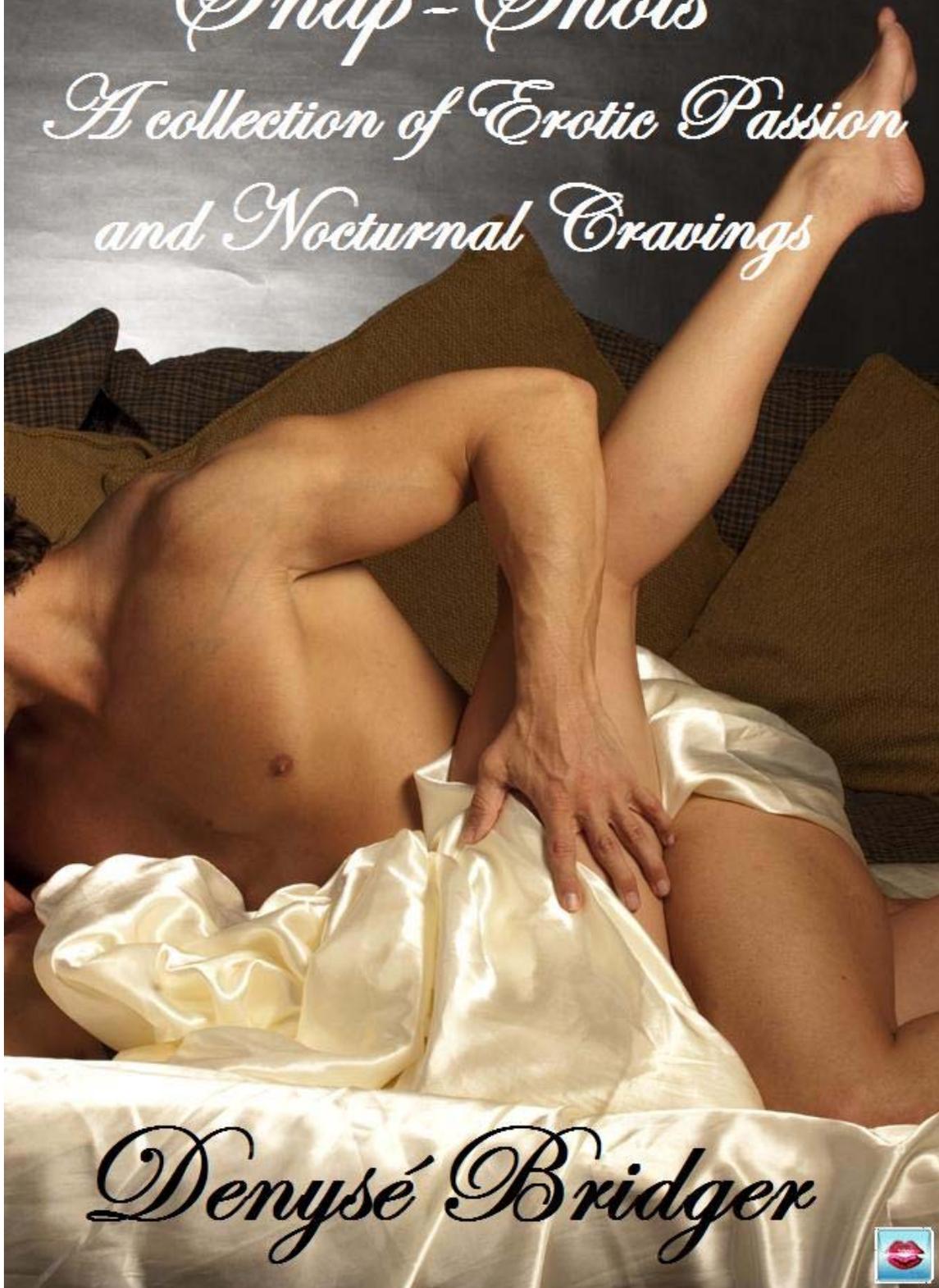


*Snap-Shots*  
*A collection of Erotic Passion*  
*and Nocturnal Cravings*



*Denysé Bridger*



# *Snap-Shots*

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and Nocturnal Cravings*

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# Snap-Shots

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Denysé Bridger  
[www.denysebridger.com](http://www.denysebridger.com)

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## *Author's Note*

*Virtually all of these stories have appeared in one format or another before, usually as FREE stories, but in at least one case, a paid for eBook offering.*

*Anyone who follows my work knows that I like to create diverse and mixed worlds, often with romance overtones, though not always. These stories represent a cross section of genres and levels of romance and eroticism that I hope appeals to anyone who downloads this book.*

*In future, I will be leaning a little more toward mainstream romance and fantasy fiction, but I will never stop stirring the creative pot to see what comes to mind for an intriguing tale. So, please drop by my website often and check out what's happening there, it might surprise you—it often surprises me!*

*Thank you to all of the readers who buy my books, support my dream, and offer your friendship and love every day via the social media we all use to reach out and touch like-minded hearts. I hope you enjoy this small offering, and look forward to chatting with you all, wherever we may meet!!*

*May the blessings of life be yours always!*  
*Denysé*

*Eastern Canada,  
August, 2012*

## *Games of Seduction...*

It all began as a conversation, with a man on another continent...

*Any man who can seduce a woman's mind owns her body long before he ever possesses it....*

It is a simple enough concept, but is so alien to so many.

He taught me that in the space of a few hours. From a man half a world away, I learned more about myself in one night than I had from anyone I had ever been with. And I wanted more. I wanted to know how far hunger and need can be stretched before possession is all that matters, and surrender is all that remains.

He created a game that he said never ends - a bit like life and the learning we do each day. "Truth" is the name of this game, but it's more accurately called "Seduction." When one party wins, both claim the prize.

Under his shrewd eyes, my truths have never looked so bare and so small. They make me crawl inside myself. He doesn't intend to let me hide behind my walls, though. I wondered if I should be afraid or entranced? Both, perhaps.

*The first question: "what do you like in a man?"*

How do I respond to that? I was looking at what I like in a man, and I choked on the awareness of it... So, I struggled and replied with sublime idiocy that I didn't know the answer. To my great amazement, he didn't end the game, but pointed out that stupidity didn't appear to be a problem, so why was I giving him stupid answers. At this time, any other man would have been staring at a blank screen, but not this one, his honesty was enchanting.

*What do I like in a man? What do I notice first?* They seemed like easy questions. I've answered them before, but they weren't usually being asked by the physical embodiment of the honest reply. I noticed his eyes, his smile, his shoulders, and most of all, his presence and the way he carries himself - the strength of his personality and his confidence. This should have been an easy thing to answer. It wasn't.

I felt like I was a love-struck sixteen-year-old in the throes of her first infatuation. I'd known him about an hour at that point. Can you understand how overwhelmed I was and how ridiculous I felt? He made me blush like a schoolgirl, and that hasn't happened in a very long time.

*Question two: "tell me something you've never told another person about what you want from sex."*

This was even more difficult and where I had the internal heart attack. I wondered how much more he could rattle me without even trying. If my first answer was inane, this one was worse. The game was going badly, and I was losing all credibility as a woman with intelligence and passion. Oddly, it hurt to know just how foolish I was being, but faced with this man's candour and honesty, I couldn't let myself speak words that should have come easily. Why was putting those words onto the screen for someone who is watching me – someone who is the answer to those very questions – why was that so impossible to do? I knew why. I wanted him. I wanted to be possessed by him in a way no other man has ever known me. I wanted a stranger to own me because I knew he had the strength to do it. That was very frightening. The enormity of it made me want to run, but I had no idea if the answer was to run toward him or run away? I wondered if I should ask.

How do I tell this handsome and passionate man that if he wanted my fantasy, he would have to tie my hands and blindfold me, then talk to me as he does whatever he wants with me to make me his? That, in return, I would want to do the same thing to him, leaving him breathless and aching as I decided how best to tease his lust?

