

Del Fantasma

Virgin Special

Sharon Maria Bidwell



Aspen Mountain Press

Virgin Special [Del Fantasma]
by Sharon Maria Bidwell

Aspen Mountain Press

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Del Fanasma: Virgin Special

Sharon Maria Bidwell

When the temptation to end his misery proves too much to deny, unbeknownst to James his very existence is about to change.

Seth doesn't want to visit with another vampire, but his beloved wants to see Cody, and whatever Hannah wants, Hannah gets. Cody may have the answer to their grief, but while Hannah is optimistic, Seth's moods are interfering with her plan. Then there's the complication that the human who might well save them is a virgin.

Virgin Special [Del Fantasma]
by Sharon Maria Bidwell

Thank you for your purchase of *Del Fantasma: Virgin Special* by Sharon Maria Bidwell. Cody Warren keeps romance hopping at the Del Fantasma bar where he enjoys playing matchmaker to some of the world's more unusual paranormal creatures. From coyote shifters to vamps to sparrows, Cody finds the right mate for those seeking love.

Stop by www.AspenMountainPress.com and take a look at some of the couples he's set up. And, while you're there, consider joining the Aspen Mountain Press newsletter where you can stay informed of new releases, contests and drawings, and other specials available only to members of our newsletter.

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Del Fantasma: Virgin Special

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PO Box 473543

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Chapter One

James Calder cursed softly as his foot slipped and he almost fell into the small pool of water he was investigating. Elaine would have strangled him for his carelessness, although the incident was appropriate to his circumstances—cold and wet sort of described his life right now.

Earlier, he'd admired the view of San Diego from the statue of Cabrillo that looked out over the bay. He'd heard the statue described as heroic, but while he could admire the skill of the sculptor, James could find no such connection with the figure; but then, he hardly connected with anything these days. He supposed that the term heroic applied to the European expedition and the event that the statue commemorated; that of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo setting foot on shore, on what would later become the west coast of the United States.

Elaine would have loved the story and statue. She always fell into the romanticism of stories involving explorers and previously undiscovered terrain. James saw nothing romantic about risking your life in pursuits of this kind, but he paid homage to the bravery of such men and women. His Elaine was brave, always, even right up to the end, grasping his hand and smiling at him even as she struggled to draw breath.

He blinked to dispel the all too familiar prickling sensation that attacked the back of his eyes. Two years later, and he found it as easy to cry now as he had the day that she died.

He'd arrived only yesterday and, at once, unable to remain alone in his hotel room, James had taken a two-mile walk that started at Point Loma's best known landmark, the Old Point Loma Lighthouse. Today, he'd set out to do what he'd come for, to explore the local tide pools. The rocky inter-tidal zone of the area was perfect for someone with an enthusiasm for marine life. Elaine had chosen this area as part of their next planned holiday, her idea to see America by car. She wanted to travel along the coastline as much as possible for at least the earlier trips. Then, she had explained her plan where they would explore their country over the next few years until they had enough money saved to take trips abroad. Elaine felt it only right that you explored your own country before you spread your wings in the rest of the world. Remembering the detailed routes that Elaine had worked out, James pursed his lips on how almost every trip included at least one coastline.

"Tide pools remind me of exploring with my father," Elaine would say with a wistful look. Her parents had died when Elaine was quite young, and being an only child, that had left her with a feeling of isolation that even James, loving her with all his heart, had never been entirely able to ease. "Three kids," Elaine was always saying to him. "We'll have three children." Her unspoken reasoning meant that if something happened to one, the two that survived would still have each other. James hadn't the heart to point out that something could happen as easily to two as to one. Elaine's heart was relying on statistics and chance. Now, she would never have one child, let alone three. James and Elaine had set a date

and were due to marry three months to the day when Elaine had collapsed at work only to discover that cancer had spread throughout most of her body with a silent strategy that shocked even the most experienced doctors. The marriage took place shortly after from Elaine's hospital bed.

For some peculiar reason, James could remember her voice clearer than her face, though he never stopped looking at her photographs. If someone had told him that he would miss her sharp tones of anger as much as her sweetly-spoken words of love, he would never have believed them, but it was true. She would have chastised him severely for being clumsy near a tide pool. Even now James could hear her instructions on how to take care not to handle or touch the strange and wonderful creatures you could find in a tide pool; many were so sensitive they could die all too easily. Evasive Octopi, florid anemones, barnacles and squishy deadman's fingers; Elaine would have loved them all.

As James stood upright, his gaze became unfocused. Despite his resolve, tears misted his eyes and grief closed his throat. His idea to take the trips on behalf of the woman he loved now felt as if it were a foolish desire. The trip meant nothing without Elaine.

Afraid he would grow careless from grief, James decided to leave the tide pools alone for today and take another walk. Maybe when he could think a little more clearly, he could convince himself to carry on up the coast and leave tide pools alone for good.

* * * *

This time when James swore, the sound emerged loud and clear. He glanced around but the few people he had spotted earlier in the day had left the beach. Never one for reading guidebooks, still he'd flipped through the one that Elaine had bought for this proposed trip. While Elaine read up on what to see and do in the area, James opted for the more practical information, and such advice returned to haunt him now. Sentences telling him to wear clothes that he didn't mind getting wet and shoes with good grip circled in his mind. Slippery when wet took on a completely new meaning five minutes later when James, having decided he must be crazy to venture so close to the sea, had turned to make his way back just as an errant wave swept over, drenching him. James gasped, clinging precariously to the rocks, blinking to clear his eyes, and tasting salt in his mouth. The salt spray also stung his eyes and brought him to the edge of tears again.

What was the time? Was the tide turning already? He'd developed the habit of losing track of the time since Elaine died. Being asked why he was working late yet again was one thing, getting himself cut off by the sea was life threatening. Not that he cared. Even as he tried to drag up the sensation of dread at the idea of dying, he couldn't force himself to feel anything. Clouds raced rather than drifted across the sky. The day had turned grey to match his mood.

So much for believing he could undertake this journey for Elaine. So far, this trip was nothing like he'd imagined. He'd pictured himself exploring the pools, falling under the wonderment of the myriad forms of life and contained

ecosystems whose very survival was dependent on the tides, but without Elaine, he failed to take delight in the exploration. He was beginning to realize that his delight had stemmed from her joy, and without her, he could no longer find joy in anything. His daydreams of sitting by the sea, staring out at a setting sun, talking to Elaine as though she were sitting by his side were so far from reality he couldn't imagine what he'd been hoping for or been thinking. Life without Elaine meant nothing, and trying to capture a part of a future that could never be was fruitless.

The blue-green undulating waves shimmered and beckoned. James stared, ignoring the pain of salt stinging his eyes. He licked his lips, even though the taste made him feel slightly sick. Although Elaine had possessed a strong faith in her religion, she'd also believed it quite possible that humans evolved from the sea. Only his Elaine could embrace the idea of a benevolent and all-powerful being with science and mysticism. If people evolved from the sea, it was part of a grand design, and she was prepared to have faith in that design, even if she didn't understand it.

Having once joked of a burial at sea, James had planned to scatter some of her ashes here and at various locations over time as he went to places they had hoped to visit together. The plan had given him purpose. Now, the idea left him feeling hollow.

He didn't think he could scatter her ashes. He didn't think he could let her go. Instead of focusing his wits, this trip had opened his mind to the idea that he was drowning in a wave of another kind. Memories of Elaine washed over him and

through him every day. The memories were like voices, whispering and never silent. Perhaps he was the one who he should bury at sea.

James, what are you doing?

It didn't matter if the voice formed out of his memory, or if Elaine's ghost had returned to haunt him in a panicked moment that stirred up her spirit. By the time James gave a thought to what Elaine would think of him sacrificing his life like this, he was already sinking into the depths of the sea.

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Chapter Two

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," Seth said for the umpteenth time. He could tell by the rolling of Hannah's warm brown eyes that she grew tired of hearing him complain. He was older than Hannah was, much older in years on earth if not in looks, but she sometimes made him feel as though she were the more mature person in this relationship. He'd once read that the name Hannah meant gracious, and she was certainly that. She was as tall as his shoulder with shoulder-length reddish-brown hair, and eyes that blazed as hot as a fire with passion or in anger. She was also stubborn as hell, although she would call it determined. Right now, her eyes blazed with purpose, for she was firm in her resolve to see Cody. Seth could tell by the obstinate line of her jaw that he wasn't going to dissuade her. He dipped his head and squared his shoulders.

The moment they entered the Del Fantasma, Seth knew that Cody was aware of them. Vampires often sensed each other, but not always. However, he and Hannah had met Cody Warren before on more than one occasion. Just as he could sense Cody, Seth was instantly aware that the other vampire knew of their presence. Seth glanced across the room from under his brow toward the bar, not because he expected to find Cody tending there, but because that was where he simply knew the other vampire to be. Already the bar was quite crowded, but even so, it was as if the throng of human and non-human patrons parted under the heat of their

combined gazes. Seth found he was staring into Cody's sea-blue eyes feeling almost as though the man had crossed the room and stood at his side. He was older than Cody was. Even Hannah was older than Cody was. The vampire shouldn't have given off such ... magnetism, but he did.

A growl bubbled up from Seth's throat even as he looked away, and he only just managed to choke it down before he gave the sound voice. The feeling of power that he got from Cody would likely go unnoticed by a younger vamp, but in Seth, it raised all sorts of unwelcome issues that had everything to do with instinct, and nothing to do with logic. Cody was no threat to Seth, and Seth was no threat to Cody. Seth was as certain that Cody knew this as well as he did, but that didn't stop two dominant vampires from raising each other's hackles. Seth fought the instinct that told him to go into fight mode, or at least vigilance. However, the more his body screamed out for him to act first, the more of a threat he would appear to Cody, and he would in turn have the same affect on the other vampire.

"Easy boys," Hannah's calm, warm voice melted over them, thawing and softening the situation. A few of the customers turned their heads, and Seth ascertained them to be those with otherworldly senses. None of the human crowd could have heard her. A few performed quick glances between Seth and Cody, but already Seth dampened down his nature. It would do no good to brawl with Cody, especially when there was no true provocation. Keeping his gaze lowered until he felt more in control, Seth gave Cody a sharp nod. He flicked his gaze in Cody's direction from the veil of the black

hair that had fallen into his face, and saw the vampire return the gesture. What had just happened wasn't their fault. Even acknowledging their ruffled feelings and mutual respect helped ease their agitation.

"Why does he never have this affect on you?" Seth whispered, at a level even most paranormals would have a problem hearing.

"I could ask why you two *guys* affect each other at all," Hannah replied, making it sound as if she were scolding two adolescents. She smiled that thin-lipped sarcastic smile of hers as they made their way across the room. "I don't understand why you two *men* can't get along."

Once more, she put the emphasis on their maleness, and maybe she was right. Maybe it was a male dominance issue. Even as they moved nearer to Cody, Seth could see that the vampire's lips twitched. He was clearly amused. Seth felt immediately foolish. He'd just assumed that Cody Warren felt the malevolence that flared up between them when they met, but maybe Seth was the one who felt it worse. He couldn't think why. Maybe Cody just handled it better. Seth had never had a problem spending time with another guy when...

Seth slammed a mental image of a door into place. He wasn't going where that thought led. He swallowed down grief, and thoughts of time together with a bitter taste. He reacted too slowly, though; his temperament, already sorely tested, couldn't cope with bad memories that were especially unwelcome tonight. Seth wanted to forget. He wanted to wallow in excess in order to drown his sorrows. He almost envied the humans in the bar, those that were already easing

their way into the depths of a glass. As their intoxication and desires washed over him, Seth experienced a sudden and intense longing for blood.

If Hannah or Cody sensed how he felt they were decent enough not to allude to it.

"What can I get you?" Cody asked, making the question sound casual enough. Vampires didn't have to eat or drink, but they could in small quantities. As to what he wanted ... Seth still found his sudden longing for blood was taking over his ability to think. Before he knew what was happening, Cody pushed a glass across the bar, Hannah was turning to him, and Seth was drinking. When he came to his senses, he realized that their corner of the bar had suddenly cleared and that the other occupants of the bar appeared very eager to give them space.

No, that wasn't quite right. They actually appeared to be unaware of it. Those humans standing closest just *happened* to turn their backs and concentrate on their conversations. Had Cody put the idea in their heads, or were they acting on instinct? Those of the supernatural clientele just had the sense to steer clear. Seth had lost time somewhere. The sharp, coppery, salty taste of blood filled his mouth and coated his throat. He could taste something else in the mix of the drink but the taste of blood predominated.

"Feeling better?" Cody asked, those blue eyes of his all seeing and too knowing. Seth nodded.

At his side, now sitting on a bar stool, Hannah sighed. "Sorry," she muttered.

Seth glared at her. "I don't need you to apologize for me."

Hannah turned her head to stare at him. Her look said that he most certainly did.

"Do you want the same?" Cody enquired. Either he was teasing them, or he wanted to make light of the situation. Maybe he was trying to put them at their ease. Seth seldom felt anger towards Hannah. He gave himself a mental shake, trying to clear his head. The blood should have done that. As intoxicating as it was, part of the attraction was how you felt so good afterwards. The world became clear, your senses sharp. Seth just felt befuddled tonight. Hannah was shaking her head.

"Let me get you a drink," Cody suggested. He was definitely teasing ... or even possibly flirting with Hannah. To Seth's annoyance, Hannah flushed in obvious pleasure. Great. So she didn't feel malevolent around Cody. She felt ... Well, Seth didn't want to think about what she might be feeling. Cody moved as Hannah nodded and, for just an instant, once more his and Seth's gazes met. Cody's blue eyes flashed at him, daring. The look was a challenge that Seth couldn't interpret, but he could feel the weight as the vampire's gaze washed over him, through him. Seth gripped the edge of the bar, suppressing a shiver. He also gritted his teeth.

* * * *

Hannah tried to hold it together while Seth and Cody played out their little bullshit macho game. She didn't understand why Cody always had this affect on Seth. Her boy ... Crap! What could she call him? Boyfriend was inaccurate. Partner was too clinical and made them sound like a crime-

fighting team. Seth wasn't her husband, even if he was her lover, but lover to her implied just sex and there was more between them than that. So much in fact, that truly they were married in all but the biblical sense and it wasn't as if they could wander into a church and ask a priest to marry them and manage to keep straight faces. Besides, it wasn't as if vampires cared about social trappings such as marriage certificates—or at least she and Seth didn't. In fact, when they'd been a partnership of three they'd had even less reason to wed. Three was largely an unacceptable number for marriage in most religions and societies.

Drawing in her wandering thoughts, Hannah turned her attention back to the affect Cody had on Seth. Seth had told her that it was something to do with Cody's strength, but she had never felt any different around him. Of course, she wasn't as old as Seth, but in terms of vampire years, Cody was an infant compared to her man. Being young in human but especially vampire terms, Hannah had thought that she should sense Cody's power more than Seth could, but it didn't appear to be the case. She had an inkling of what Seth meant for she had often felt something akin to power coming from her beloved. However, where she was concerned, either Seth intentionally held back or, perhaps because of their physical and emotional relationship, something shielded her from the sensation. If this was what sensing a vampire's true strength did to you then she was glad of the protection. That still didn't explain why Seth and Cody reacted so extremely to one another's presence. Hannah suspected that even though Cody was a young vampire, he was as powerful as Seth and that

meant he possessed the kind of power most vampires took many decades or even centuries to attain.

Apparently finished staring at each other, Cody turned his back, deliberately if she judged correctly. Even with his back turned, Hannah could sense the smirk on Cody's face. Something about the way he held his shoulders sent out an undeniable message to Seth. *See, I'm not afraid of you; I'm your equal.*

Hannah stifled a groan. Seth remained unaware of why she had insisted they see Cody. It wasn't just because they were in the area as she had led him to believe. True, she had wanted to see the bar, and as she glanced around now, a smile stretched her face. There was a lot of wood, and it felt cozy and inviting. She didn't know what she'd imagined, but this wasn't it. Even though some of the customers dressed outrageously, they mingled with just as many who were dressed in quite ordinary clothes. Her black jeans and long leather coat raised no eyebrows. Neither did Seth's, although for the first time Hannah considered the idea that the two of them wearing almost identical clothing was rather absurd.

Completing her appraisal of the bar, Hannah turned her gaze back to Cody and almost jumped in her seat. So lost in thought had she been that she hadn't noticed the two men staring at her. Seth looked at her with a small frown tightening his brow beneath his dark hair, his green eyes flashing as though they were lit with an inner light. Cody stood there, his expression quite commonplace and only slightly questioning, his blue eyes such a contrast that the

two men reminded her of the hue of the sea merging into the colour of the sky.

"I like the bar," Hannah said, as a way to cover her distraction.

"Not what you expected?" Although Cody phrased it as a question, he clearly knew her thoughts.

"No. It's better." Hannah turned to her drink even as Cody turned his attention to Seth.

