilted his head and smiled, feeling satisfied; relieved he could feel so levelheaded after the great turmoil he had been in only minutes ago.

He yawned, stretching to work out any lingering kinks in his body. All he wanted to do was bury himself beneath the cool cotton sheets of his bed, which he would do after checking on Miss Nolan one last time.

Thankfully, she was still on the bed, though her head thrashed from side to side as a nightmare claimed her.

Walking over to her, Theron smiled softly as he laid a hand lightly over her forehead. Nightmares were one thing he could easily relieve her of.

Concentrating for only a moment, he sent soothing messages to her nocturnal mind, driving away the monsters that haunted her until her slumber was dark and peaceful, and she lay still once more. Fleeting, he realized he would have to be very careful in not using any of his powers once she became conscious. She could not know who he was. Or, more precisely, *what* he was.

Theron shook his head slightly as he stared down at her. Yes, his life was definitely going to change for awhile.

“Sweet dreams, Leah,” he whispered, running a finger over her bottom lip. As he

touched her, Theron felt a spark, one that threatened to rekindle his extinguished feelings of desire. He pulled his hand back quickly, leaving the room even faster, until he was in the sanctity of his bedroom. Closing the door manually, he leaned against the cool wood, closing his eyes in repentance. Had he done the right thing in bringing her here?

Opening his eyes, he slowly ambled to the bed, climbing beneath the covers, thinking that he had made a grave mistake.

Perhaps things would look better once he had some sleep, he reassured himself as he drifted off into slumber, his mind filled with a pair of emerald eyes.

Chapter Two

Leah awoke to waning sunlight filtering through partially opened cranberry-colored drapes. Her head pounded like a two-year-old beating a pot with a wooden spoon. A gentle prodding with her fingertips confirmed the reason for her pain. There was a huge lump on her forehead.

She tried sitting up, but felt a little dizzy. Her thoughts smashed into one another. Where was she? And what had happened?

Struggling to brush away the clouds in her mind, she remembered leaving her job at the law firm, moving from Salt Lake City to Hollywood two weeks before, needing to get away from Utah, her memories and the pain that never waned. She closed her eyes and sucked in a shuddering breath. A studio apartment just a few blocks away from the Boulevard had been her home for as many days and nights. This was a new start. A time to heal and move on with life.

She had been taking in the sights of the city once again and recalled walking along the sidewalk on her way back to her small apartment. She had paused to get her bearings, then a bone-crushing object smashing into her as she stood at the front of the alley. Afterward, all went dark. Well, at least she didn't have amnesia.

Frowning, she tried to grasp the fleeting pieces of memory running through her mind after that. A dark figure had stood in the shadows of this room. Her gaze took in the white wicker rocker to the other side, the pastel color scheme, rose-patterned wallpaper, as she dug through her mental files.

A voice. She remembered a soothing, velvet-soft voice breathing through the web of night her mind had been tangled in. *I'm here to help you.* It had been the voice of sanctuary. A dark angel. Haven.

Strong arms had held her tightly. Gentle hands had touched her forehead. A cool, strong-smelling liquid. A finger on her lips, feather-light. Her heart beating faster at the touch. She remembered this clearly.

Leah viewed the room in the slackening daylight. She wasn't in a hospital, of that she was certain. The bed she lay in was large, with a mountain of down pillows at her head. A pink comforter covered her body. Lifting the item, she saw that her clothes had been removed, even her bra and underwear. Her blood sped throughout her and heat raced to her cheeks at the knowledge. Someone had dressed her in a luxuriously soft forest-green nightgown.

Where was she? And why was she not in a hospital? Obviously she had been unconscious for a while. She tried to unravel the mystery of why she was here, but at the moment felt too woozy to acknowledge anything but confusion.

"Hello?" Trying to remain calm, she called out to see if anyone would appear. Silence was her only answer. She called out again, louder this time, but there was still no reply.

Not knowing whether to be afraid or angry she attempted to swing her legs over the edge of the bed, wanting to find her clothes and get out of here, but her legs would not obey her brain's command. Puzzled, she tried one leg then the other. They wouldn't move an inch. Fear raced through her. She was paralyzed!

*

Theron awoke sensing his guest was awake ... and frightened.

A rueful smile claimed him as he lay there for another moment with his eyes closed. He would probably be frantic also if he awoke to find that he was in a stranger's home and unable to walk.

Opening his eyes visually confirmed the fact that it was on the verge of sundown. He could still use a little more sleep after the hectic hours he had put in, though he was usually up and around long before now. Though he enjoyed the day, nighttime was always his favorite. Darkness seemed to carry with it a sense of peace. The night also brought out his potential victims, hid his nocturnal activities. The shroud of darkness helped to keep him invisible to curious eyes that might witness his actions of luring women to his car.

Effortlessly, he opened the French doors at the other side of his bedroom to let in the last rays of dwindling sunlight. It was enough to dress by, and with a small hand gesture he retrieved his clothing and in a moment donned more comfortable attire than his clothes of last evening: A black T-shirt and a pair of jeans he had owned for so long he wouldn't be surprised to find out they were the first pair the Levi brothers had marketed during the gold rush era.

A few strokes with the comb and his toothbrush and he was ready to meet, and tend to, Miss Leah Nolan.

As he climbed the stairs, opening the door well in advance of his arrival, Theron wondered how much of himself he should reveal. Naturally, he would keep his immortality a secret, but would it hurt to divulge his telekinetic and psychic powers? Perhaps not, but he would keep the information to himself for the time being. Theron vowed to play the role of the aloof host and physician. *And no matter what, Ambrose, he lectured himself for the hundredth time, you will not submit to your desires.*

*

Leah dragged herself into a sitting position as she heard light footsteps approaching the room she occupied. Setting aside the fear of finding herself immobile, her mind swam with reasons why she was here. Since she had carried no ID, had someone found her and brought her to his or her home? It just didn't make sense. For a second, scenes from *Silence of the Lambs* flashed through her brain. Had she been kidnapped, soon to be murdered? She searched for panic at the thought, but found none, putting it down to the fact that she couldn't think straight at the moment.

The door swung inward, revealing, not a person, but a polished dark wood railing that seemed to border an upstairs hallway. Beyond that she could see a cathedral ceiling and windows in what she supposed was the foyer or living room. The final remnants of day shone through the bare windows, causing a variety of light and shadow to fall across the room.

Leah's heart lodged in her throat and all blood ceased to flow as she took in the man who passed over the threshold.

He looked tall and gorgeous and a whole lot intimidating! And his eyes! They were so big. So black. Like two huge pupils with hardly any white showing around the mesmerizing orbs. Never before had she seen such unusual eyes. Leah gasped with both fear and awe. She pressed her fingers to her lips.

His ebony eyes were on her, fathomless, without a hint of emotion. She fought their

drugging hypnosis, rebelled against a faint glimmer of recollection that was completely ludicrous. His slightly bronzed, aristocratic features were also placid as he walked, seemingly in slow motion, to her side of the bed. He looked young, no older than her own thirty-two years, yet his aura spoke of age-old wisdom. The confident swagger also added an air of insolence about him.

Timeworn jeans sculpted lean hips, long legs, and a healthy bulge beneath the zipper, while a black T-shirt hugged shoulders that seemed wide as the doorway. His hair held her attention for another moment. It was wavy and coal-black, brushed straight back from his forehead, accentuating a highly pronounced widow's peak.

If there was ever a person who epitomized the perfect male, the man now standing at the side of the bed was certainly it.

He didn't speak, but gazed down at her with a small frown between his thick brows and a look in his eyes that made her flush slightly since she had the distinct feeling he was reading her mind. Could actually feel the sensations as if he was sifting through her thoughts as easily as fingers sifting through sand. Mentally she shook off the crazy thought.

His lips curved in a manner ten times more arrogant than his walk had been.

Leah was suddenly quite afraid, but she'd be damned if she'd let him know it!

She sat up very straight, her gaze never leaving his. "Who the hell are you? Where am I? And what happened to me?" Her last question came out a bit quivery and she admonished herself for the weakness in her voice, wanting to project a tone that was strong and unflinching. She felt in a very vulnerable situation at this moment, and the longer he stared down at her the less assured she became. Finally she averted her gaze to the pastel comforter on her lap, resisting the urge to pull the covers over her head and hide from his intense perusal.

He chuckled slightly, a sound that was merely amusement and not in the least bit friendly. Her head shot up and she frowned.

"In due time. I see you've finally decided to join the world, Miss Nolan." He nodded slightly, took her hand by the wrist, thumb on one side, fingers on the other, apparently feeling for her pulse. He wore no watch and instead cocked his head to one side as he seemed to be counting the beats.

She inhaled a sharp breath. "How do you know my name?" She was certain she hadn't been carrying any type of identification, having forgotten her purse at home, and she didn't recall any lucid moments after everything had gone black. And she most certainly would have remembered talking to *this* man!

"You talked in your sleep," was his bland answer as he let her hand go, now examining the bruise on her forehead with great scrutiny.

"I see," she replied, not totally convinced. "Weird that I would be saying my name in my sleep." All the while he stood there, she tried to ignore the waves of awareness lapping at her libido. She didn't even know this man, yet here she was getting all worked up over his efficient touches that were meant to check her injuries, not send her heart racing a thousand beats per minute and her nipples to become hard, though that was the effect he was having on her.

He merely shrugged and said offhandedly, "Well, how often do you hear yourself talking in your sleep?" His dark eyes pinned hers, his eyebrows raised high before he looked back at her forehead.

Leah pursed her lips. "You know, I really need to get out of here. I have a job interview tomorrow." She pushed on the mattress in a feeble attempt to get up. She felt dizzy, nauseated, and leaned back against the headboard, closing her eyes for a second to stop the room from spinning. "What day is it?" She stared at the wall across from her where a framed print of cabbage roses hung.

"Calm down, Leah. You're going nowhere in your condition." Just his accent alone had her blood pumping overtime and sensation zipping between her thighs. His tone and words had an old-world color to them. Formal and commanding. She couldn't place it, though she thought it might be English, softened by several years in America. "Tomorrow has passed you by."

"What?" She held the fingers of one hand to her temple. If she could just think clearly. "It took me two weeks to get an interview with that firm!"

"Relax."

Leah was starting to feel frustrated. "Maybe I would relax if you gave me some answers, like..."

"The name's Theron Ambrose," he interrupted, using a composed voice that had a calming influence on her nerves. He peeled back the covers. Leah wanted to snatch them away from him and cover herself, but fought the temptation. He obviously knew what he was doing.

"That's an unusual name," she commented absently, watching, enthralled, as he touched different parts of her legs. Her previous fight was forgotten. It had been a long time since she'd been so close to a man and she couldn't help the little thrill that passed through her.

"It's an old Greek name," he answered in a preoccupied tone. "It means, *hunter immortal*."

So he was Greek. No wonder he was so drop-dead gorgeous. "How interesting," she remarked, admiring his professional, take-charge attitude. Leah frowned inwardly at her line of thinking. She should be finding answers as to what happened to her and why she was here, but admitted that it felt good to not be alone. It felt even better being touched by this stranger. She found herself saying, "I haven't the foggiest notion as to what my name means."

He pressed his thumbs from the soles of her feet, inch-by-inch to the tops of her thighs. Leah inhaled sharply, seeing how close his hands were to the intimate area between her thighs, certain he could feel how embarrassingly hot and wet she was becoming with his professional touch that felt strangely personal to her. "Did that hurt?" It was a question. No real concern was there in his voice.

"No." Part of her willed his hands closer; the other part wanted him far and away.

Theron Ambrose continued his gentle prodding. "It's a Hebrew derivative." He answered her previous statement regarding the origins of her name. "Defined in English, it means The Weary."

Wasn't that the truth! She *was* weary. Weary from all that had taken place over the past half year. She felt as if she had been running for so long, mostly mentally and emotionally, recently physically as well.

"Are you a doctor?" Leah gave in to her circumstances for the moment. If she went along with things maybe she'd be out of here sooner.

He nodded slightly. "An N.D. Naturopathic doctor," he clarified. "Among other

things.” His mouth curved in that amused smile she had seen moments ago. One that held no laughter or happiness. A guarded smile that matched his hooded gaze as he looked up at her.

“What’s the verdict?”

He stood upright. “I can say with certainty that you have a mild concussion, and most probably a few swollen discs, although I won’t know for certain until I examine you more thoroughly.”

Leah swallowed hard. The thought of this big, handsome man *examining her more thoroughly* conjured all sorts of wicked scenes in her mind. She started feeling a bit lightheaded. No doctor had the right to be so intoxicating. So mesmerizing. She glanced down at his left hand. No wedding ring. She wondered if he’d ever been married, or engaged. With that thought she slipped into the darkness of her own memories, but levered herself back up into the here and now.

“At your office or the hospital?” She interrupted her own wayward musings and cringed inwardly at thought of the huge medical bill she’d be paying. She didn’t even have a job yet and her bank account was dwindling fast.

“This is my office, of sorts. And don’t worry about my fee.” She started to say something, but he held up a hand that was surprisingly graceful, possessing long, deft-looking fingers for a man of his stature. “Since I’m the one who inadvertently inflicted these injuries upon you, it seems only right that I tend to them.”

“You—How...”

“You were on the sidewalk passing an alley just as I was backing out. It was dark and I didn’t see you.” He fastened her with a hard look. “You really shouldn’t be out walking around that late at night, especially in such dark clothing.” She opened her mouth to protest, but he continued speaking. “My intention was to take you to the hospital or call an ambulance, but since I found no identification on you and the fact that I felt a twist of remorse since I had been the one to harm you...” He shrugged. “I brought you back here to my home.” He turned his back to her. “You will heal more quickly and efficiently with my help than you would at any hospital,” he assured her.

Her anger at him for reprimanding her as if she were a child vanished as she admired the straight, if not somewhat tense, line of his back and the confident manner in which he projected himself. Leah wholeheartedly believed him.

Hey, she laughed silently, what choice did she have? Even if this guy turned out to be the world’s most handsome serial killer, she was stuck here until she was able to walk again. Her mood slipped. And who would miss her?

Leah continued to stare at the man beside the bed, her appreciative gaze roaming over his broad back and delicious ass that filled out his jeans to perfection. She frowned. Why did he have his back to her in the first place?

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“I need you to strip and roll over onto your stomach.” His tone was matter-of-fact yet Leah’s blood raced around her body and came to pool several inches below her navel.

“I beg your pardon?” Feelings wrestled around her mind as the past and present tumbled in her mind like jagged stones. Fear and excitement, grief and arousal; all were there. For a moment the thought crossed her mind that maybe he was one of those weirdoes that captured women and kept them around as their personal sex slaves.

Theron gave a rusty chuckle and Leah felt, not for the first time since meeting this

man, that he *could* read her mind.

“You sound so offended. I assure you, my intentions are purely as a physician, Miss Nolan.” He stuck his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. “I need to check the damage done to your spine in order to know what corrective measures need to be taken. I’m sure it isn’t permanent, but I’d like to have a look.”

“Okay,” she murmured, feeling silly for thinking he was something other than what he represented. Should she believe he was nothing more than a doctor who was offering his help, even though there had been something slightly sinister in the air when he had walked through the door? But what about the fleeting moment when their eyes locked and strange sensations had flashed through her mind and body, hinting at the knowledge of fate having stepped into her life?

Her mind was muddy and her temples throbbed. She didn’t know what to think. The only thing she could do at the moment was to take this man at face value and pray for the best ... and to tamp down her aggravatingly persistent libido.

Obviously there was a woman in the house, a fiancée or steady girlfriend, since he had women’s sleep wear around his home. She doubted he was a cross-dresser, so the former could only explain the soft nightgown she had just shed and set on the nightstand. Though the thought of him having a woman in his life should have comforted her, she felt strangely let down.

Another low chuckle came from the man who shook his head slightly from side to side.

Leah found herself irritated. “Are you going to let me in on what it is you find so funny?” she said somewhat curtly.

“It wasn’t my intention to annoy you. I just found something greatly amusing.” He didn’t elaborate and Leah didn’t ask him to, for when he turned around she swore she saw a wicked light flicker in his big, dark eyes. A glow that was part desire, part evil. Something that was hidden beneath that cool exterior of his, but leapt out for the briefest second and grasped onto her soul and left its imprint forever.

Leah closed her eyes, searching for the armor of detachment that had gotten her through three funerals. Don’t think, don’t feel, and in the end just run away. Though she couldn’t run away from this situation at the moment, she could at least try to remain aloof while she was here. She found herself quite attracted to Dr. Theron Ambrose, and though she didn’t have any trouble considering a sexual rendezvous, there was no way she’d ever allow herself to fall in love again. It just hurt too damn bad. Leah rolled her eyes at her lunatic musings. That lump on her head was causing some crazy-assed thoughts.

Once the well-used shield was in place she dared to open her eyes. There, she thought with satisfaction, he didn’t seem nearly as attractive or malevolent as he had before. And look, she thought with bitter joy, that reliable, invisible blanket of numbness permeated every part of her. This, she could live with. Now she could handle anything that came her way.

“I think I need some help here.” She tried to keep her tone short. Tried not to think about the next few minutes when his hands would be on her.

Without a word he turned around and came closer, his face a stony mask. Leah focused on a spot across the room, refusing to look at him and willing away the thrill shooting through her as he went about the task of turning her over.

When Theron looked down and saw the long column of her back bared before him, her inviting buttocks covered by nothing more than two layers of fabric that could easily be thrown back, desire nearly pushed him over the edge of sanity. It had been all he could stand to withhold his yearnings while he helped her onto her stomach so he could examine her back injuries.

“Would you thank your girlfriend, fiancée, or significant other for letting me wear her nightgown?” Leah broke the heavy silence between them.

Theron cleared his throat and spoke, quickly gaining control of his runaway impulses. “I’m afraid the thoughtful gesture was mine.” He narrowed his eyes in forced concentration as he gently felt along her spinal column, taking note of the black and blue streak. “I’m not married. Never have been. Nor am I living with anyone aside from myself—and now, you,” he added in a grim tone.

He heard her take in a sharp breath and muttered a granite-hard, “Sorry.” It was as close to an apology as he could get when all he wanted to do was wrap his hands around her lovely throat and choke the very life out of her for threatening his safe and long-time existence in less than twenty-four hours. He had been warned of this challenge centuries ago, now here she was. Early on he had laughed at the thought, believing he would simply take one look at her and walk away. But the pull of temptation had been too strong, the desire overwhelming. And he couldn’t walk away. Not yet. In one way, he was just as paralyzed as Leah Nolan.

“It didn’t hurt. I was just surprised to find out you weren’t attached in some way,” she said, her voice muffled by the pillow.

“Just lucky, I guess,” he remarked, locating the source of her trouble. A prolapsed intervertebral disc in the lower portion of her spinal column exerted so much pressure on the nerve that at the moment she was completely numb and paralyzed from the waist down. When the feeling started coming back she would be in tremendous pain. Her legs would be weak. Though he had no doubt she would walk again, it would take time. And he had all the time in the world.

The thought of spending so many nights and days under such close conditions with this woman sent a lightning bolt of lust and anticipation through him, along with a wave of intense fear and nausea. Would he be able to resist the lure of surrendering to passion as he’d intended?

He felt another erection looming. He would have to resist her, though it would be infuriatingly hard to do so. So very hard. Theron made a mental trip into his boxers and grimaced at his choice of words. They suited his present condition quite well.

She turned her head so she faced him instead of the wall. “Why do you consider yourself lucky at not having a life mate?” Her innocent enough question had him instantly on edge.

Bending down, bringing his strained face only a whisper from hers, he said, “Because, sweet Leah, letting a woman into my life would be suicide.”

She lifted a brow and asked, “Are you gay?”

A huge breath exited Theron’s lungs in one big gust. He stood upright, looking down at her, wanting to show her just how very much he enjoyed females, but resisted. “No, I’m not gay. I just prefer being single.” He lifted his chin defiantly.

Her eyes met his. “Same here.” Her tone was so low he could barely hear her, but he had, though he refused to have her elaborate, convincing himself he really didn’t care.

“You get used to it.” He took the bottle from the nightstand, pouring some of the strong-smelling liquid into his hand. “Loneliness is just a feeling, and feelings are always fleeting. Joy, sorrow, pain, passion, they are all temporary.”

“Sometimes they seem to last forever though.”

Theron ignored the comment and said, “This will feel cool at first.” He rubbed his palms together. Laying them on her back, he worked the herbal remedy into her skin with expert, gentle strokes. Theron looked to the ceiling and reprimanded himself as he felt the familiar steel-like hardness seeping into his groin. He had designs on buying himself a male chastity belt and tossing away the key.

He heard her sniff. “What is that stuff?”

Theron was grateful at the change in subject. “*Dit dat jow*,” he said flatly, kneading her flesh from waist to neck and back down again.

“What’s it made out of? What does it do?” She moaned in delight at his touch.

Theron turned a deaf ear to the erotic sound, answering her question with one of his own. “Inquisitive, aren’t we?”

She shrugged. “I have a right to know what you’re putting on me.” Her tone was solid. She sounded like she was used to getting her own way. They would certainly clash in this area since catering to whims was something he had never done before and refused to start now.

He stopped his thorough manipulations. “True.” He began massaging again. “It’s an ancient recipe. Chinese. It helps to heal any damage that has occurred. When you get a bruise, you have blood stagnation due to ruptures in the capillaries and smaller veins. The blood pools in the surrounding tissue where it turns purple and black. Applying this three times a day will reduce the swelling, and heal the bruises in a matter of days instead of the normal period of one or more weeks.”

“I never thought much about bruises.” Her voice sounded heavy and relaxed. Somehow it brought a sharp thrill to him knowing she felt somewhat at ease around him. Knowing she was vulnerable. That he could take what he wanted—

“Blood stagnation leads to swelling,” he continued on, squelching any and all ridiculous thoughts he was thinking at the moment that included himself and Miss Leah Nolan wrapped around one another in ecstasy. “Swelling closes off the blood vessels, hampering the rejuvenation of injured cells. Particularly bad bruising can result in nerve damage also, which is precisely what you have obtained.”

“Is it really that bad?” Her eyes met his and he saw real worry in them.

“You’ll heal,” he assured her, forcing a small smile.

She smiled back at him like a trusting child. Theron felt his heart trip over itself. He swallowed hard and got back to his work.

“What’s in your magic potion?” Her eyes closed again and Theron let out a silent sigh of relief. The effect of those eyes upon him was unsettling. After their session he would have to go into his room and offer himself release, though he had a feeling this round of masturbation would be sorely lacking.

He began reciting the list of ingredients and the role they played in the mixture, forcing his mind off the path of lust. “Cinnamon twigs, which elevate blood temperature locally. Rehmannia, which tones the blood. Lotus root rebuilds damaged veins and capillaries, stops minor internal bleeding, and reduces pain and swelling. Skullcap root detoxifies the blood. Frankincense and myrrh to break up blood stagnation. Licorice root

to help open the twelve meridians in the body. There are other ingredients along with vodka and water, though that's a rough breakdown."

As he slid his hands down her waist, he didn't resist the temptation to dip his thumbs lower with each stroke until he was rubbing circles over the top portion of her buttocks. Though she couldn't feel it, he damn well could. His gaze traveled up her spine and caressed her long neck. He moved his shoulders restlessly. Flirting with danger, he worked his thumbs up to her nape, his fingers resting gently on the arteries on either side of her throat. He felt her blood pulsing quick and strong. The rhythmic throbbing called to him. Theron bent his head, opened his mouth—ecstasy only inches away. He stifled a groan, wanting so badly to taste her, but slid his hands back down and sat up straight when she tensed.

"And here I've been making do with aspirin all of these years." Her laugh sounded forced and he realized he had overstepped his boundaries.

"I make it myself." He wanted to get back on the patient-caretaker track again.

"Well, it feels marvelous." Her voice was soft.

"Yes, it does." He smiled grimly. It also felt good to him touching her this way. "We all need to be touched." Even himself, though he perpetually avoided letting any woman touch him. Although he would please them with oral sex, caresses, and kisses, he always felt that by allowing a woman to offer him the same would result in him caving in and having intercourse. Sex was something he had to abandon in order to hold on to his immortality. Purity was the only way to retain this gift. And for the very first time, he resented the hell out of it.

"I agree." She offered her knowledge in the area. "I read an article once that stated newborns who are touched and held by their mothers frequently grow up to be more affectionate, loving, and trusting."

A sharp laugh escaped him. "Then I suppose I was never touched as an infant."

Those damnable eyes were on him again, creating havoc with his insides. They were big and soft when she said, "I'm sorry."

Feeling angry at his weak admission, he said tightly, "That's enough for today." Finished with his examination and massage, he helped Leah turn back over and dress. Needing some space between himself and this succubus, he went into the guest bathroom to wash his hands.

"So how long do you think it'll be until I'm up and around again?" she asked after giving him the okay to venture out of the bathroom.

He shrugged. "With therapy, around a month."

She chewed on her bottom lip and wrinkled her nose. "What about my apartment?"

"It will be taken care of."

"And you're equipped to handle all of this therapy that I'm in need of?"

Theron walked over to her. "My dear Leah, I'm quite equipped to handle anything either you or I find that you're in need of." He raised an eyebrow and smiled.

Leah let out a small gasp, her eyes searching the room. Theron read her thoughts and said, "There's no phone in here. Besides, who would you call?"

She blinked up at him. "I—I wasn't..."

Theron only tipped his head back and laughed. "You were. But you'll just have to trust me. You're alone in the world." He glanced at her legs covered by the spread. "And unable to go anywhere. Any neighbors are few and far." Though he wanted her to fear

him so he could remain aloof, the worry in her eyes made him feel wounded in some odd way. An irritated sigh leaked out with that thought. "I'll bring you something to eat." He turned and headed toward the door, not waiting for a reply, closing it behind him without ever touching the knob.

*

Leah sank back onto the mattress in her supine position, one thought floating in her mind: Theron Ambrose was no ordinary man.

Being run down by an enigmatic doctor who wasn't married and had a house and body to die for was the most interesting thing that had ever happened to her.

"To die for." She repeated the words out loud as the image of his dark face burned in the center of her mind, pricking her with a strange sense of dread. And she wondered ... would she be going that route? Death?

For some reason she couldn't push away the sight of the unholy spark she had seen in his black eyes. A small spark that quickly ignited into a flame every time he looked at her. It was unsettling, yet arousing at the same time.

Leah forced herself to relax a little, smoothing the cool covers over her, thinking that perhaps she had imagined the dark, savage look, knowing in her heart she hadn't. She also realized she was here to stay, at least until she regained the use of her legs.

The brazen part of her hoped she would sample some of that raging passion she saw in his gaze before she left here. She had to admit Theron Ambrose was sexy, mysterious, and slightly eerie. She ran her fingertips over her breasts, feeling her hard nipples beneath the satin as she stared at the closed door. Whether it was sensible or not, she found herself wanting the man. Though there was no way she would ever let her heart get involved again, her body craved a man's touch.

Chapter Three

Theron still lingered in the kitchen a half-hour later. The food had taken all of five minutes to prepare, but he had spent the remainder of that time thinking, brooding, and sending the refrigerator and cupboard doors into a series of wrathful open and shut motions.

He had more pent-up energy than he could handle at the moment. His traitorous mind suggested a few activities that could lessen the severity of his strained emotions, all of which were centered on the woman upstairs.

Just the thought of crushing her soft, warm body beneath him, having her writhing with desire as he bit into her fragile flesh sent another wave of electricity through his body. It was released in the form of a small explosion that sent the coffee maker flying into the air, landing on the plank patterned wood flooring in a small heap of melted plastic and twisted metal. And it was building again inside of him. He could feel it, like a volcano ready to erupt.

With long strides he went out to the shadowy backyard, overturning every item of patio furniture he could lay his eyes on. Stripping off his clothes, he ran to the opposite end of the unlit pool and dove in. Back and forth he swam angry laps, letting his overabundance of energy slowly ebb away with every stroke.