What was going on in my mind that made me want to know what it was to belong to this man. Why I suddenly wanted to be his and only his? Other men have tried to make me bend, and failed, but I knew this one could make me beg, and leave me more fulfilled, more alive than I thought was possible, even in my romantic dreams.

I wanted the touch of his hands and the whisper of his words, while he held me captive to his desire. I stared at the computer screen and my heart was pounding a wild timpani in my ears, but still the words would not come forth.

I discovered that I knew nothing about a man's idea of beauty, that I saw myself in a very different way than he did. He saw more deeply than I believed was possible - even through the fear that kept me struggling to play my part of the game, knowing I was failing badly.

He upped the stakes when he told me he wanted to see me... really see me... naked, in all ways. It was easy for him, he's had more lovers than I want to think about. I've had few real moments of passion in my life. And I was a different person then, a woman barely aware of what desire was, and playing at being in love. I looked different then, but even knowing that time had not so much aged me as improved me, I was desperately afraid to let him see me. My first glimpse of him is burned into my mind. Beautiful as only a strong man can be, vital and vibrant, at ease with his sensuality and his potent sexuality.

*“I've been told I am not the kind of woman who inspires passion.”*

When I admitted that, it made me fear deeply. He asked me why I would believe such a thing from a man who clearly wanted to cause me pain. Once again, he reminded me that I did not appear to be a stupid woman, yet I persisted in the belief that words intended to hurt could be true in any way. He did not hold back his truths, nor did he

make them gentle when he forced me to see them. I took a leap of trust, and I did what he asked. Each step into his vision was rewarded by an equal exposing of his body. I wondered if he saw how badly my knees were shaking when he looked at me – how much my heart leapt when his response was a simple, but appreciative “Wow” when faced with me.

I still shake, inside and out, when I permit my mind to relive that moment.

*“Do you think I do this with everyone?”*

I felt near anger in that question. How was I to know what he did with the women who passed through his life? But I did know, before he spoke. Whatever was happening between us was a connection that was real for those hours. We existed for each other, and there was no room for bitchiness or jealousies. All that mattered was what he was teaching me about myself, and about how a man I’d never touched could feel things that people who have stood next to me never sensed. I wanted to be the woman he saw, I knew she was waiting for an escape from the place I’ve kept her hidden.

In the end, he told me to write - to do what I do best. Therefore, I have made a beginning, and now I have allowed him to see the truth his eyes have already told him, to give him this whisper of my honest secrets, and ignore the fear it created in me to think that I could never be enough for him.

He said the Game never ends... and I wonder if my inability to open my soul to him has already ended it. I wanted to see what the second play would bring, but would there be a second chance?

Months have passed and we have grown to know each other in surprising ways.

## **TODAY:**

I faced the screen, smiling as I considered what I was about to write. Our game had grown into a challenge over the months - each new seduction charged with eroticism that left me gaping in shock at the things I now casually gave voice to and the things I never imagined. Today, I had chosen to change the rules, it was now time to tease passion in a slightly different way.

*“And how do I tell you what seemed so easy when I proposed this new game? We will do this for the next three days, and then, on day four, it will conclude in a way that you are not expecting. This year will end, and a new one will begin—with new possibilities and more exciting games to discover.”*

The thought was threaded with uncertainty, and I forced myself to ignore it.

Fantasy... erotic whispers... banish fear and speak with total honesty and trust. It was a simple answer: Banish fear...

## **DAY ONE OF FANTASY:**

### **I write:**

*In my mind, I see you as you step into the shower... the water is pouring over your body, caressing your magnificent contours like the hands of a lover... and I want to be the water. Close your eyes, let the heat of desire go deep into your heart. Let your imagination create this fantasy with me.*

*The door to your shower opens and you know I am behind you now, but I will tell you not to look, only feel. Soap can become like silk against warm, wet skin and between my hands and your skin it creates a smooth glide over the perfect muscles of your back and your ass. When I drop to my knees, following the trail of soft lather all the way down the length of your legs, I will slowly move all the way back up, and when I reach your ass, I will stick my tongue in it, licking until you are shaking.*

*You want to turn around. I can sense it, and I tell you not to. This is about making you feel me with you. I stand up and wrap my arms around you, kissing your gleaming back, pressing myself so close we are like one person.*

*“Put your hands out, against the wall, and let me touch your chest, learning the shape of you, the beat of your heart.” All this time, my soapy hands are exploring you, but not touching what you want touched most of all.*

*I can feel the tension in your body now. Your wanting, your passion is as awake as your imagination, and it wants to be satisfied.*

*I tell you to spread your legs, just enough so that I can touch you. I can hear the sound of your approval when finally my hands are between your thighs. One hand cups your balls, squeezes carefully, almost pain, while my other hand is stroking your dick, making it harder with each slow motion. Over and over, until I can feel the wobble in your legs. Only then do I allow you to turn around and look down.*

*On my knees in front of you, I wait for you to put your lovely dick in my mouth. I suck it while my finger slides in and out of your ass, fucking you and sucking you while the water pours over us. My tongue makes circles over the head of your cock, stroking that tiny little slit that wants to explode right now. I can suck your hard cock so hard it almost hurts, but it will be sweet pain to you, and when you can't stand it anymore, I will stop.*

*When you want nothing more than to come, you can tell me what you need - my ass, my pussy that wants you so badly... or do you want me to stay on my knees for you and swallow your cum?*

Smiling, more than a little uncomfortable, I lean back in my chair and read the words I

wrote, then I add what would be the tag to this week's game...

*"Do you have a hard-on now, my sexy friend? Think of me today and what it would be like to have this happen - every day if you wanted it and as many different ways and places as we can imagine. I want you this much and more."*

## **DAY TWO OF FANTASY:**

Once again I will see if seduction can be tested with words and imagination. I can think of a thousand ways to love him, but how many ways can emotion and passion be spoken?

### **I write:**

*Imagine waking up in darkness when it should be light, feeling the kiss of the sun touching your skin, but blackness is all that fills your vision. For a moment do you feel fear? I think you don't, because there is a smile shaping the sensual fullness of your lips. Awareness is waking and telling you the truth your body already knows. You are bound and at my mercy..*

*Smooth, cool silk covers your beautiful brown eyes, and as much as I miss looking into them, I want you to focus only on what all your senses are experiencing, not just what you are seeing. I can almost feel your surprise when you try to move your arm and discover it is bound, that both arms are tied, as well as both ankles. You look like a delectable and sinful pleasure, naked, unable to touch me. I promise you won't mind, not for long...*

*Bared skin has such lovely textures and subtle tastes, and yours is like a drug I am addicted to. Even though you cannot see me, I will tell you that I am as naked as you are, and as excited as you're going to be.*

*I will very gently rake my fingernails over your chest, the friction being more tingling than hurtful, and it will make your nerve-endings quiver. I'll change the pressure and smooth the hollowed contours of your hips while I bend forward and breathe heated kisses over your cock as it stirs. When I take you in my mouth and suck very hard and suddenly, your hips rise and the sharp intake of your gasp tells me how much you like the surprise.*

*That same barely scratching sensation is repeated on the inside of your thighs and again you are smiling... small shivers betraying just how much this is effecting you... so I climb across your thighs and lean forward, until I can take the fullness of your bottom lip between my teeth and tug. Your head lifts, and tries to turn this into a kiss, but I won't let you. The soft growl of your curse makes me laugh and in spite of your frustration, you smile, too.*

*"You're allowed to talk, darling," I purr close to your mouth before I lick your lips.*

*“What do you want?”*

*“I want your pussy. How wet are you?”*

*I can hear the smile in your voice, because you know the answer to that already. So, I lean forward again, so close my breasts are brushing your skin - “Suck,” I tell you, and put one aching nipple within your reach. It’s my turn to shudder now, because your tongue is working familiar magic, like no one else ever has.*

*“Untie me.”*

*“No.”*

*I pull back and settle out of your reach, but you know what I’m going to do so you laugh and wait.*

*“Fuck me, honey,” you order. “You know you want to. Take what you want.”*

*“I will, but first I want to taste you.”*

*And I will taste you, I glide down the length of your body, kissing as I move, my tongue stopping to lick at the spots that make you choke for want of air in your lungs. I tell you to spread your legs wider and when you do that, my tongue explores the inside of your thighs until it reaches that smooth line of skin behind your balls and when I touch you there, you shudder with the pleasure of it, over and over, until we both know you are almost ready to come.*

*Then, when you think you can’t hold back a moment long, I take your cock in my hand and very slowly guide it into my weeping pussy... In that moment, it will be difficult to know which one of us is closer to release. And when I begin to ride you, muscles clutching and holding you tightly inside me, there will be no way to tell where you stop and I begin...*

She leaned back in the chair again and laughed. The Game was getting more intense with each day. And it was not over. Once again she typed the words that would conclude the fantasy for today...