"You have somewhere to stay?" Cody asked, his tone light.

Hannah watched Seth as he nodded. Cody returned the gesture. He wouldn't inquire more than that. No vampire ever asked another details about sleeping places, not if they knew what was good for them. It just wasn't polite. A safe place away from the threat of sunlight was too precious to share, and too precarious to discuss.

"What is this?" Hannah asked. She had sipped her drink and decided she liked it, but she hadn't a clue what kind of cocktail it was. The drink tasted ... interesting was the only way she could describe it. The liquid was red, but she could tell from the taste that was because of the raspberries in it rather than blood. Still, the colour pleased her. Not only that, it brought up memories of Edward. He'd always said her nipples were as large, ripe, and red as raspberries. Considering how refined Edward was, his preoccupation with her breasts amused Seth. One night, Edward had bought a punnet of raspberries and used them to crown the tips of her nipples...

"It's called a Virgin Special. It has rum and brandy, redcurrant and lime juice, raspberries and sherry," Cody said,

interrupting Hannah's train of thought. Just as well. She was going to blush if she followed the memory to its conclusion.

"It's good," Hannah said, nodding in appreciation.

"I know. It's exactly what you came here for," Cody told her, and something in his voice made her look up.

She was suddenly seeing another characteristic of Cody. He could be so lighthearted sometimes; at others, he appeared to carry sorrow as though it manifested as a physical weight. Then, at times like now, he could be deadly serious even as he teased. This shift in character had always interested Hannah from the first day their paths had crossed. It made her want to get to know him better, and then she decided that she had enough to deal with. Seth was enough of a moody male for anyone.

Frowning, Hannah stared into her drink as she struggled to decipher Cody's meaning.

* * * *

"Enough!" Seth sneered, pulling back his lips, almost, but not quite, revealing his teeth. His fangs ached with his anger. He put enough force into his voice to show Cody he was pissed off. He hated it when the vampire pulled this schizophrenic act of his. Hannah jumped. For a vampire she could act all too human at times, but then she was only thirty years old, both in human terms and then in vampire years. Even as he had the less than charitable thought, it crossed Seth's mind that Hannah could be as changeable as Cody could. She treated Seth as though he were the young vamp in this relationship, and yet she often jumped at the sound of his

voice or a quick motion he made—usually when he made such a gesticulation in anger, granted, but she jumped just the same. Unable to keep his animosity in check, Seth pulled his gaze away from Cody in a manner that the other man could only take as dismissive.

"I told you this was a waste of time," Seth told Hannah. They'd only been here a few minutes, exchanged few words, and already he wanted to leap over the bar and fasten his hands around Cody Warren's neck. *Dirty little upstart. Filthy sodding know-it-all.* Despite the knowledge that what had happened wasn't Cody's fault, and that the vampire had even tried to warn them that night they lost the one they loved, seeing Cody, together with the way he reacted to the vampire's strength was too fiery a combination. Who was Cody to think that he knew more than someone who had three centuries—*three sodding centuries*—on him did?

"Let's get out of here." Seth glanced back, expecting Cody to look annoyed, but instead he still had that slightly teasing, slightly amused look on his face. Seth couldn't explain how he knew it was there. Most people might look at Cody and take that expression as just a normal look but something danced in the man's eyes. Entertainment topped off with an unhealthy dose of cynicism, perhaps.

"I haven't finished my drink," Hannah muttered and Seth blinked. Vampires could only eat or drink normal food sparingly. She'd regret downing the entire drink, so that had nothing to do with her objection. She just didn't want to leave. He couldn't believe she was resisting, not over

something like this. She knew how he felt about Cody. She knew...

No! Once more, Seth slammed that mental door into place. Still, the shimmering rays of awareness crept around the edge of the door, tried to steal beneath, slip through the keyhole. Cody had been there when Seth and Hannah's life had burnt up in the blaze of one man's righteousness. Well, okay, he hadn't been *there*, but he'd seen how broken up the two of them were at heart, afterwards. The least Cody could do was respect the fact that they didn't want to talk about it, but no, this time was going to be exactly the same as last time.

"I'll make you another tomorrow night."

Hannah looked up from her drink to Cody's face as though she saw something beautiful there. Seth had the feeling that he might as well be on another planet. Staring at Cody, Seth slowly shook his head. If Cody brought up the subject of Edward, trying to act as some kind of parasitic psychotherapist to the undead, Seth didn't care how many were in the bar, human or otherwise. The customers would see one vampire leap over the bar and grab another by the throat.

"Drop by after midnight," Cody said, and inwardly Seth groaned. They didn't need Cody's sympathy or counseling.

"We don't..." Seth began but Cody shook his head.

"The time for talking is over, but that doesn't mean I don't know what you need."

Despite the fact that he naturally wanted to argue, something in Cody's voice caught Seth's attention. Even as he

turned to walk away, one arm around the woman he loved, he couldn't deny that he felt some curiosity. He might have even been able to enjoy the unusual sensation if it were not for the pain that rose up to engulf him when he saw the look of hope in Hannah's eyes. He didn't know what Cody was promising, but nothing could put an end to their grief. Time eased such emotions; it never extinguished them.

No. Cody had nothing to offer them. He would have to talk Hannah out of returning here tomorrow night. Coming here had been a mistake that he intended never to repeat. Seth never wanted to set eyes on Cody again.

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Chapter Three

The sounds from the bar down below had gradually eased off. From what he'd seen of the apartment he woke up in, it was small, but then James didn't care about the size of the room or the décor. He spent most of the time with his eyes closed or gazing at the wall. He had no idea what time it was when the strange man who had rescued him came into the room. He expected the man to speak to him right away, but he didn't, and for that James was grateful. He turned his head and closed his eyes, concentrating on breathing. If he just kept breathing, perhaps he could get through the night to greet the sunrise. Maybe then, he could accept that he'd nearly thrown away his life—something for which Elaine would never have forgiven him—and maybe that thought alone would keep him from doing something like that again.

"Drink this."

The beverage looked and smelled like hot tea, white, maybe with sugar in it. James didn't drink tea and he'd given up sugar ages ago, which was the reason he could often smell its presence. "I don't..." James began to say but the man forced the mug into his hands. "I drink coffee," James complained, although his voice sounded feeble.

"Not right now you don't. The tea, and the sugar, will help with the shock."

"Shock?" The word whispered out through his mouth. Was he in shock? If he was suffering shock then shouldn't he have succumbed to it immediately? Shouldn't ... James shook his

head. He didn't know the man's name. Shouldn't the stranger have poured hot sweet tea down his throat hours ago? James frowned as he realized that for all he knew the man had. He couldn't recall the last few hours very clearly. He could remember...

The sea had closed over his head, muffling sound, numbing sensation, blanketing the world, and James had let his body sink. The grey light of day grew dimmer still through a haze of green. James felt a smile stretching his face as the world retreated and he gave his body to the deep. Then all too soon, a burning sensation had set in. Pressure in his chest grew tight as if a harness or band encompassed his torso. His head began to throb with the need to breathe. A strange prickling sensation spread out through his stomach, as if fingers wriggled inside him, teasing upward to his lungs. The weight on his chest increased and James became aware that shortly his body would take over his mind. He would open his mouth whether he wished to or not, but the only thing he could breathe in down here was the sea.

What was he doing? He couldn't die like this. Even as he had the thought, James had known he'd never make it back to the surface. The pain in his oxygen-starved limbs would slow his progress and already the ache in his jaw demanded he breathe in. The sensation grew until it felt as if unseen fingers tried to pry apart his lips.

A hand clamped over his mouth just as he started to inhale a breath that would draw in the ocean. A finger and thumb pinched his nose shut at the same time. Now James grappled not to swim back to the surface but with his unknown

assailant. He didn't care that he would drown. He needed to fill his lungs even if that meant a brief struggle and eventual death. He needed to suck something in, be it air or water; it didn't seem to matter which, just so long as it eased this aching, burning need in his chest and head.

He couldn't break free. The man's grip was iron hard. Either that, or James grew weak. Even as the stranger took them both to the surface, James felt his fear fading away to peace.

The next thing he knew, instead of staring at the surface of the ocean from below, he was lying on his back in a bed staring at the ceiling. Since then he'd drifted in and out of consciousness. Finally, the need to use the bathroom had brought him to his feet. He remembered needing the bathroom. He just couldn't remember using it or making it back to the bed, but he must have. Now James sat with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders dressed in a pair of joggers that were definitely not his and a shirt at least one size too big. Of course, his clothes had been soaked in the sea, but he couldn't remember changing his garments.

James gave the stranger a wary glance, taking in his dark hair and somewhat disheveled appearance. Odd that his appearance seemed erroneous, as something about the man's energy spoke of order. He was surely a good six feet tall, and his casual clothes strained enough to indicate that the man carried some muscle. Maybe the man's build combined with his oxygen-deprived body accounted for the successful rescue. James could remember trying to fight off the man's grip in the sea. At least, he presumed...

"You are the one who dragged me out, aren't you?"

"Yes." The word emerged short and clipped.

Squirming a little, James calculated how much he needed to confess. "I don't even know your name," James said, stalling.

"Cody will do just fine."

"Nice to meet you, Cody, and ... thanks. I'm James—"

"Calder. I know. Forgive me but I went through your things."

His things ... James swallowed. He couldn't blame the man. He supposed anyone dragging you from the sea would look through your identification. "I guess my money's a little soggy."

"It was. Everything's dry now. You've been out for some time." Cody lifted his head in a strange gesture. "All evening and most of the night. It's almost dawn."

Something puzzled James but he couldn't place what. Still thinking, he sought for a means to excuse himself and be on his way. "Well, thanks again." He gave a soft laugh. "Stupid of me going out onto the rocks, and for not noticing the tide coming in..."

Cody had turned away but now he spun quickly on his heel to face James again. The speed of that movement surprised James but he put it down to his befuddled mind. Besides, Cody's agitation finally sunk through to him. The other man looked annoyed.

"You may not have noticed the tide, but it didn't wash you away."

James opened his mouth to protest before he realized he was going to complain. The gesture did no good, for Cody just waded in with his accusation.

"You jumped into the sea."

Hearing it from the stranger's lips froze whatever James intended to say. He couldn't bring himself to deny it. "I'm sorry," was all he managed.

"Sorry for what? That you tried to throw your life away? That I stopped you?"

Anger waded in. James gritted his teeth. "You didn't have to risk your life. You could have just walked away."

"No, I couldn't."

Guilt replaced the anger with a speed that unsettled James. Here was a good Samaritan, and he was throwing the heroic rescue back in the man's face. Elaine would have been furious with him. Before he could apologize, Cody's next words brought his head up and had him staring wide-eyed.

"If you want to kill yourself then do it somewhere else. Not on my beach. Not where your body will wash up to frighten small children, or kills the romance of a couple walking hand-in-hand, or where it'll bring authorities and the morbidly curious to my bar."

"Thanks for the concern." Sarcasm came all too easily to James in the circumstances. "As I'm so much trouble, just give me my clothes and I'll be on my way."

"No."

"Pardon?" The shocks just kept coming.

"What should I let you go for? So you can try again?"

Bristling with indignation, James rose to his feet. "I am not going to do it again."

"I intend to make sure of that."

Now the thing that was puzzling James came to his mind bright and clear. "Why aren't I in hospital? Why did you bring me here instead of calling for help?" Not many people dragged someone from the sea and took that person home. They called the authorities. They had the person taken to hospital to make sure they were well. "What do you have to hide?"

Cody sneered. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

James didn't like the implication of that and he seriously wanted to leave. "Look, I don't want to get caught up in anything illegal. I just want to leave, check myself into a hospital, and have them check that I'm well."

"You're fine. Trust me. Your heart's strong. You didn't take in any seawater. You blacked out, but not for too long. You don't need a doctor. You need a life."

"So it's insults now?"

"Why not? I'm sure whatever Elaine would be saying right now would be choice. Who was she? A loved one? A loved one who died? You're not the only one to ever lose someone they loved, you know. Most don't drown themselves in the sea."

James spent a few seconds wondering if Cody referred to personal experience. Then it occurred to him to wonder how Cody knew about Elaine. Of course, photos of her filled his wallet and he'd written things on the back of them such as James and Elaine at Disneyland. Disneyland. *Fuck!* His whole life was one of make-believe now. As for the photos, he had

reprints at home but it stung his heart to think of how the pictures were no doubt curled and blemished by the sea.

"You can't keep me here," James muttered, wishing he sounded a little more convinced. Still, he wasn't a project. This Cody, whoever he was, couldn't just keep him prisoner.

"I don't intend to for long. I think you could do with some quiet introspection, and much later this evening, I'll get someone to escort you out of here."

Cody turned toward the door. Fingers on the handle, he paused. "I'll bring up some food for you. Don't try leaving. Even if you make it out of this room, you won't make it through the front doors."

As Cody left the room, an eerie sensation that the man spoke the truth crawled up James's spine and over his scalp. The only thing louder than the sound of a key turning in the lock was the solid thump of his heart.

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Chapter Four

"Hmm ... that was good," Hannah murmured.

Seth looked at her face needing the visual confirmation. Her smile was decidedly smug, and her eyes remained shut. Her body lay languid beneath him. Unable to resist, Seth put out his tongue and gave her a lick right between her breasts. He knew it was a mistake the moment she opened her eyes. A frown brought a troubled look to her face. Seth didn't know how he'd forgotten. Licking her there was Edward's habit. He didn't know what had made him do something that their long-dead lover had done.

"Hannah, I'm sorry," he began, but she was already rolling out from under him and short of fighting with her, he could do nothing to stop her. He didn't want violence between them and the kind of wrestling involved to keep her on the bed would be decidedly non-erotic.

"It's time we left." Hannah looked at the clock. "Cody said..." Her voice trailed off as though she were aware that Seth didn't care what Cody said. For once, she might have been surprised. Seth lay his face back onto the bed, feeling the rumpled cover press into his cheek. He struggled to cling to the memory of Hannah lying under him, her legs wrapped tight around his waist, but it already faded into memory. He didn't know how it happened, but all too soon they lost each other after making love these days. They could lose themselves in each other's arms, but the moment reality

kicked in, the sensations and emotions faded into a dreamlike state.

Hannah was young in both her mortal and immortal years. Maybe there was hope for her yet, but for Seth, he was well aware that the only reason he'd not walked into the sun was for her sake. He didn't want Hannah to lose both the men she had loved, but in all honesty, he didn't know how long he could continue to exist while feeling this way. Sometimes, when Hannah looked at him, Seth was certain that she knew how he struggled. Neither of them continued to live for their own sake but for the sake of the other.

* * * *

"You want us to what? I do not believe you!"

Hannah watched Seth run his fingers through his hair while he paced. A moment later he started up what she knew would be another rant. "Of all the—"

"Seth," she said quietly. "It's a small favour to ask."

Seth glared at her. "He," he said pointing a finger at Cody, "wants us to babysit a human and hold his hand in the dark."

Seth meant the dark of the night but Hannah felt certain he meant another kind of dark as well. She and Seth understood that darkness of the mind and heart, and that was part of the reason for Seth's true animosity.

"I'm well aware of that, but he must have a reason." She looked to Cody for confirmation hoping something sensible would come out of the vampire's mouth. She stared into his eyes keeping her own gaze wide, silently asking him to go carefully. She couldn't let Seth know the real reason she'd

wanted to visit Cody, not yet. In fact, she'd called Cody some time ago and had waited with all the patience that an immortal could possess for his call. To her relief, Cody took over the conversation, keeping to facts alone. He calmly told them what had happened the other day and of how he had rescued this James from the sea.

"I'm afraid he may do something like it again if we don't keep an eye on him for the next few days."

"I don't see how we got dragged into all this," Seth snapped.

"You don't have to be. You can walk away," Cody told him. "I'm asking because I don't relish the idea of diving into the sea again. As it is, he's lucky the weather changed, it was growing late in the day and the sky was overcast. I never would have been able to reach him, otherwise. I just can't do much short of keeping him locked up, and that will only work for so long before he starts pounding on the walls. I have my patrons to think of."

"If the idiot wants to die then why didn't you just let him drown?"

"Seth!" Hannah was half certain her lover didn't mean it. He was in a terrible mood and she was at fault for making him feel that way. She shouldn't have pulled away when he licked the skin between her breasts, but for just a moment the shock of memory had shot through her so that she'd almost fooled herself into believing that Edward was with them once more. It wasn't that she loved Seth less, the problem was that they fed each other's grief. Seth missed Edward as much as she did. Perhaps the wisest thing to do

would be to leave each other. Perhaps then, they could move through the grief. Trouble was that neither wanted to leave the other, yet they remained a reflection of each other, of pain barely suppressed.

"He doesn't want to die," Cody said softly. "He just doesn't know how to continue to live."