When he felt as if he could finally face Leah Nolan with some semblance of indifference, he climbed out, dried off with a towel that had literally been pulled out of thin air, and dressed in the same effortless manner.

He really must get a hold of his chaotic feelings. The woman would be here for at least a month, perhaps longer. There was no way he could go day after day with emotions as turbulent as they had been for the past twenty-four hours. A small part of him regretted bringing her here and insisted they would both be better off if he took her to the hospital right here and now, though he easily squelched the thought.

Going into the kitchen, he prepared the light meal all over again. He opened a cupboard and retrieved one of the amber bottles sitting there. Unscrewing the lid, he pressed on the rubber top and added a dropper full of the glycerin based herbal elixir to the tea. It would ease some of her pain and help her sleep. She needed the rest and he needed to feed again tonight, although he felt strangely energetic this night instead of the withdrawal that invariably sneaked up on him as the sun fell to the horizon each evening.

He set the items on a tray, grasped the handles, and grunted in dismay as he walked back out of the kitchen with what he knew to be her favorite beverage, cinnamon tea with cream and sugar. He paired it with lightly buttered seven-grain toast. If she kept that down he would offer her something more substantial later. He took a deep breath and started for the stairway that to him felt like a walk down death row.

Entering the darkened room, he turned on the bedside lamp that cast a warm, cozy light all around the feminine décor. It was an ambiance he had never noticed before, and thought it was most likely his guest had created the heady atmosphere in the room and not the blasted lamp.

When he reached the side of the bed, he noticed she was asleep, and debated whether or not to wake her. She hadn't eaten since the previous evening at least, and although tea

and toast was pretty paltry fare, he'd feel better if she had something in her stomach.

Theron cast his gaze upon her, sending her a wake up message. Her eyelids fluttered open, drowsy and looking like unpolished gems. A slow smile came to her lips when she saw him standing by the side of the bed, but it immediately snuffed out when he saw her focus and the realization of where she was and who he was hit her.

"I know this isn't much, but I don't know how your stomach will react after what you've been through." There wasn't a hint of hospitality in his tone, he was sure of it.

"You don't need to go to any trouble," she said defensively.

"It's no trouble, I assure you."

She scooted herself into a sitting position, looking right at him. "You know something? You're the one with the bad attitude, yet you're also the one who ran me down with your car, but you don't see me acting all bent out of shape, do you?"

He felt his temper flare. The muscles in his jaw tensed and relaxed as he fought for control. "Trust me, it was no problem bringing you food, nor will it ever be one." He waited patiently as she situated herself into a more comfortable position against the elaborately scrolled headboard. Unfolding the feet on the tray, he set it on her lap.

"Here." He placed a pillow at her back.

"Thanks." She avoided looking at him as he stood at her side, taking interest in the food he brought her. She took a sip of the tea and looked up at him, frowning. "How did you know cinnamon tea was my favorite? Wait, don't tell me, I talked in my sleep." The comment was dry and sounded very much as if she didn't believe it for one second.

"Nobody talks that much in their sleep, especially not of cinnamon tea with cream and sugar."

Theron only nodded, brushing off her suspicions. "I need to talk to you about something," he said flatly. Looking at the cane rocker across the room, he set it in a sliding motion with the barest of thought, but quickly stopped, jerking his head in her direction to see if she'd noticed.

The toast she had picked up fell from her fingers, landing partly in the cup of tea. She'd noticed.

Sighing, Theron slid it over the rest of the way, right next to the bed, and sat down, looking expectantly at the woman before him.

"How did you do that?" It was a whispered gasp.

He rested one elbow on the arm of the rocker, planting his chin on his fist. "Eat first and then we'll talk."

*

Leah noticed he didn't look too thrilled with the prospect, but she sure as hell was. She was also slightly afraid. If this man possessed the power to make a rocking chair glide across the room with such ease, what else was he capable of? And would she be witness or victim to those unseen forces?

She felt a slight pricking sensation shoot through her head as he glowered at her. Ignoring the pain, putting it down to hunger and the lump above her brow, she ate in silence, trying all the while to avoid looking at the man beside her who watched her every move.

A few minutes later she took the last sip of tea, setting the crystal mug back on the silver tray and wiping her mouth with the cream-colored linen napkin. This man certainly lived in style. "Thank you." She dared a peek at him and noticed he looked guarded.

“As I said, it was nothing.” He pointed a finger at the tray and it immediately obeyed his unspoken command, gliding swiftly to the nightstand where it set itself down gently.

“No, I guess not,” she whispered, eyeing the tray. “I bet it makes house cleaning a snap.” She smiled nervously up at him.

Theron shifted the bulk of his weight to a more comfortable position, folding his hands in his lap in a most serene way, though Leah sensed something rolling off him that she didn’t even want to think about in her position.

“I know I haven’t been the most amicable of hosts,” he began, his black gaze on her, even and emotionless, “but I live a very solitary life, Miss Nolan. I always have.”

She was incredulous. “So why did you bring me here instead of just taking me to a hospital?”

A sigh punctured the air around them. “Because guilt outweighed my need for solitude. And because I can help you in ways western medicine never could.”

Leah bit on her bottom lip with that last statement of his since she got the impression medical assistance wasn’t the only thing on his mind. Fool that she was, she was eager to find out just how this enigmatic man *could* help her.

“I have no family, no friends or acquaintances, and that is the way I prefer my life to be.” He turned a palm toward the ceiling.

“Me too, but not by choice.” Her eyes felt watery, but she refused to cry.

Theron didn’t speak.

Leah stared at him, not knowing what to else say, various thoughts floated around in her head, though none trying to be spoken. *I wish he’d call me Leah. Poor guy, doesn’t he ever get lonely? I feel lonely quite often. Why is he acting like such a grouch when I never asked to be smacked down in the first place? And why does he have to be so attractive? Maybe I could work up some anger or crawl my way out of here if he wasn’t so gorgeous and intriguing. He’s also scary as hell.*

“Very well.” He shifted once again, his eyes piercing and a small smile on his lips that looked slightly victorious. “I shall call you Leah, as you will call me Theron. You needn’t feel sorry for me; my life is exactly as I wish it to be, although things have taken a detour suddenly.” He arched a brow at her. Her jaw went slack.

“I realize you didn’t ask to be smacked into. As for being attractive, I’m afraid that my face is here to stay, as is yours. Also,” he held up one finger, “working up some anger against me would be quite wise, my sweet.”

He leaned forward and she pressed her back against the headboard as he spoke again. “You have no idea what kind of man I am, or what I’m capable of. Evil lurks in even the most timid of breasts. Feel confident in the knowledge that I am not timid in the least.” His voice was low, slow and sinister.

“You...” She pointed at him. “You just read my mind.” Her words came out on the gust of breath she had been holding. Her face felt hot because he had access to everything she was thinking, especially about *him*.

“Yes.” He sighed, looking bored. “I see that my attempt to instill some real fear into you has failed miserably.”

“That’s amazing.”

She watched as his features softened. “Indeed.”

“I’ve heard of such things, but never actually—I mean, how do you...” She tripped and fell all over her words, curiosity pushing her forward. She wanted to ask if anyone

else knew about this, how his talent affected his life, how people reacted, how he used it. But she realized he had already extracted her thoughts as he closed his eyes briefly, looked at her, and opened his mouth to speak.

"I have no idea why I'm telling you this." He lifted his hands in surrender. "I was always a unique child," he began quietly. "My talents started to develop when I was just an infant. My parents were terrified of me. By the time I was five years old they grew tired of seeing items floating around the house, of me answering them before they'd even spoken a word, so sent me to a nearby monastery."

"I'm sorry," she said softly, wanting to reach out and hold the small boy who was shunned by society and his own family.

"You need not feel sorry for me." Both elbows rested on the arms of the rocker, his long fingers steepled beneath his chin. "I was never abused in any way, merely misunderstood and held in the shadows. I must say, that though the lifestyle behind those walls was tranquil and spiritually enlightening, it was boring as hell and I was happy to leave when I did."

Leah couldn't help the small laugh that came forth. For a second there he actually appeared human. *Should I talk, or just let you read my mind?*

The first real smile she had seen since Theron had made his dour presence known slid across his lips. "Please feel free to speak. It isn't often that I get to converse. Besides," he lifted his shoulders in a small shrug, "I have the ability now to shut off my probing skills. I only use it when I feel it's necessary or when I want to uncover the truth."

"So, how long did you live in the monastery?" She relaxed, leaning back against the pillow behind her, arms folded over her chest.

He was thoughtful for a moment. "For the first many years of my life." It sounded vague, but she let it go. "When I left I started traveling the world. My powers made it obscenely easy to make money. After living behind cloistered walls for most of my life, it was quite exhilarating to see new places."

"I imagine so," she said softly.

"I lived in China for awhile. Traveled all over Europe. In fact, I've been almost everywhere."

She wondered at the faraway tone in his voice. "You've been so many places. More than most people have in an entire lifetime. How do you find so much time to travel?" It was a sleepy question. Her head felt as heavy as her eyelids did. "There aren't enough days in the year."

"Leah," he said on a deep sigh. "I have all the time in the world."

"So were your original plans to stay at the monastery and remain a monk?" She started shifting her weight down until she lay flat on her back, yawning in the process.

He shook his head. "Never. I learned a lot while I was there though."

"Such as?"

"I learned to control my emotions and yearnings through meditation and other mind and body exercises."

She laughed softly, "Why would you want to do that? Giving in to yearnings can be fun sometimes." A small smile tipped her lips.

Theron's eyes narrowed. "It can also be dangerous," he countered. "On many levels."

“Only if you allow it,” she mumbled, feeling so very sleepy.

*

Theron watched as her eyelids drifted closed. “Oh, how right you are,” he murmured, darkening the room with a wave of his hand. Rising to his feet, the rocker slid to its previous position as he continued to stare down at Leah’s sleeping form.

When they had been talking, he’d felt the energy radiating off her. She had been awe-struck, excited, and eager to know more about his talents. And he couldn’t deny the fact that some of those feelings were absorbed into his body, arousing long-dead parts of him. The feeling was small, but it felt as if something inside of him had been resurrected. Something aside from his libido.

And Theron’s irritation grew.

A feeling he vowed to hold onto like a carnivorous bird grasping its prey. In the next moment he sighed. Try as he might, the anger abandoned him as he recalled the open intrigue on her face. She was the first person who had actually shown a positive reaction to his gifts of psychokinesis and mind reading.

Over the centuries he had been accused of being everything from a witch to a demon to the devil himself. Since then, he had learned to keep his talents well hidden.

But Leah’s intense interest filled him to overflowing and he had soon found himself telling her things he never thought he’d reveal to another living soul. In fact, he felt the overwhelming need to do so. He balked at his own weaknesses once again.

Compassion had been there in her eyes and he couldn’t deny the small tug his heart felt at the mute show of empathy. It was a strange feeling, he thought, one that was like an invisible line connecting two people. He had shared a story of his past and she had offered her undivided attention, her emotions.

“Fascinating.” He reached out and caressed a silken cheek. She mumbled something and he felt his groan lurch. Withdrawing his hand, he held it in a tight fist and gritted his teeth.

Mentally he drew one strike against his intentions to resist her, therefore realizing it was one strike against him of ever seeing this thing through while remaining unscathed.

Shaking his head in consternation, he bid her slumbering senses a good night, noting the way she smiled in her sleep at the gesture. He left her, going to his room in order to prepare for his nightly ritual.

* * * *

When Theron pulled up in front of his home at 2am, he glanced at the second floor noticing a dim light was on in Leah’s room.

He frowned at how he had just labeled it *Leah’s room*. How quickly he was already thinking of her as belonging in his home. Belonging in his life.

Grimly, he switched off the motor, opened the door and climbed out. He was alone again, dammit. That strange feeling of guilt at bringing another woman home had crept up on him for the second time in as many nights. So it seemed he would be hunting nightly for the remainder of her stay.

Sending his mind in her direction, he felt her awake, mulling over her predicament and devising plans to escape with the first chance that came her way.

No! He would not let her leave here. Not yet.

Theron didn’t investigate or linger on his reasons for wanting her to remain in his

home as anger began coursing through him again. He reached the bottom step of the porch and jerked the front door open. He felt confused; wanting her to stay with him until his curiosity was satisfied, wanting her gone now, resisting bringing another woman to his home simply because Leah occupied one room in his large home. Since when had he developed such a bloody guilty conscience? He stomped inside, flinging the door closed behind him. And where had all of this uncontrollable energy come from?

He'd always prided himself on being calm and dignified. A man, so to speak, who was in charge of his emotions. "Until *she* arrived," he muttered, feeling he was now one step away from becoming a raving lunatic.

He went directly to Leah's room, intending to let off some of the steam he'd been building since her arrival. With an angry wave of his hand he swung the door open, stepping over the threshold, a tower of rage dressed in black.

Leah let out a small shriek of surprise, swinging her head around to face him. He saw she was sitting up and pointed an incriminating finger at her, his eyes flaming. She looked frightened to the very core and it made him glad as hell.

"Good, you're afraid, as you very well should be."

He looked in her eyes as he stalked toward her and saw her shutting down and shutting him out. In less than a heartbeat she had her armor in place. "Well, small wonder with you making such a theatrical entrance," she said tartly, looking unruffled, but Theron heard her true thoughts. She wanted to duck beneath the covers and cower like a wounded dog.

"I'll show you theatrics." He was at her side now, lifting her from the bed with invisible hands. The bedspread was cast aside, leaving her hovering three feet above the mattress.

Watching on in fascination as she tried to resist, he increased his hold so that her arms were pinned at her sides.

"Put me down!"

Theron only laughed and set her body in motion, drifting it over to him until she was level with his face.

"Let me go! Please." Her last word was spoken on a small sob as he saw her start to crumble.

"Why should I?" He glared into eyes that were green as moss. "Give me one good reason. You seemed so eager to leave here. You were planning to find a way out. And earlier, you were so intrigued by my powers ... feel them, Leah. Experience them." He sent her gliding toward the French doors at the other side of the room, pulling them open with a silent command as he walked alongside of her board-stiff, yet feather-light body.

"Please," she choked out. "Stop."

They were out on the dark balcony that overlooked the backyard and pool. "No. I won't." He gave an absent wave of his hand, the pool below lighting up like an iridescent pond in an inky thicket. Leah hovered beside him, terror in her eyes as he spoke. "Do you know what I'm capable of, my sweet? I could let you drift just a few feet over the balcony, release my mental hold on you and let you plummet to the concrete below. Or," he gave a wicked chuckle, "I could float you right over the pool, let you drop, and watch as you thrash about until you become exhausted and sink lifeless to the bottom."

Her lower lip trembled, her eyes becoming liquid. The sight caused his heart to slip, but he grabbed onto his rage once again.

“Why are you so accepting of the damage I’ve inflicted upon you? Why haven’t you demanded to be taken to the hospital?” Theron changed the subject to what was really bothering him. “Why are you so accepting of my talents? When I was rude, bitter, and lashing out, I detected something in you I can’t explain. Something I’ve never encountered before. Why!” His voice thundered and Leah’s body began to shake, as did Theron’s mental hold on her.

“I—I don’t know why,” she said desperately. “I know I should be furious with the fact that you’ve made me a virtual cripple and brought me here. I should be frightened of you...”

“You’re frightened now,” he said bitterly.

“Only because you’re threatening to kill me,” she pointed out, her voice wavering.

“I’ve sent some of the most formidable warriors running away like frightened children with only a single wave of my hand, yet you ... you find what I’m capable of amusing, even ... exciting.” His voice had lost its booming quality, but his next question came out loud. “Why?”

“I don’t know! I feel some sort of connection with you. It sounds insane, but I felt it the second I saw you. I don’t know why, I don’t know what it is.” A gentle breeze sifted through her hair as he witnessed her carefully constructed emotional wall creak and heave under the pressure of her confusion.

God help him, Theron knew what it was, even if Leah didn’t. The reason why she was here and what she represented to his now very bleak future. “I should kill you, Leah Nolan, before you get into my blood any more than you already have.” He continued to look at her with a raging fury that caused his entire body to tremble, until he saw crystalline drops sliding down each side of her face. In that moment, all contempt seeped from him. “Damn your wretched soul,” he muttered. “I can’t harm you.”

He let his mental grip on her slip away and she started to fall. She gasped in fear, but Theron caught her in an unsteady embrace. She clung to him, weeping from her very soul.

“Ah, little one, don’t cry. I assure you an episode such as that won’t happen again.” He hoped. Around Leah his normally well-reined emotions quickly reached a state of delirium. Could he be trusted around her for the next several weeks?

Time would tell.

Once again he thought about taking her to the nearest healthcare facility. To have her out of his home and out of his life forever. He could pass a hand over her face and make her forget that any of this had taken place. But he immediately cast the notion aside. Much as he hated to admit it, he wanted the company of this woman. Wanted to probe her mind, read her soul, peer into her dreams. Perhaps more. He was like a curious child drawn to a box of matches, knowing that a keg of gunpowder sat so near, but was too intrigued by the flame to care.

And he liked the fact that, for the time being, he wasn’t some anonymous stranger. For the first time in so very long he didn’t feel alone. Before it had never bothered him, but now she was here, the woman he had avoided all of these years, his solitude loomed before him huge and sad.

Holding her firmly against his chest, he walked back through the doors, into the bedroom and sat on the rocker with her on his lap. In a soothing effort meant to calm them both, he set the chair in motion gently back and forth.

*

“Why did you do that?” The soft fabric covering his firm chest muffled her voice. Moments ago this man had threatened to kill her, and she had believed him with every cell in her body. He was a man of high emotion. And though she still felt the tremors of panic wracking through her, she found herself wondering how he would be as a lover. Just as passionate, she was sure.

What was it that had her so utterly drawn to him? It must be more than his dark, handsome looks. More than his overpowering presence, take-charge attitude, and mind-boggling psychic abilities. For some odd reason she felt a strong yearning in her empty soul reaching out to Theron’s. And, just as strangely, she felt his soul reaching out in return.

She was never one to believe in past lives, reincarnation, or any of those spiritual things she had heard about over the years, but now ... now she wasn’t so sure. Leah gave a silent caustic laugh. Maybe the concussion had caused more damage than she realized.

Theron placed a finger under her chin, bringing her tear-wet face into the light, their eyes locking. “If the truth be known, it’s because you scare the hell out of me. I can honestly say without fear of contradiction that I have never met a woman like you in my entire life.”

“But you barely know me.”

He tilted his head to the side. “Perhaps, but I’ve been expecting you for quite some time.”

She frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I,” was his solemn reply.

Leah felt him grow hard under her buttocks. She was bare beneath the thin material and they both knew it. Heat rose from his body, warming her in all the right places. She sucked in a little breath of air as he pulsed against her. Unable to turn away, her eyes were held captive by his. One hand went under the hem of the long gown she wore and he began caressing her ankle. He encircled it with a thumb and forefinger, a shackle of flesh and bone. The small act did something to her insides. The thought of this dark man as her master sent a delicious wave of heat between her thighs.

His gaze penetrated through to her soul as his hand wandered higher up her thigh, running lazy circles over her bare hip. Leah licked her lips, her heart picking up speed. At the moment she didn’t care if she had just met this man or that he had virtually kidnapped her after rendering her unable to walk. Right now, she didn’t want to think about anything except for the fact that she wanted him ... he wanted her.

Theron let out a soft groan, bending his head, his breath warm against her mouth. His fingers dug into her soft flesh. And he kissed her ... just barely. Leah made a small sound of protest, willing him closer.

“Leah, I...” The remainder of his words were swallowed up as she moved her palm to the back of his head pulling him close. His lips came down on hers, hard and hungry. Leah opened her mouth for him and he was inside in an instant, his tongue advancing then retreating, slow and erotic. She slid her arms around his neck, willing him closer still, pressing her breasts against his chest. She couldn’t get close enough.

Theron grunted, pushing her legs apart with impatience so he could slip his fingers inside her sex. Leah bit on her bottom lip, her eyes drifting closed as he moved in and out of her with unhurried, delicious strokes.

“Look at me.” His voice was a soft command. “I want to see the desire in your eyes. I want to watch your reaction to me.”

And Leah let him. Never had she felt as shameless as she did now with Theron Ambrose. She looked deeply into his eyes as his thumb ran exquisite circles over her clit.

He bent his head for a moment to suckle on her nipples through the satin barrier, leaving behind dark, wet patches. He nipped at one peak and Leah sucked in a sharp breath at the pleasurable pain.

“That’s it,” Theron crooned, as Leah gripped his fingers tight with her muscles. “I want to see the ecstasy on your face as I bring you to orgasm.”

Leah couldn’t speak, so simply nodded, her body and mind no longer her own, Theron was in command, and she reveled in the feelings he aroused in her. Never had a man touched her as this man was doing now. His fingers were magic, his eyes casting a spell on her as she was pulled under midnight waves of satisfaction.

He quickened his strokes as she moved faster, nearing the point of release. Her breathing came in short pants. She felt dizzy, weak, and yet oh, so powerful.

She lowered her left hand, pushing his fingers in deeper. How badly she wanted to be naked with him, to feel her body pressed into the mattress by his, to feel the full length of his cock sliding inside of her. But she greedily accepted what this mysterious man offered to her at this moment.

She had never been one to have sex with someone she had known less than two days, but somehow this was different. Perhaps because it *was* different. Perhaps she simply craved intimacy so much. Perhaps...

All further thought was obliterated from her mind as she felt tension coiling at the base and top of her spine. Two lights of pure sensation that gathered tightly at their opposite ends as her ecstasy rose ever-higher before the lights merged, bursting fire-hot all over her body. Leah clung to him as her body throbbed.

Several heartbeats later she relaxed and sighed. Had anything ever felt that good to her? To anyone?

She let out a gasp of surprise as she dared to look up at Theron. His eyes seemed to glow from within, reflecting her fevered gaze. He withdrew his fingers from her, bringing them to his lips. His eyes closed briefly and he inhaled a shuddering breath as he savored her essence from each digit with slow, erotic licks.

He lowered his hand, running his moist forefinger over her lips. “Open your mouth.” Leah did so and he slipped it inside. She sucked on the digit, running her tongue over its length and softly nibbling on the tip. “That’s it.” Leah showed him exactly how much she wanted to please him. She yearned to take his stiff dick in her mouth, bring him to climax and swallow every drop of his come.

As she indulged in these seductive fantasies, her head started to feel heavy. She heard Theron whispering words she could not understand. And though his lips never moved, she heard every foreign word. Fog seemed to drift into her brain.

A huge exhale came from the man holding her as he withdrew his hand and rose to his feet with her still in his arms.

“Where are you taking me?” Her voice was low.

“To bed.” He added in a firm tone, “To *your* bed. Where you will sleep alone.”

“Of course.” She raised her chin in indignation, though she felt like a drunk right now. The walls seemed to heave and sway.

“Don’t feel spurned, sweet Leah.” His mouth turned down at the corners and she averted her gaze. “But I have no intention of ever succumbing to the sensual promises in those beautiful eyes of yours, no matter how ethereal it promises to be. That,” he jerked his head in the direction of the rocker, “should not have happened. Nor will it ever again.” Though his tone was firm, she could see the doubt in his eyes.

Leah felt an ugly retort on the tip of her tongue, but the words wouldn’t come. Somehow, through her muddled mind, she had the odd feeling he was protecting himself. From what, she couldn’t imagine. In that space of time she felt far more powerful than Theron Ambrose ever could be.

Neither one said a word as he laid her gently back on the bed, adjusting the gown around her body, covering her with the sheet and comforter manually. Though he could perform the task mentally after all of his displays, he seemed to enjoy being so near her, despite his words of wanting to keep away.

His gaze roamed over her body for several seconds before he turned and walked over to the door. “Tomorrow we start your therapy.” He turned his back to her. “I can’t say that it will be pleasant, but you’ll have to trust me.” As he stepped into the hall he faced her once more.

How can I trust you after all that you’ve done? She mentally sent the message, her palm on her forehead to stop the vertigo she was feeling. Briefly she wondered if he had drugged her.

He looked down for a moment before meeting her eyes in the dim glow of the Victorian-style lamp at her side. “I swear to do all I can to get you walking again as quickly as possible ... for both of our sakes.”

She only nodded slightly, her mind swimming with all that had taken place. “I’ll see you in the morning.” It was a firm dismissal.

“Very well.” Theron passed a palm in front of him, whispering the same soothing words she had heard earlier. The room darkened. Leah closed her eyes to shut out the man who still stood in the doorway and her own dizzy thoughts. *Good night*, the words were his and she felt herself being cradled in their softness as she let herself drift away on a cloud of sleep.

Chapter Four

Leah awoke the following morning smelling another favorite food; blueberry pancakes. She mumbled sleepily, smiling, thinking for a moment that she was a young girl and her mother was trying to wake her up to get ready for school.

The sound of a deep, velvet voice brought a small frown to her brow.

She then remembered she was at Theron Ambrose's home. She smiled again for some odd reason. Even after recalling the terrifying episode of the previous evening, it didn't put a damper on the excitement zinging through her as she felt him standing so near.

Had she finally gone insane? What else could describe her totally uncalled for feelings? This man had posed nothing but threat, harm, and certain danger since he'd first bashed into her with his car, yet she still felt drawn to him. Indeed, she had allowed him full access to her body last night. Why?

She had always been the kind of person who found good in everyone. Even in her fiancé Tom. He had worked long hours and took on pro bono cases any chance he could. Perhaps he was a bit too dedicated to his work. But in Theron she had only found indifference, selfishness, rage and something else she didn't want to put a name to because it always came up ... evil.

So why was she smiling?

Brain damage was her only conclusion.

Leah, breakfast is ready. She heard the words in her head instead of aloud—felt him probing her mind. Like gentle hands searching through papers in a drawer, she felt him rifling through her thoughts.

What are you hoping to find, Theron? She heard him start beside her, flatware jostling as he jumped, surprised she was awake.

"You scared the hell out of me!" His voice was harsh. "I shouldn't have told you I could read your thoughts. I've never told anyone before." The last words were a muttered condemnation against himself.

Leah opened her eyes, trying to stifle the awed gasp that seemed to come to her lips each and every time she saw this man. Today he was dressed in faded jeans and a dark gray T-shirt. When he turned around to open the curtains with a gesture of his hand, she couldn't help but admire the way the soft denim sculpted his firm ass to perfection. Her fingers itched to explore what lay beneath the cloth barrier. To give back what he had offered her just hours ago.

"I would appreciate it if you would refrain from ogling certain parts of my anatomy." It was a curt reprimand.

"Then you should refrain from wearing clothing that flaunt those parts of your anatomy," she said tartly. Theron stiffened. Leah sighed. *What a grouch.*

He gave a caustic laugh. "Yes, I am. That and more, as you will find out in time." He faced her again, laying the tray across her lap, avoiding eye contact.

The scent of soap and male hit her full force. She tried hard not to think any thoughts in regard to the heady scent. He'd probably bite her head off. But it did remind her that she hadn't had a shower for a couple of days. She probably looked a mess, she thought

uncomfortably, smoothing her long hair back from her face.

*

"You look perfectly fine," he muttered, glancing up to see a blush come to her cheeks. Theron found himself amused by the modest display. How long had it been since he'd seen such a demure exhibit? Probably since women started demanding equal rights and began losing any shred of femininity. He didn't like the effect the small expression had on him. Liked even less how he had lost control the previous evening. Though he had thought to erase the memory from her, and had started the process as soon as the act was done, it brought him some sort of perverse pleasure having her remember his hands upon her. Theron gritted his teeth, feeling he would climax in his jeans at the thought any moment. The taste of her had been intoxicating, her smell pure delight.

He blinked hard, deleting the memory on the spot. "I do realize how you must feel though," he said, sliding the rocker over in his direction and sitting in it. "After you eat I'll run you a bath and give you a change of clothing."

Her fork stopped in mid-air, a wedge of pancake quivering on the end of the tines. She looked at him with wary eyes. Theron didn't have to read her mind; her expression said it all. He would have to help her in and out of the tub. And she would be bare to his eyes. His hungry eyes.