*Do you have a hard-on now, my sexy friend? Think of me today and what it would be like to have this happen every day if you wanted it in as many different ways and places as we can imagine. I want you this much and more.*

### **DAY THREE:**

The last day before this part of the Game play ended, I stared at the screen, knowing he was waiting for my final fantasy encounter to tell him how much I wanted to be his woman. It was the stuff of dreams, but it was also much more real than I would have

thought possible before I'd met him.

**I write:**

*I do want you. I want to belong to you.*

*I take a deep breath and began to weave a new scene... You have worked far too many hours once again, been awake almost a full day. You are coming home, tired and weary, intent on sleeping for at least the next twelve hours before you must go back to your work. There is studying to do, but it will have to wait, there are only so many hours that any man can push himself to endure before everything that happens to him becomes a blur of unreality.*

*So, we will say that for this late night, I will be your unreality.*

*You come into your room, certain you have no energy left for anything more strenuous than collapsing onto your bed.*

*So, I can only imagine your surprise when you turn the light on to discover that there is someone waiting for you. I am sitting on the bed, watching you, and despite your tiredness of moments before, I can see the light in your eyes. You are now considering if you need to go to sleep immediately. My guess is you no longer feel quite so tired, and your curiosity is wide awake.*

*Let me help you decide. I stand and go to you, never once losing contact with your beautiful eyes, the challenge is already between us and your smile is beginning to betray your thoughts. Or is it your reading of my thoughts that is creating the amusement in your expression? It doesn't matter, we are always on the same page at moments like this, aren't we?*

*Piece by piece, I begin to remove your clothes, until all that remains are black briefs that are already stretching to contain the hard cock that wants to be freed and given my loving attention. But not yet.*

*I tell you to sit down, to check your mail, and relax... and while you do that, my hands begin to massage the broad strength of your shoulders, smoothing strong muscle, relieving the knots of tension that have created a headache that I know is throbbing in your temples. While I do this, firm touch blends with fevered, hotly whispered words that tell you how much I want you inside me.*

*"Touch yourself for me..."*

*So you do, pushing aside the straining fabric until your aching dick is in your hand, and you are stroking while I watch. Finally, I permit myself the taste of your kiss... the exploring thrust of your tongue dueling with mine. Your kiss is more exciting than anyone else's has ever been... and the heated lust of it goes straight to my pussy, making it wetter than it was the moment you walked in... I need you, the pulsing sense*

*of hunger is becoming real pain.*

*Dragging myself away from you, I step back and you turn to watch while I toss aside my own clothes. You're waiting to see what will happen now, and you are no longer interested in going to sleep are you, my darling? But I know you well, and I know what will make you feel good. We will sate one hunger, before the need for overdue sleep claims you.*

*I walk to the bed and climb on it, keeping my back to you, on my hands and knees, legs spread, the invitation blatant... and I know you are not going to make me wait long before you take what belongs to you and only you... What has been yours from the moment we first spoke...*

Once again, I felt the uncomfortable, but much too familiar sense of needing air that wasn't coming into my lungs quickly enough. Shuddering, I closed my eyes and drew in deep breaths, and was finally able to type the words that ended it again for the moment.

*Do you have a hard-on now, my sexy friend? Think of me today, what it would be like to have this happen, every day if you wanted it...as many different ways and places as we can imagine. I want you this much and more.*

## **DAY FOUR – finale:**

The game was almost over now, the year would be over within twenty-four hours, and I knew precisely how I wanted it to end... For the first time in my life, I was going to have the fantasy I had always wanted, and the power to make it real.

### **I typed:**

*Go through your mail and find the envelope that was delivered today, open it and follow the directions...*

I hit send, and ignored the shaking of my fingers. Would he get the message before midnight?

\* \* \* \* \*

The clock said it was 11:15 when he finally sat at his computer and opened the email. The message he'd been waiting for all day was near the top of the list of new mail and he opened it. Instead of the seductive essay he'd been anticipating, there was only a single line, and it made little sense. Frowning, he picked up the handful of letters and bills he'd dropped next to the laptop and went through them until he found the one that had only his name written on it—no stamp, no return address. Something about the unreality of the moment struck him like a blow, and his heart hammered wildly in his chest for a few seconds before he opened the envelope and let the contents drop onto the desktop. A key card, and a business card from a nearby hotel with a room number written on the

back of it.

For a few minutes, the roar of his heartbeat deafened him. Before he could think too much about it, he picked up the cards and left his home.

Twenty minutes later, he slid the card into the lock, half expecting it to not gain him entry. When the click of the lock told him the card was accepted, he took a deep breath and went inside the suite. The air was cool, the lighting was muted, and he heard the door close behind him a second before he leaned back against it to prevent himself from swaying visibly.

She was lying in the bed, long red hair spilling over the pillows in endless streams, clearly naked beneath the sheet that only partly covered her. She sat up, blinking, acutely aware that she was no longer alone in the room. They simply stared—green eyes met brown, for the first time without a webcam being their contact.

“You came, “ she said.

Her accent, so different to his, was charming. He nodded, seemingly not trusting his voice. She smiled, and he knew from that smile that the Game had just ended the way she had hoped it would...

Watching the play of light catch in the gleaming darkness of his hair, she was struck again by the intuitive knowledge that dominated his handsome features. Barely suppressed sensuality and anticipation were so strong in the shadowed intimacy of the suite that she felt she could reach out and touch the things that presently put them on opposite sides of a chasm she wanted desperately to no longer exist. Months of teasing intimacy had all been leading to this night, and she did not want it to end here, but to begin. She wanted to be with him more than she had any man she'd ever known.

“Tell me what you're feeling right now?”

She trembled, the sound of his rich voice, the beautiful Italian accent layering the words, it effected her like wine, intoxicating and sensual... He was standing with his back to the door, watching, but making no move to come further into the room. He was waiting for her answer. She swallowed hard, and gave him the honesty that marked every conversation they had ever had.

“Afraid.”

“Of me?”

“No,” she whispered, then nodded. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t like being vulnerable.”

For the first time, she looked directly at him and let their gazes hold, knowing he could read all the uncertainty she was feeling, just like he always did when she was admitting things she’d never told anyone else.

He drew in a deep draught of air and ran a hand through his thick, dark hair. “You don’t have to be afraid of anything.”

She actually managed to smile at the statement, though there was little warmth in the expression. She laughed, a low murmur of sound that stirred the air between them.

“I want to share my bed with you, possibly my life,” she conceded. “It’s why we started this game of ours, to know each other, to discover if this was possible. I’ve always been afraid that when we were finally here, at this place, that I would not be what you wanted.” She met his eyes as if she were trying to pierce the shadows that surrounded them, to see what lay hidden behind that outwardly confident stare. When nothing shone forth, she closed her eyes.

He seemed to let the silence engulf them again for a long minute.

“I have wanted you so much,” she murmured, voice raw with the force of her feelings. “For so long.”

The loneliness and the need for reassurance was almost a physical presence in the room with them.

“I want you, too,” he answered, his voice soft, yet husky.

She looked at him again, measuring the truth, able to see the subtle shifts that made his eyes so fathomless. She saw her own emotions swirling amid the need that arced between them.