Hannah held her gasp in check, but just barely. No wonder Cody spoke so quietly. She stared at Seth and he returned her gaze for a moment only, and then they both looked away, unable to face the truth so openly. Cody's hidden meaning fluttered around her as moths to a flame, one that would burn her as surely as the sun if she stepped out of the shadows. Seth struggled to hold on to life, but she wanted to curl up, never to open her eyes again, too often for her deny that the sweet dream of a never-ending sleep in no way haunted her. Seth kept her alive. Seth knew that. His love for her, his knowledge that she would not survive without him for her heart would wither, kept him by her side, and that in turn fed her guilt. Guilt and grief hounded their footsteps. Sex was a brief moment of peace, oblivion sought for in soft sighs and the silken brush of flesh.

They were two. That was usually enough for anyone to feel complete, but deny it all she liked, without Edward something was missing from their existence. Yes, she knew what it was like to want to die from grief.

Seth looked as lost for words as she was. She laid a hand on his arm. "We'll take care of this James for you," she told Cody. "We'll make certain he at least stands a chance."

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She felt rather than saw Seth turn his head toward her but the expected complaint never came. Cody looked at her, and then Seth, before nodding. Cody then went upstairs, presumably to fetch James.

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Chapter Five

"What is this? An intervention?" James glared at his two escorts. Cody had explained that two of his friends waited for him downstairs, and for one brief moment a strange kind of terror had engulfed him. What if Cody's 'friends' were going to do something terrible to him? Then it occurred to him that Cody had dragged him from the sea. Most people didn't go to the trouble of rescuing someone to dispose of them a short while later. Maybe Cody led a religious cult and they thought he needed rescuing.

Don't you?

James silenced the traitorous voice. Maybe he did need help but that didn't mean he needed a sect to take control of his life. Despite his self-assurances that it would be illogical for someone to save his life only to then harm him, if it weren't for the woman's presence, James would have backed into Cody as he backpedalled up the stairs. The new man's sparkling gaze glared up at him from under an unruly dark fringe as malevolent as a stray cat. The woman—Hannah, Cody had called her—gave off an impression of contrasting welcome and warmth. This pair made a great double act: good cop, bad cop. What he couldn't account for was the startled look of surprise he had seen flash across their faces. The woman had glanced at her companion, but when he failed to return her gaze, she'd looked back at James. Clearly disorientated over something, she'd forced a smile to her face.

"Seth?" The woman's tone contained a question as they all stood there unmoving and what sounded like a grunt escaped the man's mouth. Whatever problem these two had with him, James wanted no part of it. Maybe he could make a run for it the moment they opened the door. He saw the futility of that as the three of them flanked him and herded him toward a waiting car. James settled into the back seat while Seth went round to get in from the other side. Hannah followed James so that the three of them took up the back seat with James tightly packed into the middle. Cody poked his head into the car.

"You're happy with the arrangements?"

"Happy might be too strong a word," the dark-haired man muttered.

Ah, so this Seth wasn't au fait with the plan. Maybe there was a way to use his animosity to escape.

"Yes, thank you," Hannah replied.

Cody nodded and shut the car door. A moment later, the vehicle moved off. James glanced at the thick neck of the driver who no one had bothered to introduce. Even if he got out of the car and away from these two, he could see the driver catching up to him. Somehow, he found it all too easy to picture his broken body dangling from one of the man's large hands. The steering wheel looked puny in the driver's grip.

"So, where are we going and when do we start the brainwashing?"

Hannah turned her head to shoot him an exasperated look. This close, he couldn't take in the details of her features. Her

hair tickled the side of his face and it took a great deal of resolve for James not to turn his head, to bury his nose in her red locks. For some reason, he wanted to see if he could detect the scent of the shampoo she used. From beside him, Seth growled. James blinked. At least, he thought Seth actually growled at him but that made no sense. Men didn't go around growling at each other.

"James, we're not going to brainwash you, or hurt you in any way. Cody just thinks you need to take a couple of days ... and nights, to calm down." Hannah made it all sound so reasonable, but people didn't just kidnap others on an everyday basis. Oh wait, they did, but it was illegal and not something one considered normal.

"I don't have any family," James said. "Holding me for ransom would be pointless."

At his side, Seth chuckled. "You don't know the meaning of wealth. Accumulating wealth is not the issue and would mean nothing to us."

"Seth, he doesn't understand."

"I agree," James told Hannah. "I don't understand why Cody saved me, why he doesn't just let me go, and why he's bothered to involve you. What do you two get out of all this?"

"Not a damn thing," Seth said, as though he were unhappy with the idea.

"We get to help," Hannah explained.

"Why would you want to? Most people don't care about those they profess to love, let alone a stranger. What makes you qualified to know how I feel anyway?"

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Hannah turned her head once more, from where she'd been staring out the front so that she could stare directly at him. She leaned back a little so he could see her face clearer, but James got the impression that she also looked over his shoulder, taking in Seth in her collective gaze. "We know what it's like to lose someone you love," she told him.

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Chapter Six

"You're going to chain me to the bed?"

Despite his protests, James hadn't felt particularly threatened by these two up until now. Now, staring at the room that they said would be his, he didn't know what to think. The room was more than comfortable, with soft furnishings, stained, natural wooden floors and thick rugs. The chains and manacles that dangled from the bed's wrought-iron frame gave the room a perverse twist. Seth had spent twenty minutes glowering at him from the sacristy of the kitchen while Hannah "prepared" the room. In all that time, James hadn't imagined her preparing the room like this.

"Only when we're at rest and then that would be a good time for you to sleep, too."

Hannah made the idea sound reasonable but James couldn't tear his gaze away from the dark metal of the chains and ... Were those actual manacles? The ... bondage equipment looked old.

"The chain will reach into the bathroom and you can even close the door for privacy. You can reach the sink and toilet but not the bath. You'll have to wait for one of us to unchain you before you take a bath."

"Afraid he'll try to drown himself in the tub?" Seth asked. There was no mistaking the heavy traces of sarcasm in his voice.

Hannah's reaction was not to say anything. She simply turned that steady gaze of hers on Seth. James stood there,

very much a spectator rather than a participant. His gaze flicked back and forth, as he took in Seth's glower and Hannah's calm stare. He would have been squirming under those green lanterns that almost seared you with scorn and loathing. Hannah just watched. She stood there, shoulders straight. Her head, too, was level in what appeared to be her natural stance. Her gaze remained unblinking. Her mouth didn't twitch, nor did her lips compress tightly. Her whole demeanour was one of a person relaxed and yet in this manner she returned Seth's baleful stare. She was magnificent.

James blinked. In his confusion, he noticed the way her red hair flowed soft and smooth in a straight orderly line finally to flare out over her shoulders. He wanted to ruffle her hair, sink his fingers into it. An image flashed into his mind of what she might look like laying back, her skin aglow with the flush of sex.

Guilt and pain squeezed his heart, making him gasp. The small sound that escaped his lips broke whatever battle the other two waged. Hannah turned to him, at once taking hold of his wrist and clicking the manacle into place. The strength of her grip surprised him.

James frowned, forgetting his emotional state, more concerned with the idea that someone had slapped a chain onto him. He rubbed at his wrist even though the manacle hadn't had a chance to chafe. At least a beautiful woman had put the chain on him. He was sure Seth chaining him up would feel ten times worse.

"Where are you going?"

At the sound of Seth's voice, James looked up, only then realizing that Hannah was already striding away and heading towards the main living room.

"I'm going for a walk," she called back.

"Right now? We only just got ... in."

Seth's voice implied some other complaint, one that James was certain the man aimed at him. Apparently, Hannah reached the same conclusion. She turned toward Seth.

"I need to walk." She sounded exasperated.

"I'll come with you."

Her gaze flicked towards James. "You can't." In reply, Seth's brow knotted. Hannah laid a hand on his chest.

"Please, Seth. You know how I get restless. He's not going anywhere. There are books in his room. He can read if he doesn't want to sleep." She looked into Seth's eyes and for the first time James realized how tall she was. Her voice softened. "I'll be back ... before dawn."

To James's amazement, Seth took her hand and pressed it to his lips. "Be sure that you are," he said, before kissing her fingers.

* * * *

Cody stood to the side of the building in the shadows even as Hannah approached the bar. Clearly, he'd been waiting for her. Hannah stepped into shadows so dark that even her vampiric eyes had trouble making out Cody's features.

"Are you sure?" Even as the words whispered out of her mouth, Hannah almost bit down on them in a vain effort to

hold them back. She knew what Cody's answer would be, and yet she was afraid of the hope he inspired in her heart.

"I'm sure. He's what you asked for."

Quite overcome, Hannah dipped her head, laying her forehead against Cody's chest. His body tensed so briefly, she might have imagined it, and then he gave her a hug. She could hear laughter in his voice when he spoke, but there was nothing mocking in his words. "He needs you both as much as you need him." Hannah nodded, struggling to regain emotional control. Cody's hands moved to her shoulders and forced her back, away from him. She looked into the dark hollows where his eyes were, aware that he studied her.

"You noticed the resemblance?"

She nodded. "Around the eyes and mouth, especially." She hadn't had the opportunity to mention it to Seth but she was aware he'd noticed it too.

"That's not the only resemblance you'll notice. Wait until you start talking to him. One word of warning," Cody said, and it became Hannah's turn to tense. She'd never seen Cody so hesitant to say something. She didn't know what she expected Cody to say but it certainly wasn't the something he said. "There's one major way he differs from Edward. He's a virgin."

"Wh-what?" Hannah wasn't sure she had heard Cody correctly.

"He's a virgin, in every sense. He has no idea that vampires exist, and has never been bitten by one. He's never been with a man."

Hannah's frown lessened. Neither of those things was surprising, although someone with those experiences would have made this easier.

"He's never been with a woman, either."

Hannah jerked in Cody's hands. "You're joking. He's what? Mid-twenties?"

"Almost. Let's say I picked up a vibe from him."

She searched his gaze. "How do you know these things?"

"I ask myself that question sometimes," Cody replied, laughing gently, but Hannah couldn't be sure if he spoke the truth. "To be certain, I used some contacts of mine to check into his background. His fiancée died and she was the puritan kind."

"There's nothing wrong with that." For some reason, Hannah felt that she needed to defend the dead woman that James loved.

"I never said there is." Cody's tone admonished her. "I think it's exceptional for two young people to wait. I'm not sure it's wise, but it's not foolish either."

"He's never been touched?" Hannah couldn't keep the wonder from her voice.

"I didn't say that. I'm sure they kissed and maybe hands took to wandering, but as far as I can tell from my information and instincts, all inform me that James is a virgin."

A virgin in every sense. Untouched by woman or man, and never bitten by a vampire. Despite the fact that Hannah had come to Cody to seek a way to heal both hers and Seth's heart, she couldn't deny the curl of desire that rose from her

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sex, to shiver through her torso, all the way up to her throat and into her mouth. James would be theirs, entirely.

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Chapter Seven

James sat with his eyes closed listening to the sound of the ocean. Although he didn't know his exact location, the drive here hadn't taken long, and as he could hear the sea, it confirmed that out there lay the same ocean he had tried to drown in the other day. Maybe in daylight he would even be able to see it.

"Why would you do such a thing?"

Without opening his eyes, James replied, "I don't know. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Despite knowing that it's the last thing those that love you would want? Despite knowing that it would hurt those that love you now, and loved you once, even though they have gone?"

James frowned. "E ... laine?" Her name whispered out through his lips. Tears welled in his eyes. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone. It was my pain. I can't carry this pain anymore."

A hand touched his jaw, soft, feminine, a light brush of skin against skin. He leaned into her hand, nuzzling against her touch.

"You think you can't, but you just do. You continue, even when you don't want to."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

The admission made James open his eyes. Elaine's hair was no longer blond. He saw red. The past faded into the present. Hannah crouched before him, her lips curving into a

small smile that made James want to turn away. He didn't want to feel the attraction that simmered under his skin. Even worse, her expression said that she knew too much of him without his having to explain. He resisted when she turned his head and took it to her breast but he could not fight that strength, which he still couldn't believe, or the comfort she offered him. He closed his eyes and rested the side of his face against her chest.

"What are you doing out here?" Hannah asked after she'd knelt there awhile, stroking his face, his hair, his back.

James sat in a chair in the small closed-in porch to the side of the house. He didn't know how to answer her at first. The situation was so bizarre. He laughed. "Seth said I was rattling my chain too much so he took it off me and put me out here."

"Was the chain bothering you that much?"

Her concern touched him even though that was no less peculiar under the circumstances. "Yes. I kept rubbing my wrist. Not because the cuff hurt," he added, seeking to reassure her though he didn't understand why. "I'm just not used to a chain." He lifted his head, sudden heat in his face informing him that he was blushing. "I mean, well, you know what I mean. There's no reason I'd be used to a chain, of course. That is..."

Hannah silenced him with a finger to his lips. To his horror when she left her fingers there, James felt glad of it. He resisted the urge to kiss those digits for just a minute and then as her beautiful wide eyes continued to search his, James felt his lips move almost as though they belonged to another person. The next thing James knew, Hannah was

leaning in and kissing him. Even as his mind screamed in protest, the heat and flexibility of her tongue stroked through the barrier of resistance, calmed him, called to him, pulled at emotions he'd long-since repressed. James frowned, not understanding how just a short while ago he'd thrown himself in the sea hoping to drown when suddenly his whole being trembled with a feeling he'd not only deeply buried, but forgotten. Even as he tried, he couldn't deny it; Hannah kissed him and his body rejoiced.

* * * *

When James's lips pursed and pressed their heat into her fingers, Hannah felt her heart give a start. She didn't know how it was possible, but her body reacted. A thump went through her body as though her heart still beat. Before she knew what she was doing, she was kissing him. Even more amazing was the fact that James returned the kiss. His hands clawed, ensnaring her flesh, gripping, possessive, exploring her curves; his tongue met hers, thrust for thrust. A small mewling sound escaped his lips even as they changed position and their tongues entwined once again. She tasted his tears just before the sound issuing from James's mouth changed to a strangled cry.

He tried to shove her away but Hannah was ready for him. "I'm sorry," she told him even as she clung. "I'm sorry, so sorry. That was my fault. I shouldn't have done that." He struggled with her but there was no way he could escape her strength even if he didn't know it. Maybe he was blind to how strong she was; maybe he believed that his grief disabled

him. His struggles weakened until she could once more pull him against her chest. She returned to stroking him again as he trembled and gasped.

Minutes ticked by. This had happened too soon. She couldn't believe she'd been so foolish, but he'd looked so lost in thought upon her return that the faraway look in his eyes had reminded her of Edward. She'd needed to kiss him. If Seth hadn't left him in her path as though he were the devil laying temptation before her, the chances were she would have resisted seeing James again so soon. She certainly shouldn't have kissed him. Having desired to do so the moment she set eyes on him, Hannah tried not to think how so like Edward was James in looks and what little she'd seen of his behaviour. Whenever Edward felt low, he would lay his head upon her breast like this.

"I can't believe Seth left you out here," she said, seeking a distraction.

Against her chest, James nodded, slight stubble catching the fabric of her top. "He said if I stepped off the porch he'd know it."

Hannah blinked. The screen door did creak, but that wasn't why he would know. She turned her head, still holding James close, and stared into the darkened house. She didn't need light or vampiric sight to know that Seth stood in the shadows watching her. Now that she attuned her senses to his presence, she could feel his wrath.

"Hannah?" James spoke her name.

Although distracted and wanting to go to Seth to explain, something in James's tone called to her. He sounded

different. No longer upset exactly, but rather puzzled and ... Hannah licked her lips; it was almost as though fear had a taste. Yes, James was afraid. She released him as she realized he was trying to pull back from her grip. When she watched his gaze go to her chest, she didn't think he was simply admiring her breasts. He looked up to her face.

"You have no heartbeat." James said it as though he was trying to talk himself out of the idea. He shook his head, denying it. Then he stared into her eyes. An expression she recognized when a human suddenly realized something was wrong came into his eyes. "What the fuck are you?"

* * * *

Hesitating in the shadows, Seth stood by watching as James reared up out of his chair. The man stumbled in his haste to get away from Hannah and, loving her as he did, Seth couldn't deny the pain he saw in her eyes from James's reaction. Neither could he deny the scene he had witnessed.

After Hannah had gone for a walk, Seth had tried to ignore the human's presence in the house but the man's pacing and rattling of the chain had driven him crazy. Alert as he was, there was no risk in putting James on the porch. He'd know if James made a run for it. The human had apparently believed him. Either that or he had nowhere to go for he'd done what Seth told him. What was only slightly more pathetic was the way the man flinched when Seth took hold of his wrist to remove the chain. Unable to contain his animosity, Seth had growled at him: "It's all right. I don't want to touch you either."

Then he'd had to watch Hannah first comfort this man, then kiss him. Seth had stood, silent and watching, until she remembered him and sought him out in the darkness. He'd seen the apologetic look come into her eyes, and now he saw her pain.