"Have no fear, sweet lady. My motives are solely professional. It won't be the first time I've seen a female body, nor the last, I'm quite certain." He sat there calmly, elbows resting on the arms of the chair, his chin resting on his clasped hands. "So, you see," he turned a palm over in a gesture of disinterest, "you have no need to fear my ravishing you. One nude body is the same as the next to me." Theron wondered at the reason for his sudden bout of babbling, knowing he was trying to convince himself that he had no interest in her as a woman more than he was trying to convince her of the fact.

Leah simply looked at him as though he were a lunatic. "How can you say that after last night?"

He cleared his throat, searching for something logical to say. "I assure you it was a one-time incident. If I'm to be able to help you, you have to trust me. Completely." He shot her a dark, piercing look.

She finally gave in. "All right."

He had been lost in his own thoughts, and his heart came to a dead stop when she consented. He tilted his head to the side, one brow arched. "All right, what?"

She had set her fork down and was fidgeting with the navy cloth napkin. "I—I trust you." Her head slowly rose and her eyes locked with his. "Completely."

Theron exhaled a sharp breath of satisfaction ... or irritation ... he wasn't sure.

"Very good." He got to his feet, setting the rocker in motion behind him. "You finish up here while I fetch you another gown and run your bath." With that he was out the door.

When he returned fifteen minutes later, he saw she had put her still full tray on the night table. "Why didn't you eat?" His question held no concern, merely curiosity.

"I'm not very hungry." Her eyes were on him, observant and uneasy as he made his stealthy way toward the bed.

"Your bath is ready." He stood beside her, looking down expectantly.

"I didn't see you go into the bathroom." Her gaze drifted to the other side of the room where the door was open, revealing a small bathroom with salmon and white hues, while

rosebud patterned paper bordered the top of the wall all around.

“That bathroom only has a shower stall. The bathtub is in the bathroom off the master suite.” He added for clarification, “My bedroom.”

She swallowed hard before speaking. “Oh.” She didn't move.

“Shall I remove the gown, or would you prefer to?” His voice slid out low and silky, not sounding professional or disinterested in the least.

Her eyes met his. “Would you mind?”

A muscle in the side of his jaw began jumping as his whole face tightened, but his voice came out cool as an evening breeze. “Not at all.” He viewed her with hooded eyes.

The comforter and sheet were slowly peeled back by invisible hands revealing her slim form veiled by the soft, green fabric.

Theron could use his powers to undress her just as he had the first night. He could turn his back, strip her bare, float her down to the bathroom and into the tub, all without laying a hand on her or casting an eye in her direction. Ah-ha, but that was precisely why he *wouldn't* use his powers. She may very well represent his impending doom, but he was still a man deep down inside. He couldn't pass up the opportunity to touch her exposed body, hold her in his arms, feel her heat, inhale her feminine scent. Again. His wiser side told him he would pay dearly for this second slip in his reserve, but he pushed the knowledge aside.

His hands shook slightly as he lowered them toward the hem of the gown. Clenching them into tight fists, he inhaled several deep breaths before resuming his task.

Grasping the hem, he bunched the material in his hands, raising it up her thighs until he came to where she was sitting upon it. Without a word, he placed a steady arm around her waist and raised her up slightly to pull the garment free, then up and over her head, leaving her completely naked.

Leah crossed an arm over her breasts and slid one hand lower in modesty. “Don't.” Theron impatiently pushed her hands aside, exposing her to his view. He caressed her with a languorous sweep of his eyes finally seeing what had been covered the night before.

Theron wanted so badly to will her to sleep so he could have free rein of her body, but he resisted, satisfying himself with a long, appreciative look. Her breasts were full and ripe, her rosy nipples growing taut under his perusing gaze. Her belly was flat. Her skin looked petal-soft. He viewed the silken amber triangle at the apex of her thighs. “Absolutely perfect,” he breathed in awe.

“Is that the opinion of a doctor or of a man?” Leah asked, obviously feeling disturbed under his scrutiny.

He looked up at her and smiled. “Both.”

Leah's brow furrowed. “I thought one naked body was the same as all the rest to you,” she accused, reminding him of his earlier disinterest in her as a female.

He looked right at her and said, “It appears that I was dreadfully mistaken.”

In one swift movement he scooped her off the bed and into his arms, making her yelp in surprise, as she lay within his embrace.

He started out of the room and down the stairs with long, purposeful strides. Leah's arms were around his neck, her head resting against his chest, Theron's heart beating strong and steady as eagerness thrummed through him. She looked up at him though he forced himself to stare straight ahead, making his way to the master suite.

*

When they entered, Leah took in the elegant, modern decor around her. His room was breathtaking. A spacious sanctuary with both sleeping and lounging areas. The color scheme was a variety of whites, creams and beiges. A gas fireplace took up one corner of the room, while plush carpeting in a soft ivory color enhanced the soothing appeal before her eyes.

The bed was huge, covered with a fawn and eggshell striped spread. She couldn't hide the wistful sigh that seeped from her lungs as they passed it.

The bathroom, she noted, also served as a workout area as two grueling-looking machines sat some ten feet away from the giant, oval tub and octagonal shower enclosure that were side by side. A skylight installed above the workout area, let in the bright spring sunshine.

"Does what you've seen so far of my home meet up to your standards?" he asked, breaking the silence around them.

Startled, she jumped in his arms and his grip tightened around her. Just as quickly she calmed her racing pulse. "Yes! I mean, no." Her tongue tripped and tangled over the words. "I mean, I've never seen anything so ... luxurious. You must do quite well with your practice."

"Actually, my talent and good fortune lies in the stock market. That's where my unique gifts really come in handy." He smiled with what Leah would consider as a hint of triumph.

"Ahh," she said in understanding. "What if somebody found you out?"

"Impossible. I make sure to lose a bundle every now and again. I tried it out with the horse races for awhile, but when a three-hundred-pound thug named Guido came knocking on my door, I changed my strategy quick." He actually laughed. Leah thought it sounded a little rusty, as if he hadn't done too much of it in the past. She also found it somewhat disconcerting since she was naked in his arms and they were discussing stocks and horse races.

They were now beside the tub, steam rising up to greet her as some strange-looking leaves floated atop the water. "What are those?" she asked.

Theron looked blankly at her for a moment as if trying to remember what they were doing in this particular room of the house and why. The muscles in his arms went rigid. "Just some herbs to help the circulation." He placed her gently in the heated water.

"Mmm..." she groaned, closing her eyes in bliss. "This is heaven."

*

Theron let out his own silent groan, feeling the exact opposite. He was in a living hell. Why did she have to represent the end for him? Why couldn't she be a normal woman? He answered the question quickly. Because he wasn't a normal man.

He had never brought a woman to any other part of his home except to the one guest room directly next to his. In fact, Leah was the only other person who had been in his home longer than two nights and been conscious for most of it. All of the women he brought here were kept in a trance. He didn't want to be remembered by them, only wanted two evenings of fulfillment.

But Leah Nolan had suddenly changed all of that. And he found himself wanting much more than two nights of satisfying a hunger for blood. He found himself thinking about sharing conversation with her. Waking up with her in his arms. Mostly, about

going to sleep after a long session of making love. That's what really scared him. Precisely why he couldn't give in to these intense feelings. One night of loving from Miss Leah Nolan would be all he could ever have, for after that, he would be no longer be one of the immortal.

Kneeling down, he reached for the bath sponge, dipped it into the water and began to run it over her shoulders. Leah's eyes opened in surprise. "I can wash myself."

"I thought we had an agreement?" He slid the porous sponge down her arms. "You said you trusted me."

"I—I do."

"Then what is the problem?" He discarded the sponge for a bar of soap and lathered up his hands, lifting an insensitive leg from the water to run a slick palm from ankle to thigh.

You make it hard for me to think. She rested her head against the back of the tub.

"Don't think at all," he answered her unspoken words.

"But ... we're virtually strangers," she said, her voice silky.

"Are we?" He raised his eyebrows. "Does it feel as if we're strangers?"

She gave a lazy shake of her head.

"Shhh ... just enjoy."

What started out as an innocent bath soon turned into erotic caresses as his hands slid over her wet skin, leaving no area unexplored. Theron washed her arms and legs, her neck, her face, her abdomen. He soaped up again and concentrated on her breasts, pinching her nipples, bringing a sharp exhale from Leah. She made little moaning noises, urging him on. Theron was eager to comply.

She watched as he slid his left hand down between her thighs, pushing them apart so he had complete access to her sex. A deep groan pulled from his lungs as he slipped a finger inside, finding her slick and welcoming. Her soft sighs of surrender pushed him near the brink of madness as he rubbed his thumb back and forth across her nub. He buried his face in the nape of her neck, inhaling the scent of her hair, his lips pressed against her skin, his control slipping as he yearned to take her completely.

Theron thought this was the single most intimate act he had ever performed in his life. Not only for the fact that this woman was enjoying herself under her own free will, but for the very reason that he was feeling something deeper than the normal rush of hormones. There was another emotion surfacing, one with which he had never been acquainted before. One he didn't dare put a name to.

He continued to rub her clitoris, finding a rhythm that suited her. Soon she was gripping his arm, her body tensed, she gasped, and climaxed.

"That's it," he said on a sigh, watching as waves of ecstasy washed over her. "Enjoy this."

Her head was back, the creamy flesh of her throat bared to his hungry eyes, the pulsing artery beckoning him to take her. The sound of her blood rushing filled his ears like a seductive whisper. He withdrew his fingers and brought them to his mouth, savoring the flavor of her.

What was this woman doing to him? He swallowed hard, hoping to rid himself of the feeling. It didn't work and soon the need became too much to bear. He had to taste her. *Now.*

He lowered his hand, his fingers tightening slightly around the fine, flesh-covered

bones of her neck. "I could kill you in less than a heartbeat," he whispered next to her ear.

Leah's eyes flew open. She opened her mouth to scream but no sound came out. For a second she struggled against the hold he had on her, but calmed as she met his gaze.

"Yes, I know." Her voice was a strained whisper.

"And yet I only see trust in your eyes. Even after what I did to you last night. What I'm doing to you now. Fascinating," he rasped, moving his hand away, sliding his mouth to the side of her neck. "Simply ... fascinating." He kissed her warm skin, feeling the blood coursing beneath his lips. Curiosity poured through him, longing had him aroused and hard. Leah moaned and Theron lost it.

Opening his mouth wider, he positioned his sharp canine teeth over the tender flesh, aiming for the artery that held the contents of his burning need. He bit down, bringing a cry from Leah that quickly turned into a low, lusty moan as she held his head closer, tighter, inviting his sinful act of possession.

Theron drank long and deep, the muscles in his throat working as he swallowed each mouthful of her essence, while an ecstasy he had never known before had him ready to orgasm right then and there.

"Yes, Theron, take me..."

Those four words spoken so seductively brought him back to reality. Theron wrenched his mouth away, eyeing the broken skin on her neck, the thin trickle of blood that tempted him to the point of insanity. He ran his tongue over his lips, savoring the flavor of her, knowing it hadn't been nearly enough, yet fully aware it had been far too much.

Struggling to his feet, he glared down at her. Her eyes were bewildered and slightly dazed—and he hadn't put her under any sort of spell other than the one they created when together. Damn her! No woman had ever caused him to succumb to what he so desperately wanted to avoid.

"Do you know what just happened here?" His voice was gruff, his breathing still labored, hands at his sides convulsing with barely leashed fury.

"I think so," she replied calmly. "You were giving me one heck of a hickey." She reached a slender hand to her throat, touching the spot with the tips of her fingers. When she brought them back into view, she saw the blood. Her eyes were wide and Theron thought she would start screaming at any moment. He was wrong. "Wow. That didn't even hurt."

Theron directed his attention to the front of his now ill-fitting jeans. "Speak for yourself."

She looked up at him with something in her eyes that Theron refused to ponder at the moment. If ever.

"Oh." The one word was a whisper of longing as she stared at his fly and bit on her bottom lip.

Things had gotten out of hand once again and would only get worse. He still had to take her out, dry her off, dress her and get her back to bed. He had no other choice but to put her out. He couldn't handle the desire he saw in those glittering green eyes. Couldn't handle his own desire telling him to say to hell with everything and just slide himself right into that warm, intimate place of hers.

Sleep ... sleep. He sent the message to her brain, watching as her eyes grew heavy.

“That's not fair, Theron,” she murmured. “I know what you're doing.” And then she was asleep.

With a sigh of relief, Theron lifted her from the tub, dried her off, slipped on the pale blue gown and had her upstairs and in bed in less than ten minutes. And all had been done with the powers of his mind.

The rest of his day was spent in relative peace as she slept. He read Poe for awhile, spent some time swimming laps in a futile attempt to work off his scarcely contained energies, and meditated in his favorite place among the woods as the sun went down. He had thought to satisfy himself, relieve his pent-up lust after he left her to sleep, but had refused. He wanted to prove he could resist her. That he could chase away the feelings she instilled within him in others ways not remotely related to sex.

By the time he was ready to go out for the evening, he felt worlds better. Until he went to check in on Leah and saw the purple mark on her neck. It all came back to him. The heat in his, loins, the desire ... the fear.

Feeling guilty for nearly making love to her, feeding from her, putting her to sleep for the majority of the day, he lifted the enchantment from her sleeping mind and bid a silent, tender farewell before slipping outside and into his Ferrari.

His destination: One particular woman in the city below.

* * * *

With a tight black mini-skirt and little-left-to-the-imagination blouse, the artificial blonde came out of the liquor store carrying a paper bag with a bottle inside, containing something Theron felt sure was not ginger-ale. She walked down the night-blackened sidewalk in her stiletto heels, trying to project an air of superiority. Ah, but Theron could read her soul. Her heart ached. She was grieving. She needed him. He needed her.

When she turned the corner down a lonely street, he decided to make his move. Parking his car, he opened the door, unfolded his large frame from behind the wheel, planted sure feet upon the asphalt, and closed the door quietly behind him.

Silent as a shadow, he appeared in front of the woman. She stopped, the click of her metal heels upon the cement dying a quick death. “Who—who are you?” She took one look at the tall, dark figure blocking her progress and became frightened.

Oh dear, this was going to be a tough one. “You don't need this.” He spoke low, taking the bottle of liquor that was incognito within the paper bag, tossing it to the gutter where it shattered instantly. “I'm here to help.” He smiled benevolently.

Her brown eyes were bloodshot from crying and they narrowed upon him. “Why you mother fucker!” She raised a hand to slap his face, but Theron caught the thin wrist, shackling it within his firm grip.

“Why must you resist me? I only want to take away your pain.”

“Yeah?” The single word was spat out. “If you don't let me go, you'll be feeling some pain of your own.” She proceeded to stomp on his toe with one of her heels, which could very well pass for a steel nail. She glanced around wildly.

Theron fought against the shooting pain in his foot, fought back the urge to strike that pretty, painted face of hers. “Look at me!” It was a low, commanding growl.

She did so and was ensnared within ebony eyes that bespoke of ages long past. She grew still, her breathing ragged, eyes wide. Lower lip trembling, she broke down into tears.

“There, there,” he soothed, holding her close as he would a small, frightened child. “Forget.” He passed a big, gentle hand over her face, inducing the trance.

Her body went slack, leaning against him for support. Theron tightened his arms around her, leading her to his vehicle. It was, he thought with a twinge of bitterness, his newly appointed lair.

Once they were settled in his car, surrounded outside by the night and inside by beige leather seats, he drove to a secluded area a few miles away and fed. He left the woman fully clothed, not interested in anything more than satisfying his hunger.

As he fed, he indulged in a bit of fantasy and thought of Leah. He pictured her lying in submission before him, sleepy with lust and want of him, smiling a soft, feminine smile that bid him to take her. Glittering green eyes held an erotic secret he fully intended to uncover and take full advantage of. He imagined lying on top of her, feeling her soft breasts crushed against his hard chest. His hands thrust in her mane of auburn hair, pulling back on her head so that her pale throat was bared. He envisioned her smooth legs wrapped around his waist. His erection penetrating her, just as his teeth would. And, as he reached climax, he bit harder, pressing his hips closer. Taking her essence, leaving his behind.

By the time his hunger was satiated he felt guilty as hell and hadn't experienced the surge, the rush of adrenaline that always accompanied a feeding. His shaft was unusually hard and throbbing, begging for a different kind of release other than that of taking blood. Leah Nolan was doing strange things indeed to his body and conscience.

Driving back to where he had picked this woman up, he completed the ritual by tending to her neck wound and whispering subliminal messages that would have her forgetting him, this night, and her grief at having lost her fifth boyfriend in the last three months.

He led her back to the sidewalk where he had first encountered her, passed a hand in front of her face, bringing her out of the hypnosis and climbed back into his car.

As he pulled away from the curb he glanced in the rearview mirror, watching on in amusement as the blonde came out of the trance, blinked several times, looked around, shrugged and continued on her way down the street as if nothing had ever happened; a jaunty spring to her step.

Theron smiled to himself. Yes, being a vampire certainly had its good points, though six months of psychotherapy would have supplied the same results he had administered to the woman in less than thirty seconds. He laughed in arrogance. Ah, to be immortal.

He rolled down the window, resting his left forearm on the frame, letting the cool night wind whip through his hair, feeling that this world was truly a good place to be. That his eternal existence was one to be thirsted for. Until he thought of Leah.

And, for the first time in over three centuries, he wished he were nothing more than human.

Chapter Five

The following afternoon found Leah stretched out on a narrow table down in Theron's room, on her stomach, with a towel draped over her bare bottom. Theron was standing beside her, massaging her back and legs with one of his strange smelling liniments, his healing hands working in the herbal medication with expert ministrations. "I can't feel anything," she informed him, eyes closed in bliss at his extreme nearness.

"Don't worry. You soon will. This is guaranteed to get the circulation back in those wooden limbs of yours. Massage strokes improve circulation, increase nutrient supply, as well as remove metabolic waste, thus helping the repair of damaged tissue." His hands traveled up and down her thighs before concentrating on her lower back.

"It helps the body's ability to help itself. It relieves pain by stimulating the release of endorphins." He went on to explain, "The body's natural painkillers. It also arouses sensory receptors that have been deadened."

Leah grunted in acknowledgment. "You can say that again." She couldn't help the seductive lilt to her voice. Theron aroused several deadened areas of her mind and body with those delicious hands of his.

Theron remained quiet, concentrating on his task.

The symphonic sounds of the CD he had put on minutes earlier drifted over Leah, wrapping her in a cocoon of tranquility. "The music is beautiful. What is it?"

He was working the heels of his hands into her lower spine. "It's Mozart," he said absently. After a long stretch of silence and after Leah had been turned over on her back so that Theron could work the front of her legs, he asked, "Have you ever been in love?"

She frowned as she was brought out of the serene haze she had been floating in. "Yes, I suppose I loved Tom, my fiancé." She swallowed hard at the memory.

He didn't make eye contact, absorbed in his work. "No, I mean real love. Burning desire. Uncontrollable lust."

"What kind of question is that?" She was feeling just a little bit miffed at his line of questioning.

Theron shrugged those massive shoulders of his, causing a thousand muscles, both little and big, to ripple and flex beneath the thin cloth stretched taut over his upper body. Leah couldn't lie to herself. She hadn't known burning desire and uncontrollable lust until encountering this man.

Once she regained use of her legs she would leave Theron's life and never see him again. Without ever sampling the dark passion she saw brewing in his eyes, aside from what he had been willing to offer—which was very one-sided. After the episode yesterday in the bath, and the evening before, she had to have Theron Ambrose. No matter how fleeting. No matter the cost.

And she wondered. Where did he go each and every night? Though it was none of her business, it bothered her. He had said there was no woman in his life. Indeed, all indications pointed to the fact that he didn't want one. He had said he didn't practice medicine on a regular basis. Besides, who would need a doctor in the dead of night? Aside from her? He certainly didn't need a job...

"No," she finally answered. "No burning desire or lust with Tom. He was as

predictable as a digital clock. He was safe, and that's what I needed."

Theron looked at her, a satisfied smile on his soft, sensuous lips. "And what do you need now?"

She shrugged and chose to ignore the question, asking one of her own. "Have you ever been in love?" It was her turn to pry.

He quickly averted his gaze. "No. Never."

"I'm sorry." She wanted to take this dark man in her arms, to help him find the love he never had—in her. *Brain damage*, she laughed at her childish musings of love, *that's what it had to be*. Sex was one thing, but love? That was something she had learned to stay away from. She just had to keep reminding herself of the fact lest she get her heart tangled up in the mysterious doctor.

"No. I am the one who is sorry. Or, at least I will be in the very near future, I'm certain."

Leah couldn't even begin to decipher *that* comment.

He turned his back to her, wiping his hands clean. "Have you ever made love?" he asked.

Leah propped herself up on her elbows. "Honestly!" She glared at his back, trying so very hard not to appreciate the view. Damn he was sexy. "The questions you ask. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were some kind of pervert who enjoyed hearing about other's sex lives."

He turned abruptly, startling her, one brow high, his eyes penetrating. "*Do* you know any better, Leah?" She jumped, the towel draped over her body slipped to the floor, exposing her to his lustful gaze.

He took two steps forward, bent down and covered her back up. The look in his eyes was cool. "I'm merely curious. I don't get out often."

"Obviously," was her dry remark.

Pacing over to a long window, he adjusted the ivory mini blinds so that the light filtering in the bedroom was dim and shadowy. "Would it surprise you to know that I've never made love with a woman before?"

There was silence before she said, "That's all right, Theron. It's nothing to be ashamed of. I've had many friends who were gay. Society is accepting it more and more." Her voice was soft, meant to reassure.

Theron turned around, eyes narrow. "I wasn't inferring that I am homosexual. I meant that I am a virgin."

Her mouth dropped open before snapping shut. "A ... virgin? You? No way!"

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One side of his mouth tilted up in a rueful smile. "Yes *way*, sweet one. While living in the monastery, sexual activity was naturally forbidden." He thought about the main reason for his still being untouched. It was one of the conditions of withholding his immortality. He must feed nightly or else he would die. He could feed no more than twice from the same victim, lest she became one of the living dead—he didn't want that. He must never fall in love. Never make love. Both were strictly human acts. To succumb to the first would lead to the other. Bedding a woman would make him as mortal as any other man roaming the earth.

He didn't dare reveal his true self to her, so made up some excuse for his physical purity that he hoped she would accept. "What with all of the sexual diseases going

around, the fuss of a relationship ... it just seems a little overwhelming for a few moments of genital contact.”

She said on a whisper, “You don’t know what you’re missing.”

“Thank you for the offer, but I think I’ll pass. I’ve survived all these years without it, I’m sure I can make it the rest of my life without submitting.”

She started to speak, but Theron cut off any words with a curt directive. “Let’s wrap this up, shall we?”

Leah sighed. “Subject closed.”

Theron pinned her with a hard look. “It never should have been open in the first place.”

Chapter Six

Two weeks had gone by. Two weeks of stress and strain filled with sexual tension and oppressive silence spattered only with small talk. Theron had continued his daily massages and baths, though he was sure to wear a poker face throughout every minute.

Leah was bored out of her mind, even with the portable color TV he had brought up for her nearly a week ago. She was also slightly nervous. Today would be the first day of her actual physical therapy. Though there still had been no movement in either of her legs or feet, Theron felt that some time in the pool would perhaps have a therapeutic effect on her deadened extremities.

He had been very patient all of these days and nights, putting up with her lack of progress with only a moderate amount of exasperation. She should be further along in her recovery, but an invisible force seemed to be holding her back. Well, it wasn't so invisible. In fact, it was very evident and named Theron Ambrose.

Though it was quite obvious the attraction between them was mutual, Theron seemed to avoid her as much as possible and had become a silent caretaker, verbally speaking only when necessary. The desire in his eyes had faded, and he regarded her with an aloofness that ate away at her insides like an ulcer each and every time he was around.

Still, she found herself anxiously awaiting his daily visits to her room. And every night he continued to leave for hours at a time, giving her no indication as to where he was going, or what he did.

But what could she do? She was the interloper in his life, albeit not of her own free will—at least not in the beginning. Now she loathed the day when she would have to leave. Yet every indication pointed in that very grim direction.

Leah sat up in bed, wearing yet another silken garment from his seemingly endless supply of lingerie, thinking. Since the first massage down in his bedroom, she had continued to go over their conversation. *I've never made love with a woman before ... I'm a virgin.* It sent a sharp thrill through her each and every time she recalled his words. Yet it also brought her extreme sadness. He might live the life of a hermit, but she fully believed that everyone needed love in their life. Even dark, brooding, and slightly evil men such as Theron. Even herself.

Once last week, when he had been emerged in his task of rubbing down her legs with the herbal liniment, she had boldly asked him if he'd ever touched a woman before. His answer had been slow to come, but surprisingly he had answered. "Yes, I've been intimate with women. I've pleased them ... in my own way. Mostly I use my hands. Sometimes my mouth." He was silent for the rest of the evening.

She thought that his answer had been pretty strange. What did the women do? Simply lie there being satisfied by Theron while he held himself back? Didn't they think it odd?

The fact remained however, that Theron Ambrose was sexually untouched. She now realized how men felt when faced with a similar challenge of being a woman's first. But men seldom loved the person they wanted to take. For them, it was just another notch in their belts. Leah did love Theron, if not full-fledged love, at least deep-care that was quickly turning into love.

She argued with herself over the very idea. She'd read several stories about patients falling in love with their doctor. Victims falling in love with their rescuers—or their captors. But her heart had countered every argument. It wasn't something that just jumped up on her one day while she wasn't looking. No, her feelings for him had sparked the first time she had seen him, and had continued to grow in intensity ever since.

He had taken such tender care of her. Catered to her every need. He was tough and intimidating on the outside, yet was the gentlest man she'd ever known on the inside—when he wanted to be.

She also couldn't deny the invisible bond between them—a soul-deep connection Theron would never acknowledge. All he wanted was to get her well and get her out of his life. To be left alone in his passionless, solitary world of darkness and oneness.

Yes, she did love him. For reasons that were simply human and easily understood, while others were like diaphanous vapors, just as real, though elusive and out of her mental reach. But it was a reality she would keep secret. She would never let him know how she felt.

At eleven in the morning, as was his custom, Theron came for her. Leah's heart started beating double-time as he came through the doorway. His hair was tousled, the grim expression gone from his face.

“I have a surprise for you.” He actually smiled, causing Leah to die just a little bit more inside. He would probably never feel anything for her aside from responsibility to get her up and walking again.

“Really?” she asked, forgetting her black thoughts. “Where is it? What is it?”

Theron laughed at her inquisitiveness. “First things first.” He produced a white one-piece bathing suit from behind his back. “Let's get you into this.” He walked around the side of the bed. “I went out and bought it earlier. I think it should fit.”

Her spirits dropped. His mind was only on her therapy. Leah sighed, feeling incredibly selfish and petty. Of course her therapy was the only thing on his mind. He was a doctor, she was his patient. Nothing more for him, nothing less. “I'm sure it will,” she said with false cheerfulness.

In their customary agreement, Theron helped her out of her nightgown and into the swimsuit he had bought for her, pulling it up and over her curved hips, over her full breasts, taking his time to adjust the straps upon her shoulders.

His gaze had recently been guarded and composed, never showing a bit of the lust that had poured through him during those first few days. But as he looked over her body clad in the sleek, white spandex, she thought she detected a hint of yearning in his eyes, the slightest catch in his breath. Just that fast it was erased completely, leaving her emptier than ever before.

“Yes,” he said in an even tone, “it looks tailor-made for you.” He gave a satisfied nod of his head. “Shall we adjourn to the patio?”

“Sure.” She shrugged, raising her arms up to him as he slipped one of his own beneath her legs, the other at her back as he lifted her into his embrace. With actions that had become a ritual in both their lives, he carried her down the stairs, and stopped.

An old-fashioned cane wheelchair sat in front of them near the French doors that led outside. “How do you like it?” he asked expectantly, walking over to it.

“I—I don't know what to say.” She thought he was infinitely sweet for thinking of her this way.