Smiling, feigning a confidence she didn’t quite feel, she pulled back the sheet and held out her hand to him.

He finally stepped away from the door and as he walked toward the bed, he stripped out of his clothes. Moments later he had her in his arms for the first time, and she pulled him into a kiss that was long anticipated...

Eternal minutes later, after his hands had skimmed her curves and reassured him they were really touching each other at last, he rolled her onto her back and positioned himself over her. She was gasping and panting in air, her skin flushed with heated need. He lifted her hips and entered her swiftly, the shock of sensation making them both stare in surprise. She moaned and her legs wrapped around his waist as she pulled him down into a hot, lusty kiss.

“Hard,” she said next to his ear, voice hoarse. “Like you’ll never have another woman again.”

He’d never have another woman like this one, he realized, his body moving into a fast, demanding rhythm that found its match in her writhing limbs. The added fuel fanning the flames was the normally absent emotional bond. He rarely loved any woman he was with, but he was quickly learning that she had already found her way past years of barriers—whether she had intended to or not.

He looked down into her eyes, his body still moving over her, his thrusts slower now, but each one burying him deep inside her. He was caught in the languor of the ageless rhythm of sex, enjoying this lovemaking more than he’d dared to hope. She was tight, wet, and her body was clutching his cock like she’d never let him go. He wanted it to last forever, and he didn’t want to speak, wasn’t certain he could, really, but he nodded.

“Let me move,” she asked, and laughed at his surprise. He reluctantly withdrew and watched while she rolled over and pulled herself to her knees again. She reached for the headboard and spread her legs wide. The graceful curve of her back, flowing down into the luscious round buttocks made the pain his groin intensify further, and he quickly accepted her wordless invitation.

He grasped her waist and entered her hard and fast, enjoying the choked whimper that slipped from her. She bent lower and he lost himself; his entire world consisted solely of slick, taut heat and the sounds of moist, steamy sex. Within minutes her body spasmed violently and the clutch of her muscles around him brought him to a shuddering climax that seemed to go on and on as he spilled into her.

As the tremors quieted, and their rasping gulps for air grew fainter, his grip on her waist loosened. He eased free of her, and another shockwave rocked his body at the loss of contact. She sighed and twisted around until she lay on the bed looking up at him. He sat back on his knees, wondering if he’d ever be able to move again—or if he even wanted to.

The clock beside the bed began to chime, and she grinned at him.

“So, it is really nice to finally meet you. I’m glad you didn’t make me wait until next year...”

It was the most ridiculous statement in the world, and he stared at her for a moment before they started laughing. He fell onto the bed and pulled her close. She closed her eyes, listened to the steady rhythm of his heart beating next to her ear. For the first time in a lifetime, she knew perfect peace... She was home at last.

## *New Year's Eve*

Christmas had been awful, lonely and terrifying to the woman who paced a spacious and romantic chalet meant for lovers. He'd had obligations, children and friends who had long been priorities. Claire did understand. At least that's what she insisted to herself when she wanted to erupt into tears, or fury. Somehow, neither emotion held for long, and she was left with the same empty chill of isolation.

It had been a week since she'd spoken to him for more than a few minutes. He'd called from his ex-wife's house, and the conversation had been brief. The sounds of happy children and family warmth had reached across the miles to freeze her heart into a block of ice. He'd promised her he'd be at the ski lodge for New Year's Eve and would call her as soon as possible. She'd arrived a day early, but the expected phone call had never come. It was now late into the evening of the last day of the year.

She strolled over to the Christmas tree, the glittering bursts of cheerful colors blurred as tears flooded her eyes again. She dropped to her knees and fingered the unwrapped presents that waited for his arrival. She hadn't opened her gifts, they too awaited his presence. She wanted to share this Holiday ritual with him, to turn back time and make this night Christmas Eve.

She decided to have the wine herself, and once she was settled comfortably before the blaze, she opened the bottle and poured the bubbling wine into the crystal flute. A few drops spilled onto the creamy, sheer silk of her gown and she watched in detached fascination as her skin grew visible through the opaque material. With an indifferent shrug, she placed the bottle within easy reach and sipped the chilled champagne.

When the clock chimed eleven-thirty, she was beyond caring that she was drunk and alone. Two empty bottles attested her condition, tears flowed freely and unchecked from red-rimmed eyes. The candles had burned down to the holders, and only the fire, replenished periodically, cast heat and light back into the still room. The CD player had long ago gone silent, and she no longer felt able to walk the distance required to start the machine again.

She picked up the last glass of champagne and stared at the bubbly clear liquid. Her hand trembled slightly and she sniffled softly. When she lifted her hand to wipe aside more tears, she ended up dumping the wine over herself. The shock of the cold champagne made her gasp loudly, and she put the glass on the floor beside her then looked down at the ruined gown.

In the soft glow of firelight she saw the spreading wash of wine making the silk transparent. Her breasts were outlined clearly, nipples erect in response to the cold touch of wine. She smiled slightly and tugged at the stringy strap of her gown, then peeled it away from her body. Her skin was flushed with too much wine, and she felt the

familiar ache of longing for his touch fill her with pain. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the cushions, her hands rose and caressed the fullness of her breasts, rolled the firm tips of her nipples between her fingers. The sensation was arousing, especially when combined with the image of his mouth closing over the rosy tips, tongue teasing, teeth gently tugging.

“Damn you...”

The whisper was lost in the empty room. Her hands glided slowly over her body as her mind filled with him, the feel of his hands, the hard length of his body next to hers. Her thighs parted and she pulled the gown up around her waist. She hesitated, the pound of her heartbeat a furious, loud timpani in her ears. Past that, she thought she heard another sound, the thud of a step outside the cabin. The door was locked, and in the seconds of silence that followed there was no other murmur.

She groaned softly, and a new flare of pain reminded her that a new year was only minutes away, and the only lover she had to share the night with was her vivid memory of him. Her body shuddered, roused and hungry, and she slid her fingers into the throbbing wetness between her thighs. Her hand pressed tightly against the slick folds, created a steady, rapid rhythm that her hips flowed into. Her free hand fondled her breasts, squeezed aching nipples, then moved to join the other as she fought for release.

She cried out in fear and frustration seconds later when her hands were dragged away from their erotic play. Her eyes flew open and she choked on a gasp as dark eyes, alive with fire, bored into her. She felt the icy air of the night that still clung to him, and his lips were cold when they descended to claim hers. As his tongue entwined with hers, ravaged the heat of her mouth, he was pulling at his clothes.

His mouth moved to her throat and she moaned loudly when the hard length of him suddenly filled her. Her fingers knotted in the material of his t-shirt and her hips thrust upward to meet his savage, urgent rhythm. Her legs wrapped around his and pushed his jeans further down long legs. He rode her harder, his body aroused and selfish with lust. With a low groan he pulled free of her for a moment, long enough to grasp her ankles and place them against his shoulders. He leaned into her, and she opened to him, eagerly accepted the glistening length of his arousal as he buried himself inside her again.

It was over in minutes, a fierce blistering storm of passion that left them choking for breath and trembling violently. A brisk, icy wash of air swirled over them and she arched back to look toward the door. Even with the distortion of the position she could see the heavy wooden panel swung inward.

“You could have closed the door,” she whispered thickly...

## *Beloved Stranger*

*London - 1889*

There was a touch of dark magic in the air as the latest guest alighted from another carriage resplendent in its finery. To the young woman in the entrance hall of a vast mansion house in the fashionable Kent district, the entire night was already evaporating the thin veneer of cordiality that she forced to her features for the sake of her parents. This was meant to be a celebration of her return from Paris, but she was finding the chatter and vociferous laughter tedious. Yet, in spite of her growing irritation with everyone present, Venetia Tremaine felt a distinct quiver of awareness wake deep inside her, then reach outward until it trembled within her very blood. For just a heartbeat, time stopped and hung suspended, the air around her static with alien excitement. The instant shattered when sound invaded in the form of a familiar voice.

“Mr. Adrian Dalton.”