Serves her right. Although many humans came to notice there was something wrong with them over time, no human had ever reacted this quickly. How did James know something wasn't quite right? The missing heartbeat wasn't enough by itself. Most humans would just consider themselves mistaken, but not James. Not by the way he was pointing a finger at her. His hand shook.

"Your body temperature's not right. You've got no heartbeat. I trained to be a paramedic. I know something's not right." James gave this little speech and then his head moved as his gaze flicked left and right. The man was looking for a way to flee. That Seth couldn't allow. He strode forward and made a grab for James just as the man made to bolt past him. Seth caught him easily. To his surprise, James fought, but Hannah also waded in. Her hands slapped at Seth, and Seth was sure she would have pulled James free if not for the fear that the two fighting over him would cause the man injury.

"Let go of him. You'll hurt him!" Hannah sounded panicked. James struggled but already weakened under Seth's grip. Seth tried to push Hannah away and, although he was sure it was accidental, her hand struck his face. In a jealous rage, Seth bared his teeth to snarl at her, fangs extended.

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Chapter Eight

James sat hunched on the bed. "Please don't hurt me," he said for the umpteenth time.

Hannah sighed as she set a drink on the table at the side of the bed. "We're not going to hurt you. We never intended to hurt you. How many times do I have to tell you?" Five days had passed and she grew tired of this. Five days of James chained to the bed and his flinching every time she drew near. They'd never intended to chain James up for this length of time, only during the day when they rested. Still, she could only call it time well spent. Slowly, with great patience, she'd struck up various conversations with James over the last five days. She could see more similarities in James in comparison to Edward by the hour. Both men were resilient, inquisitive, their inquiring minds ruling out over fear. Intelligence was a given. He'd beaten Seth at chess. Hannah tried not to grin at the memory.

"Maybe ... once more."

It took her a moment to realize what James had said. She glanced down at him, surprised to see a small smile tug at his lips. She took a chance and sat down on the bed. "I swear to you, we never meant you harm. We still don't."

Part of the reason James had agreed to her suggestion that the two men played chess was to ease boredom. The other reason was that James had been too scared to refuse. He'd lost the first game due to nervousness; the second took longer, but again he'd lost it due to nerves. The third she was

certain he'd thrown out of fear. If Seth realized that, he wasn't saying, but Hannah saw James make several wrong moves that could only be deliberate. The fourth game James had won.

"I might be inclined to believe your sincerity, but what about Seth?"

"Seth ... regrets what he did."

After James went still in their hands at the sight of Seth's teeth, she'd quietly stopped fighting Seth and helped him carry James to the bed. The man hadn't resisted until Seth reached for the chain. Then he had fought Seth every step of the way. She and Seth had worked together, trying to hold James still with the press of their bodies so that for one instant, they'd been a writhing, somewhat erotic tangle of limbs. Usually a vampire had no trouble trying to hold down a human, but terror appeared to give James supernatural strength. There was also the added complication in that they were trying not to hurt him. Seth had been the one in the end that managed to get the manacle around James's wrist. He shocked James into stillness by threatening to bite him. He'd even gone so far as to open his mouth and press his jaws over the nape of James's neck.

Hannah sighed. "Seth has trouble with his temper sometimes, but we really were only trying to stop you running without hurting you too much."

"I won't tell anyone."

Hannah cocked an eyebrow. "What? That we're vampires? Who would believe you? That's not why we're keeping you here."

* * * *

James blinked. A moment ago, she'd done that cute little raised eyebrow gesture that he liked. *That's not why we're keeping you here.* Had he heard right? "Why am I here then?"

Roughly pushing her hair back over her ear with one hand, she managed to look almost shy. The hair moved with weight and as though it didn't dare disobey. She gazed at the floor. "I need you here."

Now, that he couldn't have heard right, but taking it on faith that he had, James asked, "Why?"

Her eyes moved towards his gaze. "It's difficult to explain. I asked Cody to find you."

"Asked?" James couldn't keep the frown from his face.

"Someone like you. I mean, that is..."

Part of James wanted to laugh. He was in a room with a stuttering vampire.

"Cody has a gift. He's a good matchmaker."

James blinked again. *Match ... maker?* "I thought you were with Seth."

"I am. It's ... complicated." Her soulful eyes gazed into his, and despite the idea that she could be mesmerizing him, he really didn't care. He cared less that she was a vampire. That wasn't the thing he feared. As one hour bled into another he had started to inquire, but initially he'd let fear rule out over his mind. His natural curiosity and desire to know the unexplained reemerged, and had him asking questions, forgetting the possible danger he was in until it was likely too late. He still wasn't sure if he was glad that Cody had saved

him the other day, so it wasn't the thought of death that made him try to run from these vampires. He couldn't tell her why he'd wanted to run; she wouldn't understand. He also didn't care what the legends said about a vampire having no soul. He looked into Hannah's eyes and saw her spirit gazing back at him. He didn't like his attraction to this woman. She was so different from Elaine his desire for her made no sense. Still, denying it all he wanted wouldn't change a thing. He felt comfortable around her, at ease. He wanted her to hold him and to hold her in return.

"All I ask is that you stay for a few days and ... nights." She smiled at him. "I'd like a chance to try to explain."

Apparently, she took his silence for consent. "One other thing," Hannah added. "After five days with nothing but a wash in the sink, I think it's time you took a shower."

"Oh..." James felt the heat of a blush in his face. "Yes. Please."

Hannah jumped up from the bed. She went into the bathroom and he heard her fiddling about, taking things out of drawers. When she returned he set down his half-finished drink and watched as she undid the manacle. "Into the shower with you," she said.

In the bathroom, James discovered she had laid out fresh towels and soap. As he turned, he gave a start to see her standing there in the doorway.

"I..." He fumbled for what to say.

Hannah's gaze flicked to the window through which a less than nimble man could escape.

"I trust you in some things, James. I just don't trust you not to try to leave. Not yet."

Clearly, she meant to stand there while he washed. James turned his back to her even as she turned her gaze to the side. Maybe she would act like a lady, maybe she wouldn't, but he swore he could feel her gaze crawling over his skin. As he moved to step into the shower, he caught sight of her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes in that moment shifted. James felt the heat of her gaze brand his backside. He jumped. Her gaze met his in the mirror.

"You have a reflection," James said, for want of something to say.

"All vampires do."

"Oh," was all that emerged. He longed to be witty and charming, to laugh off this moment where he stood naked in front of a beautiful woman with luscious curves and ripe pouting lips ... but he couldn't. His sudden erection had stolen all the blood from his brain.

* * * *

"*Seth will bring you dinner,*" Seth parroted in a sneering voice. "What else do you want Seth to do for him, I wonder." They'd had a long talk at Hannah's insistence, and he'd agreed to give her a few days where he would curb his hatred for the human and his incredulousness at Hannah's stupidity. Now he knew the truth about why they'd gone to see Cody, and despite disagreeing with Hannah, he hadn't the heart to walk out on her. Still, Seth hadn't expected to have to wait on the human. Of all the idiotic ideas that Hannah had

conceived, and to think that Cody would pamper to her whims, give her false hope...

Seth carried James's dinner on a tray in one hand, his anger and despair wrapped into a fist in the other. He kicked open the door to James's room and then forgot all the seething rage at his command as James raised his head. He'd avoided looking closely at the man since the other night—even while playing chess he'd kept his gaze firmly glued to the board—but suddenly it struck him how handsome James was. Well, why wouldn't he be handsome? He had a passing resemblance to Edward, and Edward had been a handsome man. Seth clamped his mouth shut on a threatening growl. James stared at him, his eyes almost as wide as Hannah's often appeared to be. The moment expanded; the two men gazed at each other.

Dithering, Seth wanted to throw the tray down and walk back out, but he had promised Hannah he would talk to the man.

"Food," Seth grunted. He barely remembered to place the tray carefully onto the bed rather than fling it.

James hesitated and then drew it closer. He picked up a bread roll and started to nibble. "I guess food isn't something you have to think about," he said a moment later. "That is..." His voice trailed away and it made Seth turn his head to look at him. The man could actually blush and the vision made Seth feel strange. Longing combined with a vague delight teased at his senses. He could vaguely remember feeling those things a long time ago, but not in this vague way. He'd felt such things in abundance.

"We can eat and drink a little. Normal food, I mean. It's not necessary, and too much disagrees with us."

James nodded and set to the rest of the food. Seth suspected the ravenous attack was a way for James to deal with the situation rather than his hunger.

Just when Seth thought he could stand the silence no longer—silence only permeated with the quiet sounds of James eating and breathing—the other man spoke.

"So ... vampires."

Seth sat there quiet, waiting to hear an asinine comment. James didn't disappoint.

"What's it like to be dead?"

"I don't know. You'd know more about that than I do. You're the one who tried to drown himself." When James blinked in puzzlement, Seth snapped. "We're not dead! Do we look dead? Maybe we're not alive in the strictest sense of the word but—"

"Okay, I'm sorry. That was stupid of me. Clearly you're alive in some way." James looked him up and down and Seth struggled not to squirm. "Aren't you interested to find out more? Don't you want to know how you exist?"

"No. Should I?"

"I would."

"I'm sure. You sound just like..." Seth stopped speaking.

"Edward?" James asked. "Hannah said that you both lost someone. She said to talk to you ... about Edward."

Rising to his feet, Seth began to pace. His arms wrapped around his torso, Seth rolled his shoulders and then, realizing that the gestures probably made him appear very

uncomfortable with the question, he sat down once again in the only available chair in the room. "I'm amazed she didn't tell you the whole story."

"She told me she loved Edward and that he was killed. She told me how people set fire to the house he was living in at the time.

"I'm sorry," James added a moment later. Seth looked up. "I didn't think. I mean, obviously Hannah and Edward were an item but you cared for him as well. I just didn't realize you were that close."

"What makes you think we were close?"

"The look on your face."

That drove all thought from Seth's mind. Did he truly wear his emotions so close to the skin? Wanting to retaliate even if the notion was ludicrous and unreasonable, Seth said, "What do you think Edward meant to me?"

"I ... don't know. Friends? Brothers?"

Seth raised his gaze to look James in the eye. "How about lovers?"

* * * *

"Love ... ers?" James tried to conceal his surprise but couldn't. Thankfully, he'd finished his dinner. If he'd had food in his mouth, he might have choked on it. "You mean..." He glanced at the door. "He and Hannah, you and he...?"

"All three," Seth answered. "Sometimes together. Sometimes just two of us. Any two of us. We were lovers for longer than you've been alive. What Hannah feels, I feel too. Only I don't feel it. I don't feel much of anything sometimes."

James sat gazing at nothing in particular. He tried to keep the words in but he possessed one piece of honesty he could share, even with this creature called Seth. "I know how that feels ... to actually feel nothing, to feel numb."

The moment stretched out, became uncomfortable, and yet there was a sense of companionship in the room now.

"I apologize," Seth added, and it took James a moment to realize the comment was off-topic. James frowned in question. Seth waved a hand. "For the way I ... held you down the other night."

Held me down. James wanted to laugh but couldn't. He'd felt the power in the man's hands, in Hannah's hands, and still he'd fought them, aware they could grind his bones to make any sort of bread they wanted. The memory felt as unreal as any fairy tale. Even with one side of his face pressed to the bed, he'd tried to twist from their grasp, aware of the bruises he was causing himself, bruises that marred his flesh even now. Then he'd felt Seth's sharp teeth press at the nape of his neck, and he'd stopped fighting. The image of the vampire ripping away his flesh had driven shock into his system, but it was the strangely erotic sensation of teeth against his skin, of submitting, of knowing he couldn't break free of Seth's grasp that made his heart beat fast and made him hard even now. James was glad the position he sat in concealed the evidence.

"You don't need to be afraid of me."

James looked at Seth.

"Your heart rate's increased."

"You can tell that?"

"Yes."

James couldn't help wondering what else the vampire could detect. He'd felt such a strange and heady combination of emotions over the last few days. Fear, dread, despair ... He'd never expected to feel desire, but then Hannah had come into his life with her easy manner, kind heart, and luscious curves. That didn't explain his reaction to Seth. Hannah was warmth. Seth was a burning ember that might flare up at any moment. Besides, he was male. Suddenly aware he was trembling with some emotion he failed to understand, James met Seth's gaze, it took only the intensity of the man's stare to rip a small cry from his throat.

* * * *

Seth was up out of the chair and across the room before he knew that he was moving at all. From an inch away, he stared into James's eyes. He lifted his right hand and traced James's lips with his thumb, his chin with his fingers. "Did she tell you?" Seth asked just short of a snarl. "Did she tell you about Cody and why she came for you?"

Under his fingers, the man before him trembled as though he might shake apart. Then James nodded, his head jerking.

"But you didn't understand I'm part of the deal?"

A shake of the head indicated no. Seth leaned in to whisper into James's ear.

"If you have a life worth living out there in the world, someone or something to go back to, then tell me now. I thought Hannah was crazy, but now I'm not so sure, so you'd better tell me, James." Seth turned his head so that their lips

were almost brushing but not quite. Another tsunami went through James's body. Seth lowered his voice even more. "I'm not sure I agree with this, but Hannah wants you. What Hannah wants I make sure she gets. She wants to be your first. I think maybe ... so do I." He hadn't realized he was going to make that declaration, wasn't even aware that he wanted to, and that it was true until the words were out of his mouth.

"First?" James sounded bewildered.

"First lovers. First female, first male, first bite. If you want none of that, tell me now." Seth stepped back, watching James sway as he did, knowing that what he'd just done wasn't fair. No way could James answer him now. Turning before he could frighten the human with the sight of his straining erection, even though Seth was as certain that James sported the same, the vampire left the room. He walked swiftly through the living room and out into the night before he let the tension in his body seep out. The release was almost like orgasm and he sagged, leaning against the wall. He couldn't account for the extent of his emotions around James, but he could barely hold maintain control.

"Now do you see?" Hannah's voice whispered out of the darkness. "Now do you see that Cody was right?"

Seth nodded. He did see. James was their mate. They had felt the attraction this strongly with Edward. They shared the same attraction for each other in equal proportion. The loss of Edward was what left them off balance. Seth hadn't felt such yearning in a long time.

"Now will you stop fighting me on this?"

Virgin Special [Del Fantasma]
by Sharon Maria Bidwell

Again, he nodded. How could he fight Hannah when every vampiric sense he had told him that if James couldn't be theirs he might as well stay up to greet the sun.

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Chapter Nine

James stared at the page without seeing the words. He loved books, and he loved those quiet moments with Elaine when they had a book each and would sit in silence, both engrossed with the separate worlds within the stories, and yet sharing their time, together. When Hannah had taken to coming into his room and sitting by him, reading, at first it had shook James to his core. Sometimes they would read here in his room, sometimes out on the porch. He'd lost track of the days and nights. They chained him only during the day. He read books with Hannah, talked with her, about things he'd never thought he could care. She knew more about history than anyone he'd ever met. James knew much of science, a topic she said Edward would have loved discussing with him.

Seth sat in on many of their discussions but he didn't take part. Hannah said that wasn't because he didn't understand. She said Seth was simply "the silent type." The disgruntled look on Seth's face upon hearing the comment had made James laugh. Yet Seth's quiet presence was something James couldn't account for. He should have feared the man. He brooded even now, yet there were moments when the two of them caught each other's gazes before looking away. In that moment, Seth looked as awkward as James felt. So they took to playing chess, games which James gradually took to winning more and more. Time passed while the vampires

moved quietly around him. They spoke in hushed tones. It was as if Hannah and Seth waited for something to change.

In an odd way, James understood why they waited. As the days passed, it felt as if he were healing, and not just from his narrow escape from the cold, suffocating clutch of the ocean. He was also healing from the most severe wounds no one could see. The trouble was James couldn't decide if once he healed he would at last find a reason to exist, or if he would regain just enough strength to make sure no one pulled him from the deep second time around.

"Sometimes you have to sink to the depths of despair in order to find your way back to the surface."

"What?" James couldn't connect with Hannah's comment. He didn't understand what would prompt her to say something like that.

She looked at him studiously, then pursed her lips, marked her place in the book and set it aside. "You may not realize it, but you've spoken now and then in reference to healing, to letting go of grief. I think you are, healing. I think you're finally accepting that Elaine has gone and that you still want to live."

"I don't." Hannah raised an eyebrow but he shook his head, insisting. "I don't. It occurred to me the other night that if you are both vampires there was a neat little death in this for me."

"Neater than drowning, you mean?"

He nodded. "If I could provoke Seth to it."

"And it takes the responsibility away from you. We kill you then you didn't commit suicide. Except if you provoked Seth knowingly, it amounts to the same thing."

"I guess. Still, it would be out of my hands. No one to save me this time."

"You do know that we're not likely to fall for that now. Seth was annoyed with you the other night. Now he sees a future for us all."

"I realize that." James gave Hannah a thin-lipped smile. "He's mistaken, but I know what it's like to live without hope. I don't feel I can take it away from him."

"Yet," Hannah concluded.