Theron, having read her thoughts, replied, "You've said enough. I assure this is the first 'sweet' thing I've ever done. Probably the last," he warned. "Normally I've only had to worry about myself." He pivoted the chair around. "You'll be able to get around more freely with this. Have the run of the house and surrounding grounds." He placed her in the wheelchair.

"Thank you." She lifted her face to him.

He reached out to run the back of his hand over one smooth cheek. "No. Thank *you*."

She frowned. "For what?"

"For streaking in back of my moving car that evening weeks ago." He gave a half-smile.

"Any time," she replied, rolling her eyes skyward.

Theron laughed, full and deep. It was one of the few true laughs that had come from this man in the time she had been here. The unexpected expression brought joy fluttering to her heart and a laugh to her own lips.

"Once was quite sufficient," he replied, crouching down next to her, taking her hand, his thumb brushing across her knuckles. "Ah, sweet Leah. I haven't been around many people in my lifetime. Not for any length of time. This has been a genuine treat to share a part of my life with another. With you. Confusing and slightly frustrating at times, but fascinating nonetheless." He stood again, his full attention still on her. "I shall miss you a great deal when you're gone."

Their eyes remained locked, sad and wanting. Silence stretched between them.

Finally Theron spoke. "Why don't we go outside?" He pushed her out to the patio and the huge pool that occupied the majority of the backyard.

The first thing Leah noted when they walked outside was the textured concrete paving the pool deck and patio area. She also took in the eight-foot high fence that ran all around the enormous yard, a lone chaise lounge that sat at one side of the pool, and the small grassy area lying to the other side. It was the first time she had seen his home from the outside, and she couldn't help being impressed.

"This is an awfully big house for a single man, don't you think?" she asked as he wheeled her over to a bistro-style table and chairs, setting her in one of the cream-colored seats.

"I like to be able to ramble around." He smiled slightly. "I guess old habits die hard." The look she gave him bid him to explain further. "I wandered the earth for a good many years. Led a nomadic lifestyle. A few years ago I felt it was time to finally put down some roots. I'm not getting any younger, after all." Another smile claimed his lips.

The warm sun felt good upon Leah's skin. It seemed she had been tucked away in that bedroom forever. The heat seeped into her muscles, relaxing her previously taut nerves. She glanced up at the man still standing, shading her eyes from the bright sunlight. "Oh, come now. You make yourself sound ancient. You can't be much older than I am. How old are you? Thirty-four? Thirty-five?"

Theron tilted his head in consideration. "Give or take."

"There, you see," she reached out to pat his forearm, amazed when he didn't flinch at her touch, "you're in the prime of your life."

"You think so?"

She looked him up and down, arching an amber eyebrow. "I know so."

Theron wanted to snap at her, but no ugly retort waited on his tongue. Instead, he smiled like an idiot, feeling oddly complimented by the lusty remark. As much as he hated to admit it, he had truly missed the easy rapport he had shared with her in those first few days. Since he had vowed to himself to remain as distant as possible, spurning her attempts at creating any conversation between them, he had felt more alone than at any other time in his life.

Still, he could not let his guard down.

Another thought came to him. Just because he joined in occasional conversation didn't mean that he had to have intercourse with her, thereby relinquishing his immortality. He could enjoy her company for as long as she stayed—simply on a platonic basis, naturally. Couldn't he?

With this new thought in mind, he told Leah to relax while he went to get lunch, coming back a moment later with a large tray holding a bowl of shrimp salad, crusty French bread, and a pitcher of iced tea. His next trip to and from the kitchen brought delicate china plates, silverware and two tall, slim glasses.

"This looks delicious," Leah commented as Theron dished them each up a plate of the shrimp, vegetable, and pasta mixture.

"Thank you." He finally sat down as Leah poured them each a glass of the lemon-scented tea.

She took a bite, and then another. Theron was glad her appetite had returned.

"Over the past fourteen days, I bet I've lost at least ten pounds," she commented between bites. "This is really nice." She took the piece of bread he offered her, nodding her thanks.

"What is?" He started eating his own salad.

"Not having to eat alone." Their eyes met across the table and held.

Theron didn't have to think about his reaction to the cozy situation. "Yes, it is nice. I can't remember when I've not spent a meal in solitude." It wasn't a rueful statement, but simply an affirmation of how his life normally was. Until she had come along.

"Have you enjoyed the television I put in your room for you?" He pulled his gaze from her, looking down at his plate, growing uncomfortable with these warm thoughts flitting through his mind.

"Yes. It helps with the boredom, though I do crave human contact at times." He heard her set her fork down. "The time we spend together each day has been pretty brief."

He still refused to look into those damnable eyes of hers, knowing he'd see far too much in them. Her hurt at being left alone so much, her confusion as to why, and the fact that she wanted him ... as he wanted her.

"Well, now that we're going to be starting your actual physical therapy down here in the pool, we'll be spending more time together." He wondered if the prospect was good or bad, fully aware he would be pushing his willpower to the limits.

"How often am I supposed to have this therapy?" Her salad had been devoured and she was on her second glass of iced tea. When Theron inclined his head toward the wooden bowl, she turned down another serving.

"Twice a day, along with the acupressure."

"Oh."

She was staring at him again and he felt the need to say something, anything to get her to stop thinking those amorous thoughts. "Have you seen any interesting movies?" He

sipped from the tall glass, looking at her over the rim.

"As a matter of fact, yes. I saw an old Dracula movie last night. The vampire in the movie reminded me an awful lot of you," she said, twirling the ice around in her glass.

He coughed, shocked and intrigued at the remark. "You think so?"

She nodded, the sun casting a thousand gold-red sparks of fire over her hair. "Dark, mysterious, mesmerizing, spending nocturnal hours out hunting for his prey. You also have the most awesome widow's peak I've ever seen." Her voice was low and silky, spinning a web of desire around Theron that he soon found himself entangled in.

"Hunting?" He swallowed hard, feeling as if an ice cube had somehow slipped from the glass when he'd taken his last drink and had lodged in his throat. Had she put the pieces of the puzzle together so quickly? Somehow discovered who he was? *What* he was? He had tried to be careful in not revealing his true self. Had he made an error somewhere along the way?

"Well," she went on, "*he* was hunting. I have yet to find out what it is that you do each and every night."

Theron sighed with relief, relaxing visibly. He was so relieved in fact, that he played along with her line of conversation. "And you don't think that I perhaps may be a vampire?" He leaned way back in his chair, hands laced behind his head, his long legs stretched out beneath the table, crossed at the ankles.

"Of course not." She gave him a dismissing wave of her hand. "Aside from the fact that vampires don't exist, you don't have those long, sharp canines."

He smiled widely, showing off his straight, white teeth. "My canines are plenty long and sharp." He tapped one with his forefinger. They ought to be sharp, he'd had them filed ages ago to make his feedings easier and less painful for his victims.

She shot him a dry look. "Are you trying to convince me you're a vampire? You're sitting here beneath a blazing noon sun, you don't spend the daylight hours sleeping, and I've seen your reflection in mirrors plenty of times. How would you explain that?"

"All of that vampire lore is strictly fiction, my sweet." He leaned forward and whispered, "Let me be the one to enlighten you on the subject of vampirism."

"I suppose you have first-hand knowledge?" She rolled her eyes, looking skeptical.

He leaned back in the chair once more, arms folded over his chest. "Let's just say, that with my unique talents, I've dabbled in the paranormal and have picked up a few things over the years that would qualify me as somewhat of an expert on the topic."

She rested her elbows on the table, chin in the palms of her hands. "Please, feel free to enlighten me." She smiled that feminine smile of hers, sending Theron's blood spiraling out of control. He began to wonder if this was how real couples spent their meals: Eating, talking, teasing. This was the first time he'd ever had a companion to converse with for any length of time. He had to admit it was a little overwhelming. He also had to admit he enjoyed it. Perhaps too much.

"Why don't I tell you a story I picked up while on my travels around Asia?" She gave him a nod of her head that bid him to tell his story. "Three hundred years ago there was a man, an ordinary man, who had led a rather ordinary life. There were so many things in the world he wanted to see, so many things he wanted to do, yet fate had kept him locked up for a good many years. When he was finally free, he started traveling. One of the first places he ended up in was the Orient. He had always been fascinated with their ancient beliefs, and went seeking knowledge and wisdom, much as I did. While wandering the

countryside he met up with a shaman, a medicine man who was believed to be able to influence both good and evil spirits.” He shifted in his seat, eyes distant.

“This shaman saw something unique in the man and trusted him with his most guarded secret. The secret of immortality. It was quite simple the man discovered, with only a few stipulations that didn't seem overly extravagant and could be carried out for as long as one wished to exist on Earth.”

“Please, go on.” She shooed at a fly that wanted to eavesdrop on their conversation.

Lifting his hand he began counting off the terms for everlasting life. “One must be sexually pure and continue to be so for as long as one wished to be immortal. Making love would also make him human again, forever.” A second finger joined the first. “A secret incantation must be read, which only the shaman possessed. Finally,” a third long finger joined the other two, “one must feed nightly on the blood of humans. Blood is considered to be the essence of life itself, possessing the qualities for eternal existence—if the other two conditions are present.

“Only a small amount of blood is required each time. Half a pint. Feeding twice from the same victim is permitted, though a third time would transform the victim into a vampire. However, without the incantation, the victim would merely be one of the undead, and would not hold the gift of immortality. And, unless an immortal wants to lose this gift, he must refrain from making love.” When Leah frowned at the statement Theron clarified. “Making love is strictly a primitive, human act. To be a vampire is to be on a whole other plateau of existence.”

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The fly was back and landed in Theron's glass of iced tea. Leah watched as it spun around on its back in a vain attempt to fly away. She gave the insect very little thought, but her attention was captivated when she saw Theron stick a finger in the glass and take the tiny creature out. Holding the insect on the tip of his finger, he blew on its wings to dry them and watched it fly away. Emotion caught in her throat and a tear crept in her eye at his caring rescue.

Theron looked back at her and continued with his previous conversation, not realizing he had forged yet another link in the chain of love Leah felt for him. She was grateful he was engrossed with his story and wasn't probing her mind at the moment.

“Anyway, it could get quite ugly if one didn't resist the temptation. Soon the world would be crawling with vampires.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Who would drink whose blood? So, as the story goes, vampires are the same as you and I, simply with the opportunity to live forever.”

She felt like telling him that he seemed to avoid sex quite easily, but instead said, “So what are the gifts of immortality this secret incantation supposedly bestows?” Leah asked.

Theron nodded. “Incredible powers.”

Leah gave a soft snort, her mouth in a crooked smile. “And they make it look so simple on TV. One bite and you're a vampire.” She laughed, shaking her head as she said, “Sounds pretty lonely if you ask me. Always having to live a solitary life. No one to love or to love you in return. No intimacy.” She sighed, feeling strangely saddened by the story.

He tilted his head to the side as if considering her words. “Yes, I suppose you're right.” He got to his feet and began clearing the table. “I'll be right back.” Leaving Leah

with her thoughts, he returned a few minutes later wearing a navy pair of swimming trunks.

It was the first time that Leah had seen any part of him bared aside from his arms. She sucked in a sharp breath as he strolled toward her, two thick towels in his big hands.

His chest was broad and muscular—that she had already known—but her eyes now took in the light dusting of raven hair that thinned into an inky line, trailing down to his navel. A washboard abdomen held her appreciative gaze before wandering to his long, sinewy legs that were covered with the same sprinkling of silky black hair. Evidently he enjoyed the pool quite often as his finely hewn and lightly bronzed body attested.

Leah looked up, noticing the grim line of his mouth and quickly averted her gaze. She was ogling again. She swore she wouldn't do anything to have him avoiding her as he had been for the past days and nights.

Theron was beside her now, pivoting the chair around until she faced him. “Feel free to look all you want, sweet Leah,” he said silkily, running a finger over her lips. “I know I will.”

She felt herself blush, a testament to her embarrassment at him always able to read her thoughts. She laughed shortly. “Look, but don't touch?”

“Something along those lines.” With that he hauled her into his arms, walking over to the shallow end of the pool. Taking the steps with graceful efficiency, he continued to wade toward the deep end until the water reached his chest.

Though Leah could tell that the pool was heated, the tepid water still gave her a momentary shock since she had been sitting in the sun for so long. Her arms tightened around Theron's neck. “You'll get used to it,” he assured her. “Now hold your breath, we're going under.”

Leah took a deep breath and closed her eyes as he dunked them both under the water and back up again. When they surfaced, he held onto her with one arm while running his fingers through his hair, combing it back away from his face. Leah did the same.

He looked sexy as hell, she thought, as beads of water clung to his long, thick lashes, making his eyes seem bigger and black as the blackest night. Each dewy drop of liquid that covered his smooth, golden skin reflected the light of the sun like thousands of miniature kaleidoscopes. Theron looked down at her with that same look he had caressed her with those first few nights here. A look that was dark and lusty and evil. She shivered in his arms as he continued to stare down at her with great scrutiny.

“My,” he rasped, “it seems that your swimsuit has become quite transparent.” A devilish smile curved his lips.

She glanced down at the front of her bathing suit, taking note of the way her nipples nearly burst through the thin fabric, their rosy crests showing straight through, as was the dark triangle at the juncture of her thighs. “Yes, I can see that. Perhaps black would have been a better choice in color.” She tried to hide her mortification.

Theron slowly shook his head. “No, this will do quite nicely.”

Look, but don't touch. She sighed inwardly. He seemed to enjoy having her in a constant state of confusion and sexual turmoil.

He gave one of his rusty chuckles that didn't quite reach his eyes. “Shall we begin?”

Oh, she definitely wanted to begin! But she realized they were on a whole different wavelength. He meant the therapy for her legs. She meant the therapy for her body and soul. “I'm ready when you are.”

“Very well.” He made his way to the shallow end of the pool, setting her down on the top step. “All we’re going to do today is try to get some movement back. The water will make it easier. There should be no reason for your not being able to move yet.” It was a muttered remark of dismay.

Theron held onto the back of her left calf with one hand while pushing on her foot with the other. “Now see if you can exert any pressure at all.”

Leah willed her muscles to move. She grimaced. She panted. Still, nothing happened. “I can’t,” she said in defeat, her body slackening, leaning against the concrete step at her back.

“Yes you can.” His voice was stern, meant to taunt her into trying harder. “Try again.”

She did try, again and again and again. She tried until beads of perspiration formed on her upper lip and brow. She tried until she thought she’d cry. And still, nothing happened. Her legs remained useless as rubber bands.

A deep breath seeped from his lungs as he peered at her from beneath his lashes. “Leah, I know you can exert more volition.”

“Maybe we should wait longer,” was her only answer.

Thrusting a hand through his sun-dried hair, Theron stood, glaring down at her. “Don’t you want to regain the use of your legs?”

“Yes, of course I do.” She sounded weak even to her own ears. “Maybe my injury was worse than you thought.”

“No. No it wasn’t.” He crouched back down, his face a mere breath from hers. “Why do you continue to frustrate me like this?” His voice was low and angry, snaking its way forward to coil tightly around her chest, making it difficult to breathe.

“It’s not intentional.” She blinked several times, wishing she could jump to her feet and run from the ire that she felt building in him.

“Oh, no? Sometimes I wonder.”

Leah’s eyes narrowed, and she lifted her chin in indignation. “Just what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

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It was one of the very few times since her arrival here that Theron had seen any spark of fight emanate from an otherwise acquiescent woman. If taunting her was what it took to get her to put forth some real effort, so be it. “You know exactly what I mean, Leah Nolan,” he ground out. “I’ve seen old, lethargic dogs scratch their bothersome fleas with more enthusiasm than you seem to be able to summon up in that beautiful body of yours.”

“How dare you!” Her right hand lashed out, her target Theron’s left cheek, but he caught her by the wrist a tenth of a second before she would have made contact with the skin. His fingers tightened around her, cutting off all blood supply to her hand.

“Now that’s what I want to see, sweet one.” He felt an eager fire ignite inside his chest. “I want to see you fight. I want to see you react. I want you to feel the pain of your recovery. And I want to witness the sweat of your exertions as you bring these useless limbs back to life.”

In the next moment he felt her shutting down once more. Her eyes lost all spirit, becoming that unpolished jade color that made him ill to his stomach and angry as hell. She was hiding something and he would find out what it was.

“What is it that haunts you? What are you keeping from me?” He held her face between his cool palms, pressing with the force of a vise.

He entered her mind, finding nothing to indicate why she continued to feign helplessness. He knew it was in that part of her she kept hidden even from his insistent probing. The part of her that was buried in some deep, dark recess of her mind. And now, he would find out just what it was.

Lurching to his feet, he glared down at her. “All right, Leah, have it your way.” She had pushed him over the edge. No more was he the reserved doctor and benign host. He was now a man. A powerful man who wanted answers. And he would stop at nothing to get them.

Chapter Seven

With invisible, angry fingers, he delved through her mind, finding information, evaluating it, discarding it.

Like a raging tornado, he left her thoughts in a state of chaos, searching for that elusive piece of evidence that would tell him what he wanted to know. *You are alone, temporarily paralyzed and staying with the very man who injured you, even threatened to kill you twice now. A man who also happens to be a telekinetic and what else you do not know. A man who has taken advantage of your body on more than one occasion.*

Leah held her palms against the sides of her head, her eyes closed with pain. "Stop, Theron! It's bad enough that my thoughts and memories can be read by you at any time, but..." she whimpered with pain, "when you're angry it hurts. If you want to know, I'll tell you."

"Spoken words are often lies," he countered.

"Why would I lie when I know you could dig your way straight to my soul?"

He shrugged, lessening his mental grip slightly. "I've been trying since the day you awoke to probe the part of you that you keep so well hidden. I haven't been able to uncover those thoughts. It bothers the hell out of me." His last words were muttered.

Theron let go of his mental grip, kneeling at her feet, caressing her temples. "I'm sorry, little one. Forgive me." He pulled her against the warm, sun-baked skin of his chest. Leah melted into the embrace. It was the closest she had ever been to him without it being the chore of carrying her from one place to another. Without him being indifferent or furious.

"I'm so used to being able to get what I want from a person's mind that I often don't think of how painful it must be. I enjoy seeing the pictures in another's mind, feeling what they have experienced." His massaging fingers soothed her. "When one speaks they are merely words. Words that are often untrue."

When she didn't answer Theron rose to his feet taking Leah in his arms. "Never mind. That's enough for today," he said evenly. "We'll try again tomorrow."

Leah only nodded, feeling like a fool and a liar both.

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That night, before Theron left, he came to bid her farewell until morning. He had never said goodbye to her in the past, and when Leah saw his state of dress, her heart plummeted. There had to be another woman, and she couldn't help the spear of jealousy that lanced through her.

Theron looked down at her, cupping her chin in the palm of his hand, his eyes harboring a sadness she couldn't interpret. "Oh, sweet Leah, don't be jealous." She opened her mouth to deny the remark, but he only smiled and said, "There's no need." He walked away, leaving her in the darkness of her room. Her gloom quickly built along with the midnight shadows, knowing he would never love her, knowing he could never find out she loved him.

The fact that he hadn't been able to dig the information from her had been somewhat

reassuring. As long as she kept her love locked in the dungeon of her soul he would be none the wiser.

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The following afternoon, when lunch was over, Theron had them both in their swimsuits and in the pool once more. His mood had been somewhat detached, but no more than usual, as Leah had come to expect. After all, by his own admission, he said he had always led a solitary life, so she put his remote attitude down to habit more than his actually trying to ignore her.

She sat on the top step of the pool, enjoying the warm, spring sunshine on her skin and the sight of Theron swimming several energetic laps. He then dove to the very bottom, and, graceful as a mythical merman, surfaced near her, water cascading in rivulets off his jet-black hair and hard body.

He shook his dark head, sending drops of moisture flying in her direction, cooling her heated skin. Washing a hand over his face to rid himself of any excess water, he waded back over to her, his expression blank.

Leah promptly stored her growing feelings for this man down in her secret place. "That was quite a workout," she commented as he came to sit next to her.

"Yes," he agreed, hardly winded. "And very soon I expect you to be swimming along side of me."

Leah was certain his comment meant nothing more than the fact that he wanted her to recover the use of her legs. Still, his words sent mental pictures flitting through her head of the two of them swimming side by side, living side by side, sleeping side by side, for the rest of their lives.

She saw his eyes narrow, saw how his body tensed, and quickly erased the images in her mind, making sure he would find no trace of her affection for him if he were to probe. *It worked*, she thought with relief as his expression softened, looking less observant.

"Are you ready?" he asked, sitting down on the bottom step, taking hold of her left calf and foot as he had done the previous day.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"Have you been practicing the mind projection exercises?"

"Yes. I imagine myself healing, my toes, feet and legs regaining their strength, and eventually walking again. Just as you'd suggested I do."

"Good." He seemed satisfied with her answers. For a few minutes he concentrated on her feet, calves and thighs, applying his acupressure techniques. "Now let's see if you can start moving something today. I have an idea." He stared down at her legs in thought.

"Maybe we've been working on too big of a scale. I've been forcing you to try and move the whole leg. Why don't we see if you can focus your mind on just your toes? Every bit of energy you feel in your body, try sending it to your feet."

"It's worth a try." She smiled, feeling that such an accomplishment as wiggling her toes was not out of her reach.

Looking down at her foot cradled in Theron's large, gentle-at-the-moment hands, she concentrated on her toes, willing them to move. Theron's undivided attention was also on the five digits of her left foot.

As if a jolt of electricity had just shot through her, Leah yelped as her toes moved a fraction of an inch. It hurt like the hell, but she did it.

Jerking his head up, the wide, surprised smile on Theron's handsome face made her want to weep more than for the fact that her toes had finally moved. "You did it!" he exclaimed, his whole face alight with excitement.

"Yeah," she laughed softly. "I guess I did. You want me to try again?"

"Naturally!" He turned his attention back to her foot. Her toes moved a little stronger this time. Leah gasped with pain and elation.

Theron gently released her left foot, picking up the right which was dripping wet having been lifted from the cool water. "Now try this one."

Again she concentrated, and again the toes slowly moved with renewed life. "You did it, little one." His voice was low and emotion-filled. "At the risk of sounding like a father figure, I must say that I am proud of you. You've just crossed the biggest hurdle of all, regaining movement. Today your toes, tomorrow the feet, and so on."

Leah just looked at him, letting out a pent up sob of delight laced with agony as her nerves and muscles were being revived.

Taking her into his arms, Theron held her close and tight. "You did it."

She lifted her head. "I did, didn't I?" Theron nodded. "Did you take the pain away?"

"For now, but I must warn you that regaining complete control and strength of your weakened limbs won't be a pleasant experience."

"As long as you're here beside me, I'm sure I can handle it." She caressed his face with her loving eyes, wanting so badly to do so with her fingers. Fingers that longed to touch his squared chin, high cheekbones, full, sensual lips, but she satisfied herself with merely looking.

Theron's eyes narrowed. "There's something in your expression. Something I've never seen before." He frowned, tilting his head in puzzlement. Leah felt him entering her mind and she began to shut him out. "No, Leah." The tone was stern. "Don't block me out. Let me know what it is that I sense in you. Something in you has changed."

"No!" She tried wriggling free of his hold, but it was a futile effort on her part. Aside from the predicament she was in because of her useless limbs, trying to break free from Theron Ambrose's grip was like trying to cut through steel with a rose petal. She tried to turn her thoughts off, but her feelings of love for him ran like a rampant wild animal, wanting to be heard, needing to be released. *Theron can't find out that I've fallen in love with him. He'll force me away. He can never know!*

Theron heard every thought loud and clear. "Oh, sweet Leah. You poor, poor fool. You have no idea what you're saying, what danger you're putting yourself in by loving me. Especially when I can never love in return." His tone grew more solemn. "Not you. Not anyone."

Leah felt as if she'd been physically kicked in the stomach, all air wooshing from her lungs as the impact of his words hit her full force. Yes, she was indeed a fool. A fool for letting herself fall in love with this man.

"Ah, Leah." His voice came out on a long sigh of remorse. "If only I could..." He bent his head closer to her trembling lips, letting out a defeated moan.

Leah made a soft sound of surprise as his mouth came down on hers. With slow, tentative movements, his lips fondled hers, his tongue gliding over the soft barrier. It wasn't the possessive, crushing kiss she would have expected Theron to administer, but it was equally overpowering.

His tongue forced her lips apart, entering the moist cavern of her mouth. His right

hand slid up her spine to cup the back of her head, his other arm remained around her waist, pulling her closer, pressing himself against her while his tongue continued its exploration—tasting, taunting, teasing.

Leah responded in turn, growing just as desperate as Theron seemed to be. Her mouth opened wider, her tongue mingling with his. She slid her hand up to the back of Theron's head where she tunneled her fingers through the silken waves of hair. Her other hand remained on his chest where she could feel his heart beating strong and heavy. Her joints liquefied and her body grew hot, yearning for more.

Theron's lips left hers, skimming her jaw, moving up to her ear. "God you're sweet," he murmured, eyes closed in ecstasy. Trailing kisses down the length of her neck, he stopped at the carotid artery, running his tongue over the pulsing flesh, the area he had pierced once before. His entire body trembled. "You don't know how badly I want to take you. Right here. Right now."

"I want you, too," she said on a heavy sigh, glorying in the feel of him, the taste of him, the scent of him.

*

For Theron, the temptation was within reach. It would be so easy to clamp his teeth down and puncture the tender flesh, just as he had last time. He wanted to drink long and deep from her, to ease the dull, aching need within him. But it wasn't as simple as a feeding. He wanted to possess Leah. To take her as he had never taken a woman before, yet he was frightened of what the consequences would be if he were to succumb.

Still, he couldn't hold back. He wanted this woman. Wanted her body. And he would have her. Now. If he couldn't give himself wholly, he would give all he could. All he dared.

Lifting her into his arms as he stood, Theron crossed the backyard with long, easy strides.

"Where are we going?" Leah asked.

Looking down at the glassy-eyed woman in his arms, Theron couldn't erase the smile that came to his lips nor the fire igniting his groin turning him into heated steel. The only other time he'd seen women this willing was when he had put them into a trance. Only then would they obey his every command. But this ... this was something ethereal. Leah was breathing rapidly, her chest heaving with passion, her lips wet and slightly swollen from his hungry kisses. There was an expectant look in her deep-green eyes, and it was all meant for him. Only him. The knowledge made him feel infinitely powerful.

"We're going to my bedroom." He added in a raspy whisper, "To my bed."

Leah's eyelids fluttered shut, her head rested against his collarbone. When she opened them again they were in Theron's room. He laid her gently on the striped spread, staring down at her, taking in every inch of her in the flimsy, wet suit.

"How could I ever resist such sweet temptation?" The question was mottled with defeat.

Theron took in her gentle curves, her breasts pressed so firmly against the thin layer of spandex, the open invitation in her eyes. She looked like an angel lying there upon a soft cloud.

An angel of death, Theron reminded himself, fully intending to only take a taste of the forbidden fruit that lured him.

Kneeling on the bed beside her, he lifted his unsteady hands to the straps of the

smooth, white suit, pulling them off her shoulders, down her arms, until she was completely bare.

He started to lie beside her, wanting to feel her water-cooled flesh beneath his aching fingers, but stopped before things went any further. "Leah?" He looked into eyes that were drunk with passion.

"Yes?" Her voice was a thin thread of desire.

"I want to be honest with you. I can only go so far. I can please you, but I can't give myself to you. Not yet." *Not ever*, was his silent testament. He was giving her an opportunity to back out, he realized, surprising himself. Especially since he was used to getting what he wanted, when he wanted it. But if she couldn't accept his offer, he would allow her to have the last say.

Her body was smooth and fluid, moving to an erotic tempo only she could hear. "I'll take whatever you can give me, Theron. For as long as you can. Having a part of you is better than having none at all."

With a primitive growl and a burst of energy, he had every door in the house slamming closed and every shade and shutter drawn, bathing the bedroom in murky shadow even though the day was still young. A wave of his hand lit a single sconce at the far end of the room, casting soft light over the bed, over their bodies, adding to the sensual atmosphere.