The Tremaine family butler, Lawrence, announced the newest arrival, then turned to accept the greetings of a couple only steps behind Mr. Dalton. Venetia felt faint, and it raised her annoyance further. The rush of exhilaration dissipated, and she was left feeling lost and disoriented.

“Lady Tremaine.”

Adrian Dalton smiled as he bent over Genevieve Tremaine’s hand, the gesture perfect in its etiquette, yet somehow mocking at the same time. No one appeared to notice the fleeting disdain. No one but Venetia, and the handsome man who now stood before her, his dark eyes thoughtful in their obvious appraisal.

“It is a distinct pleasure to see you again, my lady.”

Venetia tried to summon an expression of cordial appreciation, and knew the effort did not reach her eyes when his striking features transformed into a smile that she suspected could charm the Queen herself. *If it hadn’t already*, some inner voice chided.

“You haven’t changed at all in the years I’ve been away, Mr. Dalton.”

“You flatter me, Miss Tremaine,” he murmured in reply.

“Do I?”

For just an instant she saw the flicker of surprise in his shadowy eyes, then his smile grew warmer. Inside, her entire being felt the shift of something intensely powerful,

something she would attempt to name later, when she wasn't quite so enraptured by Adrian Dalton's presence.

"Adrian! How wonderful to see you again."

The spell splintered and broke, and the colours of the evening so suddenly lost their iridescence it shocked her. Adrian Dalton turned to answer the whispered words of the woman who had joined them, then permitted himself to be led away from her. Venetia was inexplicably bereft by his leaving. Angry with herself, she conjured up another false smile, and greeted more guests whose names she would never remember.

\* \* \*

"Your parents don't seem at all pleased, Miss Tremaine."

Venetia felt the caress of his voice so acutely he might have actually touched her skin with his words.

"My parents are seldom pleased with much that I do, Mr. Dalton," she answered when he stopped at her side and looked out over the vast gardens of the estate house. Lamps had been lit and placed all over the property; from their vantage point on the second level balcony, it looked as though a hundred stars were hovering just above the ground. "I'm afraid that's why I was shipped off to Paris for several years. They hoped the Holy Sisters would instill a greater sense of propriety into my wicked heart."

Adrian's smile was brighter than the sun, and warmed her in a much more intimate way, she was forced to admit.

"And were they successful, Miss Tremaine?"

"Venetia, please," she requested as she turned to face him fully. She was captivated anew the instant their eyes met, and every part of her instinctively attuned itself to his presence. She had met Adrian Dalton on several occasions when she was little more than a girl. He had never struck her as being anything more than a handsome rogue who was far too certain of his appeal. As a woman, she was growing more certain his arrogance was not misplaced in the slightest. Every unmarried woman in attendance tonight had sought his company at one time or another. Even some of the married ladies had been unable to resist his charm, despite the ire of their husbands.

"What are you thinking about, Miss... Venetia?" Adrian asked, his voice pitched to a smooth, sensual cadence.

"Honestly, or a polite answer, Mr... Adrian?" she amended softly when he smiled.

"Honestly, please," he remarked, tone casual and inquisitive. "Polite society makes me feel rather ill after a time."

Venetia laughed, her pleasure genuine. He straightened and their eyes were mere inches apart when she spoke again, her words a whisper of air between them. “I was simply wondering if there was a woman here who does not wish to be your lover tonight, Adrian Dalton.”

“Bold words, indeed, darling,” he whispered.

“Are you surprised?”

“Delighted,” he corrected. “And what of you, my beautiful Venetia. Do you wish to join me in my bed tonight?”

She felt faint, and the restrictions of her corsets were suddenly stealing both reason and breath from her body. Deep within her, she felt a longing so profound it was almost pain. Adrian’s smiling mouth filled her vision, and she knew he was aware of the effect of his presence and his words. It didn’t matter, the outrage she’d have felt had he been any other man could not rise past the truth they both recognized. The curve of his lips fascinated her. The soft, fine dark hair of his goatee and moustache dared her to touch him as she wanted to. And the perfect fine angles of his face led her inexorably upward until she was trapped in the chasm of his eyes.

“Tell me what you’re thinking?”

There was a hint of wine and smoke in the flutter of air that touched her with his query.

“Why?”

“You fascinate me.”

“Why?”

“Innocence is seldom found coupled with utter honesty.”

“My tongue wants to taste your lips, Adrian Dalton,” she confessed in a voice that was barely audible, wouldn’t have been had he been further away from her. “And my fingertips are tingling with the desire to know if beneath your fine suit and silk waistcoat is skin that is even finer to the touch.”

He took a step closer, so they were almost embracing.

“Tell me more.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I am baring my soul to a man who is laughing at me,” she stated. “I’ve never before said

things like this. Yet even mocking me as you are so obviously doing, Mr. Dalton, I find myself compelled to indulge these wanton thoughts of you.” She chose to accept the subtle, unspoken challenge in his mood, sensing he was not mocking her in the least.

“I am not mocking you, darling,” Adrian assured her. His fingers came to rest on the side of her face, learning the curve of her cheekbone with a feather-like caress before moving to the back of her neck to draw her forward. “Quite the contrary.” His words dissolved into a soft murmur of pleasure as he bent his head toward her.

As she lost contact with his mesmerizing eyes, Venetia gasped and the sound was captured by his mouth as it covered hers in a kiss so tantalizingly slow and lingering she was certain they were now the only two people in existence. She tasted the wine he’d been sipping earlier, and the hint of cigar smoke, but more subtle and intoxicating was the man himself. His tongue slipped between her parted lips and coaxed her to imitate the erotic dance of exploration in which he was engaged. She sucked his tongue deeper into her mouth and moaned softly when his arms pulled her into full contact with his body as the pressure of his kiss intensified.

Sensation exploded through her like a wildfire, and the swirl of heat and excitement threatened to consume her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned closer, pressing her hips into his, allowing her body to obey the desire to be as close to him as possible.

“And what do you want, Mr. Adrian Dalton?” She posed the query as he finally left her lips and continued a wet, open-mouthed trek down the side of her neck. As his tongue stroked the frantic pulse there, his hands rested at her waist, brushing the smooth satin of her gown.

“I want you naked in my arms, Venetia Tremaine,” he breathed as he kissed her forehead. “I want to do things to you that have you crying my name like a prayer. Things that no other man will ever do to you, darling.” He smiled down at her, and she laughed quietly.

“You’re very certain of your prowess, Mr. Dalton.”

Adrian’s laughter was genuine for the first time in a very long while.

“Venetia!”

The spell of seduction shattered with the strident outcry of Lady Tremaine as she arrived on the terrace and found them.

“I do apologize for my daughter’s shameless conduct, Mr. Dalton. Do forgive her lack of manners, please.”

Adrian’s eyes glittered with amusement when he let his gaze linger a moment longer on Venetia. “I would forgive your daughter any breach of manners, Lady,” he assured the

distraught mother. “Her charm far surpasses any minor lapse in propriety. And,” he turned the full force of his disarming smile on the older woman, “any indiscretion was entirely my fault.”

“If you’ll excuse me, Mr. Dalton,” Venetia interjected. “Mother, I’m not feeling at all well. I think I’ll retire for the night.”

“In the middle of a ball given in your honour!” The piercing quality had returned to her voice and Venetia frowned at the censure. “Have you no sense of proper behaviour, my dear?”

“I am hardly likely to charm a potential husband if I can hardly stand up due to fatigue, Mother.”

Adrian hid a smile behind his hand, and turned to look out over the gardens.

“Perhaps a walk in the garden would revive your spirits, Miss Tremaine?” He made the suggestion in a tone meant to appeal to her mother, who watched them with overt suspicion. “Lady Tremaine, with your permission...”

The challenge was there between them, though only Adrian and Venetia knew it was in fact a challenge to the woman’s position and authority. Genevieve Tremaine was not only outwitted, she was severely disadvantaged by Adrian’s outwardly innocuous appearance of decorum.