James hung his head. "I'm hoping he'll simply realize it."

"Am I supposed to realize the same? Or don't you mind taking away my hope?"

He looked at her then. He shrugged. "I don't know why but somehow I see you being a little more realistic."

"You're wrong there."

"Maybe." Despite what she said, Hannah appeared relaxed. Seth came across as a wound coil. Hannah was his opposite, whatever that might be. She would realize that he couldn't possibly envision sex with another man. She would realize that he couldn't even give into his desire for her. Wanting to change the subject, James asked, "How did the three of you meet? You, Seth and ... Edward?"

Hannah's lips curled upwards. The smile lit up her face. In her expression, James could see happy memories. Sometimes such memories of Elaine haunted him. He always did his best to banish them, but the expression on Hannah's face made

him suddenly want to relive the happy occasions. Could it be he wallowed in misery partly because he wanted to?

"Tell me how you and Elaine met," Hannah suggested, "and then I'll tell you how we three became a ménage."

James shook his head. He might feel open to the recollection but he didn't want to share it.

"Why not?"

"I don't want to think about that."

"Why? Because it's a nice thought?"

"I hate the way you do that."

"Do what?"

"You always seem to know what I'm thinking. It's eerie."

"It doesn't take a genius to figure you out, James. Elaine died. You didn't. You feel guilty and want to punish yourself. When you feel a moment of happiness you deliberately cling to the worst moment together because you feel that you deserve no better."

A hard, heavy lump seemed to take up residence in James's stomach and then move up toward his throat. "How do you know that?"

"Because I've done that. I've lived it. I know what grief does to you. The difference is I'm tired of feeling like this. I want more. For me, for Seth, and for you."

James sniggered. He just couldn't help it.

"You think I don't want more for you than to be a meal for the fishes? You're a good man, James. I don't need to know more to see that." Hannah sighed and the sound made him glance at her again. "Forget why you're here for a minute. I'll

tell you my story and you can decide what to make of it. No pressure. No ulterior motive."

He wasn't sure he believed her entirely, but James agreed.

"Ever consider how many men like the idea of a threesome with two women?"

It didn't sound as if she truly expected him to answer, but James gave her a shy smile as way of reply. He'd only ever wanted Elaine and couldn't get over the idea that he'd never even had a chance to share that kind of pleasure with her. Boredom in a relationship was a thing he couldn't contemplate. He didn't have to explain to Hannah, apparently.

"Even for those who manage a lifetime of monogamy, consider what it's like if you're immortal. What if you get to live ten lifetimes?"

"I can understand that."

"No. You can't. I'm not talking about tedium. I'm talking about having those in your life you can rely on. Seth and Edward knew each other before I fell in love with Seth. Then I saw what the two men saw in each other. I wanted a part of each of them."

"Seth and Edward were lovers before they met you?"

"No," Hannah said in answer to his question. "I wanted them to become lovers. They did it, for me."

James almost gulped. Those large brown eyes of her issued a silent command. One day soon, Hannah was going to ask him to do the same thing for her. Perversely, part of him wanted to do anything to please this woman. The trouble was she'd picked the wrong man, and not just because he had no

desire for another man—even if his cock had taken to playing games with him. The fact was he was too broken ever to want...

James closed his eyes against the lie. The fact was he did want. Without Elaine, all he could see was an empty, barren existence with no one's touch but that of his own hand, and since Elaine's death he'd not even enjoyed that. Wet dreams, he had those, but orgasm only brought forth despair. If he lived long enough, he'd give into desire, and Hannah was the perfect temptation. It wasn't just her beauty; it was her manner that enticed him. Even now, as he glanced at her, he saw she watched his face, waiting for whatever emotion gripped him to ease.

* * * *

Seeing that she had James's full attention once again, Hannah continued where she left off. "Seth, Edward and I were faithful. Edward turned me, but I slept with Seth long before I had sex with Edward. The two of them were so deeply entrenched in my heart that I couldn't separate them. I couldn't give one up for the other so I asked them to love each other for my sake. Seth hated the time I spent with Edward, and Edward hated the time I spent with Seth. Seth couldn't do without sex," she said, laughing. James returned the grin and to her surprise, they share a moment where she was certain the two of them tried to picture Seth going without sex for a time. "Edward was more cerebral. I don't simply mean intelligence."

"No. I get what you mean."

"You're like a younger version of him, or so Seth tells me. Both men were turned long before I was born."

"I'm sure Seth just sees what he wants to see."

James's tone implied that she did, too, but Hannah ignored him.

"We complimented each other. Edward's analytical mind, Seth's passion, my..." She hesitated, waving a hand.

"Serenity," James said.

She blinked, surprised and pleased. "If you like."

"I do like."

She watched as his face reddened, almost as if he hadn't intended to let that slip. Quite likely, he hadn't.

"I met Seth when he rescued me. I was human then. I was on my way to see Edward. I was studying and Edward had this reputation of being an educated man, something of a recluse, like some kind of eccentric professor. I sought him out and begged him to tutor me. He refused at first. I persisted. Even after I finished my degree, I continue to learn under his tutelage.

"You have to understand," Hannah stressed, "there was nothing sexual between Edward and I at that time. In fact, not for many years. I met Seth one dark night when some idiots from the local prep took to following me. He picked up on my fear, chased them off for me and then proceeded to give me the fright of my life."

"I can imagine. He may have saved you, but he is rather ... impressive."

Hannah couldn't deny the small smile that tugged at her lips. Seth was certainly that, and the idea that James

unwittingly chose the perfect word to describe him didn't escape her. Despite his protestations, James liked Seth. She turned her mind to that long ago night and the feelings that had flushed over her skin. She could recall the icy chill of dread as she realized that the young boys pursuing her footsteps weren't going to leave her alone until they'd at least humiliated her, and the way her bladder had threatened to release would have either spurred them on or had them turn away in disgust. If she'd expected the latter she might have just peed her pants and been done with it, but once the teasing continued she had suspected it wouldn't end there. They would want to touch after that, and if that proved too satisfying who knew what they would move onto next.

Then Seth materialized out of the night like an avenging demon. Her fear had given way to relief, only to return to spike in the *"Oh shit, what have we here?"* stakes. Seth was tall and broad shouldered, but that didn't account for the dark menace that sent the youths running. He'd then turned to her like a foreboding storm. Hannah had felt that attention swim over her, until she thought for sure that she would drown in the dark wave of peril that emanated from the man's pores. He'd marched toward her, holding out a hand in what appeared to be a placating gesture. Even so, she would have run from him if she hadn't been certain that his long strides would catch up to her skittering flight too easily, and if she hadn't gone weak in the legs. Perhaps the adrenaline of the initial chase had sapped her strength. Even as the man whispered to her, told her everything was going to be okay,

and that his name was Seth, she'd pulled the old Victorian heroine routine by fainting into his arms.

* * * *

Even from the other room, Seth could discern Hannah's melodic tones. He could hear her telling James of how she had slumped into his arms. The recollection produced a little pang of regret mixed with fond memories. What a fool he'd been. He'd saved her and then tried to comfort her, not thinking that all she would see was another menace stalking toward her. Wondering who the unconscious female was, he'd searched through her possessions, all the while trying to ignore the nagging desire to drink from her. The small pulse jumping from her carotid artery beckoned, but he resisted. Aware that being found with her in his arms would not be a good idea, for at the very least there would be questions and possible delays when he needed to be safely ensconced before the light of day, he'd simply sought for a safe haven for her. He soon located her address but was surprised to see that her home lay several blocks away. Even more surprising was the fact that he recognized Edward's scrawl in the papers that she carried. As intellectually inspiring as Edward was, he should have been a doctor if his handwriting was anything to go by. He excelled at ineligible penmanship.

Curious as to what relationship this human female had with Edward, and seeing that his was the closer address, Seth picked the woman up in his arms and took her to the one vampire with whom he could stomach spending time.

He listened to Hannah tell the tale now, of how she had woken up in Edward's study with the two men standing over her. What she failed to describe was the look in her eyes, the white flash of fright as she took in the sight of Seth, her expression turning to one of confusion as she realized that Edward watched over her, too. She'd only relaxed when Edward had told her that Seth was a friend. Then she'd glared at Seth and asked what the hell had he tried to frighten her for. Of course, that was her projecting her fear of the youths onto him. She'd actually stood up and slapped him. Only his astonishment and Edward's apparent amusement had stopped Seth retaliating. By the time his lips began to curl in a snarl she'd apologized and he'd found he was accepting her apology with all of his being. Damn, if he hadn't fallen in love in an instant.

From the other room, Hannah's laugh pealed. Yes, she would find that part of the story amusing. On the other side of the wall, Seth glowered. He couldn't help it if she'd been frightened of him. He'd saved her and she'd had no reason to suspect he was a vampire, so her fear had been totally unreasonable in his eyes. Yet now she made a joke of it, teasing James into laughing with her. What did she mean he was all pent-up frustration? What way was that to describe someone? He listened intently but it didn't change her meaning. Hannah was saying very little had changed, except that since Edward died, Seth had added brooding to his persona. He didn't brood ... much. Besides, he had a right to brood, didn't he?

Seth moved to slam his hand into the wall but stopped himself in time. He would likely crack the plaster and the sound would carry. He would only confirm what Hannah was saying and probably scare James when that was the last thing he wanted to do. James was so like Edward. He wasn't lying when he'd said that. Different in many ways, still James reminded Seth of Edward in some unfathomable way. Some of the man's movements seemed familiar, but it was more than that. It was in James's quiet acceptance. Despite the fact that he'd fought them at first, the fact remained that James let their existence slip into his consciousness with little effort. As Hannah had said, when one reached the depths of despair, there was only one way to go. Seth could understand why James had swiftly overcome his terror of realizing vampires existed. If he felt as grief-stricken as Seth did, then James had no room for the emotion.

What he didn't know, and Seth had only just come to accept, was that as upset with Hannah's plan to seek Cody's help as he was, she was right. James was their last chance for survival. Oddly, Seth sensed that they were James's last chance, too. The question remained of whether James wanted to live or to die. If it came to that, Seth vowed he would ease the young man's passing. It was the only act of kindness left in Seth's heart.

* * * *

"Seth started courting me."

"Courting?" James couldn't imagine it. Hannah smiled and nodded.

"Little things at first. Flowers. Seeing me home safely. Edward was more amused by this than I was, at least initially. He would even joke that Seth would soon be by to take me home, but then I saw his amusement give way to a sort of jealous frustration. I tried not to see it at the time. I didn't understand. I thought Edward older than me and, of course, he was. I just didn't realize how much older. In human terms, he wasn't that old, he just looked older. In vampire years, he had several lifetimes on me." Hannah laughed once more. "I couldn't deny my attraction to Seth and I didn't want to. I realized much later that Edward fought two conflicting emotions. He felt possessive toward me, but also protective. He'd already wrung a promise out of Seth not to harm me, one I am sure he would have committed revenge on. He needn't have worried. I came to realize the kind of man that Seth was too easily. I'm sure you've noticed that Seth isn't one for restraint when it comes to passion, whether it's sexual or anger."

Trying not to blush for some reason that made him even more uncomfortable, James nodded.

"He wanted to turn me, but I was hesitant and then ... Edward did it for him."

Some change came over Hannah's face. "I grew sick and even though the cancer was swift from the outset, I clung to hope. I'm not sure why. Something made me believe all the old stories that vampires were soulless and, for all I know, perhaps we are, but I don't feel particularly different. I still wanted a human life but Edward was fast losing his temper. I knew that one night he would change me against my will,

even if I hated him for it afterwards. He said I was far too intelligent to die." Hannah gave a half-laugh, a sort of snigger. "Can you picture the two of them? Seth telling me I was too beautiful to die and Edward telling me I was far too intelligent?"

Oddly, James could picture the scenario. As much as he physically desired her, that wasn't the sole reason for his attraction for her. James liked her manner and her mind. The idea of her dying the way Elaine had ... He knew that if he'd had the power to save Elaine he would have done everything to persuade her, although he wasn't sure he could have forced her to do something she didn't want.

"I decided that if I were going to accept what Edward offered then I wanted it to be a tender moment. I wanted to go to him in something like joy. I said yes and, possibly afraid I would change my mind, Edward changed me that very night. By the time Seth arrived, I was already experiencing the change." Her dark eyes flashed up to James's gaze. "Seth was far from happy. I guess he wanted to be there, maybe even be the one to change me, or at least be part of the process. I recall the two of them glowering at each other and then commonsense won out. I was becoming a vampire. They weren't going to lose me. Funny how some things can take precedence when you set your eyes on the bigger picture."

"That doesn't explain how you became a threesome." James tried to picture Seth kissing another man and couldn't. He could all too easily picture Seth kissing Hannah and he could...

James swallowed. The vision of Seth leaning over him, engulfing him with his presence returned all too vividly.

"No, it doesn't," Hannah continued. "Seth and I were lovers before I changed over. Edward wanted me as much then as he had when I was human, but he had never given in to the temptation. Edward wouldn't let his baser instincts win out over his intellect. Once I became a vampire, the rules changed. I'd always felt a little uncomfortable because I had mistakenly believed that Edward was older when I'd believed him to be human. In reality, as a vampire, the guy was like, centuries older, not my perceived twenty years. By then, it was too late. I was a vampire as well, and things couldn't stay the same. I knew Seth couldn't stand to see me go off to spend time with Edward. Even when I went just to study, discuss books and culture, it ate into Seth. He started to challenge Edward to chess, but the battle on the board became a war waged for me. Then when Edward suggested we take to the road so I could see something of the world, Seth almost had apoplexy. He thought Edward meant for me to go off and leave him behind. That last night spent at Edward's residence was when I snapped."

James stared into Hannah's eyes. "You played them." Her lips twitched teasingly.

"Only a little."

* * * *

"Ever thought what it would be like to have me between you?"

Even now, Seth need only to close his eyes and he could recall that fateful night.

"I love kissing," Hannah had told him, moving at once over to Edward. By the look on Edward's face Seth could tell that the other man was as surprised as he was. "I love one set of lips against mine. Imagine," she said, bestowing the lightest of kisses around the edge of Edward's lips, "how it would feel for me to enjoy two mouths on my flesh."

Then later, she'd gone on to whisper into Edward's ear and Seth, already knowing that he could deny her nothing, felt every tug on the other male vampire's heart as she teased him with suggestions.

"You've traveled the world, Edward. Lived many lives." Her tongue emerged to lick along the curl of Edward's ear and Seth almost jerked from his side of the sofa. He could imagine how that felt to Edward, almost as if he were feeling it, too. The way a soft, strangled moan escaped Edward's mouth, called to Seth's most basic instincts. He and Edward shared a glance that said they knew what Hannah was doing and they shared the experience. She was playing them as expertly as her fingers could fly over piano keys.

"Would watching Seth spear into me be so abhorrent?" Hannah hissed the question into Edward's ear. "Would you mind so much knowing that you would be next?"

Unable to stay in his seat, Seth had moved up behind her. Hannah leaned back into his embrace. She turned her head so that he could easily nuzzle into her neck. One hand came up behind his head, the other curled around Edward's neck. She tugged both closer.

"Would it be so bad," she whispered, and Seth realized she was speaking to him now, "to see me caress an erection while I took yours inside me?"

She made it sound perfectly reasonable and in that moment, Seth hadn't thought it would be a bad thing at all. In fact, he struggled against the odd sensation that he would find it arousing. Hannah's enjoyment was his enjoyment. He respected and admired Edward. He was very aware of how much Edward loved Hannah, and in that they were as one. He loved Hannah more than his own existence. If something happened to him then Edward would take care of her. It occurred to Seth now that Edward had looked to him for the same bargain. The sad fact was that he hadn't taken care of Hannah, not truly, not since Edward's passing. Existence wasn't the same thing as living. Edward would be ashamed of him. That night...

He'd caught Edward's gaze in that moment and some kind of understanding passed between them. Two became three and it had little to do with the lovemaking session that evening. Even as the two men had held Hannah between them, they'd given all they had to her, not each other.

It was another six months before Hannah asked them to kiss.

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Chapter Ten

"You asked them to..."

"Kiss," Hannah confirmed when it seemed James wouldn't say another word. She shrugged. "I loved them both. I think two guys can look hot. I loved them both and I wanted them to love each other. As I hope you two will," she added, aware that a mischievous smile graced her face. James looked suitably uncomfortable, although it wasn't for the reasons he might have said. A vampire could smell many things on a person's skin; often things a person wanted to deny. The truth was that while James resisted the idea of sleeping with another male, he wasn't as adverse to the idea as he believed. She could understand why. Seth was a presence difficult to deny. There was another reason that James was interested, a reason she could scent on him even now. She breathed in and there it was. Hope. James wanted to die no more than they did. Like them, he just couldn't continue to tolerate his current existence. She wished they could get to know each other; that she could persuade him to travel with them so she could give him more time, but he would never agree to that. One slip on their part and the melancholy that currently raged within him would overcome everything they'd accomplished. He would bolt the moment they gave him a chance, and if he tried to kill himself a second time, he would succeed. Hannah was certain of it.