His mouth was on hers again, bringing a deep moan from them both as their lips fused in the deepest of kisses. He palmed her breasts, teasing her nipples, kneading the soft flesh that filled his hands to overflowing.

Rising to his knees, he placed one on either side of her thighs so that he was straddling her, hovering over her ripe, naked body. He held her head between his palms, kissing her eyelids, kissing her forehead, her cheeks, her chin and neck. He rubbed his face over her soft breasts before taking one nipple into his mouth. While he suckled on the stiff peak, he pinched her other nipple, bringing a whimper from Leah that urged him on. Moving down her body, he placed wet, open-mouthed kisses over her abdomen. He opened her thighs and positioned himself between them, sliding two fingers into her moist, feminine core. Theron groaned at the exquisite feeling of her warmth. "You're so wet," he whispered.

He continued his sweet torture for a moment then replaced his fingers with his seeking tongue and lips. "Oh, Theron," she moaned, grabbing hold of his head, pushing him closer.

Theron felt bold and empowered by the lust he aroused in this woman. He so loved the taste of a woman. He licked her pussy lips for a good while before probing inside of her with his tongue, relishing her unique flavor. Varying his oral lovemaking, he paced himself according to her moans and sighs. With expert ministrations he sucked on her clitoris, first softly and seductively then with a bit more force.

Soon she was calling out his name and he felt her body grow rigid before pulsing with wave after wave of passion. In the next moment she went limp.

Theron came to rest atop her, his breathing harsh and ragged as he fought to hold onto his physical restraint when all he wanted to do was bury himself into her wet heat. To bring her to that glorious peak she had taken before, riding it with her this time as he pumped relentlessly into her until they both fell over the edge of passion together.

Of all the women he had had over the years, none of them had ever tasted as sweet.

None had ever reacted to his gift of giving pleasure with such total abandon as Leah had. And he wanted so badly to make love to her.

But he couldn't. Not without losing something very precious in return: His immortality. So he lay very still, not wanting to move, knowing that he must get off her body before he gave in, surely regretting it afterward.

Loathing the thought of leaving her so quickly, he rolled to his side, pulling her close against him.

A moment later she reached out to caress his face. Theron's eyes flew open, stabbing her with an angry, confused gaze. "Just let me touch you, Theron," she softly pleaded. "Please?"

He said nothing, but continued to stare at her, feeling uncertain.

"You have a beautiful body," she whispered. "I promise to stop whenever you ask me to." She let her hand stroke his cheek again, his eyelids fluttering shut in silent acceptance.

Theron had never let a woman touch him before. He'd never felt the need to get that close. Never spent more than two nights with one particular female, so he had never had a chance to develop any feelings.

So what was he trying to tell himself? That he was growing to care for Leah Nolan? *Yes*, was his solemn answer. Even so, he couldn't, *wouldn't*, relinquish what he'd fought to keep for so long. And though he would go as far as he could with the beautiful temptress lying naked before him, he would never go all the way.

Touching wouldn't hurt, he assured himself. He was certain that her caresses would feel glorious. In silent welcome, he rolled over onto his back, lacing his hands behind his head.

Propping herself up on one elbow, Leah bent her head to plant tender kisses on his soft lips, running them all the way to his collarbone. Her right hand roamed over his chest, Theron's skin feeling uncommonly sensitive to her touch. Experimentally, she slid her fingers over one of his nipples until Theron gasped with pleasure. Bending her head, she flicked her tongue over one flat tip, nipping slightly when it came to a hard peak beneath her persuasive influence.

"Mmm ... yes..." Theron groaned, realizing that his preconceived notions of how her caresses would feel hadn't come close to the reality of it.

Lower, Leah let her hand drift down to his flat stomach, searching for his firm cock throbbing beneath the dark blue barrier. Sliding her hand under the waistband, she grasped his shaft.

Theron bolted upright, ripping her hand from his shorts. "No! Nobody touches me!" He sprang to his feet, his hunched back to her as he tried to gain control.

Leah fell back onto the bed. "I—I told you to tell me when to stop," she reminded him shakily. "I didn't mean to make you angry, but—you seemed to be enjoying it." It was a soft accusation that had him pivoting around to face her.

"Yes." The one word was said through clenched teeth. "I indeed enjoyed it. Too damned much. Why are you affecting me like this?" His strained expression demanded an answer, yet she gave none.

Flinging open a window, he saw that it was dusk already. She had permeated his senses so completely, gotten him so intoxicated with her taste, her scent, and her touch, that hours had passed and he hadn't realized it.

Stalking over to a long, low dresser in a blond-colored oak, he reached into a drawer, retrieving a gray T-shirt and tossed it at her. "Put that on. I don't want to be tempted into taking you." He went into the bathroom, slamming the door after him.

Less than a minute later he stepped into the warm shower and went about the task of relieving his pent-up hormones. He was already at such a high peak recalling how Leah's warm, soft palm felt wrapped around his shaft that it took only a few strokes before he was climaxing. He held back the cry in his throat, Leah's name a rough whisper of release as the water cascaded down over his fevered flesh.

After several shaky heartbeats he washed a hand over his face and glanced down at his still stiff erection. Reaching forward, he twisted one lever into the Off position, pressing his lips into a grim line as the icy water chilled his body, yet did nothing for the fire in his soul.

*

Leah's hands were unsteady as she pulled the shirt on over her head. *Is this what solitude does to a person?* she wondered, scooting herself, leaning against the headboard. Solitude and celibacy?

"He may as well have just stayed at the monastery with the way he leads his life," she muttered. She felt bewildered, frightened, and damn mad at his theatrical display. For a moment she wondered if he was a masochist and just enjoyed getting himself all worked up only to stop when he was hard and aroused, ready to orgasm.

Her thoughts turned elsewhere. With a heavy sigh, she realized Theron belonged only to himself. That's how he would remain for the rest of his life. Nothing she could do or say would change that fact.

She had upturned his life far enough. The least she could do was work hard at gaining the strength back in her legs so she could walk out of here with some semblance of dignity and let him carry on with his life.

The sound of a knob turning had her looking in the direction of the bathroom. Theron emerged from the room like a naked man rising from the mist of a lustful dream. Only this wasn't a dream and he wasn't naked. A dove-gray towel was wrapped around his waist, and he had a wary look in his eyes.

Since she couldn't get up and walk out of the room to leave him in privacy, she did the next best thing by turning her head and closing her eyes. *I promise not to peek.*

"Thank you for the courtesy," he said shortly. Leah heard him rummaging around in a drawer. The sound of something being pulled off a hanger. Heard the soft sound of clothes being pulled on. A zipper sliding. "You can open your eyes now, I'm decent."

Leah mumbled an unladylike epithet, averting her gaze when he turned to face her.

"I gather you believe otherwise?" He arched a raven brow at her. "Having regrets?"

"Only that I can't figure you out." She met his puzzled expression with one of her own.

"That's the only regret you have?"

Leah nodded. "For now."

"Ah, I see." He pulled out a pair of black socks from a smaller drawer, going over to sit on the bed to pull them on. "You're expecting to have further regrets in the future?"

Leah didn't answer. He was simply goading her into an argument so he could forget what happened between them without feeling guilty. She wouldn't give him that luxury. *The only other regret I'm anticipating is when I leave here. Now put that in your hat and*

smoke it, mister.

Theron stopped in the midst of slipping on a leather loafer. Casting her with an infinite look, he smiled ruefully. "Take heart, sweet one, I too shall regret that day. You've become a bright spot in my life, as well as a painful thorn in my side at times." He gave a low chuckle. "I suppose I've been about the same for you. Yes?"

Leah had been bracing herself for a verbal confrontation, but when he changed his demeanor it left her feeling strangely deflated. "Yes," she answered. "I suppose you're going out again?"

"You supposed correctly." He stood before the mirror at the dresser, running a comb through his hair. "You can sleep in here this evening." She noticed he was leaving earlier than usual, and seemed to be in a hurry.

"What am I supposed to do? Sit and twiddle my thumbs until you decide to return?" Her tone was sharp. "It's really frustrating not being able to get around."

He stopped over the threshold, turning back to her. "I can see your predicament. I'll tend to the problem come tomorrow. Before leaving I'll help you into your wheelchair so you'll be able to get around. Now, sweet dreams." He started walking away.

"I'm not tired!" she yelled, angry with him for leaving her alone. Angry at herself for behaving like a pouting child.

"You will be shortly," he called back.

She heard the front door open then close. The sound of his car starting. *Sleep, precious one. I'll be back before morning. Ah, sweet Leah,* the words were a whispered sigh in her mind. *Sleep and dream of me. Tomorrow we shall be together.*

Leah started feeling drowsy and a smile came to her lips as Theron continued to talk softly inside of her head, murmuring his regret at the earlier episode in his bedroom, telling her how he couldn't wait to be in her company once more.

Briefly she wondered if it was her own fanciful imagination creating the beautiful words in her mind, but pushed the nagging thought away. So what if she was? It was bringing her solace. And if it was truly Theron, they were some of the sweetest words she'd ever heard.

A few minutes later she started to drift off to sleep, hoping to make good on Theron's bid to dream of him.

Chapter Eight

Theron sat in one shadowy corner of his room, elbow planted on the arm of the overstuffed chair, chin on fist, brooding. His mood was as black as the night outside, his somber eyes watching the woman occupying his bed, wearing his shirt.

A gentle probing of her mind showed that she was indeed dreaming of him—locked in a passionate embrace, making love, giving of himself completely, whispering words of everlasting adoration. In her heated dream he was loving her as he could never do in reality, sliding in and out with slow, measured movements. Her nails dug into his back, leaving their passionate mark behind. Her hips bucked, meeting each thrust of his pelvis.

The scene changed and Theron was there in her dream world sitting up against the headboard while she rode him. Her legs were firm, the muscles flexing as she moved up and down his shaft. Color and scent swirled around them. Their heavy breathing filled the air. Theron's hands moved around her waist and up to her shoulders as he climaxed, pulling her down tight against his groin. He could only imagine how deeply he was buried inside of her warmth.

Theron was glued to the chair as he viewed his dream self and Leah in the throes of the most passionate sex he had ever been witness to. Leah let out a little moan, murmuring his name in her sleep.

Instantly, his mien slid down another dreary notch.

Adjusting his posture to accommodate the sudden constriction of his slacks, he exited Leah's pornographic dream. He had never been a voyeur in the past and loathed to start now, especially when her nocturnal scenes caused him such physical stress.

Several slow, deep breaths and a whispered mantra had him back to some semblance of tranquility moments later.

He tried to look upon Leah's stay here objectively. He had the knowledge of a physician, and was trying to help her in regaining her strength. In doing so he was relieving his guilt at having been the one to injure her in the first place. She was supposed to be no more than a patient to him. If it had been any other woman, she *would* be merely a patient. But Leah Nolan was no ordinary woman. She represented a potential state of euphoric nirvana. His extreme ecstasy. His soul mate. His doom.

Yes, he felt culpable for her injuries, but he could just as very well have dropped her off at a hospital, anonymously offered to pay her expenses and be done with it. He would have his life back. A life he had grown accustomed to over the past three centuries.

He could never do such a thing though. He and this woman shared some sort of deep-seated bond. She needed him, and for some reason, he needed her.

But she was changing the perfected routine of his life. Tonight he had gone out to hunt, as always, and a woman had been scented. He hadn't gone to her though. Not that he had resisted, it was simply that he didn't have the inclination to feed this evening.

Hunger gnawed at him slightly. He was certain he would have to feed come nightfall tomorrow, but Leah's presence had been with him all night long as he drove through the city. She had haunted him with her unspoken promises, with her silent words of love, her caresses that had burned his body and still lingered there in places that begged to feel her again.

Each day when he awoke, he found himself eager to be with her. To spend the hours close together as they ate, talked, worked on her therapy. She had brought a new dimension to his life that he couldn't explain. He often tried putting into words the feelings she aroused in him, but none seemed suitable.

Yes, he lusted for her. For her body. For her blood. There was something more to it though. Leah made him want to lose control for the first time in his strictly ruled life. She made him want things he could never have.

Sighing, he got up from the chair, crossing the room to where she slept. In a compulsive gesture he covered her shoulders with the spread and bent down to place a tender kiss on her lips.

"Ah, sweet Leah." He ran a gentle thumb over her bottom lip. "Why do we have to be who we are? Why do I have to be what I am? If I were but human I would accept everything those eyes of yours have to offer."

He dropped his hand to his side, gazing at the amber hair fanned over his pillow, knowing her scent would linger on his slipcover and on his sheets. "If only you didn't represent my downfall, I would take you and love every inch of you thoroughly with every inch of my body and my being..."

With a muttered curse, hands bunched into tight fists, Theron left the room and the woman who slept there, going out to the backyard for a midnight swim that would hopefully curb the hunger growing in him—for her body and her love.

* * * *

Sunlight pierced through the tiny slits in the vertical blinds, waking Leah. She opened her eyes and stretched, feeling languorous. The words Theron had whispered in her mind as he had left in the evening still lingered, as did his touch.

Yearning still filled her. She wanted to have him completely, and yet she had to be content with therapy sessions, moments of conversation, a few stolen kisses and his own brand of intimacy.

She closed her eyes as she realized nothing was hers anymore. Not her life. Not her future. Not even her thoughts—he knew them all. Leah could often feel him probing, rifling through her mental files, leaving them in a cluttered mess when he was through. Still, she found herself irrevocably in love with him.

In one way, she admired him for his strength at being able to push aside the attraction that constantly pulled at them. In another, she hated him. As much as it would pain her when she left, the kindest thing she could do was to work hard at regaining the use of her legs and leave him to his accustomed way of life. It's what he truly wanted. She would give it to him

Throwing back the spread, she concentrated on moving her toes once more. They moved freely, with only the smallest twinge of discomfort. Now she focused her energies on her feet. They also moved. Her legs? Yes, they were slightly mobile.

Leah smiled, excitement wrapped in a swaddling of dread. She was growing closer to the day when she would leave.

Theron would be pleased to know that her mobility was coming back. Should she wake him? Was he even home? She hadn't heard him come back. If he were home, she would try to rouse him gently. *Theron, can you hear me? Are you awake?*

His answer was quick to come. *Yes, I hear you perfectly. What is it that you need?*

The blood in her veins rushed hot and quick. This was the most intimate way of conversation she had ever partaken in. The sound of his beautiful voice in her head never ceased to bring a breath of awe from her lungs. The act made her feel strangely powerful, though she admitted it was Theron who had the power. He read her thoughts and impressed his own upon her, not the fact that she was actually reading *his* mind.

She wanted to tell him that she needed him, needed him as a woman needs a man, but didn't. *I thought you'd like to know that I'm able to move my feet and legs today.*

I'm glad to hear of it. Your therapy should come along quickly now.

Yes, she thought with a tinge of remorse, I'm sure it will.

I'll be in to help you shortly. His voice faded from her mind.

Glancing at the nightstand, she saw that Theron had left some clothing on top. Leah reached over to take the small stack. Apparently, these things were meant for her. A pair of wine-colored cotton shorts, a pink tank top, sin-red panties with tiny white bows at the sides, and an equally wicked bra. Never had she dressed so provocatively under her clothing. Again she wondered at Theron's fetish for sexy lingerie when it was quite clear he didn't like being aroused.

"Perhaps he's an emotional masochist." She laughed.

Pristine white socks and equally white tennis shoes completed the outfit. All were new, possessing the store tags. She felt a tug at her heart knowing he had gotten them for her.

Aware she wasn't a complete invalid, she admitted to herself that she continued to have Theron dress her only for the sake of having him so intimately near. She banished the selfish routine on the spot and stripped off the gray T-shirt he had given her to wear last night and removed the tags from each item of clothing.

The bra and tank top were easy enough to put on, but the underwear and shorts proved to be a little more difficult. Though her legs had a small amount of movement as of this morning, it was like dressing the limbs of a heavy rag doll. Sliding them over her hips was even more cumbersome. But after only a minimum amount of sweat and struggle, she had them on. She had to admit that it felt wonderful to have clothes on again.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she wondered what was taking Theron so darned long. He'd told her he'd be right up. That had been at least fifteen minutes ago, and there was still no sign of him. Where could he be?

Or was he still out, doing whatever it was he did? Something he kept private. Something he hadn't found necessary for her to know.

Leah called to him with her mind, eager to hear the familiar voice of dark velvet wrapping around her senses. *Theron? Are you home?*

She received nothing. Another try, more insistent, brought about the same results. Nothing. Only silence filled her head.

Evidently he was still out, a fact that had her spirits sinking. But she couldn't very well expect him to sit around and entertain her all the time. He did have a life before she unexpectedly came into it. She would be a fool to think he'd put everything on hold just to cater to her needs and wants.

She put on the shoes and socks, and brushed her hair to a gleaming satin with the silver handled hairbrush lying on the stand next to her.

A laugh bubbled up inside of her when she caught sight of her reflection in the

mirror across the room. She looked human again.

What should she do? Sit around and wait until Theron came back?

She tried moving her feet and legs, wincing with the pain that shot up them.

Although she had slightly more movement, she would never be able to walk just yet. The thought of staying in her room all day long was depressing.

Theron hadn't started in on her therapy yesterday. In fact, the "twice a day" that he had stated in the beginning had been in reality one or none. As much as she wasn't looking forward to leaving this light, beautiful house, and the dark, beautiful man, she was rather tired of not being able to get around.

The bedroom door was open and she could see the highly polished railing just outside. If Theron hadn't moved the wheelchair he had bought for her last week it would still be at the foot of the stairs. She'd be able to get around somewhat—at least see something aside from the four walls of this room until he returned—if she could make it as far as that railing...

Twenty minutes, several curses, and one sweaty forehead later, she had made it to the bottom of the carpeted steps and gotten herself into the wheelchair. She never thought about it much before, but she admired the handicapped. They had to face such challenges everyday of their lives and she was certain they didn't put up as big a fuss as she had.

Once seated in the beautifully crafted chair, she wheeled herself first to Theron's room. The door was closed. She had no right to disturb his sleep if he was home. Didn't want to open the door and find out that he *wasn't* home.

Maneuvering the chair around, she went to the kitchen, not surprised to find it was just as tastefully decorated and immaculately clean as every other part of the house she had seen so far.

Maple cabinets in a warm finish graced the majority of the large room. An oversized island provided the cooking area with a copper range hood above. The counters were topped with an eggshell colored tile. The wall cabinets stopped three feet short of the ceiling, giving the whole room an airy, spacious appeal.

She rolled over to the refrigerator, taking note of the way each object on the counter—blender, toaster-oven, terracotta bowl of fresh fruit and other items—was placed just so. Each and every room in the house looked as though it belonged in a showroom or a *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine.

She had never been a slob, but she had been known to wash the breakfast dishes right after dinner and leave the Sunday paper scattered around the living room on occasion. Theron was obviously very picky about having his home in such a pristine condition. Leah doubted if he ever left a coffee cup unwashed or the toilet seat up.

She was afraid to touch anything.

Seeing the ceramic containers at the back of the counter, she investigated each one and found coffee. The coffee maker was to her left, as were cups hanging by their handles from a wooden mug tree.

Perhaps she could manage a pot of coffee without too much difficulty.

* * * *

Sitting on the patio, sipping the hot, full-bodied brew, Leah was lost in her thoughts as it seemed to be her only companion for the greater part of each day and night.

A fluffy gray cat walking along the top of the fence at the other side of the yard

caught her eye. Quiet and graceful, he slinked along the white vinyl fencing, yellow eyes focused intently on a butterfly resting there.

Just as he was about to pounce on the unsuspecting monarch, it flitted to the sky and came to land on the glassy smooth surface of the pool.

The cat would not give up so easily, Leah noticed in fascination, as he jumped to the small patch of grassy lawn, stealing silently to the edge of the pool.

Crouching down low, tail twitching with a life of its own, he waited until the time seemed right then leaped through the air landing, *kerplop*, into the pool.

Leah burst out laughing as the orange and black winged insect got away once again and the cat splashed about, trying to make his way to the side of the pool and dry land.

She set her cup on the glass topped table, her mirth turning to concern as the drenched feline's little paws beat at the water with no progress toward its destination. If she didn't do something fast it could very well drown.

Turning her head this way and that, eyes darting, she searched for something to fish the poor animal out with. A second later she espied the pool skimmer hanging on a hook at one corner of the house. The handle was long and the blue netting on the end would be perfect to capture the frantic cat.

Placing her hands on the wooden wheels of her chair, she made her way over to the skimmer, lifted it off the hook and moved herself over to the edge of the pool. She grabbed the aluminum handle with both hands, levering the net into the water, aiming for the poor victim of a butterfly's unwitting joke.

The animal thrashed and meowed, getting itself farther from her reach. She couldn't get any closer to the edge with the chair, so she leaned forward, plopping the net on top of the cat.

Frightened and not feeling the least bit grateful at Leah's heroic attempt to save it, the feline's nails caught in the plastic netting as it continued its unsuccessful attempt to triumph over the ocean of water and, now, the contraption over its head.

Leah fought to drag the cat toward her but she suddenly felt unsteady. Letting go of the skimmer, she tried to regain her balance but pitched forward, falling into the pool, bringing the wheelchair down on top of her.

She gasped as the shock of hitting the water knocked the air from her lungs. She tried to move her legs, but their weakened condition and the cold water had a paralyzing effect on them, rendering them useless. The cane chair was over her head, trapping her underneath.

Her lower limbs were heavy and she felt herself being pulled down, down, by invisible hands. Fear rose in her. Mentally she screamed out for Theron, hoping her desperate plea would reach his mind, hoping he was here at home and not out somewhere.

Fighting against the weight of the water enveloping her in its deadly grasp, against the dead limbs attached to her, she tried swimming using only her arms, frantically seeking the undulating surface that loomed overhead.

Her lungs were on fire and she felt as if they would burst at any second. She couldn't die this way. She had to make it to the top. She needed oxygen. She needed Theron.

Her mouth and lungs reflexively tried to bring in fresh air, though all she took in was chlorinated water. She felt her body go slack and everything went black.

Theron bolted upright in his bed, body covered with a fine sheen of perspiration, heart pounding out of control. He was disoriented for a moment, trying to clear away the foggy remains of the nightmare clinging to his mind like a sticky web.

Wiping a trembling hand over his face, he tried to recall the dark scenes in his head. He frowned, concentrating, but the pictures were gone. Only sound remained. Like an eerie recording that played back in his mind over and over he heard Leah's terrified scream.

It was probably his guilt getting even with him for not checking on her when he had come home earlier. It had still been dark out when he had returned from his hunting. He had reluctantly fed, feeling unfulfilled, though stronger.

When dawn had come and he'd finally found a fitful sleep, it wasn't long after that he had heard her beckoning him as she did each morning. He had answered at first, but ignored her further summons, falling back into that pit of empty, lonely slumber.

He sat up straighter, his eyes wide, brow furrowed. There it was again! The call she sent was weak, as if she was far away or weary.

Springing from the bed, bare feet upon plush carpet then wood planking, he stopped in the foyer at the foot of the stairs, an unsteady hand on the banister for support. The wheelchair had gone.

How?

A noise made him pivot around. The doors were open to the patio.

With a fear in his heart that he had never known before, he ran outside, ignoring his state of undress as he wore only a pair of wine-colored boxers.

Seeing the overturned chair in the water caused his stomach to quake and dip like a plane hitting a pocket of heavy turbulence. A drenched cat with fur drooping and yellow eyes wide in fear jumped onto the cane object that only remained part way out of the water and scrambled to the pavement. Shaking all four wet paws, it leaped to the top of the fence, disappearing over the other side.

Theron finally saw her, terror rising in him like acrid bile. Leah lay on the bottom of the pool in a heap of pink and red clothing, dark hair, and alabaster limbs. Still. Lifeless.

"No!" He howled like a wounded animal, sending a burst of energy in the direction of the wooden wheelchair. It went flying into the air where it came to crash upon the cement, splintering into an odd number of pieces.

Running to the edge of the pool, he dove in, knowing he could retrieve her just as well with a wave of his hand, but needing to feel her in his arms as quickly as possible.

Guilt clawed at him, a wildcat ripping his insides as he remembered his words of weeks past when he had floated her over the balcony. He had told her that he could very well watch as he let her drown. And he had meant it. But now ... actually witnessing it. He prayed he wasn't too late.

Down, down he sliced through the water, feeling as if he were moving in slow motion, again caught up in that sticky, foggy web he'd thought had been a nightmare.

The water was liquid lead against his stroking arms and kicking feet. Would he ever get to her?

Reaching out with a frantic hand, he grabbed a fistful of her tank top, started pulling her toward him, got a hold of her arms, held her close and tight. Her eyes were closed. He detected no heartbeat. His own heart ceased to beat. Was she dead? No!

In another eruption of energy, propelled by intense anguish, he shot out of the pool in

one mighty explosion, landing on his feet on the concrete.

He gently laid Leah on the sun-warmed pavement, placing three fingers at the side of her neck checking for any sign of life. There was a pulse, thready and weak, but she was alive. Barely. She wasn't breathing though.

He pressed on her abdomen several times, getting as much water out of her as possible. Pinching her nose with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, supporting the back of her neck with his other, he sealed his mouth over hers, breathing his own life-giving oxygen into her lungs. He watched the movements of her chest. He breathed for her; her chest rose. He lifted his head slightly; her chest fell. Several more times he performed the kiss of life until she coughed and sputtered, expelling the remaining water from her lungs.

Her eyelids fluttered open and she tried to focus on him hovering over her cold, waterlogged body. "Theron?" she said in a weak voice.

Too overwhelmed with blessedness, Theron let out a sob of relief, pulling her into his embrace, not bothering to prevent the tears that welled in his eyes and trickled down his cheeks.

He had never been so filled with horror. Had never felt such utter and complete dread as when he saw her slumped at the bottom of his pool. The sheer delight he was experiencing at this very moment as Leah clung to him as tightly as he did to her was a feeling he had never been familiar with in the past.

Later, when he had time, if he dared, he would analyze this strange, new emotion she had roused in him. But for now, he wanted to calm the fear that wracked through her, wanted to warm her shivering body, wanted to spend the next hours simply holding her, convincing himself she was truly all right.

She looked up at him, her face pale, lips a deep purple color. "I—the cat." Her teeth clattered, her voice trembled. "It fell in the water. I—tried to save it."

Theron gazed down at her, dismay replacing some of the worry that had plagued him. "You risked your life for a stray animal?" His tone was incredulous, yet he suspected Leah Nolan would sell her soul to the devil just to save another.

"It didn't start out that way." She attempted a smile, but it was a diluted one.

"You foolish, foolish woman. Let's get you in the house and dried off." He lifted her into his arms and stood, heading straight for his room to run her a hot bath.

Trying to lift the somber atmosphere that weighed heavily upon them both, he looked down at her, arching one brow. "And maybe you can explain to me how you managed to make it all the way downstairs, into the wheelchair and out onto the patio."

"I made you a pot of coffee," she murmured.

"Leah," his long strides didn't falter as they came to the bathroom, "if this is what I have to look forward to each time you make coffee, I'd rather prepare it myself in the future."

They both laughed.

Chapter Nine

Sweat rolled down Leah's forehead and into her eyes making them sting. It dripped down the back of her neck, saturated the front of her thin, cotton top, glistened off her arms and thighs. She gripped the handles of the rowing machine, pulling with her arms, pushing with her still weak feet. Again and again. Push, pull. Push, pull. Her legs hurt like hell. She was hot, tired, angry. She wanted to stop. She wanted to die. To be put out of the torture she was experiencing now.

Theron towered at her side, a tyrant of a coach. Pushing her harder. Motivating her with his words that were meant to taunt and tease to give her the incentive to try harder and harder still. And he was making her goddamned mad. "Just a few more strokes, little one." He looked down at her, an arrogant smile of amusement on those lips of his, a devilish glint in those ebony eyes.