“Of course,” Genevieve nodded, still visibly unsure of the proposition. “I’ll expect to see you inside very shortly, Venetia.”

“Of course,” Venetia nodded, her entire mien demure and compliant.

Lady Tremaine hovered for a moment longer, then turned and went back inside to her guests.

“You are a very wicked man, Adrian Dalton,” she noted with a small laugh.

“Thoroughly inveterate, I’m afraid,” he agreed. “Now, would you really rejoin this rather tedious ball when I’m offering you an escape?”

“An escape,” Venetia repeated, tone thoughtful. “An interesting proposition.”

“I have a much more interesting proposition in mind,” he told her, walking half a step behind her so that he had to lean close to speak the words next to her ear.

“And what might that be?”

The gardens were alive with scent and sound, soft murmurs of nature that refused to be muted despite the great city of London all around them. A vast array of night-blooming

flowers caressed the air with perfume, their shadowy colours barely visible. The bright pools of light that spilled from the lanterns poured false sunshine into the maze of smaller gardens within the large expanse. Adrian avoided the tiny alcoves where lovers trysted, and he devoted his attention to the pretty woman at his side.

Memory of Venetia Tremaine was vague, but he did know that the last time he'd seen her, she was barely thirteen, far too forward, and lacked any great beauty. Much about her had changed, and in the best of ways. She was still defiant in the face of society's restrictive limits of decorum, and he sensed a smoldering, carefully hidden wild streak lurking within her. It was that deeply-rooted and virgin passion which drew him to her.

They walked, the silvery fingers of the moonbeams lighting a path that took them deep into the garden. He was enchanted as she smiled, and allowed herself to be led. Another girl would have been protesting her modesty. Venetia, he sensed, knew that this would be the first of many such trysts, and she wanted his attention.

“You understand what we are about to begin, don't you, darling?”

She stopped walking and turned to look up at him, eyes clear, the sparkle of stars stolen from the heavens glittering in their depths. She smiled, the sun captured in the radiance of her pleasure.

“Yes, my lord, Adrian – you are about to own me as no other. We are embarking on forever this night.”

He considered her claim, her sheer brazen certainty of his hunger for her. As he accepted her truth, he smiled and drew her into the shadows...

## *Haunted*

“You haven’t left this room in days,” D’LaRoux observed when he entered the dark bedroom. His eyes pierced the shadows naturally, and he felt a wash of desolation pour over him when his look fell on the forlorn figure curled up at the window. She was dressed only in a dark shirt, one of his, and her face was turned outward to the night. The torrents of rain that pelted the glass were an echo of the tears within the lovely woman who watched the streaming waters.

She ignored his presence and his words.

Sighing inaudibly, D’LaRoux crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed, gazing at her rigid profile.

“Talk to me, my pet?” he requested.

She continued to stare at the rain.

D’LaRoux nodded, slid back over the rumpled sheets, braced his back to the wall and waited. He crossed his ankles, brushed idly at a fleck of lint on his immaculate black pants, then closed his eyes as weariness seeped through him. For several moments the silence was soothing, and welcome. He inhaled the scents of the room, so uniquely her, and his mouth unconsciously curved into a soft smile. Only the lingering traces of pain that tainted the air disturbed the tranquility of the solitude.

“Come down to the gallery,” he suggested, voice pitched low, a caress of seduction.

She didn’t answer, but she finally moved from her statue-like vigil at the window. Her legs unfolded and she rose slowly, walked to the bed, and curled into his arms. Her head rested against his chest and she took his right hand between hers, fingers tracing the heavy ring he wore.

“I’ve missed you, *bella mia*.”

Tears touched his neck as she burrowed closer to him, and his left hand smoothed over the tangle of heavy auburn hued hair that spilled down her back.

“I feel empty, Lucien...” she finally murmured.

Her voice was a rasp of sound. It had been nearly two weeks since he’d heard her speak, and the words startled him with their unexpectedness.

“...and alone,” she concluded.

He held her tighter, kissed the top of her head.

“You used to despise this type of weakness,” she quietly commented a long while later as she cradled his hand in her lap.

“I can despise nothing about you, Gianna,” he assured her in a tone that was indulgent and faintly amused. Then, more seriously, he added, “Your pain is growing with each night.”

“Do you miss him, D’LaRoux?”

He heard the fear in her voice, the reverberation of it deep within her mind and heart.

“He chose his end, Gia.”

She flinched inwardly at the harshness of his voice, then tilted her head to finally meet the brilliant blue of his gaze. The agony that tormented her shone back from the sapphire gems of his eyes, and the hard line of his mouth was the result of clenched teeth.

“He loved you,” she whispered and the tears fell from her eyes. “Through all you did to each other, he did love you, *mon bien-aimé*.”

“Why have you locked yourself up here?”

“Solitude,” she sighed and leaned on his shoulder. “I want to die, D’LaRoux. True death.”

He laughed but there was only bitterness in the sound.

“Without me?”

She moved again and he permitted her to leave his arms, watched her rise and walk back to the window.

“You can find a thousand women to warm your bed and share your nights, Lucien,” she noted with false detachment. “Why would you want one who can no longer feel?”

“I didn’t realize Vincenzo was the core of your passion, *cara*,” D’LaRoux sneered, sudden rage boiling to life inside him.

She shrugged, and the dismissal in the gesture infuriated the master vampire. He rose and left the room as silently as he’d entered it.

\* \* \*

The nightmares were terrifying visions that blurred into shadowed darkness and refused to be made whole. She tossed in her bed, her limbs trapped by the sheets as her soul was

imprisoned by the terror that now dwelt within her mind. She heard the whispers, but could discern no words. She felt the presence near her, but was unable to see past the veil of obscurity that kept the identity of the watcher a secret. All she could know was the pain, the all-consuming anguish that wracked her body, and tortured her soul.

D’LaRoux listened to her cries as he stood over her and tried to see into the netherworld that was taking her from him. He didn’t doubt that something was attempting to claim her, he simply couldn’t perceive what it was that reached for her when twilight approached. He sat on the edge of the mattress and felt her body go rigid next to him. He sensed the scream of terror a moment before it shattered the stillness of the room, and he was ready for her when she bolted upright in the bed.

D’LaRoux’s arms tightened around her and he held her firmly when she choked back a second cry and began to fight his hold.

“Lucien!!”

He grabbed her head, fingers entwined in silken red hair, and he forced her to look at him.

“Gia, I’m here, *bella*,” he soothed gently. “Shhh...”

It was the soft, coaxing tone a parent uses to comfort a frightened child, and she tried again to break his hold. As before, D’LaRoux held her, countered her fear with his immense strength. After several minutes of struggle, the fight went out of her in a single rush of air as she began to sob.

Pain emanated from her. D’LaRoux knew it was as much physical as emotional, and it was born from the horrifying vision of the dreamworld.

“Please, D’LaRoux,” she begged, voice filled with agony and entreaty. “Make the pain stop, *mon amour*. God! Make it stop...”

“Tell me how?” he mused in a low tone, his helplessness made his voice harsh with anger.

“I feel something close to us, D’LaRoux,” she told him after a long time had passed in an uneasy silence that had been broken sporadically by her cries. “Something that watches, and waits. It is not you this being wants, though.”

Vincenzo?

D’LaRoux shook off the absurdity of the thought. Vincenzo was gone, truly gone. D’LaRoux had ended his son’s life irrevocably, a single, swift strike, and his Vincenzo was no more.

“I feel tremendous pain, Lucien. Nothing more than the ache and the anger that taints it.”

D’LaRoux had no answer for her. She was stiff in his arms, muscles knotted into coils of

fear and pain. He moved, stretched her out on the bed, and began to smooth his hands over her. He began at the base of her skull, his long fingers sensitive to every tremor his touch induced. She sighed softly, relief in the sound, and his touch moved to her shoulders, caressing ever-expanding circles of peace into her body. His name slipped from her lips periodically, and he kissed her each time, a gesture of reassurance that was instinctive, and surprisingly sincere.