Aware that this situation was delicate, and yet they didn't have much time, Hannah decided to take a possibly unwise

step. His attraction for her was palpable. Lust had a scent all its own. Couple it with the type of yearning that fired lovers to dream of a future together, and she had a heady brew to work with, as intoxicating as any drink Cody cared to mix.

Hannah drew in air, not because her immortal body needed to breathe, but because it was the way to draw in James's scent. Odd that this moment should come now when they were talking, when their behaviour was almost casual, when anyone spying on them would have thought they appeared relaxed. James was anything but relaxed. An underlying tension thrummed within him and she became aware that he was as ripe and aching for her touch as she grew moist at the very idea.

* * * *

James swallowed, an audible gulp resonating in his ears so much that it almost hurt. Surely Hannah had noticed his reaction, but it did nothing to slow her pace. She was up and out of her chair, mimicking the way Seth had moved the other day so accurately that the sight made his heart start. She paced toward him, a predatory gleam in her eye. Shifting away as she advanced, James wished he'd opted for more restrictive clothing. Cody had arranged to collect James's possessions from his lodgings, though goodness knew what the staff had thought of his disappearance. No doubt Cody had taken care of that, too. James had chosen to dress in casual sweats and foolishly gone commando. He'd thought it would ease the strain on his often aching erection and,

indeed, it did. His erection was why he'd gone for a loose-fitting clothes and a long shirt. Hannah wore...

James glanced down and his eyes widened. He'd not taken much notice of her top but now he could see that it fit snugly, the thin straps baring her shoulders, the tight constriction of the bodice pushing up her breasts, offering them to him. One quick glance at her eyes told him that she knew he had just taken a good look at her breasts. She crawled over the bed now, leaning over him, like some great cat over her prey. Her hair brushed over him, stroking his arms, raising gooseflesh that caused a delicious shudder to run up his spine. Even as he opened his mouth to protest, she kissed him.

* * * *

On the other side of the wall, Seth became aware of the scent of lust. The essence curled and crawled, moving through the house as though it had not only life, but purpose. Seth knew enough of Hannah's body, and the way she reacted to recognize that most of what he felt came from her. He recognized the perfume of her approaching orgasm and only the pain in his lip told him that he was biting down on it. He forced his lips apart, choosing to bite on a finger instead. His finger would heal quicker than his lip and if he couldn't get his emotions in check, he might well bite through to the bone. She was close. The anticipation of making ... He hesitated to use the word 'love', but what she felt for this man was more than lust, yet less than what she felt for him. That, and only that, kept his feet planted to the spot where

he stood. That, and the declaration he had made to James; what Hannah wanted, he made sure she got. Yet it was only the thought that she loved him that prevented Seth running into the other room and seizing the other male by the throat. Even as part of him remembered the attraction of the other night, he couldn't help his rage building. James wasn't Edward. Seth didn't see how James could replace their loss. The trouble was, logic dictated that he gave him a chance. Still, it nagged at him that Hannah should feel such intensity.

Seth gasped, becoming aware that her desire affected him. He hardened, licked his lips, and the taste of sex entered his mouth. Seth groaned and clung to the doorframe, stood shivering on the other side of the wall. Now his struggle was *not* to go to them. He couldn't. Another overheated male in the room would frighten James.

* * * *

Closing his eyes brought images of Elaine to mind. James moved to shake his head, although he wasn't sure if it was to shake Hannah aside or to deny the imagery. A hand eased up, sliding to the back of his neck. She held him immobile so that she could continue the kiss. Realizing that she held him effectively trapped, James grew still as her tongue stroked his lips. Little flickering licks eased apart his lips and then progressed to a gentle invasion. James could almost hear her unspoken question as pure sensation. Even as he felt her determination crying out to him in every taut line of her being, he sensed her patience. She wouldn't let him go easily but Hannah wouldn't rape him. Not that raping a man was

easy. An unwilling man shouldn't have the raging erection that he strained to keep from brushing against her. Even through two layers of cloth, his clothes tented. As though his thinking of his hard-on drew her attention to it, Hannah laid a hand over his stiff member. Unthinking, James grabbed her hand in reaction. They struggled, James not quite allowing her to grasp him, even though he couldn't truly resist her strength. Hannah clearly waited for his decision.

He couldn't do this. Even this desire was a betrayal. As if in argument, his cock throbbed and strained towards Hannah's waiting hand.

You'll meet someone, and when you do, I want you to open your heart and love again.

Those were Elaine's words to him, and at the time, he'd agreed to do so. He would have agreed to anything to make her passing easier.

No lies between us.

She'd said that when first they met, and then later when she told him she was dying. No lies, but he had lied while sitting by the side of her bed. He had said he would open his heart and mind to the possibility of new love when he'd had no such intention.

* * * *

The awareness of two males almost overwhelmed Hannah. At her back, she was aware of Seth's anguish. She could feel him as though two winds had entered the room and circled her, battling, one hot, and one cold. Seth hated James. He wanted to strangle him, ripping out his throat even as he did

so. Conversely, part of Seth liked James and wanted to join them. He wanted to roll on top of both of them. He longed for an end to this torment of loss for all of them, whether that meant death, or peace in each other's arms. She tried to silence him, sending out her thoughts and feelings, to quiet his suffering. She was sensing so many things from him, and she tried to balance out his personal squall with her inner calm. He shook under the onslaught of so many mixed emotions. Seth hated her going to James. He hated the intensity of her need for the human, but another part of him urged her to hurry. Perversely, Seth's mixed emotions spoke to her desire, made her wetter, made her blood run hotter. Still she waited, knowing that she couldn't hurry James. In the next minute or two, James would be theirs or they would lose him.

She knew she had him when he whispered, "I-I've never...."

"I know. Let me show you how. Let me pleasure you."

* * * *

"Let me pleasure you."

James's eyes shot open. On her hands and knees leaning over him was one of the most gorgeous women he'd ever seen. Her eyes were wide and bright with need; her lips parted slightly, the tip of her tongue protruding. Her hand hovered over his erection and she shook with ... *longing*.

Ah ... heck, she wanted him. James had never thought much of himself until Elaine made him feel like a human being. More than that, Elaine had made him feel as if he were

a man. Now Hannah stared at him with desire written all over her face. He shook his head.

"Why me?" he asked, at the same time thinking that no sane man would ask such a question when he had a glorious woman wanting to mount him. "I'm nothing special."

The space between Hannah's eyes twitched. "Then you don't see what we see. James, you are beautiful. You're intelligent. You're loving. The way you phrase things, the way you think, even now questioning at a moment like this, those things are so like Edward. But, you're not just a copy of him. You're your own person as well, one that's unique. Why wouldn't I want to be with you?"

More to the question, why was he hesitating? Gone were the thoughts of Elaine disapproving. That was a self-serving lie. Elaine would be urging him to enjoy life, grasp whatever came his way. While she might never have envisioned a vampire, she would lament if he went to his grave a virgin. That she and James had waited and left it too late, and then she had become too sick for sex to be possible, was one of her regrets. One of the last things she'd told him was to experience sex for both of them. Now he realized he was considering whether he was worthy of Hannah.

"I'm so wet for you," she whispered suddenly and that did it. James was lost, wrapped up in lust, yearning, and hope. He lay back on the bed under the press of Hannah's hand, aware that the combination would prove too much for any man.

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Chapter Eleven

"Let's get naked."

Naked. James didn't think he could feel more exposed than he already did until his shirt parted under her hands. He lifted his hips, barely resisting the urge to reach down to cover his erection as it sprung free and very much to attention as she drew down his trousers. When he saw Hannah glance down at his cock, James turned his head and would have closed his eyes in embarrassment if she hadn't sat back on her heels and peeled off her top. He'd never seen Elaine's breasts. He'd never touched them. *Sweet Jesus...*

The palms of his hands itched and he almost laughed. People would say that's what you got from playing with yourself. His cock was going to rupture. His skin would surely split. Her breasts were high and firm for their size, the aureole dark and gathered with need. He could almost feel the pert nipple on his tongue. He even licked his top lip in anticipation, aware that her shifting gaze took in the gesture. When Hannah took one of his hands and placed it on her breast, he hissed, arching on the bed, ashamed by his reaction.

Shivering, gasping, he looked to her face for signs of disappointment. He wasn't entirely sure she would reject him, but he expected the type of pity that would surely cause his erection to wither. What he saw in her eyes was quite the opposite; his reaction to her put fire in her eyes. When he

opened his mouth to say he knew not what—perhaps to apologize—she silenced him with a nipple pressed to his lips.

* * * *

Memories assaulted Seth from all directions overlapping with the present. He could all too easily recall his torn emotions the day that Hannah and Edward became lovers. Swept up in the moment, lust took over the better part of his brain while love made his heart want to do anything to please her. It had been strange to see another man caught up in the same desire that Seth felt for Hannah. Strange then, and strange now to know that another man saw what he saw in her, and it wasn't just her beauty. At least, from talking to James, he was fairly certain the man saw Hannah for the incredible woman she was, and not just as some glorious form of sexual focus.

That night with Edward, he'd not understood the pleasure of seeing Hannah kiss the man that both of them held feelings for. As much as he'd enjoyed the evening, hearing Hannah's little gasps and groans of pleasure, Seth had opened his eyes much later only to discover that the sight of her and Edward wrapped in each other's arms sleeping, drove frustration into his stomach. He'd extricated himself from the bed and padded, naked, into Edward's kitchen. There, shortly after, Edward had found him, probably come looking for him. He'd felt Edward's hand on his shoulder and his back had stiffened in something close to anger, but not quite as heated as that emotion. Too many other feelings cooled the heat of his temper.

"I'll never hurt her," Edward had said to Seth's back. "I'll never hurt you, if you can bring yourself to share your love. We don't have to be enemies."

Another moment had passed before Seth realized a soft growl issued from his throat. Still Edward's hand remained. The man waited, and Seth choked down his growl almost in embarrassment. When Edward had turned him by gripping his shoulder, Seth had complied, even though he felt as stiff as a mannequin.

He'd looked into Edward's gaze, trying to remain as nonchalant and restrained as two men could while standing together naked after having shared the same woman.

"Do you know how many years I've watched you with her? I know you love her. I know she's the one thing that can tear down that shield of yours." Edward raised a hand as Seth bared his teeth. "I'll not throw that in your face. I'll not mention it again, if you accept and understand that I see through you. So does Hannah. We know how grouchy you are, and we love you anyway. If you can't cope with that, then this will never work. It's not sharing Hannah that you're afraid of, it's knowing that there's someone else who thinks more of you than you believe you deserve."

Edward's words returned to haunt Seth. There'd been nothing between them then, and all they'd foreseen in the future was their both taking care of Hannah. Edward had been as shocked as Seth was, when Hannah had asked them to kiss. Seth could tell in one glance just how surprised Edward was by the suggestion. He could also tell as Edward

blinked that the man considered it in an instant and found the idea less than disagreeable.

When Edward had looked up to meet his gaze, the amusement and serious consideration Seth had witnessed in the man's eyes pole-axed him. Seth would do anything for Hannah, and Edward had known that, but more than that, the moments when they'd brushed together when entering her body had brought about a strange union. Seth had realized in that moment that he wanted to know Edward physically as well as mentally but, even more, he wanted Edward to force the issue, perhaps to lay their very souls open, if such a thing existed and if vampires had one.

Now, years later, with Edward gone from them, he'd never expected to feel that way again, but James ... James looked at him as if he saw more than the quiet moody man or a tempest waiting to happen. Seth had never frightened Hannah, not truly. Her fright was a thing she'd got over quickly. He'd never frightened Edward, and he no longer frightened James.

Unable to restrain himself, Seth peered into the room. He could sense some of what Hannah was feeling, but the sight of James's face confirmed the waves of desire permeating the house. It almost drove Seth to his knees. Here was an untried male. Moving just to the side of the door so that James wouldn't accidentally spot him, Seth closed his eyes, gasping at the recollection. Even after all this time, he could remember his first sexual encounter. He'd embarrassed himself by finishing too soon, but the woman was older and far from surprised. She'd coaxed him to another round and

then a third. James was much older than Seth had been, but from the look on his face, Seth couldn't help wondering if the man would hold out. Hannah was all woman, and the feel of her in a man's hands was enough to undo the most seasoned soul.

* * * *

Hannah couldn't contain her cry of joy. Although James's touch was inexperienced, it was by no means ineffectual. In fact, his very eagerness to please her spoke to places in her body that such an innocent touch should ever hope to reach. Even as she moaned, he hesitated and, opening her eyes, she saw concern flash into his gaze. She stroked him in reassurance. She needed to get rid of her trousers but she didn't want to leave him. If she let the heat cool between them, he might withdraw and that she couldn't have. She needed to wrap him in yearning, and then let it ripple outward, retreat for a beat, and then rise again. By the time he poured his climax into her, she wanted it to shatter his resistance.

Still, she wanted free of the jeans. They rubbed her wickedly, almost nipping her, and they were soaked. She should have shed them sooner, for they were now a problem. Not so much of a problem when she made the swift decision that they were expendable. She tore them from her, her nails and superior strength ripping them apart. The way that James moaned and his heart rate increased told her that she'd unwittingly amplified his need ... so, ripping clothes did something for him. That was interesting and she catalogued

the information for later. Seth liked to rip clothing, and she couldn't help wondering if James would find it as exhilarating if she and Seth were slowly unwrapping *him*.

Speaking of unwrapping, she moved in such a way as to capture James's attention. She let him see her. He stared not at her face, but at the core of her femininity, and she was by no means insulted. He lay there, frozen, as though he were not a man in his twenties, but someone much younger. His innocence reached out to her, not spurring guilt, but delight. She would be his first.

* * * *

A thousand pictures paled in comparison, yet sight was nothing compared to the feel of her. She guided his fingers past soft folds into slick heat. Beneath her, James became aware he trembled. He prayed, he knew not to whom, that she didn't try to touch him. One brush of her fingers and he would spill into her hand. She moved, up and down, onto his hand as he stared at the vision of his fingers sinking into her. Something told him that he would soon be sinking his rigid length where his fingers stroked. It had to be soon or he would not last more than one quick thrust.

She squeezed his cock, he knew not how, and his approaching orgasm eased off a little. It almost brought him back to reality. *What was he doing?* Almost as though she read his mind and would have no denial, Hannah shook her head and guided his fingers over her sex. He now circled a small nub of ripe flesh that he could not see but knew would make this woman soar, and he wanted to make her soar. He

wanted to have her cry out for him, because of him. He didn't know how to do what he wanted, but he knew enough to know such things were possible. Shifting down the bed, he moved into position. Taking one glance up into her surprised but delighted expression, James tasted her, fed on the tang of an ocean, not of salt, but of a heady musk that stopped him thinking. He lost his line of thought, the very concept of thinking. Vaguely aware he became something primordial, James let need take over. He didn't want to be a man, to be human. He wanted to be something of flesh, striving for fulfillment.

Only when Hannah cried out did James remember who and what he was, and by then it was too late for him or her. By the sound of her shout, she was as surprised as he was. Her body undulating, within and without, squeezing his fingers, pulsating against his lips. He drank her down, surprised to find his guilt assuaged, his heart set free.

* * * *

"Fuck me."

Hannah blinked, certain she couldn't have heard him correctly. She was staring down into his face when his eyes opened. His expression looked lazy, replete, almost as if he had come already, which was crazy. The orgasm had washed through her, not him, yet he smiled and then licked his lips as though he'd experienced the same release.

"Please. I can't hold back much longer."

In answer to his plea she took his heat into her hand, branding her palm and heart both. James moaned, and lifted

his hips, instinct winning out over innocence. She pumped him to full hardness, although if he got any harder he would crack when she sat down on him. She wanted to take him in her mouth but he would never last a moment if she did that now. Swinging a leg over his hips, Hannah guided him to her entrance. As his tip speared into her, Hannah could hold back no longer. She slid him home.

* * * *

James shouted, aware his cry was one of sound rather than words. Above him, Hannah danced. She swayed and bounced, squeezing him as she went down, easing open as she withdrew. James whimpered, hands crawling and then gasping as she took hold of his wrists. His body rocked with hers but, little by little, she took over. Something he could only describe as altogether male began to inch its way up through his skin. He wanted to turn her over, thrust into her. He might be inexperienced but he knew enough to know that he could lay her on her back, have her wrap her legs around his waist, as he pounded into her. The gleam in her eyes told him that quite possibly she sensed his desire. Her superior strength informed him he wasn't going to get his way, not this time. Still, something rebellious made him twist beneath her. He couldn't dislodge her grip on his wrists so he twisted, making her plunges less deep. As that meant she stroked over his cockhead in short, sharp, delicious thrusts, he wasn't sure if he'd made the right choice. James gasped.

"Let her ride you."