"That's what you said two hours ago," she grumbled, sliding herself back and forth. Her legs were shaking and she was sure she'd fall into a dead faint at any moment.

"Truth be known, my sweet, you've only been at this for a little over ten minutes."

She muttered a most unladylike expletive under her breath that had something to do with Theron kissing a certain part of her anatomy.

He laughed. Loud. He laughed a lot lately, Leah noticed, not amused in the least. He laughed at her. It made her boiling mad.

She took out her frustrations on the machine, pumping harder, pretending she was slugging him right in that handsome face of his.

"When you're done working out and after a nice long bath, I'd be more than happy to kiss any part of you that you feel is in need of my attention." He was in a casual, laid back stance, arms crossed over his chest, causing the thin material of his white T-shirt to strain over every taut muscle in his upper body.

"Go to hell." She looked up at him.

"My dear, I've already been there," was his lofty reply.

"I'll just bet. What happened? The devil wouldn't take you?" she muttered blackly.

He sighed, feigning sorrow. "I'm afraid he didn't want me. Had the distinct impression that I would supersede him."

She gave a snort. "Instead, he let you loose out into the world so you could wreak havoc and torture helpless women." Another curse ended her statement.

He chuckled. A low, rumbling sound like thunder in the distance. "One man's pain is another man's pleasure. In this case, your pain is my pleasure." He grinned widely.

*

Two more weeks had gone by. After her near drowning in the pool—something neither of them had talked about since it had happened—Theron had started her on his workout machines. At first she was weak as the proverbial kitten, but her strength was building as the days went by. Her muscles were growing firm and defined. Her legs were becoming stronger. And she was developing an inner glow. One that Theron found quite fascinating.

He sighed. It was going to be hard letting her go.

A sudden jab of dread shot through him in the area of his heart. *Letting her go.*

No. He wouldn't think of the coming day right now. He would push the sorrow of her departure aside. He would tuck away the fear of his growing feelings for her. He would simply glory in her presence, yet continue to keep his guard up. He couldn't afford to let it down. She was a beautiful and unique woman, and, not to forget, his potential nemesis. It would be so easy to throw caution to the wind and fall in love with her.

"I hate you, Theron Ambrose!" She stopped the rowing movements, pounded her fists upon her knees and shouted again like a child provoked. "I hate you!"

Theron's smile was a pure one as he stared down at the sobbing woman. The kind of smile a priest would bestow upon one of his choleric parishioners. Or, perhaps, the kind of smile a lover would caress his beloved with.

And then it hit him. He stood up stiff and tall, eyes wide as he viewed Leah's huddled body, arms wrapped around her knees, head resting on her forearms. God help him, he was in love with her!

"That's enough for today. I'll prepare your bath," he said, choking the words out past the lump of dread in his throat, heading for the safety of the bathroom.

He closed the door behind him, waved a hand in the direction of the tub's water faucets and started it to fill. Leaning against the door, he closed his eyes in remorse.

How had he let it happen? He had been careful not to let her into his heart—or so he had thought. Never had he let anyone in before. How had she managed to accomplish the feat?

He realized it hadn't been anything sudden. No, she had slipped into his heart a little each day. When he'd first laid eyes on her that dark night. When he had read her mind and felt her fear and sadness at being alone in the world. When he had found her lying at the bottom of his pool knocking on death's door. All of the conversations they had shared. The terrible jokes she told. Her sorrow, her laughter, her tears and her smiles; all had left an indelible mark upon his soul.

Each day she seeped into him just a little more like a thick night fog. He hadn't wanted to admit it before. Hell, he still didn't want to. But it was there. That damnable emotion he swore he would never fall prey to: Love. Theron opened his eyes. "Love? No, that would never do," he whispered dark and low. For in loving her he would have to do one of three things. Make her his by feeding three times, which would transform her into a being such as himself—minus the psychic powers. Or he would have to make love to her, therefore becoming human. The thought was a terrifying one. He'd lived too long to stop now. Or, reluctantly, he would have to kill her if he was going to preserve his celibacy, his immortal existence.

All solutions were ones he didn't want to act upon. She was nearing the end of her therapy, already walking with assistance. She would be leaving soon. If he could keep his feelings for her secret, make sure that she didn't find out about them and the fact he was a vampire, his wretched neck might be saved.

Leah Nolan must not discover his love for her. Must not learn his secret of everlasting life. If she did, she was writing her certain death. And he would do it, yes, in the blink of an eye.

* * * *

"That's it, Leah. You can do it." Theron held onto one side of the foam board while Leah held onto the other, vigorously kicking with her legs. Her strength was coming back

more each day, and Theron had to admit he felt a new sense of purpose in life.

All of the knowledge he had attained through the years was simply for the purpose of helping himself or satisfying a curiosity.

He had truly been selfish. Now that he had the opportunity to help another, it gave him a bigger thrill than that of feeding nightly, though it didn't curb his hunger.

What did life mean to him really? He had lived all of these centuries and for what? For life eternal? And for what reason did he crave everlasting life? Was he contributing some great thing to the world and mankind? Was he such a good man that the world would not function without him in it? No. The solemn thought plagued him as he continued to drink in the beauty of the woman before him. He was simply a man who was afraid to die. A selfish man who wanted more than what was his fair share of life.

On the other hand, if he'd lived out a normal life, he would have been long dead. Never would have had the opportunity to meet the woman whose emerald eyes were on him now, affectionate, though slightly wrathful at the way he pushed her to her limit each and every day.

Amusing, he thought, as they slowly made their way from one side of the pool to the other. He'd always been a loner, cherished his solitude. And not once had he ever felt lonely. Not until he ran his car into the beautiful body of one, Leah Nolan. Now, three hundred years of solitude came crashing down on him at once. Damn her soul!

He felt the anger rising in him again, but tried to deflect it. It wasn't her fault that he couldn't carry on a normal relationship. A normal life.

"Theron, can we stop?"

He came back to her with several, startled blinks. "Excuse me?" He frowned.

"I asked if we could get out and dry off. I feel like a giant prune," she joked.

"Yes. That should be enough therapy for today." He kept his demeanor aloof as he towed her to the shallow end of the pool. "You've already completed a half hour on the rowing machine and another half hour in the pool." He tossed the foam float onto the deck and helped Leah to unsteady feet with a strong arm around her waist. "I'm quite impressed. You're coming along nicely."

"You think so?" They climbed the steps leading out of the pool, Leah leaning heavily against his body, one arm around his waist, one at his chest.

"I know so. In fact," he looked down at her once they were on the warmed concrete, grinning mischievously, "I bet you could even walk a few steps by yourself."

Leah grimaced. "My legs feel like wet spaghetti."

"Oh, come now." He scooped her up into his arms. "Where's your sense of adventure? We'll go inside and give it a try. That way, if you fall in a heap to the ground, you'll have an inch of carpeting to cushion the blow."

"Don't I get some kind of incentive? Even dogs and babies get a treat when they master a new skill." She fluttered her long lashes.

Theron set her down on a patio chair, thoroughly drying her off with a towel as he pondered over the request. He didn't answer her until he had rubbed his hair dry and it lay atop his head in a wild mass of curls. "I'll make a deal with you." He cocked an eyebrow.

"What if I don't like your deal?"

"Then I shall believe that you're truly insane. What woman wouldn't jump at my idea?" He grinned again. Theron came to take the chair next to her, leaning forward, elbows on his thighs, hands clasped under his chin. "How's this for incentive?" He lifted

a finger to point at her. "If you can manage to walk from your room upstairs to my room downstairs, I'll plan a special evening just for you. Fine food, champagne, music, dancing, candlelight."

"What length of time do I have to perform this tremendous feat?" She sounded skeptical. "Two weeks. That should be quite sufficient."

"I'd like to up the ante." She met his puzzled look with a dark, lusty stare. "I'll accomplish the feat in," she held up a finger, "one week."

"You sound quite certain of your ability to progress so quickly." He sat up straight, beginning to feel slightly uneasy. What did she have in mind?

"If you agree to my request, it will be just the incentive I need."

"Go on." He gave an impatient flick of his fingers.

Leaning back in the chair, she smiled ruefully. "Don't worry, Theron, I won't ask you to make love to me. As much as your devotion to retaining your virginity frustrates me, I would never try to intentionally sway you to give it up."

He visibly relaxed.

"If I can walk from my room, down all fifteen stairs to yours, I'll gladly accept the special night you have planned, but ... I want you to spend the night with me afterward." Her eyes looked suddenly sad. "I want to share your bed." *I want you to hold me, sleep with me while we're both naked.* "I ... just want to be with you for one whole night." *I'm tired of being alone.*

Theron reached out and caressed her cheek, cupping it in the palm of his hand. "Ah, little one." His voice was husky, eyes flickering with uncertainties. "It will prove to be the most trying night of my life, but, yes, I will sleep with you, hold you, keep you with me through the night."

"Thank you," she whispered.

Leaning forward, Theron used the tip of his tongue to wipe away the tears that trailed down either side of her face. "Think nothing of it," he replied, his voice a deep whisper against her skin.

Chapter Ten

Leaning heavily on the hand-carved cane that Theron had given her nearly a week ago, Leah slowly limped around the first floor from room to room. Her strength was progressing quickly, though Theron probably had no idea about her great improvement as he was never home anymore. Since they had made their pact out on the patio last Friday, she hadn't seen him much, except for in the mornings when he brought her downstairs.

Nowadays she bathed alone, swam alone, exercised on the rowing machine alone. Ate, slept, talked, spent her days and nights ... alone.

Where before Theron had come into her room each night to share in his brand of intimacy, now he stayed away. And she wondered why. Had she scared him off by her request at having him spend the night with her? No, he had agreed. Acceptance had been in his eyes. Besides, if he didn't want to do it, he could have simply refused.

Where was he now? The question plagued her. She hadn't heard his car pull out of the driveway—as she did most every evening. She frowned, pursing her lips as she entered his study. That was one sound she had grown to detest. His quiet motor purring as he backed out of the driveway, headlights illuminating her darkened room. Light and sound fading as he drove away from her, closer to the place, or person, he never allowed her to know of.

Spending the day with him used to help to distract her from the jealous thoughts that haunted her each night, distracted her from her problems. Now she was left alone with both evil beasts. And she didn't know which of the two were worse.

She was bored out of her skull and tired of counseling herself in regards to her ludicrous covetousness over Theron. Simply put, he wasn't hers. Never would be. She had no right to feel like a cheated-on lover.

As she ran her fingers over the vast array of books tucked upon the shelves before her, she remembered the lonely, haunted look she had often seen in his ebony eyes. “What demons plague you, Theron?” she asked the empty room around her, taking a very old-looking, leather bound book from one of the higher shelves.

Is it possible for me to help ease your pain? Or are you really hurting at all? Maybe she was just imagining the sad look of a lost soul on his face. Perhaps because she wanted him to need her as much as she had grown to need him—which was more likely.

Thumbing through the aged, yellow pages of the book in her hand, she saw it was a diary of some kind, dating back to the seventeen-hundreds. *Ambrose* was inscribed on the inside of the front cover. A family heirloom? She loved looking through things of the past. History had always been her favorite subject in high school and college, and she had visited the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles the first week she had come to California.

She grimaced as her legs began to throb painfully. They were still pretty weak, but she figured she could try to make it upstairs. Some rest sounded good right about now. The book would provide some entertainment until Theron arrived back home. Of course, he would probably repeat the same routine as he did every night. Wait until she had fallen asleep, leave a tray of food on the nightstand, and go off on his nocturnal journeys.

Standing at the bottom of the stairs, she looked up, way up, and sighed. This was

going to be like climbing Mount Fuji.

Taking a fortifying breath, she gave herself a pep talk, figuring that if she accomplished the feat, it would bring her one step closer to her night with Theron.

By the time she had reached the top of the stairs she was extremely grateful he hadn't been around to witness her ungraceful struggle. Resisting the urge and the need to drag herself along like a wounded soldier in combat, she finally made it the rest of the way to her room.

Collapsing on the pastel spread in an exhausted heap, she lay there for several minutes trying to catch her breath and will away the pain shooting up her legs and in her lower back.

Using the focusing technique Theron had taught her, she concentrated on a spot on the wall, blocking her mind to everything, breathing slow and deep, using the powers of relaxation to ease the pain.

After fifteen minutes or so, the pain had subsided into an annoying hum. Something she could live with.

Leaving the book on the bed, she got up, going to the bathroom for a much needed shower. She would have taken a bath in Theron's tub, but he had found it necessary to lock his room these days.

The rowing machine had been removed from the bathroom workout area and placed in the small room adjacent to his bedroom. What had soured his mood so suddenly, she could only guess. Trying to figure him out just managed to give her a headache, so she put it out of her mind. At least she had a way to get clean, though it wouldn't be the long, luxurious soak in a tub that she so loved and looked forward to.

The salmon and eggshell bathroom was small, but inviting with its framed lithographs of various flowers and plants. The shower stall was another octagonal structure with etched glass doors as in Theron's bathroom. Opening one, she reached in, turned on the water and adjusted the temperature. When the water was hot enough, she stepped in, managing to keep her legs steady and from crumbling as she quickly soaped, shampooed and rinsed.

Exiting the steamy room with a pink towel wrapped around her and one turban-style upon her head, she went to the intricately carved armoire, sighing when she opened it and discovered that it still held only flimsy lingerie.

Unfortunately, Theron never kept clothes in her room, instead, bringing fresh ones up each day. "A most puzzling man, indeed," she murmured, going through the several lacy gowns. It was far too early to be wearing pajamas, but she rejected the idea of putting on her shorts and T-shirt which were damp with the sweat of her previous bout of exercise and her difficult trip up the stairs.

Sighing, she picked out a short, white gauze nightshirt that was frilly around the low-cut neck and long sleeves, and slipped it on over her bare body.

The bed seemed a million miles away as she limped over to it, her legs aching. Finally she made it. Picking up the aged, brown leather book lying beside her, she hoped it would get her mind off her throbbing legs and back.

She was feeling a tad grumpy, what with the pain and Theron's absence. She didn't need a building to fall on her to let her know that he didn't want to be around her. The knowledge hurt. A lot.

She inspected the plain, brown leather of the book. There wasn't anything special

about the cover. No title. Nothing. It was very old, though. The year written inside was 1747. A museum would love this, she mused as she read a few passages from the timeworn pages. It was completely handwritten in an elegant, flowing, cursive style. She decided it had belonged to a man. For what reason she came to that conclusion she couldn't tell, but the passages had a dark, sensual tint to them that could only have come from a male.

She frowned, looking at the rows of Chinese characters at the top of the first page. Dismissing the foreign letters, she went on to read the first segment.

May 9, 1747

Today the ceremony was performed. The incantation read aloud to me, for me, as a cleansing fire blazed in the bowels of the cliffside cave. My next step to complete transformation was to take the blood from a fair one. She was easy to find as my senses led me to the small town below and to her weeping heart.

In the beginning I was quite uneasy, but once I had put her in the trance excitement coursed throughout me as she was under my complete control. After I had fed ... my feelings were of savage joy and exultation. I had now crossed the threshold onto the other side. I was—I am—immortal.

Leah continued reading, enthralled and awed by the contents of the small book. Of course it was a complete work of fiction, yet the man in the book had her spellbound.

More pages were read, which centered on the Asian shaman and this man's life with him. Obviously, this was the story Theron had told her over their lunch by the poolside those weeks ago.

She laughed, amused. A vampire story written in the first person. Interesting.

As she was about to begin the next installment, she heard the sound of light footsteps upon the stairs and her heart started beating a little faster. At last Theron was home. Leah tucked the book away in a drawer of the nightstand, intending to read some more later.

* * * *

Theron raked a hand through his hair as he climbed the steps to Leah's room, frustrated. This had been his fourth straight day of meditation. He had gone to his quiet place, a large, flat boulder sitting amidst a circle of towering spruce approximately a quarter of a mile beyond the east side of his home. It was his place to sit and absorb the world around him—the pine-scented breeze, the delicate songs of the birds, the warm sun upon his face and body.

He would sit there, eyes closed, concentrating on absolutely nothing. It was his way to center himself within an often chaotic world. His life had certainly been chaotic the past several weeks.

Five hours of meditating, silent chanting, practicing his relaxation techniques... "And all for naught." It hadn't done him the least bit of good. Leah Nolan continued to occupy his mind against his will.

Reaching her closed door, dinner tray in hand, he hoped she would be asleep. If not, he prayed she wouldn't ask to dine with him. Since she had made her daring request, he had been loath to spend any more time with her than necessary. He had finally admitted to himself that she was more temptation than he could handle. Spending a few brief moments in her company had rage and confusion ignite within him, growing stronger as one day shifted into the next. The nights were a living torture that had to cease. He was

ready to break.

He had never killed before. He didn't want to start now if at all possible. So he forced himself to stay away, fought against the yearning inside him that craved to drink of her feminine sweetness as he had so often in the weeks past. The only way he could let her leave here intact—to leave at all and still be alive—was to simply avoid her as much as possible.

Both would part. His celibacy intact. Her heart only slightly broken.

In this case, he would not be able to help heal the damage that would be done. He was used to making women forget about other men in their lives that had hurt them. He had not once had to help a woman forget about any heartache he had caused.

Knocking upon the off-white door, a habit he had recently acquired since all too often he had stepped in just as Leah was dressing, or undressing, whichever the case had happened to be. He would see her on that big, soft bed, half-naked or completely naked, his cock stirring with a life of its own. Against everything inside him that warned not to, he had often relented to the growing need within his loins and had fondled her in every way his lustful imagination could conjure up.

And he vowed no more.

That is, until she fulfilled her side of the pact. He would then have to honor his promise. He had no doubt she would someday soon walk down those very stairs he had just climbed, and he would be under obligation to satisfy his part of the bargain.

Damn her! Damn himself. Damn this whole wretched world. He feared it was quite possible he would go insane before she left this place.

“Come in, Theron.”

He cringed. She was awake. Her soft voice skated along his flesh, raising the hairs all along each arm and at the back of his neck. That lovely voice was the one seeping into his nocturnal mind. One that would forever haunt him.

Pasting on a false front of lassitude, he entered, avoiding her bright jade eyes that were upon him. She looked so incredibly pleased to see him. And his loathing grew. Of her. Of himself. Of the very fact that she was chipping away at his resistance more and more each day.

He gripped the silver tray tighter as he walked stiffly to her bedside.

She mumbled thanks, briefly looked down at the food, and back at him. “Is this your way of telling me that you'd rather not be with me?”

“It's my way of re-establishing our previous relationship as host and guest. Doctor and patient.” He didn't slide the rocker over as he used to do when she ate. Instead, he remained stiffly at the foot of the bed where he had retreated seconds before. He was torn between surfacing emotions, alien desires, and his habitually solitary and celibate ways. And he stayed right where he was.

“I see.” Her voice was no more than a whisper. She took the spoon in her slightly trembling hand, poking at a carrot, looking at the bowl of food. “Is that why we haven't shared in our special talks lately?” *Why you leave me alone each day and night, avoiding me, letting me carry on with the exercises by myself? Why you've stopped the massages, no longer caress me, kiss me or even want to look at me?*

Yes, came his silent answer. Feeling their special talk was too intimate, he added out loud, “You're a very beautiful woman, Leah. I'm afraid that if we would have continued on the road we were on it wouldn't have been long before I relented.” He exhaled deeply.

“Would that be so bad?” She met his eyes. “Would something so completely terrible happen to you if you gave in to the attraction between us?”

Her words were so taunting, her sweet lips inviting, as was the hungry look in her eyes. Theron felt his reticence waning. If he stayed here any longer he would... “Yes!” he forced between clenched teeth. “I could very well die if I complied with your wishes and my hormonal urges.”

“If you're insinuating you might contact a sexually transmitted disease, rest assured that the only thing I'm carrying around from my previous and only lover is bitter memories, nothing more.”

His hands were at his sides, fists of tightly reined fury. “The thought had never crossed my mind in regards to such things. My solitude is my choice, as is my chastity. It is a way of life I don't expect you to understand. Even if I were to tell you of my reasons...”

Her chin rose, obstinate, her eyes shining with challenge. “Go ahead. Try me.”

Theron turned his back to her, thrusting his hands through his hair. When he faced her once more he raised an angry hand. The door slammed shut. Another wave and the tray rose from her lap and settled with a sharp bang upon the nightstand. “Why must you constantly try my patience?” His voice boomed in the suddenly tiny room. “You won't be happy until you break me, will you?” He still stood at the foot of the bed, every muscle in his body taut, straining against their cloth imprisonment.

Leah sat, silent and wide-eyed.

“Centuries ago, women who tempted men into copulating against their will were considered witches and burned at the stake,” he said in a low, snaking warning. A voice that was meant to intimidate and frighten.

She threw back the covers, revealing to Theron's black gaze the sheer, white gauze nightgown she had donned. His eyes were riveted, as were his feet. He could not move as he watched her rise from the bed and walk over to him. She looked like an angel from a hellish dream he had had where she was far stronger than he could ever be, and he, weeping with love for her, succumbed to the haven of her passion.

Standing directly in front of him, she looked up, meeting his wary gaze, her own eyes more assured than he had ever seen them. “Then burn me.”

A sound came from his throat. A gasp. A curse. And he was dragging her pliant body against him, pressing a hot, long kiss against her open mouth, his hands seeking the full mounds of her breasts, taking great pleasure in rousing the soft peaks into tight buds.

Leah moaned, the sound muffled by Theron's tongue as it surged deep inside of her throat, lapping at her sweetness, devouring her very soul.

Briefly, he thought that if this was what it was like to be mortal, he had been missing quite a lot. But in the next moment the frivolous idea was gone, replaced by a strong need within his groin. A need he could not satisfy. Did not dare to. And he grew angrier.

Ripping the fragile material from her body in one harsh movement, he tossed the scrap aside, pressing her back against the foot of the bed until she lay flat on the mattress, naked, his body covering hers. He grabbed her hair in one hand, winding it around his palm until her head was unable to move. He skimmed his other hand along the length of her neck, testing the heavy beating of her quick pulse. “Are you afraid, sweet Leah?” He smiled arrogantly, looking down at the woman who was pinned beneath his full weight.

Her only reply was the opening of her thighs so that he lay nestled against her moist

heat. The one thing separating her femininity from his manhood was the thin material of Theron's sweat pants. He was aroused, hard, throbbing against her sex.

This was the closest he had ever come to the sex act, and he soon found himself rubbing against her in curiosity. Up and down he stroked cloth covered steel against hot velvet. And he wanted more. Was certain he would shatter into a million fragments of agony if he didn't bury himself within her depths.

Freeing his erection as he pulled down the waistband of his pants and boxers, he ran a forefinger over the tip, capturing the silken bead that seeped out. He laid his throbbing shaft against her lower belly and rested on top of her, his eyes never leaving hers.

Rubbing his finger over her bottom lip to coat it with his semen, she ran her tongue over it then took the appendage into her mouth. Theron let out a quick breath of pleasure at the erotic feeling and sight of it. He moved against her, his slick member wedged between their bodies.

Leah looked up at him, eyelids heavy and a small smile on her lips, her breathing just as ragged as his own. She put one palm on either side of his face, ensnaring him within her gaze. "Do it, Theron. Give yourself to me." It was a soft command.

Theron felt sensations gathering within him. A primitive need. A billowing storm. It was a feeling that bordered on pain, and he was certain ecstasy would only be found within Leah's deep, secret place. He wanted to know. He needed to find out what it was like. But he stopped, her words breaking the spell he had been under.

"No! I will not *do it!*" In the next instant he was off her, adjusting his pants, stalking toward the door.

"Damn you, Theron Ambrose!"

He felt a pillow hit his back.

Without a look behind him, he slammed the door shut.

Chapter Eleven

Two evenings later, Leah stood in the foyer, looking out the window and at the man in front of the house who was gazing up at the silver crescent moon and diamond-scattered satin sky. Theron looked so relaxed, so peaceful. She realized it was probably because he was alone. Though she hated to disrupt his privacy, she craved human contact. Even if they ended up arguing, as was the norm when they were together lately, it was far better than spending another moment in solitary confinement.

She was now able to make it up and downstairs, but she hadn't pressed Theron to make good on his promise. He had been so wrathful the other night when he had nearly made love to her that she was reluctant to even breathe the wrong way when around him. Darn it, though! She was lonely. She didn't want to have sex, didn't want to dissect anything, didn't even care whether or not they talked. Just to be in the presence of another human being was enough for her at the moment.

Opening the heavy door, she stepped out into the cool, silky night. Barefooted and dressed in yet another nightgown of satin and lace, she found that it was a poor barrier against the wind, soft as it was.

Abandoning any thoughts of going back in to retrieve something to keep her warmer, she silently went to stand a few feet from Theron. Wrapping her arms around her middle, she gazed heavenward, spellbound at the clarity of the stars from up here on Theron's hilltop property. Normally, the city lights made it difficult to see the majority of the distant stars. What she viewed now was like being in another dimension, as if she were in outer space itself.

She felt a shirt being placed over her shoulders and Theron's hands resting on them. A glance behind her revealed him standing there with only a white T-shirt on, while she now possessed his black flannel button-up. He pulled her gently toward him and she didn't fight the need to lean against his warm, solid body. He slid his arms around her, resting his chin atop her head, his warm breath whispering through her hair.

It felt so natural, so normal to be in his arms. As if she had done so for a million years, but soon he would come to his senses and lash out at her, just as he had done before. The thought made her want to break free from his hold and leave before he ruined the moment even though he felt so good pressed up against her, and she felt so alone.

Standing on that black, lonely hill with Theron by her side and the bright stars twinkling above, Leah felt like she was in a snow-globe. It was an overwhelming feeling. One that caused her to break the oppressive silence weighing down on her. "The stars look like they go on forever."

"Mmm." He nuzzled his chin through her hair. "Actually, they go on for about fifteen billion years in every direction, give or take," he said matter-of-factly. "One theory is that the universe will reach a limit, a point of maximum expansion after which the collective forces of gravity will start pulling all cosmological bodies back toward the center in a big crunch. All matter will compact itself tighter and tighter into an extremely small space until a tremendous hot, dense explosion takes place. Another *Big Bang*, where the universe begins all over again, to the outer reaches of space and back again for infinitum."

Leah sighed. It was all so mind boggling and awesome, yet, once again, Theron had to analyze everything. She twisted in his arms, looking up at him in the darkness that was lit only by the flickering lights above in the nighttime sky. The house sat in back of them, dark and silent. "Does everything have to be described in scientific terms?"

He shrugged, shifting his gaze from the stars above to the woman he held in his arms. "That's the way things are. There's no big mystery where anything in life is concerned. The universe, the sea, the land and all living things, everything can be explained by fact and figure." He sounded so superior, so assured in his views.

Actually, Leah felt sorry for him. What fun was there, what beauty and majesty in the wonders of the world if everything was explained away by scientific data? "Why can't you simply enjoy the stars for their awe-inspiring beauty and the deep thoughts they arouse inside our minds? Why can't a flower be enjoyed simply for its vibrant color and delicate fragrance? The way a warm, furry kitten purrs when you pet it, the way it feels silky-soft against your cheek?" Her words were urgent, she needed him to understand these simple pleasures. "Hot cocoa sliding down your throat and warming your insides on a cold winter's day." She reached up to run her palm over a smooth-shaven cheek. "Not everything has to be explained away until no mystery is left. Some things are better enjoyed simply for the pleasure they bring."

He tilted his head to one side. "Simply enjoyed for the pleasure they bring?"

Leah nodded, moving her hand to his chest over his heart.

"Let me see if I understand this concept correctly." There was no amusement in his voice or eyes, simply a need to understand something that was new to him. "You mean I should simply enjoy the way your skin feels against my hand when I caress you?" He raised a hand to her cheek, stroking softly.

"Yes," Leah whispered.

"When we share our special mind talks, as you call them, I should simply ... enjoy it and not question the feelings it arouses?"

Leah nodded.

Theron frowned.

"When I look into your beautiful green eyes, I should simply enjoy the feeling of drowning in them and not try to stay afloat?"

Again she nodded.