D'LaRoux's thoughts were divided as he rediscovered every ivory contour of his lover's curvaceous body, his hands worked their magic while his mind searched the room for resonances of the being Gianna feared so deeply. He could hear her panic echoing in his head, and see the vague, shadowy figure who loomed over her when she tried to sleep. He could distinguish an identity no better than she had.

"Lucien?"

He smiled at the breathy whisper and leaned away so she could twist onto her back. Huge grey eyes stared at him, the sheen of crimson tears faint on her cheeks. Her desire was blatant when she drew her knees up and spread her thighs. His body's response was equally evident. He kissed her lightly, stood, quickly shed his clothes, then settled back on the bed. The long length of his body covered hers, and her arms went around him as she arched upward and he slid into her warmth. Their rhythm was easy and natural as they made love and exchanged blood with exquisite gentleness.

For a short time, fear was banished and the only emotion that filled Gianna's heart was the joy of D'LaRoux's possession. Each stroke of his hips, and every teasing bite of his fangs sent her soul into the light that existed only in his arms. His blood thrummed in her veins, and she knew he now felt the same ecstasy she'd always known with him -- D'LaRoux loved her now as he had never before loved her. She pulled his mouth from her neck and covered his lips in a kiss that lasted forever. Long after their passion was sated they remained locked in the oral caress, tongues entwined as they clung together.

The shadow emerged silently and stood at the foot of the bed. Unseen eyes scanned the tangled limbs of the lovers as they kissed, oblivious to anything but their desperate hunger for each other.

He felt the love that bound them, and it made him hesitate.

*Could D'LaRoux be capable of the love that permeated the murky bedroom?*

*<Would you rather he died alone?>*

A second shadow took shape beside the first.

*She has always loved him too much.*

*<So did you.>*

*He gave me death.*

*<He gives her life.>*

*She knows I've been watching her.*

*<And it's been making her doubt her sanity.>*

*I want to help her.*

*<Then leave her to the life she has, to the one who gives her the reason for her being. She can't survive without him, Enzo.>*

*She won't survive with him.*

*<That's her choice to make. You asked him to free you so we could be together. He loved you enough to do what you asked, so accept his gift.>*

*You're defending D'LaRoux?*

*<You're destroying her, Enzo. Can't you see that? Every time you come here, you fill her with pain.>*

*And he fills her with happiness.*

*<Let him go. Let her be with him.>*

“They were here, Lucien,” Gianna murmured into his neck as she snuggled closer to her lover.

D'LaRoux pulled her across his hips and held her face between his palms. His thumbs traced the gentle slopes of her cheekbones, then brushed over her lips before he eased her down to meet his kiss.

“Do you know who has haunted you, pet?”

She smiled, sat up, and idly caressed the satiny hollows defined by his hipbones.

“You think it was Vincenzo,” she concluded.

“And he was not alone.”

She raised an eyebrow and her skepticism made him laugh quietly.

“Enzo's *ghost* has haunted me?” she queried, her tone filled with amused disbelief. “He

would have no reason to seek me, *mon bien-aimé*.”

“He loved you, too, in his way, Gianna,” D’LaRoux assured her seriously. “He has never been happy to acknowledge your devotion to me, my pet.”

“If that were true, why so much pain, D’LaRoux?”

Ocean blue eyes regarded her with rare candour, their azure depths sparkling as though the sun itself radiated from inside him.

“Because love is often intimately acquainted with pain, Gia. Vincenzo knew better than most what sacrifices it commands. It’s why he took Elissa with him into true death. She begged him to free her, because she could not bear to live without him. She knew I would destroy him for his last betrayal of us.”

“The harshest alchemy,” she smiled sadly. “You teach too well, my beloved master. Vincenzo often demanded that you let him go, yet in the end it was he who could not release you.” She grinned suddenly and his eyebrow rose in question. “You are a difficult addiction to escape.”

“Even in death?” he smiled.

“Oh, particularly then,” she teased.

D’LaRoux’s laughter was a balm to her troubled spirit, and she curled back into his arms, her palm over his heart as her head rested against his shoulder.

“How do you feel, Gianna?”

It was a reflective enquiry and she hesitated, then reached into the shadows of the room. There was no ghost present, no phantom flinging pain into her heart and body, and no terror to threaten her mind.

“No longer haunted.”

Satisfied, D’LaRoux kissed her forehead and covered her hand with his.

Outside the sun began its path across the sky, and the shadows faded from the world...

## *Eternity Awaits*

He felt her anguish washing over him in waves, each new torrent of grief like the power of a tide battering his mind. He watched her from concealment, as he had for weeks, and wondered when the raw power of her grief would begin to ease. He'd been observing this woman for what felt like years; in truth it had only been a little over a month. Each night his obsession, and his hunger, grew within him.

*How long had it been since any woman had called to him like this?* He searched his vast memory and found no answer.

Lady Rebecca D'Angeaux, wife of the late Lord Bernard D'Angeaux.

He'd met them briefly at one of the gala events of the season. He attended many grand parties, and they all ran together in his mind, but that night had been different. The Duke of Cornwall had introduced his daughter to society that night, and relatives near and far had arrived to attend the lavish ball. Lady Rebecca was a distant cousin, he had later learned.

So, for the first time in many years, the Comte Gerard des Montagne had been smitten by a mere woman. He hardly believed it himself. He had thought about Rebecca with all the passionate ardor of a boy smitten for the first time. The absurdity didn't escape him, but it remained in spite of his efforts to forget her. She haunted him; her pale, flawless skin, her flaxen fair hair, the soft cadence of her voice... Even the faint whisper of her scent, lavender and wildflowers, was like a drug to him.

He had attempted to lure her with his wealth; lavished gifts upon her; arranged chance meetings that would allow him to be in her presence. She rebuffed him every time, gently but firmly stating that she was married; and it became increasingly clear that she was a rarity among noblewomen, she truly loved her husband and would not betray the vows that bound them.

Gerard hadn't any choice. He'd had to eliminate his rival for her affection.

Lord D'Angeaux's death, his brutal murder, had sent shockwaves of terror through the aristocracy. At his funeral, the frail and shattered widow had collapsed into the arms of her brother. Gerard had wished in that moment that his jealousy had been sated in a manner less painful to her. It passed quickly.

Now, she was alone in the cemetery. She came every evening at dusk, when she could be alone. She would kneel at the graveside; sometimes she read poetry, other times she simply wept.

And Gerard would bear witness to her agony, hidden in the shadows, lusting for her even as he sought a way to offer comfort to her pain. Tonight, he decided he had waited long enough to claim his prize, and he stepped from behind the towering tombstone that had hidden him from her view.

\* \* \*

She rose slowly, and began to look around, sensing a change in the air. Her eyes searched the thickening darkness, driven by a perverse mixture of anxiety and curiosity. For a moment, she could detect nothing. A cool breeze caressed her skin, and she shivered against the damp night air as a whisper of movement drew her gaze. Immediately the darkness lost some of its depth. Shadows dispersed, and he stepped into the pale radiance of the moon's light.

Tall and thin, he dressed in a flowing black cape and rich clothes. She knew him, but couldn't see clearly enough to recognize him. As if he heard her thought, he moved closer, and she stared. The severe blackness of his dress was broken by the stark white of frothy lace at his throat and cuffs. That contrasting whiteness of the shirt was repeated in his hair, streaks of shimmering silver glinted in the moonlight, and softly shaggy hair framed a fine-boned, aristocratic face. His skin was milky and had a translucent quality to it. His mouth was well shaped and generous. The narrow, aquiline nose and high cheekbones gave him an unmistakable hauteur. But, it was his eyes that dominated striking features, blue as the morning sky, his eyes seemed lit with twin fires burning within them. And they compelled submission from anyone who looked into their endless depths.

Rebecca gasped audibly, unprepared for the wave of weakness that threatened to overwhelm her. Deep in her mind she knew she should be screaming for aid. Fear had been dulled by an intense, escalating thrill of excitement. This was Gerard des Montagne, a man who had pursued her relentlessly.