A hand at his hip backed up the command. James blinked and gazed into a pair of green eyes. Seth's hand burned at his hip as though the man had branded him and perhaps he had. In one insane moment, he wanted to share this with Seth, with the man who already loved Hannah and surely had more claim to her. Unable to help it, James's gaze flicked to Seth's lips. Seth clearly noticed and, for just an instant, it occurred to James that Seth might try to kiss him. Tension slammed throughout his body but Seth apparently anticipated his reaction.

"I'm just your anchor," Seth said, taking hold of his wrists so that Hannah could let go. Her hands now free, took to pinching James's nipples. He writhed at the combined pleasure and pain.

* * * *

Hannah felt as surprised as James looked when Seth took over the chore of holding their captive's wrists. Not that she objected, for James's soft pants weren't much of a protest. With her hands free, she could balance as she wanted. She could nip and pinch, tickle and tease. Reaching back, she gave the softest, most delicate parts of James's anatomy a gentle squeeze. Yet even as she tried to concentrate on making his first time incredible, Seth's presence distracted her. She looked to his face, gazed at Seth's sharp green eyes as they stared at James. She watched even as the man retreated and the vampire came out to play.

No. She sent a silent command—plea—to Seth. Sometimes he could pick up her desires and he certainly had to pick up

what she was feeling in her scent. *It's too soon.* Bad enough that she'd rushed this. They couldn't ask James to be Seth's lover, to take that step as well in the same evening. They certainly couldn't drink from him.

Seth was aware of her fears; she knew by the flair of his nostrils and the slight narrowing of his gaze. His eyes darted ever so slightly in her direction but, otherwise, he ignored her. Crouched over James, he looked feral. He would frighten the human and they would lose him, all because Seth couldn't control himself. Anger drove back her approaching orgasm, though as wet as she was, James could be forgiven for thinking she'd already climaxed a second time.

Beneath her, James grew still, though it felt as though he swelled inside her, which was impossible. If anything, the look on Seth's face should make his erection subside. James swallowed, staring into Seth's eyes. Then his gaze flicked towards Seth's teeth. Seth's lips parted, revealing his fangs, two long curving menaces that made even Hannah shiver over the thought of how they would feel puncturing her flesh. She didn't care what the books and movies said. A few vampires could mesmerize so that a human was unaware of the bite, but the only true way to dull the intensity was to make the bite part of erotic pain. That's why so many vampires associated feeding with sex. The pain was why humans made the unconscious link. Somewhere in their instinct, they knew the truth.

"D-Don't kill me," James whispered.

Although he spoke quietly with a decided lack of terror, Hannah could smell his trepidation; she could hear it in the

kick of his heart. She opened her mouth to say something soothing but Seth spoke first.

"So, now you want to live." He sounded somewhat amused.

"I ... don't know, but I don't want to die ... now." Something about the way James said now indicated that he meant this moment, this evening. In the morning, he might feel differently but he was a young man experiencing sex for the first time. What man would want to die in that moment?

"I won't kill you," Seth said. Hannah noted that he hadn't said he wouldn't drink.

"D-Don't turn me," James added, and Seth lifted his head in a sharp jerk even as Hannah's eyes widened. So that was what he feared.

"You fear eternal life more than you fear death?"

Hannah couldn't tell if Seth sounded merely interested or disgusted. She wasn't sure how she felt about the idea.

"It's not that simple," James replied.

"It never is." Seth hadn't blinked once. Hannah longed to know what was going through his mind, but she couldn't read his body or his face. It was as though Seth had thrown up a barrier keeping her at bay.

* * * *

If James had ever doubted that Seth and Hannah were something more than human, he believed it totally now. One look at Seth's face told him that vampires existed. Something hard and cold existed in Seth's stare, like a shark's gaze. However, a shark didn't really see you. A shark noticed you

as meat, plain and simple. Such a creature gave no thought to what you felt in the instant of death. Seth was very aware. As steely as his gaze was, intelligence shone out of his eyes.

As though Hannah wanted his attention, her hands moved over him now, ruthless, raising gooseflesh with a gentle stroke, then spearing him in punishment. James lost the fight to keep his eyes open. In darkness, he was lost to sensation. Seth's bruising strength kept him pinned, but it was Hannah who danced above and dictated his responses. He gave in, let her lead him through the torture of trembling on a precipice he at once yearned to tip over, even though his whole being expected agony, so intense was his need.

His thoughts drew down. He became a taut string, plucked by expert fingers. The soft brush of her breasts promised bliss. She teased him mercilessly with their caress. The scent of flesh heated from desire intoxicated him, drowned his senses in longing. He craved, he pined, he lusted. His lips gave way to whispers that turned to sobs, and then softly begged. He was close, the feeling recognizable, but different. This time there would be no frantic grip of his fingers. Hannah met a thrust of his hips with a shove of her hands pressing him down into the mattress. His body strained, struggling to sink his cock deeper.

James fought to open his eyes longing to see the angel who brought his body alive. For so long his mind and body preoccupied with thoughts of death, had forgotten what it felt like to live.

Beads of sweat ran together into small pools to trickle over his skin, adding another level to the torment. Her touch

seared. Oddly, Seth's grip remained cool. James finally opened his hands in a frantic gesture, certain the man wouldn't understand and would continue to hold his wrists. He gasped when Seth answered his need. Hands clasped. James tightened his grip, his body bowing as he did. The need to climax crashed into him and over him, washed through him, drowning him, stealing his breath in the current. He felt the soft wash of wetness every time she rode him. He felt the sharp cut of nails and teeth on the downward plunge.

Hannah squeezed down on him, crying out her release in a scream that sounded closer to agony than bliss. The sound, more than the sensation, spoke to him. His cock swelled while other parts of his body tightened. James bucked, he fucked, he spilled, overflowing, pouring into her, and even as he reached completion, James moaned with the knowledge that he still wanted her.

* * * *

"Please, no."

Hannah looked to James's face but although he pleaded, his body danced under her fingers. Long after his release into her, they teased him still. She had to wonder if he realized Seth touched him as much as she did. Could he feel the difference in the way they stroked and pleased him, plucked at him with their fingers? As she had done so many times in the last couple of hours, Hannah looked to Seth's face. She couldn't decipher his expression. Her fear that he would turn from her after sharing intimacy with James was lost in the instant that he'd clasped the man's hands. The trouble was

she couldn't tell what he was thinking. The look on his face said it might be something worse than jealousy. The chill in Seth's eyes almost made her fear for James.

No. Seth wouldn't harm this human. She wouldn't let him. She would make sure Seth knew she would never forgive him, and for Seth that would be worse than dying.

A particularly loud hiss from James brought her attention back to him. Her hands worked his red and swollen flesh back to rigidity. Spurred on by the way his eyes roamed behind his lids, and his eyelashes fluttered alarmingly, Hannah closed her hand into a fist. She jerked him, using his own escaping moisture to ease the passage, at the same time tightening her grip to increase the friction. How many times had she done this to Seth or Edward while the other looked on? She would normally take him to her lips but she could tell his need lay too ripe and ready in her hand. The soft caress of her lips would be too raw for James. Besides, the throb of his flesh told her there was no time left for James to appreciate it.

The heat of his seed blossomed, overflowed, streamed over her fingers. James fell back, replete, slipping into a sleep that would last for hours. Catching Seth's gaze with hers, Hannah licked her hand then leaned in, capturing Seth in a kiss too intimate for most lovers.

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Chapter Twelve

James opened his eyes abruptly. One moment he lay tangled in dreams too hot and sweaty for his liking, and the next he was staring at the ceiling. Turning his head slowly left and then right, James gasped in surprise. Hannah lay on one side, Seth on the other. They were dead to the world, though for a moment he wasn't sure how literally. Just how deeply did Vampires sleep? Sitting up carefully, James tried not to wince as his body protested. How many hours had he spent lying in the same position? Muscles complained and his head swam. He had that drugged sleeping-sickness sensation that came when one had slept too long.

Moving carefully, James slipped from the bed, turning back to look down at the man and the woman. Hannah lay there naked, the wet gleam of their combined pleasure glistening on her thighs. Even now, his seed trickled from her. Her posture was one of relaxation. Seth lay there fully clothed, curled into an almost fetal position, as though he remained as wound up in sleep as he did when awake. James was aware that vampires could move around in the day, and even though they'd made the effort to board up the windows behind the drapes, something about the atmosphere told James that hours had passed where night finally became day.

Needing the bathroom and unable to stand looking at the two sleeping vampires, James turned away, ignoring the small nagging voice in the back of his mind that urged him to try to kill them. He couldn't do that. They were no threat to

his life, not in the living, breathing, physical sense. They only threatened his resolve to live a miserable existence. They slept. He was naked but unchained. Maybe he could get away.

He was still trying to make sense of his options when he lent over the toilet and vomited.

* * * *

He couldn't kill Hannah and Seth. Whatever the reason for their existence, and no matter why they'd laid claim to him, he sensed a similar anguish in them. He couldn't kill them for that. He couldn't hide from the truth that they shared the same pain. Staring into the mirror he also couldn't hide from his reflection. His eyes stared back at him bright and clear. Hannah had given him an incredible night of pleasure, but in taking what she offered, he'd betrayed Elaine. Elaine wouldn't have seen it that way, of course, but James could no more deny the crazy logic of his heart than he could deny that Hannah felt more real to him now than Elaine's memory. If he gave up on her memory, if she began to feel less significant to him, then did that mean what they'd once had wasn't real? Again, Elaine would have said of course not, but there was some truth in the feeling. He didn't want to let go. Elaine would call him stubborn, and maybe that was what it came down to, but he wouldn't accept it any other way.

Looking toward the window, James considered how easy it would be to climb through and escape. Set high into the wall, they hadn't bothered to barricade this window, being that he was usually chained or watched when in here. He could stand

on the sink surround and slip through easily, even if he did take a short tumble to the ground on the other side. He might have done, but his clothes were in the other room and he didn't wish to run naked along the beach. Being arrested might be one way to escape, but he couldn't take the enquiries, and the necessary lies and explanations that would ensue. Besides, escape wasn't exactly what he had in mind.

Licking his teeth, James almost laughed. After being sick, he'd brushed his teeth. He'd die tasting minty freshness. He'd drunk from the tap but ignored his hunger. Looking up at the window, James blinked, surprised to see that the light already grew dim. The day slipped away. How long had he been standing there? He couldn't believe he'd lost track of time once again. That hadn't happened since he'd met Hannah and Seth, and he didn't want to think why, or why it should be starting again now. So much of the last two years filled his mind with empty spaces, gaps in his memory where he'd simply ceased to exist. Even being aware that these moments were times where he'd sat staring into some dark void where he preferred to hide, did nothing to make them easier.

The void, abyss, the deep ... He couldn't save Seth and Hannah. He couldn't be what they wanted. He couldn't be the saviour of others when he couldn't save himself. They were asking too much of him. With a shaking hand, James reached out and took hold of the door handle. He slowly opened it, fully expecting Seth or Hannah to be standing on the other side, but the two vampires lay where he'd left them. Walking slowly, keeping quiet, James picked up his fallen clothes. He slipped into his trousers and then pulled the shirt over his

head. He didn't worry about shoes. He wouldn't need them, and he could move more quietly in his bare feet. At the threshold, he paused once more to look back at Seth and Hannah. Oddly enough, the man's face was as relaxed as he'd ever seen it, and Hannah smiled in her sleep, if sleep was what you could call this seemingly comatose state.

A pang of regret that had nothing to do with Elaine seared through him, but resolute in his decision, James turned his back on them and hurried out of the house towards the porch. The screen door outside creaked a little and he held his breath as he slipped through it, easing it back into place. Nothing stirred within the house as far as he could tell. James turned his face into the fast-approaching night, and moved as swiftly as he could toward the ocean.

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Chapter Thirteen

Seth stirred. In his dreams, something creaked. He shifted, settling down, hugging his folded arms tighter to his body. On some level, he was aware he lay on a bed and slept. He'd not rested this deeply for a long time. Vampires needed rest just as much as humans did, although the light of the sun dictated their body clock. Vampires could move about during the day. They just didn't feel as strong as they did at night. Many chose to rest for at least a few hours. It preserved strength and aided healing. Still, Seth only took pleasure in resting like this when the three of them lay cuddled in a heap. When he, Hannah and James...

Blinking, Seth began to open his eyes. James? Didn't he mean Edward?

The memory of James's expression, the way the man had clung to his hands, as though he was adrift in bliss with only Seth to hold him tethered sent a shiver through his body and brought Seth back to reality. Raising his head, Seth reached out a hand to ease himself up from the bed. The first thing he noticed was the rumpled covers where James had lain. Staring stupidly at the empty space, Seth lay a hand in the vacated space. The covers were cool but he could pick up a residue of warmth. Still, James must have got off the bed some time ago.

His gaze flicked across to Hannah's face as she sighed in her sleep. Although he'd been aware of her on the bed, Seth's mind remained befuddled enough to believe that at least one

of them should have been aware of James's waking and getting up. He turned his head, but the bathroom door stood open. No James in there, and the chain dangled uselessly at the side of the bed. Seth listened. He heard nothing that spoke of life elsewhere in the house. The only thing he'd heard...

Seth sat up with a shout. Startled, Hannah at once woke up, gazing about. By the time she said, "Where's James?" Seth was already off the bed and running for the door.

* * * *

The house lay further from the ocean than James had believed. Somehow, the sound carried. As he approached the shore, the light grew dimmer. Afternoon slipped away into evening, and although you couldn't call this grey time of day night, James knew enough of vampires now to realize that they didn't need full dark. Cody, after all, had saved him when the day grew overcast enough. Hannah had explained that he had caused Cody some pain, and for that he silently apologized, but whatever kind of creature he was, the man should learn to leave well-enough alone. Matchmaker, indeed!

A wild, cackling, bubbling laugh slid up and out of James's throat. His hysteria indicated madness and he welcomed it. Madness would make what he intended to do easier. Even as the thought beckoned, the question of what he was doing and why almost drove him to his knees. James staggered on, ignoring the cold, oddly fleshly feel of sand clinging to his feet, sinking between his toes. He ignored the small voice in his mind that told him he didn't want to die. He was still

denying it when a bellow announced another man's arrival. Seth landed on him with what had to be the full weight and strength of a vampire. Bowled over, James rolled in the sand, coming to rest on his back with a snarling demon on top of him.

* * * *

"You're not going to do this!" Seth bellowed. "You're not going to kill yourself."

"That's not your decision."

Seth blinked. He couldn't believe that James argued, but he did. Even more peculiarly, James smiled at him. The human tried to rise but Seth batted his hands away and held him down in the sand. A wave washed in, filling in the depression that James's body made, easing its icy fingers around Seth's knees. Seth grabbed the collar and some of the fabric of the man's shirt, bunching it into his right hand and lifting James up to where he bowed over him. Staring him in the eyes, Seth snarled. "You're not going to do this to Hannah. I'm not going to let you." Incredibly, James just grinned.

"How are you going to stop me?" James stared into his eyes, no longer fighting. "If not tonight then I'll do it another day. Change me, turn me, and I'll walk into the sunlight. The only way to keep me is to chain me, and how will that sit with you both? You'll try to change my mind, but in time you'll grow to hate me and detest each other. You're more man or beast than most women can handle, Seth. Go love Hannah."

"I've tried that," Seth answered, hating how empty his voice sounded. "I worship her, but without Edward to balance us, our love isn't enough. Hannah used to have peace. She's still composed, but she no longer has peace. As for me, I don't know what she sees in me. I never have. I'm irritable more times than not. Watching Edward and Hannah in conversation used to fascinate me. Then when they'd turn to me, the attraction I felt soothed my anger. I'm not as intellectual as Edward was." Seth relaxed his grip on James and sat back, aware that he sat on top of the human. "Hannah needs more than I can give her, and as for you..." He looked down into James's eyes. "Watching you these last few days soothed me, brought me back to the way I used to feel."

James shook his head, shivering as a cool wave came to wash in around him again. Beneath Seth, the shiver caused an interesting sensation. "I'm not Edward."

"I don't want you to be. Hannah doesn't want you to be. You can't replace Edward, but you can be someone we love."

James laughed. "And where does love get you?" He tilted his head to one side. "You may as well kill me, Seth. You're not going to get what you want so you may as well use all that anger in one vicious twist of your hands to snap my neck."

Seth stood up. "No."

"Why?"

"Because you want me to."

"Don't you mean because Hannah would hate you?"

"That too, but that's not the whole reason." Seth stood looking down at where James lay as another larger wave washed over the man. When it retreated, James came up spluttering and blinking. Seth turned his back on the man. "If you're going to kill yourself don't ask me to do it, or to watch you. The reason I can't kill you is because I don't want to. Cody was right. He said you didn't want to die. You just didn't know how to continue to live. Well, has it occurred to you that neither do I?"