"But," he said in dismay, "if one doesn't ponder over situations, actions, feelings and emotions, one could very well end up regretting it."

"It's very rare, I assure you." She had turned around to face him fully, her arms around his neck, his arms straying down her back and to her bottom. "Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, if something feels good, it usually is."

"I'm beginning to see that." He inclined his head so his lips were nearly touching hers. His next words came out in a gusty sigh of longing. "When ... I kiss you, I should simply enjoy it and not analyze the hows and whys of the act?"

Leah let out a small shuddering breath. "Exactly."

His lips came down on hers. His palms pressed against her bottom, pulling her against his firm arousal. Their tongues mingled and twisted against one another.

All too soon, Theron pushed her away from him only slightly, the look on his face one of regret. He smiled grimly. "Old habits die hard, I'm afraid." His tone was rueful, and surprisingly enough, no hint of ire tinged it.

"Hey," she laughed softly, "you've got to start somewhere. Not everybody can quit old habits cold turkey."

Theron chuckled. "You certainly have a way with words."

"Poor grammar is my specialty." She batted her eyelashes.

Theron smiled in amusement. "Let's get back inside," he said, leading her toward the door.

"Are you going out this evening?" Leah asked as they entered the warmth of the house, knowing the answer before he even spoke it. The pause in his stride and expression on his face, said it all.

"I was just on my way out when you joined me." He stiffened and his arm dropped to his side.

"Well," she gave a false smile, "I suppose you'd better get going. I don't want you to be late for whatever you need to do." She looked at him expectantly, hoping he would finally divulge where he went each night. A pregnant silence stretched between them. She should have known he wouldn't answer. "I'd better be going to bed." She started toward the stairs, but turned back toward Theron when he spoke.

"Do you need any help up?" He looked anxious, as if he couldn't wait to get out of the house.

"No. I can manage." She started her way up, not wanting to continue to look at that eager expression on his face. A look he had never bestowed upon her while in her company. *I hope you have a lousy time.* She couldn't help the bitter thought.

"Have no fear, little one, I'm positive I will." *Good night*, he silently bid her.

* * * *

Theron returned only two hours later. He had performed the nightly ritual, absently following instinct as he went through the entire process: Locate the woman, put her under, feed, make her forget him and her troubles, bid her farewell.

Now he lay in bed, staring up at the inky ceiling. He couldn't sleep. Why? That was no mystery. Leah Nolan had dominated control of his thoughts, as always. The ache that had pervaded his chest earlier was now growing in intensity. He had a feeling that after she left him it would hurt so much more, but it couldn't be helped.

She was lightness and laughter, while he was darkness and shadow. She was truly a good spirit, and, as much as he wanted to deny it, he was evil. Good people didn't go around taking blood from women in order to prolong a selfish life. Good people didn't contemplate murdering the woman they loved in order to preserve that same selfish life. She deserved so much more than he could give her. She deserved to be loved.

He turned his head when he heard the doorknob turn, the door opening softly. His eyes widened, taking in Leah's naked form illuminated against the rectangle of soft blackness behind her. She had come downstairs on her own, without assistance. It was time for him to pay his dues.

With gentleness he probed her mind, but found no thoughts, only feelings. Feelings so pure, so intense that he nearly choked on the lump of emotion he felt in his throat.

Theron wanted to run and hide, wanted to cast her out into the night and force her to leave now, but he did none of those things. Instead, he waved a hand in the direction of the bedside lamp, the room now dimly lit. Leah walked in, stopping at the opposite side of his bed, looking at him with sadness and longing. How could he turn her away when it

was he who caused her to feel so utterly miserable?

Rising from the bed, Theron stood across from her, his intense gaze never leaving hers as he slid his boxers down his thighs, exposing himself completely to her, as per their agreement.

He saw her mouth open in awe as she viewed his aroused state, Theron feeling a strange sense of male pride as she stared at his nakedness. No woman had ever seen him nude. He felt like an exhibitionist and found it most exciting.

You're simply awesome. Leah silently sent the message.

He drew in a shuddering breath. *So are you, my sweet. So are you.*

Crawling back onto the bed and between the sheets, he held one side of the covers up in invitation. Leah took the empty spot. Just that quickly they were entwined in each other's arms, flesh against flesh. It felt heavenly. It felt wicked. God help him, he loved it.

A wave of his hand enveloped the room in pitch-darkness. He claimed her lips with a kiss that had his insides ready to burst. He could hold back no longer. Her body was so soft, so warm, and when he trailed his seeking fingers to the soft curls between her thighs and found her slick and ready for him... Tonight, right now, he would make love to Leah. For the feel of her embracing his shaft in her sweet wetness, he would die ten times over.

"Sweet, Leah," he rasped, his erection pressing against her warmth. He felt it slip between her thighs. He sucked in a sharp breath, withdrew and pressed forward again. Yes, he needed her. Needed to be inside of her. Now. "I..." But she covered his mouth with a soft finger, shaking her head from side to side in refusal.

In the next instant she rolled to her side, her back to him. *Good night, Theron.*

Shock washed over him. She didn't push him, didn't attempt to seduce him as he thought she would when claiming her prize. She intended him to simply hold her through the night. And his love for her grew.

Chapter Twelve

When Leah awoke the next morning, she was disappointed to find she was alone.

Last night had been very special for her. Everything she could have wanted. Her blood surged ahead quick and strong when she recalled the sheer beauty of Theron's naked body, his rock-hard arousal. No man had the right to be so delicious looking and keep it only to himself. She wanted to hate him for his selfishness.

But Theron had been willing to give her that part of him last night, she clearly recalled. A fact that had her feeling slightly giddy and overtly guilty. He had only bared himself and slept with her at her request. It hadn't been his idea. He was a virgin, for goodness sake! Naturally, when they came together, flesh against flesh, he had wanted to make love. And Leah had wanted him to make love to her. Why hadn't she accepted his physical offer?

Because there was that deep, dark part of him he kept hidden. Because he would have regretted making love to her. Because he didn't love her.

She was something that he had never experienced in his solitary life before. Having a hot-for-your-body woman underfoot everyday had to wear down his resistance sometime.

She laughed at her change of thoughts. Before, all she wanted was her selfish needs quenched. To feel him buried deep inside of her. Feel his hard, heavy body pressed atop hers. Never pondering what the aftermath would be like. The probable loathing he would have of himself for giving in to a temptation he had kept at bay for thirty-five years.

No more teasing, she vowed. No more coming into his room undressed and slipping between the sheets with him. She would be his friend for as long as she remained—not much longer, she was certain. And, if the glorious day ever came when he fell in love with her, she would give of herself as she had never done before. But she had a feeling she shouldn't expect any such thing to happen.

Getting to her slowly strengthening feet, she made the bed. Finding a fresh stack of clothing on his dresser, she quickly changed and left his room with only a lingering look over her shoulder before clicking the knob in place.

Instead of searching the house for Theron, knowing he most probably wouldn't be home, she went to the rowing machine, needing the ache and oblivion that hard exercise would bring her.

How much longer would he allow her to stay here? He hadn't once mentioned when the day would be for her to go. Maybe she should simply leave on her own. It would be easier that way. For them both.

She grunted as she worked the machine back and forth, back and forth, a monotonous rhythm that gave her some modicum of comfort.

When she was sweating like a horse and ready to faint, she climbed off the black metal monster and trudged to the bathroom, her mind made up: She would leave tomorrow.

There was a life waiting for her out there somewhere. She must find it.

She would always carry around her love for Theron, but it was useless to love a man who simply could not love in return. The sooner she left and got on with her life, the better.

One last day, she gave herself. Should she tell him of her plan? Or should she let him wake up tomorrow morning and find her gone? No, that was the coward's way out. She had to face him, thank him for all of his help and tell him she was leaving.

He knew she loved him, though her words had never been spoken, and they would continue to be only a mute desire. Saying it aloud would only cause her more hurt, perhaps make him feel guilty. She scoffed at her absurd idea. More than likely, her verbal confession would make him downright angry.

After taking the opportunity to soak in Theron's giant tub, she pulled the plug, stepped out and wrapped the towel around her. When she entered his bedroom once more, she saw that yet another small stack of fresh clothes had been placed on the center of the bed.

Theron was still home.

The thought brought her only a moderate amount of solace. The less she saw of him in these final hours would probably be for the better. She also resisted the urge to call to him with her mind as she dropped the towel to her feet and dressed once again.

When she emerged from his room, she looked around, not seeing him anywhere. Spirits fluctuating between relief and sorrow with every step, she went to the kitchen, pouring herself a cup of coffee. She sipped from the heavy, black mug, walking aimlessly around, coming to rest in the breakfast room, noting there was a pitcher of orange juice and a basket of muffins on the table.

Every window in the house seemed to reach from floor to ceiling, and she found herself entranced as she caught sight of Theron swimming vigorous laps in the pool. She took one of the chairs, her gaze riveted to the graceful man in the backyard.

Whenever he was alone he looked so much more at ease than when he was with her. The tension in his jaw was gone, the frustrated anger in his blazing eyes vanished, his whole body ceased to contain the wooden stiffness as it did when around her. It must really be hard on him to have her in his life.

Turning her back on the mesmerizing sight, she reached for an apple-cinnamon muffin, poured a glass of juice and tried not to feel sorry for herself.

Moments later she heard the back door open and close again quietly. Theron coming in for a shower and change of clothes, she assumed.

Half an hour later she was still perched morosely in the breakfast room when she heard him exit out the back door again. Against all will, she turned in her seat to see him open the side gate of the huge fence and go off into the woods, leaving the gate open.

Where was he going? What did he do out there for so many hours each day? Curiosity got the better of her. Did she dare follow him? Her blood shot through her veins at the thought. If she was leaving come morning, she wanted to solve at least a tiny bit of the mystery.

Shoes. She needed shoes. Where had they gone? She hadn't seen them for a couple of days now. She remembered Theron had said that he had put her tennis shoes in his closet. Should she?

With her legs not in tip-top condition she would only be able to go so far before they gave out on her. Hopefully he hadn't gone trudging off too far.

His closet was huge, filled with clothes, mostly in his favorite color of funeral-black. There were wool slacks, silk slacks, lots of blue jeans, sweaters, button-up shirts, and several pairs of loafers rested below. The small room smelled of him. Leah inhaled

deeply, reveling in the scent that was as mysteriously male as he was.

Getting her mind back on track, she searched for her shoes and found them toward the back, resting beside a pair of Theron's jogging shoes, looking completely ordinary sitting side-by-side as if they had always been there. It was a tiny reminder of a domestic life she craved with this man, but would not be living out.

Pushing the somber thoughts away, she slipped the white tennis shoes over her bare feet and, with determination, set forth to find out what Theron did during his days. His nights, unfortunately, would continue to remain a mystery, unless she ended up stowing away in the back seat of his car.

When she went through the gate, she was afraid his trail would be hard to follow, but saw there was a well-worn dirt path. *Evidently he went there quite often.*

Setting one foot in front of the other, she followed along the clear pathway. Though her gaze took in the towering trees, low shrubs, chirping birds and darting squirrels, her mind was focused on only one thing: Finding Theron Ambrose.

She would follow her silent oath to leave him be, but before she left, she wanted just a little peek into the cloistered life he led. Have a glimpse of how he spent his time—aside from on the phone with his stockbroker, swimming, exercising and avoiding her.

Creeping along as silently as possible, she intended only to catch a brief glance. For what seemed like a decade, she walked and walked. Her legs ached badly, but she took it slow and steady. Through a thicket of trees that blocked her view a little, she saw Theron directly ahead of her, lying on a huge, flat boulder on his stomach, chin resting on one fist. His other hand was stretched out in front of him as he fed a squirrel with what she supposed were nuts or something. He was sideways to her and she stayed just out of sight, behind a thick tree, trying not to disturb the carpet of fallen leaves beneath her feet.

He was whispering softly to the small, fluffy animal who was as enthralled with the tall, dark man as she herself was. Soon another squirrel joined the first one, Theron remaining in his horizontal position, feeding the grateful little creatures. Their bushy tails quivered with delight, their small front paws holding the offering, consuming it greedily.

Leah felt tears gathering in her eyes at the beautiful sight as she witnessed yet another side of this enigmatic person. He was severe and frightening, violent and angry, sensual and caring, and he had a soft spot for animals.

She felt a twinge of jealousy stab through her. If only he had a soft spot for her.

Feeling guilty at having invaded his privacy, she quietly turned to leave. Taking one step forward she put her foot down right in the middle of a twig, snapping it in two, the sound echoing along the soft breeze like a gun shot.

She darted behind a tree once more, her heart in her throat, her pulse beating out of control. Had he heard her? If so, what would his reaction be? Should she turn and run, not bothering to look behind her and pray for the best?

Peeking from behind the ancient trunk, she looked over at the rock slab, and saw Theron; stiff, wrathful, and staring right back at her! His eyes were huge and angry. Two incandescent orbs. No, that was silly, she admonished herself, nobody's eyes glowed. It must have been the reflection of sunlight in those black, bottomless eyes of his.

She wanted to look away from the sight of those evil eyes, but like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car, Leah stood frozen against the tree, leaning heavily on it for support, her legs feeling as though they would give out at any moment.

He sat up. His eyes still had that eerie, demonic glow about them, like a bicycle

reflector shining in the night. His face bore the mask of twisted anger she had seen once too often.

And he was coming after her!

“Leah!” His voice sounded strange and rough.

Run! her mind screamed out.

Lifting her feet which felt as if they were embedded in quicksand, she ran toward the house, never looking back as she dashed through brush and bushes, through the open gate and in through the doors.

Up the flight of stairs she went, into her room, closing the door and locking it behind her. The barricade would be nothing for him to break through, but she felt safer with it in place. Eyes closed, breath coming in gasps, she leaned against the door, trying to steady her racing heart, calm her wired nerves.

God, she should just start trekking down the hill and out of Theron's life right this very moment. His anger was getting out of hand. She had to leave, for her sake, as well as his.

Taking a tentative step forward, she fell to the floor. Her legs were useless.

“Damn! Damn! Damn!” She pounded the plush carpet with her fists. In a prostrate position, Leah rested her spinning forehead against the softness the rug beneath her offered. Her legs weren't strong enough to make it anywhere. Her idiotic journey into the woods had taken every ounce of strength she possessed. She was stuck here for now.

Where was Theron? Was he coming up the stairs now? *Ready to ... to do what?* she wondered. Try to kill her as he had said he very well could? Ravish her body? Her unresisting body, she bitterly added at her own lack of self-control where he was concerned. She'd probably let him shackle her to the bed and remain here as his sex slave until her dying day.

After several moments of lying crumpled upon the floor and no sign of Theron's angry footsteps, she dragged herself over and onto the bed, exhausted.

Resting one arm over her eyes, she willed away all thoughts of the immortal man.

Slowly she removed her arm from her face, frowning. Now why had she pinned that label on him?

Immortal.

That was absolutely absurd. Theron may be mysterious and peculiar, but immortal? As in possessing powers that no normal human being could?

Memories bombarded her from all sides. How he was able to read minds, move objects with the wave of a hand, command her to sleep—hypnosis?—the electricity that flew from his fingertips when he was angry. Were these signs of immortal powers?

No. She had often read of people just like Theron. Telekinetics. Clairvoyants. There were many branches of the psychic field, although Theron's powers seemed to be remarkably strong. People who were able to move an object a few inches were marveled at. Theron could bring down an entire building. Or lift a resisting woman from her bed and let her hover above the ground, she remembered as a chill shot up her spine.

There were no such things as ghosts, ghouls or monsters of any kind, she reassured herself.

But what if he was psychotic? That could very well explain his extreme mood swings.

Again she tossed out the evidence. If he had intended to kill her, he would have done

so by now. He'd had plenty of opportunity. She was letting her imagination get the best of her.

Feeling slightly better after counseling herself, she slid up against the headboard into a sitting position, took the strange diary out of the drawer by her side, wanting to get her mind off Theron, not eager to face him when he made his appearance.

In a matter of minutes she was absorbed in the age-old book. She continued, page after page, stopping when she read the last passage. It had been only one hundred days in this man's life that he had chosen to write about. According to the story, it had taken one hundred days for his powers to reach their optimum. Evidently, he had been a telekinetic and clairvoyant, as was Theron. "Must run in the family," she mumbled, wondering if insanity did also.

Leah had read along, growing more fascinated as this man developed into, what he believed, was an all-powerful being.

That wasn't what caused her stomach to suddenly drop, or her heart to beat a jerky rhythm for a few seconds. It was the words that were written on the last page that had her blood running icy.

August 22, 1747

This is the final installment of my transformation progress. If I continue to live each night as I have the past one hundred nights, I shall exist until this world no longer revolves.

Whatever it is that I desire is now at my fingertips. Riches, power, travel, knowledge. Nothing is out of my reach.

I shall continue to drink in the life of the sweet ones for they are my nourishment. I must never relinquish my vow of celibacy. To do so would have my immortality stripped. I would be, simply, a man once again. I am on a higher plane than mortals, I must not fall prey to their temptations.

The shaman has warned me that I will someday meet up with my nemesis, a woman who will seduce me into her web of mortal enticement. She is out there. I must be strong. By the very blood that flows through my veins I make this oath: I will not succumb.

If she were just a tad more superstitious, she would swear that this man described Theron to a T. All of his powers, his fears. But it was purely coincidental, she was certain. Wasn't it? Vampires simply did not exist. "Remember that, Leah Nolan," she assured herself as her hands began to tremble slightly, causing the diary to fall to her lap.

"You're letting your imagination run away with you simply because you're cooped up in this house alone, day after day."

If she wasn't very careful, she could convince herself that all kinds of beasts roamed the earth. *Get a grip*, she reprimanded herself. She did not want to imagine Theron being a night dwelling, bloodsucking monster.

However, if the book was true in all that it said, if it was an account of Theron's life, she didn't want to know. Opening a Pandora's box of potential evil was not her idea of a good time. There was no other way, she would have to leave him to his complicated life. Tomorrow. Theron represented something she had no right to intrude on. The incident in the woods had sealed that suspicion. Whether preternatural or supernatural, he was clearly a man who must be left alone. Who, by his own words and actions, desired complete isolation. He was a man who was reaching a breaking point. She didn't want to be around when he snapped.

Sliding the book back into the drawer, intending to put it back on the study shelf later, she lay down, her eyes feeling incredibly heavy, her mind swimming with silly thoughts of Theron and immortality.

* * * *

Theron prowled around the bottom floor of his home, an angry, caged tiger. He stalked from one room to another, muttering graphic expletives, jamming his fingers through his hair so many times he'd lost count. He was mad. Scared. Furious.

Leah had seen him. Not Theron Ambrose the man, but Theron Ambrose as he really was.

They had made eye contact. She had seen his eyes in their trance-inducing state.

The fear on her face had said it all. *She had to know*, he thought with defeat, walking into the study.

Perhaps not, he deliberated with some glimmer of hope remaining. She was still in his home. If she had discovered he was a vampire, surely she would have taken flight, wanting to get away as quickly as possible. But she hadn't. Indeed, she was still here. Sleeping upstairs in her room.

Letting out a long breath of relief, he placed one hand against the bookcase, resting his head against his outstretched forearm, closing his eyes as he gathered his jumbled thoughts.

Apparently he was safe. For now. She was getting unbearably close to learning the truth though. That could not happen. If she found out and spread the word ... it could get quite ugly. Police, reporters, nosy people with nothing better to do than stand around and gawk. And that would be the most pleasant thing that could happen.

Shaking his head to rid himself of the gruesome thoughts, he opened his eyes, trying to get the horrific scenes out of his inner vision.

He frowned, examining the rows of books before him. Something was not right. A book was missing. He could see the empty slot between two other books as one lay against the other.

A nagging ache of dread thudded in his brain. It was his journal. Damn! Why hadn't he thought to remove it when she'd first arrived? Now it was in her clutches. Revealed to her in those yellowed pages were his secrets. His first stages of transformation, the ancient and sacred incantation that had helped to make him what he was today.

He was the only one in possession of the ancient spell and ritual, all written in his journal. If it ever fell into the wrong hands ... Theron shuddered. God help us all.

He must get the journal back. He was certain Leah could not read Chinese, but if she became suspicious, she could take the book and have it translated. More than likely, nobody would believe the words written in the old book. But, it would take only one person who did believe. One person to perform the ritual. What if that person wasn't as careful as he had been? What if that person created a whole colony of vampires? He could just imagine a world teeming with creations such as himself.

No. They would not be like him. He had been unique since birth, which is the reason he had been entrusted with the sacred words. Anyone else would simply be a vampire.

It had taken everything within him to resist sweet Leah's charms. He wasn't ready to give up his immortality in return for a few moments of intercourse. Still, he had to recover the journal. She had dug her way into his life a little deeper each day. Today she

had followed him into the woods. She had taken his personal property without permission. And he was mad as hell. She would pay for her error in judgment. Her persistent snooping.

Chapter Thirteen

“Leah!” Theron burst through the bedroom door, jolting her out of the deep sleep she had been under.

She rubbed her eyes, disoriented by the fact that it was now dark. When she had fallen asleep it had been light outside.

“Leah! Wake up!” Theron stood by the bedside, glaring down at her, shaking her by the shoulders.

Scrambling up into a sitting position, she instinctively raised a forearm over her face for protection.

“Wake up. Focus.” His voice was a low warning telling her to rouse herself out of the slumberous fog. Now.

“I’m trying!” She shook the murk from her head.

Theron sighed, impatient. “I assure you I don’t go around striking women or threatening bodily harm.”

She blinked again, coming out of her sleepy daze. Gathering her strength, her anger rose to meet his. “Oh, sure, like when you nearly dropped me on my head by floating me over the balcony? Or, how about when you practically strangled me in the bathtub? Those were perfect examples of your meekness.” Her tone was sarcastic.

“I was a confused man. A man with powers that I often lose control over.”

“And I was the lucky recipient of that confusion.” She crossed her arms over her chest, avoiding eye contact, looking toward the open door. The door that had been locked. Tight.

“No, dammit,” he growled, “you were the cause of it.”

Leah sighed. He wasn’t the only one who was confused. She met his black stare with a bored look. “To what do I owe this pleasant visit? Just another opportunity to see your sunshiny face?”

“You’d better avoid taunting me, little one,” he said tightly. “Or have you forgotten what I am capable of?” In a dramatic display he flicked the fingers of his right hand, causing the lamp on the nightstand to go sailing through the air, crashing against the wall on the other side of the room, blanketing them in darkness.

Leah clapped in mock delight. “Bravo! Let me see you do that again.” She couldn’t believe her gall. She was purposely heckling this very powerful man. And, though she tried to project an aura of disinterest, she shook to her very core. A fact she refused to let him be witness to.

“Enough!” He turned on the wall sconces with an invisible hand. “No more games. I want my journal.”

“*Your* journal?” Leah raised a dark brow at him. “Are you telling me you personally wrote that nearly three-hundred-year old diary?”

Theron paled and looked suddenly weak. “Don’t be ridiculous. I simply meant it in the sense that it is mine and not yours, even though you seem to have taken possession of it. Without asking, I might add.”

Leah wasn’t cut out for mind games, only trying to be just as big a bully as Theron, but she was already tired and her head ached from the mental tug-of-war. “Why are you

so mad? I only borrowed it. In case you didn't realize, I do get quite bored around here being constantly alone." She leaned over, reaching into the nightstand, withdrawing the aged book.

Theron snatched it away from her as if she had stolen a priceless artifact and was now coming clean. "Jeez!" she exclaimed. "I would have given it back."

"It's—it's quite old. I'm afraid that something will happen to it if not properly cared for."

"I'm an adult, Theron. I didn't manhandle it. Besides, I finished reading it just this afternoon."

He stood very still. "And?" he said very casually.

Leah smiled at his effort to pry into her brain, but she quickly blocked him. "Now who's trying to take possession of something that doesn't belong to them? You can't always have things your way. If you want to know something, ask." Her voice held a layer of hurt to it.

"What did you think of the journal?" His tone was so wary, so soft and unlike him, that Leah was caught off-guard.

She blinked several times and frowned. "It was quite interesting. An excellent work of fiction. Quite original, although I'm no book critic."

"That's all?"

Leah tilted her head to one side, puzzled. "What were you expecting me to say?"

"Nothing. Thank you for the book," he said gruffly, lingering by the side of the bed. Leah felt this was his way of apologizing.

"You're welcome. And I'm sorry I didn't ask you first." Their gazes held.

"It's quite all right. Please excuse my previous rude behavior."

"No sweat. I'm getting used to it." She attempted a smile that didn't quite materialize. *Are you actually leaving tomorrow?*

Leah was overjoyed to hear the words in her mind. She wanted to break down and start bawling her eyes out. But she remained calm and steady. *Yes*, she silently replied. She saw the look in his eyes. It was sorrow.

All it would take was one word from him to make her stay. She doubted he would ever say it though. He was too used to his lone existence. And though he wanted her, he would not relent to those feelings. *It's better for the both of us if we get on with our lives. Yes, I suppose it is.* Anguish mottled his reply.

He turned on his heel, starting for the door. "Dine with me this evening." He stayed in the doorway, one hand on the knob, his back to her. "Please?"

This would be their farewell night, Leah thought with heavy melancholy. Well, at least he wanted to spend the time with her. "I'd love to."

The door closed softly behind him.

* * * *

Twenty minutes later there was a knock on her door. Theron came in with a white sequined dress draped over one arm. "I thought you might like to dress up a bit this evening," he said softly. "I never did give you that special night I had promised. Remember?"

Leah smiled. It was a tremulous one, but she managed to keep it in place for longer than three seconds. "Yes. I remember."

He walked over to the bed, placing the sparkling material at the foot. From his other hand came a pair of satin pumps in the same snowy color. Leah wondered where he got all of these clothes. Did he have a women's clothing store attached to the house?

Theron laughed. "No, I bought all of these things for you. In the city. It's a habit I've come to enjoy." He avoided her gaze as she realized the habit would soon be quickly broken.

"Oh." She was touched and decided not to ask about the lingerie. Why so much was here. Who it belonged to. Those things, she was certain, had not been bought for her. One look at Theron's face told her he didn't want to explain the presence of the lacy items.

He reached out and caressed her cheek. "Oh, sweet Leah. There are so many things you do not understand." He exhaled a solemn breath.

"Try me," was her husky reply. After living this past number of weeks with Theron Ambrose, she was ready to believe just about anything at this point. What she wanted to believe in was a future with something she could never have. Him.

Theron headed for the door. A hasty retreat. Running for cover in order to hide his surfacing emotions.

"Dinner will be ready shortly." His stiff back was to her as he stood in the doorway. "I'll..." Something caught in his throat and he tried once again. "I'll be waiting ... for you."

The door closed and Leah trembled from head to foot. "Damn you, Theron Ambrose," she whispered to the empty room around her. "Why are you putting us through this? What secrets are you hiding? Who are you?" *What are you?*

Leah felt like a kamikaze pilot preparing for suicide, knowing that this would be his last day on Earth as she dressed in the body-skimming short dress Theron had brought in for her.

Though tomorrow would find her alive, as would the next day and the next, a part of her would always be dead. Would always be here with that mysterious man.

With Theron she felt whole, if not off balance, by his constant mood swings. He made her feel alive, and oh so female.

She smiled ruefully as she reached into the bottom drawer of the nightstand, extracting the brush. Too bad she didn't have some make-up, perhaps a curling iron. Her hair always did look better with some wave in it.

Tonight she wanted to make Theron see exactly what it was that he would be missing if he let her go. Looking at her reflection in the mirror that hung on the inside of the armoire door, Leah smiled. She looked pretty darn good, if she did say so herself—even if she did long for some face paint and perfume.

Flipping off the light switch, she left the room, slowly making her way down the stairs. As much as she hated to admit it, her legs were feeling much better. Even after running through the woods earlier, they had recovered quickly. She knew she wouldn't be able to run a marathon for a good, long while, but she had recovered enough to care for herself.