* * * *

Standing on unsteady feet, James blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected so many words from Seth. He certainly didn't expect the sound of tears in the man's voice. He jerked in shock when the vampire suddenly spun around to face him. Seth's hands grasped him about the shoulders and tugged him close. Being the shorter man, James gasped when Seth's superior strength almost lifted him clear off his feet.

"You don't get it, do you? We feel with you the way we felt with Edward. We see so much of him in you. And we see not only that you're our only hope, but that we are yours. You've nothing to lose, James, and everything to gain." Seth's green eyes gleamed. "We want to penetrate you, join in you, find each other in you. Deep down you want the same. You want to stop feeling so empty, so alone, so isolated even with those who share your pain."

"Penetrate..." The words slipped from his lips and sounded almost like a question, though James wasn't certain what he was asking.

"With my fangs. With my cock." Seth dragged him against his body tighter, and James winced from the pain of the vampire's unyielding grip. He shook his head.

"I can't."

"Why? Scared of feeling something with another man, James? Or just scared of feeling?"

* * * *

Staring down into James's eyes, Seth felt a glimmer of hope. The trouble was the only way he could win this argument was to be honest. "I don't feel anything except when I'm in her." Seth struggled not to blink, not wishing to dislodge his sudden tears. "I don't feel anything. I can cry, yet I still don't feel anything. Except cold. I feel cold. I keep thinking I'll walk into the sun one day just in the hope that it will warm me. I hover around Hannah for her warmth some days, unable to remember that I love her, just needing to feel warm. I know how you feel, because I feel it too. I haven't felt anything except for when I'm in her, or drinking from her. I don't even relish feeding. I haven't felt alive for longer than I can remember. I feel as if I'm simply existing because I don't know what else to do. I consider thoughts of death because they are all I have in the way of yearning for peace. I still walk upon the earth for Hannah, and she continues to live for me. In that way, we are both kind and cruel to each other. I want her to go on and find peace. I want her to love and laugh, and live. If you could give that to her, I'd hand her over and gladly step aside. If you alone could make her

breathe with desire, I would give her to you. If you could make her feel..."

Seth stopped speaking, not knowing how to finish the sentence. He'd walk away. He would. If James could love Hannah and be all that she needed, he would step aside, gladly die when the sun rose in the heavens.

"I can't help her," James whispered. "I don't feel anything either. How can I warm her, or you, when I can't feel?"

"You felt alive earlier."

"The same way you do, inside her."

"Not just inside her. I've watched you. You come alive when you talk to her."

* * * *

From further down the beach, Hannah waited, watching the two men. She could hear Seth's voice carried on the wind to her ears. She could feel James's confliction. She understood how both men felt, for she felt it too. That emptiness and longing that gradually ate away inside of you. The difference was she had clung to hope that she and Seth could have what they'd once had. She'd looked for James because she trusted Cody to find the right man for them, and because James was her gift to Seth. Just as Seth said he would gladly step aside in exchange for her happiness, she would have done the same for him.

"I guess you call that love," she whispered. The trouble was, as much as they loved each other, it wasn't enough. Not now. Besides, now she wanted to save James for his own sake. She understood his longing to walk into the sea. The

trouble was, she couldn't drown in the ocean. Amazingly, she hadn't yet drowned in her tears.

She stood and watched as Seth set James upon the ground. She watched Seth sink to his knees. She stared as James stood in front of the kneeling vampire and turned his head as though he heard a siren call at sea. If James turned and walked into the ocean, she knew Seth no longer had the strength to stop him. She sank down into the sand and waited, for if death was the only thing to give James peace, so be it. His decision would be theirs. She just knew beyond all reasoning that if James walked into the ocean, she and Seth would sit here until the sun obliterated them.

* * * *

"Do you feel the call of the ocean?" Seth asked, although he sounded dreamy. "Do you feel the pull of the tide?"

The man's hands gripped his hips and although James knew that Seth's skin remained that odd side of cool at all times, he could have sworn he felt heat sinking into him.

"Do you feel the pull? Hear the surge?" Seth's voice deepened, became insidious.

"Don't do this to me," James complained.

"Do what? How can I do something to you that you don't want? I'm not holding you here. You can turn and walk away."

As he spoke, Seth's fingers pulled at James's shirt. Buttons popped and scattered. It occurred to James that someone might find shimmering drops of plastic and mistake the buttons for abalone shells. He imagined their disappointment

when they dug them up. Life was like that; full of disappointments.

Seth's teeth on his skin made him gasp. The vampire knelt in the sand, nipping the skin of James's stomach between his teeth.

"Blood answers to the tides," Seth whispered against his skin. The feeling shivered over him; Seth's lips tickled. "Blood surges. It calls. It screams of need. It's life. It breathes. It carries the air humans need to keep their hearts beating. It carries the desire of a vampire in one drop of oily fluid. Red satin. You want to die? I'll take your life."

James turned his head from staring at the sea to look down at Seth. Those green lanterns glowed up at him.

"I'll end your pain, but not by a snap of the neck. I'll drink you down. I'll end it all for you in one scream of ecstasy."

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Chapter Fourteen

When Seth said he'd drink him down, James imagined the vampire rising to his feet and sinking his teeth into his neck. The mere idea of a vicious assault turned his legs to water but perversely made his blood surge just as Seth said it would. His cock grew even as Seth yanked down his sweat pants, and James would have covered himself with his hands if Seth hadn't swallowed him down. He'd never experienced a mouth on his cock. He didn't know what to expect, but he hadn't imagined this strong suctioning, the sheer intensity of being gulped down. James blinked; oh yeah, of course, vampires didn't have to breathe. Even as he had the thought, he became aware of softness at his back. Another pair of lips kissed his neck. Fingers caressed his mouth, teasing through the barrier of his lips. James sucked on those digits with the same abandonment as Seth sucked on his dick.

When Hannah moved her hand away, he didn't think, couldn't think, dizzy with the sensation of Seth's tongue teasing the slit and then swirling around the head of his cock. When wet fingers pried apart his cheeks and pressed against his hidden entrance, James almost collapsed. Hannah held him on his feet and slipped a finger in, expertly seeking out and rubbing at what he knew was his prostate.

"Oh god," James cried out, feeling the double onslaught of Hannah's prying fingers, two of them spreading him, opening him, stroking him, and Seth swallowing even as he bobbed his head. James clutched at Hannah's arm holding him, and

Seth's head, thinking to try to push the vampire away but unwittingly clutching at him instead.

"I can't..." He'd been about to say he couldn't hold out but it didn't matter. In the moment of his orgasm, Seth bit.

* * * *

Oh fuck, I'm going to die. I'm going to bleed out because some vampire bit off my fucking cock!

As wild as the thought was, James couldn't help thinking it. He'd rather Seth drained him, broke his neck, tossed him into the sea. No guy wanted to lose his dick even if he wanted to die. Laughter bubbled out of him but it drowned on a rush of blood and semen. Even as he climaxed, Seth rode him down to the sand, Hannah's hands helping him.

Something was wrong. Even as the last spasms assaulted James, Seth continued to pull on his cock. Blood gushed forth and the vampire drank. Pain escalated, held forth by the heat and slickness of Seth's throat. He didn't care how cool Seth and Hannah were to the touch. Seth's throat was warm. *Warm with my blood.* James let the thought engulf him and he welcomed it. He'd wanted to drown, he truly did. The rushing sound he heard was the same as when one held a shell up to an ear. This was his blood, drawn down and out of his cock. Well, they said a man's blood went from his brain to his dick. Hysterical laughter threatened to overtake him once again but it died on a fresh onslaught of tears.

James sobbed, rolled his head in the sand, gulped and gasped as Seth's hands came down to each side of his face. The pull on his cock had ceased. James blinked, staring up

into Seth's bright gaze. When the man came down to kiss him, James opened his mouth in shock. By the time he thought to protest, Seth's tongue rolled his and he could taste the strange salty tang of blood and semen. Oh god, he tasted his own fluids on Seth's lips, in his mouth, and James arched, his body reacting to the erotic aspect of that, even if his mind said he shouldn't enjoy it.

You wanted to die, love. What does the taste of a little salt matter compared to that?

He didn't know if his imagination conjured up Elaine's voice or if her spirit spoke to him. The salt of the sea tasted bitter, the salt of his tears of his misery. Blood tasted of death and existence in a strange combination, a peculiar balance. His semen tasted of life.

"I'm not going to let you do this to Hannah," Seth whispered into his ear. "I'm not going to let you hurt Hannah. I'm not going to let you hurt me." That last Seth said as his voice broke. Cool drops fell against James's skin, his face, his neck, and for an instant, James wondered if it was raining. He realized that Seth was crying as the man adjusted his hips, curled James's body around him. Hannah must have helped Seth strip for he was naked enough for it to widen James's eyes.

"You want to feel," Seth hissed at him. "I can make you feel." Despite the promise, Seth held James's body to his, poised, his cock a solid reality, pressing where James would have said it had no business ploughing. Above him, Seth trembled. On his back, James gazed up into the other man's

face and realized that he wanted to feel alive more than he cared about what other people thought was wrong or right.

"Make me feel something," James said, and a moment later Seth gave him pain.

* * * *

The pain should have been devastating. It wasn't. Hannah had eased the way, and as unpleasant as it should have been, the blood seeping from his cock had dribbled around to grease his entrance. James gave a thought to the idea that it should worry him that he lay there bleeding into the sand, but he could feel that already his cock ceased to bleed. The fact that blood was the lubricant Seth used failed to alarm him as well. Seth paused and James's body caught up. For a few hard strokes, James welcomed what pain he could feel with the underlying build up of pleasure, and then when the discomfort grew too much, he turned his head, seeking out Hannah's gaze even as Seth sunk fangs into his neck.

* * * *

Hannah stared at the two men fucking, one of them drinking the other one's life away. Her hand fluttered out. She intended to push Seth away but she wasn't a part of this. When James started to cry in earnest, she believed Seth truly had hurt him. Only James's whisper of "Harder," stopped her from clawing at Seth. James wasn't crying from pain. He was crying from grief. She could recognize the quality of his sobs, for she'd cried that way too often herself. Little hitching gasps when your misery was too much to contain.

"Hannah." Seth speaking her name, his voice muffled while fastened to James's neck, finally broke through her paralysis. She crawled toward them even as James's crying eased. Her own vision blurred but she blinked away her tears. This was no time for crying. James moaned and this time the sound truly was one of pain. The combined assault on his backside and neck would be too much without pleasure to match it. She slipped a hand between the two men, until her fingers closed around an erection. As Seth lay buried to the hilt inside James, she didn't need any more confirmation that some part of James was enjoying itself. She started to pump her hand and when Seth's body grew still, and he angled his hips, she directed James's cock so that her lips could take over. Seth drank from James's neck, while Hannah reopened the wound on James's dick and drank from there.

* * * *

He grew cold.

James opened his eyes and stared out to the horizon. Turning his head, he looked down to where two creatures of the night feasted on his flesh. The little sucking sounds that escaped their lips disrupted the night. Something in their eyes had changed. Although Seth's and Hannah's intelligence still shone from their eyes, their stares were blank. This wasn't the first time he'd thought of a shark's unfocused gaze. Predators. Only predators didn't cry as they feasted.

For better or worse.

His fate was being decided at his feet, only he didn't have feet. He couldn't be in two places at once, lying there a

victim, and yet looking on. He couldn't be lying there in the sand and standing here watching two vampires drain him dry.

I don't understand.

Elaine's voice replied to him, although he couldn't tell if this was illusion, memory, or wishful thinking. Maybe it was due to some weird effect of dying.

You don't have to die. They're not trying to kill you.

That was true. They could have drained him long before now if that was what they intended. They gave him time. He could die ... or live forever.

For richer or poorer.

No poorer man than the one who lived a life without love. Riches had nothing to do with material wealth. No point in being the richest man in the graveyard.

In sickness and in health.

Elaine had died from cancer but all this time the same cancer had been eating away inside him. The time had come to get rid of the sickness; the time had come to recover.

Til death us do part.

Being immortal didn't guarantee he'd never die. The loss of Edward proved that. Still, Elaine had wanted three children as a ward against disaster. He'd longed to tell her that out of three one could die, or two, or all. He was dying now. If he didn't stop them, these two beings would drink until he died. Amazingly, he understood why. This was their kindness to him. Their pull on his flesh a kinder way of dying than drowning because they saturated him in the eroticism of the moment. He doubted they would survive his death, though.

His heart fluttered even as he realized he no longer wanted to die. Once you reached the depths of despair, there were only two ways to go. You either sunk or swum.

* * * *

"Take me."

Hannah opened her eyes not sure she had heard right.

"Change me. Take me with you. Make me live."

Maybe her ears were playing tricks but Seth's reaction told her that the voice might well be real, though it whispered into the darkness sounding drunk or drugged. Hannah lifted her head in time to see Seth cover James's mouth with his own. Her beloved's throat worked, only this time, Seth didn't drink. He gave. Hannah bit down on her own tongue as James's throat began to work. He drank from Seth, and a moment later, Hannah took her turn, taking his body in her arms and let blood seep from her mouth into his. As James regained strength, she and Seth took turns there on the beach, drinking and opening a vein.

Later, they carried James back to the house, knowing that he'd wake to a new dawn that never required the sun to rise.

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Chapter Fifteen

Oh sweet heaven he hurt. He felt strong, but his body ached from the adjustment to the change, his cock throbbed with a wanton need that no amount of sex seemed to ease, and his ass hurt from Seth's umpteenth invasion.

"Are we going to leave here?"

"Yes. We're going to travel. You're going to come with us."

James considered what his work colleagues would think when he failed to turn up for work, oh, *ever* again. He didn't much care. He'd pen his notice, pop it in the post. He had all that he needed right here, including Elaine's ashes. He knew what he'd do with them now. He'd scatter them around the globe just as he'd intended. He could do it now. Just a pinch here, a pinch there. His lost love would be everywhere, then one day she'd be no more but she would be in every incoming tide. He'd hear her voice in the call of the ocean, but he'd no longer feel its pull.

He felt another kind of pull and opened his eyes. Hannah grinned up at him from his groin, which was quite an accomplishment while her mouth was full. James groaned.

"Don't you two ever get enough?"

"Not likely," Seth said, seeing as Hannah couldn't speak. "We'll ease off but not for awhile."

"You're not fooling anyone," Seth said, as James turned his head. He lay with his head in Seth's lap. The sensation of a semi-tumescent cock at the back of his neck was odd but interesting. Seth's fingers stroked through his hair. His touch,

oddly possessive, felt reassuring and comforting. "One night of great sex does not bury the pain of all that you've gone through. We know."

James wanted to argue but couldn't. "I know," he admitted. "I'm not okay. Not yet. But I will be. I meant what I said on the beach. I wanted you to make me live." He laughed softly. "Who would have thought I'd find a desire to live by having someone take my life."

"You saved us too," Hannah said, clearing her mouth so she could finally join the conversation. "Even more amazing, you've made Seth smile. Well," she gave Seth a considering look and said, "you've eased that glower of his, anyway."

Seth's growl made James laugh but Hannah quickly put an end to both when she said, "And now I get what I want."

"I thought you already did," Seth said, clearly meaning James and the three of them.

A slight flush entered Hannah's face. "I haven't had what I want from both of you," she said, something defiant and brave in her gaze. "I want things as they used to be."

"Oh," Seth said quietly, obviously catching on.

"What?" James asked, bewildered. Seth chuckled then leaned in to whisper in his ear.

"She wants us both at the same time."

"The same...?" James couldn't see how that was possible, and then he uttered a small echo of "Oh," as he cottoned on.

Well, no one could say he wasn't one to oblige a lady and after all, whatever Hannah wanted, Seth made sure Hannah got.

The End

Virgin Special [Del Fantasma]
by Sharon Maria Bidwell

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Virgin Special Cocktail

Ingredients:

Take a glassful of fresh raspberries, bruise them a little and pour upon them:

2 glasses of Old Brigand Rum

2 glasses of Brandy

1 glass Redcurrant juice and half glass sweetened lime juice.

Mixing Instructions:

Let steep for half an hour, then add 1 glass sherry and some ice. Shake and serve in 6 cocktail glasses. Decorate with a cherry.

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Sharon Maria Bidwell

With over forty small publishing credits, her first novel receiving a favourable response, and several books now available, the muses have definitely found a home at aonia...

When people ask me to explain my work, only one word springs to mind: Diverse. I've written fact and fiction in almost any genre. So far, I've been extremely lucky in that I have had the opportunity to do this, but I've also, often, had the pleasure of crossing genres. Thus, crime, horror, fantasy, action, adventure, fairy tales, gothic, erotica, romance, and slipstream, are themes I've use in any combination.

Among others, my poems, articles and short stories have appeared in the following and forthcoming publications. Many have featured my work on more than one if not several occasions. I should like to take this opportunity to express my thanks for their interest, support, compliments, and enthusiasm.

See what Sharon is up to at: www.sharonbidwell.co.uk

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