Thoughts slipped in and out of her head. Her apartment would still be waiting for her, Theron had assured. He'd taken the liberty of paying several months' rent there since she was unable to work in her condition. He had offered to pay for the entire year, even tried to convince her to let him buy her a home of her own. Leah had refused on the spot. She would have felt like a mistress. Her laugh was grim. At least mistresses made love

with their benefactors. She had accepted the few months of paid rent though, simply for the fact that Theron wouldn't accept no for an answer.

She started to go into the dining room, but noticed that lights were flickering out on the patio. Following the soft glow, she walked through the open doors, out onto the concrete. Theron waited there and rose to his feet in gentlemanly fashion, pulling one chair out for her. He had dressed in a black silk suit, which looked as if it had been tailor-made. A black T-shirt peeked out from beneath the jacket. His hair was slicked back, bringing attention to his pronounced widow's peak. His fathomless eyes reflected the light of the two tapered candles sitting in the middle of the white linen covered table. He looked darker than ever. Sinful and sensual. The epitome of maleness.

And she was leaving him.

"You look positively enchanting." He smiled. "Please, have a seat." She took the offered spot, Theron pushing the chair in before taking his own seat opposite her.

"Thank you," she murmured. "You look quite enticing yourself." Their opposing attire—he in black silk and she in shimmering white—complemented and contrasted just as their personalities did. To anyone who might see them, they would appear to be lovers celebrating, having a quiet, intimate dinner. But they weren't lovers, and they weren't celebrating. For Leah, this was her farewell from Theron.

The black china plates set against the snow-white linen were dramatic to behold. Chicken Kiev, broccoli with hollandaise sauce and sautéed new potatoes graced the elegant settings. Chilled water goblets sat to the right of each plate. "What? No wine?" She smiled, trying to make light of the somber atmosphere.

"Not tonight." He picked up his fork, halfheartedly digging into his food.

"Party pooper."

That brought a smile to Theron's lips. "I won't ply my woman with alcohol," he said dryly, freezing at his words.

Leah bit into her lower lip and sighed. *My woman*. The words were tantalizing to hear, but he didn't mean them in the sense she wanted him to. He was simply stating a fact of another facet to his life. No alcohol.

They both only picked at their food. What a *special* evening this was, Leah thought ruefully. They were both miserable. She glanced at Theron who drank from his crystal goblet, staring off out into the distant night. What was he thinking? That he couldn't wait until she left? That he couldn't wait to get this dinner charade over with?

Leah slumped against the back of her chair, laying the fork on her plate. This was not working out as she had planned. She wanted a beautiful memory of this evening. Not to recall how they had sat around with glum faces.

"Would you care to dance?" Theron asked, breaking the oppressive silence around them, his expressionless gaze upon her.

Leah jumped, startled. "But—there's no music."

"Easily taken care of." He gave a flick of his hand and a symphony of music came drifting through the open doors. Theron stood, reaching out a hand in invitation.

You don't have to do this, Leah whispered silently.

Nobody makes me do anything I don't want to. "Come." He pulled her into his arms, fitting her against every hard line and contour of his body. They swayed like flowers in a soft summer's breeze, the delicate moon from above kissing them with its silver light. It was all so overwhelming, Leah thought she would fall apart at any second.

Theron held her tighter. *Are you really leaving?*

Yes, came her concrete answer. She heard Theron take in a sharp breath. It sounded like a man who had just been wounded. *All you have to do is say the word and I'll stay.*

He pulled her so tightly against him Leah felt she would break in two. *I can't*, was his somber reply. "Damn," he muttered, dropping his arms to his sides and his gaze to the ground. "Maybe it's best if you go to bed now." He wouldn't make eye contact, but Leah saw the mist forming in them before he pinched the bridge of his nose with a thumb and forefinger.

What haunted him so badly that he couldn't accept her love?

She sighed, certain she would never know the answer.

"No, Theron. You promised me this evening. You can't back out now." She looked up at him smiling widely, both knowing it was false bravado. "Now let's finish our supper."

The remainder of dinner was spent in strained silence. Leah tried not to dwell on any self pity, though it kept popping up against her will. She wasn't good at faking it and felt it was probably best if she did go to bed. Pushing her plate aside, she stretched and yawned, feigning fatigue.

"Are you tired?" Theron quickly asked.

Jeez, Leah thought with a touch of bitterness, he didn't have to look so happy about it. "Yeah, I guess I am. Why don't I help you clean up? After that I'll go on up to bed. I have a lot of thinking to do before leaving in the morning." Her expression was grim.

"Just leave the dishes." He smiled slightly. "They'll take care of themselves." He stood, extinguishing the candles with just a look.

Funny, Leah thought, he always had the opposite affect on her. She always ignited whenever those deep, black eyes were on her. "I guess they will take care of themselves," she said wryly as he gave a wave of his hand and the table began clearing. "You'd be a real boon to the restaurant business." She gave a sincere smile but it felt forced.

"That's nothing." He smiled in return. "I can do it with both hands tied behind my back *and* my eyes closed."

They laughed softly together, but the forced aura soon dissipated, leaving them feeling awkward and uncomfortable.

"Well, I guess I'd better be going." Leah stood, heading for the open doors. *Good night, Theron*. She didn't look back, but she could feel those obsidian eyes boring into her.

Good night, little one.

Chapter Fourteen

Leah awoke hours before dawn and turned on the lamp at her bedside. She couldn't sleep. No sounds could be heard anywhere within the house. Earlier she had heard Theron leave and suspected he would remain absent until she had gone. Her heart called him cruel for not wanting to spend time with her during her last hours here, but it was for the best. What did they have to say to each other? He had fulfilled his obligation of helping her to walk again, and, as per their agreement, it was now time for her to leave.

With solemn steps, she walked over to the armoire, running her hand over the silk and satin items before her. There was one gown she hadn't worn yet, one that was kept at the back of the closet. She took out the sinful bit of satin and lace, holding it against her.

It was a short, body-hugging chemise in the whitest white. A sheer peignoir went over it with gathered lace at the hem and the ends of the long sleeves. Tiny satin bows held the filmy robe together at the front, while tiny red rosebuds sat in the middle of each bow. It was a gown made for seduction.

A thought started to spin its wheels in her head. Not a thought actually, but a need. An intense need that she fully intended on fulfilling.

Slipping out of the violet gown she wore to bed last night, she put on the sensual item of lingerie that looked as though it had come straight out of an erotic dream. Taking in her appearance from all sides in the mirror, she deemed that she looked more feminine and alluring than at any other time in her life. It wasn't all due to the wickedly soft material covering her bare skin either. No, the glow that shone on her face came from deep inside. Love.

A love that had never been verbalized, but would when she saw Theron.

Her heart raced quickly at her new line of thinking. She would wait for Theron to come home, would go to his bedroom and confess her love for him. If those were the last words she ever said to him, she wanted it to be of her love.

In the back of her mind she hoped he would reciprocate. To have him divulge his intense feelings of love for her also.

Turning away from the mirror, she hugged her arms around her as a chill crept into her soul. A laugh bubbled up and out. What was she thinking? She was a fool for even thinking such nonsense. Theron had not once hinted at any other feelings for her aside from bitterness, frustration, anger and lust. There was no love there. She was an idiot for even thinking to do such a thing as fling herself into his arms and proclaim her undying devotion—even if that's exactly what her heart craved.

Closing the carved doors, she went and sat on the edge of the bed. "Well, Leah," she said softly, staring at the carpet, "today was your last day here, and nobody's going to stop you from leaving. Not even yourself."

Reaching over to switch off the lamp, intending to force herself to sleep a few more hours, she noticed a piece of paper sitting on the nightstand she hadn't seen there before. It was a note.

"Theron?" She frowned, puzzled. Evidently he had come in earlier during one of her dozing spells.

Picking up the thick, ivory paper, she read the words that were scribed in an elegant,

flowing hand. *Leah, please feel free to take the clothes I have given you and the lingerie that is in the armoire. As meager as they are, they are my gift to you. Take care, little one. Always, Theron.*

Leah read the note twice more through tear-blurred eyes. Meager gifts indeed. She felt resentment rise in her throat, leaving a bitter, metallic taste in her mouth.

“What were you hoping for, Leah? A love note?” She laughed again at her silly fantasies.

Just as she was about to wad the paper up into a tight little ball and throw it across the room, she stopped, looking at the handwriting once more. It looked strangely familiar. That graceful, flowing style.

All blood suddenly drained from her face and her entire body felt cold as she realized ... it was the same writing she had seen in that ancient diary!

No. It couldn't be. It had to be a coincidence. She read the note over and over, comparing the writing before her eyes with the writing she had previously witnessed on the aged pages. It was the same. She would stake her life on it.

Her head reeled as everything came to her mind at once. His strange behavior, his reluctance to relinquish his celibacy, the words in the journal, the episode in the tub when he had bitten her neck, how his eyes had appeared in the woods yesterday, how easily he could control the world around him with only the wave of a hand or the slightest of thoughts.

Feeling dizzy, she lay down, trying to absorb all of the information all at once. What did it all mean? Was it all some crazy coincidence? Or had Theron found what Ponce de Leon never had? Eternal youth. If that was the fact, then ... Theron was a ... vampire!

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the horrendous thoughts that plagued her. Vampires didn't exist. In Theron's own words, there was nothing mysterious in life. Everything had a scientific explanation. She hoped to God this was one of those instances. If not, she was very lucky to have made it this far without losing her life!

Come on, Leah. What more proof do you need? You already suspected that he wasn't like the rest of the human race. This is just one more piece of evidence to support your theory.

Rolling over onto her stomach, arms folded under her head for support, Leah's mind whirled at lightning speed. What should she do? Get out now while she was still intact? Or confront Theron and finally have all of her questions answered? If she followed her curiosity, she could very well die.

A heavy sigh seeped from her lungs as she came to the disheartening conclusion. She needed to know. One way or another, she had to uncover Theron Ambrose's secret. It was a secret that haunted him, allowing him no pleasure or happiness. Only solitude.

Switching off the lamp, she sat up against the headboard, vowing to wait up for Theron and attempt to get some answers. No matter the cost.

* * * *

Theron drove along the night-shrouded streets, following his well-honed senses to his next victim, feeling completely miserable, yet highly relieved at the same time.

Leah Nolan would soon be out of his life, a fact that made him heavy hearted. It could not be helped though. They were as far from being alike as night and day. In fact, he was the night, and she most certainly was the day. She was everything he could never

be. Everything he could never accept nor return.

"Damn!" He slapped his palm against the steering wheel in aggravation. Why must she constantly occupy his mind? Now that sweet sense of freedom he had felt seconds ago was replaced with one of great loss.

He was losing the only woman he had ever, would ever, love.

He had tempted fate one too many times. All he had to do was get through this one last night and he would have spurned destiny.

Theron willed away the tightening in his groin. Just the memory of her naked body so close to his the other night sent him into a state of sexual frenzy. He was lucky to have lasted all of these days with her around and not give in to his libido.

If she continued to stay, he would only do something he would forever regret. Yes, it was good she was leaving him, he further convinced himself of the idea.

All he had to do was avoid her until she left. After she had gone he would have free rein over his home again. Over his life.

Turning onto a little side street off Sunset Boulevard, Theron easily located his next victim. He pulled his Ferrari over to the curb and switched off the engine, awaiting the rush he used to feel when nearing the end of the hunt, the knowledge that he was about to feed.

It didn't come.

Wanting to get his life back to some modicum of normalcy as quickly as possible, or perhaps out of spite against the woman who had caused him to change his life so drastically over the past weeks, he decided to bring this woman home as he used to before Leah arrived. Yet somehow the thrill of stalking, of feeding, of bringing a woman home and seeing her in the lacy bits of nothing he kept for his pleasure only, appealed to him no more.

"Time," he whispered, climbing out of the car. It would just take time before he got his life back together again. Before he stopped imagining sweet Leah in his arms and in his home. In time she would cease to creep into his dreams and his thoughts.

Yes, in time he would stop craving her body, her voice, her laughter and kisses. In time, he would stop loving her. He had to. If not, his very existence was now meaningless. It would forever be a living hell if she continued to prey upon his mind as she did now.

Yes, he had to forget. That's all there was to it.

"Don't worry," he spoke softly as he strode toward his prey. "I'm here to help you."

Chapter Fifteen

Leah had been dozing in the darkness of her room, but woke when she heard the gentle purr of Theron's car engine as he came home. The confrontation was now very near. She would hopefully at last have the solution to the puzzle called Theron Ambrose.

Her heart shot into high gear, her blood skyrocketing through her veins. She waited a few moments as she heard him enter the house and go to his room. Longer still she waited.

When she ultimately rose from the bed her entire body felt weak and trembled. Nerves, she counseled herself, walking in to the bathroom to splash some cold water on her face. She looked at her reflection in the dark mirror in front of her. "This is it, Leah. Do or die."

A rueful grimace twisted her lips. How right that saying fit this strange situation.

Walking out of the murky bathroom, through the equally black bedroom and over to the door, she repeated over and over in her mind, *love conquers all, love conquers all*.

She prayed it was true, for in the next few moments she had a feeling she would be fighting against demons stronger than her physical self, though not as strong as her love for Theron.

What if he didn't want his demons conquered? she interrogated herself as she slowly descended the steps. What if he liked being whoever, or whatever, he was? What if he became angry and violent because she was intruding on his private life?

Dear God, what if he tried to kill her?

She now stood in front of the closed door. The door to Theron's bedroom.

As the seconds ticked by she became less and less assured. Not of her love, but of her good intentions to help Theron overcome his problem. What problem? And once she found out what it was—if she did at all—what if it was something far more than she could handle?

Leah turned, thinking it best just to go back to her room. Intending to lay aside all of her plans of telling Theron of her love and chasing away his ghosts, intending to simply leave without a backward glance. As she took a step she heard the soft, velvet sound of Theron talking behind the closed door of the guest room to her right. He was not alone!

Another voice followed Theron's much deeper one. A whispered monotone that was positively female.

Not stopping to ponder over whether she had any right to feel as such, jealousy burned through her, heating her blood to a raging boil.

He couldn't even wait until she was gone before bringing another woman to his home!

Placing her hand on the doorknob, not really caring one way or another as to what she was about to interrupt, Leah turned the metal handle in her grip, flinging the door wide open.

"Why Theron?" she asked in her most courageous voice, her eyes seeing perfectly in the dim light the wall sconces offered. But any other words were snuffed out as a gasp of horror replaced her previous jealousy.

Theron's head snapped up, looking toward the open doorway. His eyes were two

luminous orbs, just as she had witnessed in the woods yesterday. His eyes *had* been glowing! Just as they were now.

Her stomach churned as she saw two rivulets of blood running down either side of his mouth. Glancing at the fully clothed woman on the bed, Leah saw a wound on the side of her neck where Theron had been ... feeding from her.

The woman turned her head in Leah's direction, the pupils of her pale gray eyes dilated as if under the influence of drugs or ... hypnosis.

Leah tried to scream, but nothing would get past the boulder of fear in her throat. She started backing up, her hand over her mouth.

Like a cat about to attack, Theron opened his mouth wide and hissed at her, jumping from the bed as if he had springs attached to his feet. He swiped at the lines of blood on his lips with the back of one hand, stalking toward her, dressed in his customary black from head to foot, with a fury in those eyes that burned with an unholy fire.

"No!" Leah shook her head, holding out her hands, warding off the attack.

"You!" He pointed at her with an angry finger, his voice sounding thick and sinister.

Turning, Leah ran in the direction of the back door, the only thought occupying her mind was to run for her very life.

She came up against the glass doors, frantically pulling on the lever handles until they finally budged, swinging open. His heavy footsteps thudded behind her on the wooden flooring. She must hurry!

Out onto the pool deck she ran, fumbling with the lock on the gate before it sprang free. She thought about closing it behind her, but it would only slow her down.

"You can run, my sweet, but you can't hide." Theron's evil voice traveled with the night breeze, drifting to her ears.

Faster, she urged, her legs feeling the burden of their trials. She still wasn't one hundred percent and could only hope she would escape from the beast hunting her down. *That malevolent creature cannot be Theron*, her mind cried out.

Oh, no? A voice growled within her brain. *Did I not tell you that there were things in my life you would not understand? Did I not tell you that evil inhabits even the most timid of breasts? Why did you have to come into my life!* The question was one borne of fear, giving Leah a strange sense of power.

I didn't ask to come here. You brought me here, she mutely countered.

Yes. I was a fool. I made a tremendous mistake. Now, I shall correct my error in judgment. It was a dire threat against her life. One Leah believed he fully intended to carry out.

She ran until she felt her lungs would explode from the effort of breathing, and still he was only a few steps behind her. *This is it*, she thought. *I'm going to die.*

And she knew it was the awful truth as she came into Theron's woodland clearing and crumpled to the leaf-strewn ground, her still weak legs crumbling like old mortar.

She looked toward the flat boulder, the moon shining down upon it like a sacrificial stone altar from the Aztec age. And she was to be the sacrifice.

Her eyes closed in defeat, all fight in her gone as Theron walked right up to her, looking down at her with those huge, incandescent eyes.

He laughed, a short, bitter sounding noise. "Did you honestly think you could escape?"

He crouched down so that he was level with her face, Leah flinching at the

monstrous light glowing within Theron's once beautiful eyes.

"What are you?" she gasped, turning her head away so she wouldn't have to view those eyes.

A harsh palm gripped her chin, pulling her head back toward him. "Look at me and see." That voice. She shivered. That haunting voice of a demon. It made her shrink away. She wanted to cry out with the horror she felt. Wishing that this was all a nightmare and she would awaken from it soon.

Theron rummaged through her thoughts, not caring that he was causing her extreme pain by the severity of his probing. "You nearly had it all put together, sweet Leah. I was wondering if I could get rid of you before you discovered my secret. But it was not to be." He sighed with impatience, lifting her into his arms, rendering her immobile when she began struggling. "It's of no use, little one. My powers far exceed yours." He strode over to the smooth, flat boulder, laying her down in the very center.

Leah's mind grew hysterical. This was like some low budget horror movie. But, no, she reminded herself, hanging on to a final thread of sanity, this was reality. And the reality was that she was about to die.

"Why?" she whispered, her voice trembling.

Theron tilted his head to one side as he stood on the ground next to the slab of rock. "Why what? Why did I choose to become immortal? That one is quite obvious, my sweet. Wouldn't most anyone crave an eternal life? I was offered the opportunity, as you read in my journal, and I took it." His lips twisted. "Or are you referring to the reason behind my evasiveness? The reason why my moods ran so hot and cold all of these weeks. Why I would be at ease with you one moment and lash out the next."

Leah opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. All she could do was lie there, helpless, staring at the man who was not entirely human.

"My actions should be quite clear to you now. As my journal plainly stated, I was to meet up with my nemesis one day. A woman who would steal my heart, tempt me into relinquishing my immortality by making love. Falling in love. Unless," he held a long forefinger up in front of him, "unless I resisted. Which I did." His smile was arrogant, obviously proud of himself.

A long sigh escaped his lungs. "Tonight I was attempting to recapture my previous way of existence that had been interrupted since your arrival. You were jealous of the woman in my bedroom." He laughed. "There's no need. I have no feelings for the women I feed from. I merely help them to forget their sorrows, while taking from them the very thing that perpetuates my life. Blood."

Leah had witnessed this grisly act with her own eyes just moments ago in his bedroom. Still, it sounded far worse when put into words.

More memories drifted back to her. Of the story he'd told her by the poolside and the entries she'd read in the journal that a vampire could make a woman his eternal mate by feeding from her three times. Of possessing immortal powers should the incantation be read. Of becoming mortal if he should relinquish his celibacy. Or killing her to avoid all cases.

Leah had a sinking feeling that she fit into that last category.

"I was this close, Leah," he growled, holding up a thumb and forefinger to measure a minute distance. "This close to giving in. You're very beautiful." He reached out to stroke her cheek. Leah was appalled at herself for actually feeling a thrill run through her veins

at his touch. "I almost made love to you on many occasions, but oh, the things I would have given up." He opened his arms wide to embrace the world around him.

Now that her initial fear was over, Leah was filled with only a dull hum of dread, knowing she was about to die. If that was the case, she fully intended to say what was on her mind. "What would you have given up, Theron?" she said, her tone icy. "A miserably lonely existence? Total and complete solitude? Waking up by yourself, going to sleep by yourself, every single day and night of your very long life?" She was aggravated at not being able to move, fighting against the invisible restraints that held her.

She continued, "What about sharing your hopes and dreams with another? What about loving someone? Having that person in your life always so you can share in the laughter and tears that life has to offer. Before I came along, Theron, who did you share laughter with? With your luxurious home? The moon and stars and sun? Or *was* there any laughter in your life?"

"Silence!" he thundered, electricity flashing from his fingertips. "I was fine until you came along!"

"Oh, sure," she replied dryly. "Living your days of *oneness* and nights on the prowl. Bringing strangers home, putting them under some kind of mind spell, having them dress up in lingerie while you suck their blood. No emotions involved. No feelings. Just a quick blood-high. Sounds thrilling."

"I said, be silent, woman!" He waved a hand, sending blue and white sparks into the night where they hit a distant tree trunk and exploded. "Why must you always try my patience?" Both hands were rammed through his hair.

She was getting to him. Good! "You brought me here for a reason." Her eyes grew wide in realization. "You know something? I think you're afraid of me."

Theron scoffed. "Me? Afraid of you? Don't be ridiculous."

"Yes, I believe you are. I represent the end of your fabulous life of immortality. Don't I?"

"Yes," he muttered. "But I, fair lady, represent *your* end." He smiled, climbed up onto the rock and straddled her, cursing blackly as he became instantly aroused as their most intimate places touched.

Leah smiled, satisfied at his reaction. "Go ahead, Theron," she taunted. "Do it to me."

"I will not!" Thunder rumbled in the distance and Leah had no doubt it was Theron who caused it.

In the next instant his hands were upon her throat, his eyes still blazing a yellow-red fire. "In order for me to survive, you must die, Leah Nolan. There is no other way!" His grip tightened so much so that Leah could barely breathe. "What do you think of that?" He brought his face only an angry breath away from hers.

Leah tried to speak, and finally managed a small rasp of sound. Her eyes filled with tears. "I love you."

Theron stopped, his grip lessening, his eyes wide. "Say it again," he demanded.

Her words came out tremulous, but stronger this time. "I love you, Theron Ambrose."

"Even now? After all I've put you through?" His voice was losing that strange, sandpapery tone to it.

She nodded, tears spilling from her eyes, running down into her ears. "I'll always

love you. You've given me so much in these weeks I've been here. I never wanted to hurt you. Never wanted to cause your doom. When I asked to make love with you it was only because I love you. I wanted to bring you pleasure, as you brought me so many times."

Theron looked down at her, still and silent for a moment. "Ah, sweet Leah." He closed his eyes in defeat. When he opened them again there was a new light shining in them. A gentle light that reached out and embraced her. "I shall probably hate myself for all time, but ... I love you too."

Leah gasped. This was all so crazy, so horrifyingly, wonderfully crazy.

"Yes, I love you, little one." He shifted his body so that he lay flat on top of her, resting his forearms on either side of Leah's head. "I've known for some time now, though I was hoping to get out of this unscathed." He sighed. "I want you to be mine, Leah. Always."

"Yes," she bit back her tears as she felt his lips touch her throat and his teeth nibble slightly where her artery pulsed. "Take me, Theron." When his teeth penetrated the sensitive flesh there she let out a cry of intense pleasure. Theron was going to make her his, forever. She would never know what it would be like to have him buried deep inside her, but she would be with him always from this night forward. And she reveled in the knowledge.

*

Theron never felt such strong sensations as he did now. These feelings were so new, ethereal. After a moment of feasting on her, he raised his face to the black sky, whispering the ancient incantation that would make Leah one of the immortal.

Overhead a storm started to gather, sending a bolt of lightning crashing to the ground, and a tremendous roar of thunder to follow in its wake.

Inclining his head, he placed his mouth over the small puncture wounds on Leah's neck and fed again, vibrations thrumming within his body, his senses raw and passion unleashed. He had never tasted anything like her. And she would soon be his for always.

Lifting his face heavenward once more, he repeated the second part of the ancient spell, the storm building in intensity as was his need for the woman beneath him.

"Yes, Theron," Leah rasped. "Take me. Make me yours forever."

Looking down at Leah, his heart nearly burst as he witnessed her complete trust, her total love, bared to him in the windows of her soul, those lovely eyes.

He couldn't let her exist in the same living hell he had for all of eternity. Hunting every night. Searching for victims.

He had pretended, even believed, that his immortality was a blessing, but all of the things that Leah had said about being lonely, having no one to laugh with, live with, love with ... it was all so true. He loved her far too much to let her experience such an existence. Though they would have each other, what kind of life was one of hunting and hiding for an eternity?

He also had to face the reality that he wanted to make love to her. Every night for the rest of their lives. "Oh, yes." He moved against her, mimicking the sex act. He needed to, had to, feel what it was like to be sheathed deep within her warmth.

Theron was off her now, ridding himself of the aggravating barrier of clothing. He threw his boxers aside in the direction of his slacks and shirt. Swallowing hard, he said, "I've released my hold on you. You have freedom to move now. To run away if you so desire."

Leah's only response was to open her arms to him. Theron let out a sound of surrender as he slipped into her embrace, lifting the hem of the short, satin nightgown. Leah spread her thighs, allowing him complete access.

He reached down between their bodies and wrapped his fingers around the base of his stiff erection, rubbing the head over Leah's clitoris and around her opening. She inhaled a sharp breath and arched toward him. "I want to feel myself inside of you," Theron whispered.

"So do I. I've waited so long for this."

"Not nearly as long as I." He gave a small laugh before licking the side of her neck where he had bitten her. Leah shuddered beneath him.

When Theron slid into her, his entire body tensed with the rapturous sensation of being gripped so tightly within. Oh, it was so, so, exquisite these feelings of making love, being in love. "Yesss..." She was warm and wet and fit him perfectly.

Placing her hands on either side of his face, Leah brought Theron's face closer to her, sharing in a soft kiss. "I love you, Theron."

"Ah, sweet Leah," he groaned, sliding in and out of her with slow, smooth strokes. "And I love you."

He moved his hips with hers in an erotic tempo, her heels pressing into his buttocks, her nails digging deeply into his back, just as in her dream. Theron kissed her again, feeling he *was* surely caught up in a dream, positive this could not be reality. Not his reality, anyway.

When Leah whispered his name against his lips, his heart beat double time; this fantasy world was now his. And he gloried in the knowledge, in the feel of Leah beneath him, his erection sliding hilt to tip and back again. How had he ever lived all of these years without her? Without making love?

Sealing his mouth over hers, his tongue plunged deep, twining with hers. Sensation built within him, gathering at the base of his shaft. He wanted to enjoy this moment for as long as possible, but he was quickly losing hold of his control.

Theron ran a trail of wet, hot kisses over Leah's face and nipped at her earlobe. He grabbed handfuls of her hair, holding her tight. The thought flitted through his mind that he might be hurting her, but Leah's soft moans urged him on faster, harder. She called his name and he felt her body tense and relax again and again with her orgasm.

Theron's thrusts increased until he was driving into her with fierceness. Briefly he wondered if he could possibly die from feelings so savage, but realized this was what true living was like.

Soon there was no time for thoughts as tension compacted in his groin. A white-hot sensation burst throughout him as he drove into her once more. A rough gasp stuck in his throat as wave after wave of ecstasy engulfed him. He was being consumed by lust and reveled in their passion.

Feeling spent, he rested atop Leah as she stroked the relaxed muscles of his back. Theron looked up at her, the light of love shining in her eyes, a smile of satisfaction on her lips. Leah was now truly his, for as long as they *both* lived their mortal lives.

The End

About the Author:

A lover of romance and strong characterization, Kelly believes that any story worth reading should have a hero/heroine that the reader can fall in love with. She is currently living her dream, writing sizzling tales of suspense with paranormal elements, as well as contemporary and humorous romance. All of her books contain highly sensual love scenes and sexual tension that will make your heart race!

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