His piercing eyes held her gaze, seeming to draw her soul from her. She was unable to resist the alluring, intense presence.

“Are you afraid?”

This time she noticed the hint of accent that textured his voice. He walked toward her, graceful in his motion. He lit the lamp that he carried and false warmth cast weak golden fingers of light into the shadows. He set the lamp aside and slipped off his cloak to place it over her shoulders. Suddenly, the wind howled in fury and she gasped as it whipped against her gown, clawing at her as though some animal sought to pull her away from the enigmatic Comte. She stumbled as she tried to back away, and her foot hit a stone and sent her tumbling into blackness...

When her awareness returned, Rebecca was in a well-appointed chamber, and he stood at the foot of the bed, watching her. The cry of the wind had escalated, but now its haunted and sorrowful music caught at her heart, evoking a painfully familiar loneliness

inside her.

“Why?” She heard the small, tremulous word she spoke, yet felt as though someone else had uttered the breathy question.

“You know why. I am your slave, Lady Rebecca.”

The silky richness of his voice brought a ripple of sensual awareness into her mind. He smiled, a ghost of mocking arrogance in the unfathomable depths of his eyes. He lifted her hand to his lips. Instead of the light caress she was anticipating, he pressed his mouth to the soft skin of her wrist. The cool firmness of his kiss raised a wild, searing pang of desire within her. The fierce pounding of her heart began anew, but there was no longer fear inside her.

She was confused, disoriented. Almost instantly her eyes were drawn back to the man before her—and everything beyond him suddenly ceased to exist.

A sigh escaped her lips when his tongue touched the throbbing pulse at the base of her hand, and lingered persuasively there. Her breathing was ragged when finally she reached out to touch the fair head. He looked up and the blue eyes that blazed back at her were alive with hunger. The force of that need flooded into her eager mind and found itself twinned.

She smiled, an expression suddenly wild with abandon and burning passion. She moved into his arms without hesitation, consumed by the inferno that raged within his eyes. Tears glided along the contours of her cheeks and she almost sobbed as he pulled her across him and sat up. The lacy shirt he wore had been torn open and she pressed herself against the smoothness of his exposed skin. She shook her head in agonized protest when he eased her back. Her breaths were broken rasps now as her eyes begged him to end the exquisite agony he had aroused in her. Languid warmth seeped into her mind and she moaned softly. Her lips trailed soft kisses along his neck, and she pressed against him with renewed urgency.

“We will be together forever, my love,” he breathed into her ear.

The words, meant to reassure, sent ice coursing through her veins, followed instantly by shame. She tried to pull away from him, but he refused to permit her escape.

“No!”

For moments that hung suspended in time, she fought him. Without warning, he released her and she scrambled back until she hit the wall.

“You killed him, didn’t you?” It made no sense. Yet she knew it to be true.

“Yes. Because I can give you everything he couldn’t.”

“You’re a monster.” Her voice was barely audible, but it had the impact of a shriek.

For endless minutes they stared at each other, the impasse a terrible chasm that would not be breached. In those moments, he seemed to read her soul... and his visage reflected the fury her defiance woke...

The coldness of death descended on the room again. He leapt toward her, reaching for her. He jerked her head to one side and her scream died in her throat as sharp fangs were savagely buried in her soft, exposed flesh. The room careened wildly in her fading vision, and her cries quickly became feeble whimpers. Then they, too, began to drift into silence. Her death would come slowly, though, after all his hungers had been sated. He had waited long enough, and would have his prize, however resisting she was initially.

\* \* \*

The emptiness of the bedchamber settled over him as the hours passed, a shroud of calm that belied the turmoil of anger and loss that plagued the ancient vampire. His head felt disturbingly light as he rose and the momentary dizziness was a shock to him. He closed his eyes briefly, forced his mind and body to familiar controlled discipline.

It was over.

Gerard looked again at the beautiful woman on the bed, and the tremors that suddenly wracked his tall frame appalled and frightened him.

Rebecca.

Dead.

It was inconceivable.

It was true.

And he had been the instrument of destruction.

He had killed the woman he adored.

The guilt was a surprise.

He accepted it.

The well-known tingle of warning told him dawn was rapidly approaching, yet he was loath to leave the room where he had at last held her close to him. Some deeper part of him acknowledged that he really had no place to go. The thought nagged at his consciousness and irritated him further.

For a time he had been prepared to simply leave and find a new life. Why should it be any

different now?

His eyes drifted back to Rebecca. Her hatred and her fear hung in the air like a vile odor, offending his senses. Her revulsion of what he had offered her rang in his ears, condemning him.

The first rays of sunlight were visible at the sides of the protected windows of his home. Gerard stared at the brilliant sliver of white fire, his gaze transfixed. He walked toward the window, his hand reaching for and finding the latch that would spring open the shutters.

As he stood a few feet from the eastern facing window, he lifted the latch. The heavy wooden panels creaked faintly as they began to part, and his mouth curved into a speculative smile as the shutters began to spread like unfurling wings.

Gerard, the ninth Comte des Montange, poised on the edge of forever in so many ways, remained immobile as he watched the stain of lethal sunshine begin to reach inward...

He moved to step forward, into the searing radiance of the sun. A hand clamped down on his shoulder, fingers like talons biting into sinew and muscle. Startled, he turned, and froze for the first time in almost a thousand years as he met the eyes of a demon wearing Rebecca's face...

She smiled, eyes glowing fiercely scarlet with blood lust... and he knew he was now facing a threat greater than the sun itself... he was face to face with the wrath of a woman betrayed and abused... and she *would* be appeased... Her fingers dug deeper into his flesh and she yanked him toward her...

## *Cold Wind in the Night*

Locked in her hellish nightmare, the laughter continued to swell, growing ever louder. Insistent and inescapable, it fanned outward until it filled the room, becoming a presence in itself. The very darkness seemed to press down on the restless woman who tossed fitfully upon the large, moonlit bed. Malignant and oppressive, the blackness bore down, choking her. She fought the suffocating sensation, gasping for the air her tormented body craved.

A scream rose from deep within her, and lodged itself in her throat. The murky shadows began to fall away, gradually becoming dull shades of grey. And the silence was finally broken by her weak, strangled cry.

Her eyes flew open and flooded with reactive tears. Her shaking breaths dragged air into lungs that ached painfully. Trembling hands rose to push back dark tangles of clinging curls, as she fought for composure.

Slowly the pounding of her heart eased enough for her to hear beyond it. Then she became aware of the icy stillness of the room. And the sense of a presence that did not belong.

Her lover's name formed in her mind, but her voice was lost to her. Unreasoning terror forbade motion. Closing her eyes, she forced herself to breathe, steady, calming breaths.

“Tessa?”

The voice was sensuously soft and lilting, completely unknown to her.

Ice invaded her blood, and again her vocal cords refused to respond. Dread-filled silence hung in the air around her, spilling into every part of the room as it held her transfixed and terrified.

“Querida,” the voice murmured provocatively.

The endearment brought a piercing flood of warmth to her numbed mind. She opened her eyes, driven by a perverse mixture of anxiety and curiosity. For a moment, her eyes detected nothing. The air stirred by the open window and the whisper of movement there inexorably drew her gaze. Immediately the darkness lost some of its depth. Shadows dispersed, and he stepped into the pale radiance of the moon's light.

Tall and thin, he dressed in a flowing black cape and clothes that whispered of another place and time. The severe blackness of his dress was broken by the stark white of frothy lace at his throat and cuffs. That contrasting whiteness was repeated in his hair, almost

shimmering silver bathed in the glow of the room's eerie light. The softly shaggy hair framed a fine-boned, aristocratic face. His skin was milky and had a translucent quality to it. His mouth was well shaped and generous. The narrow, aquiline nose and high cheekbones gave him an unmistakable hauteur. But, it was his eyes that dominated striking features, blue as the morning sky, his eyes seemed lit with twin fires burning within them. And they compelled submission from anyone who looked into their endless depths.

Tessa gasped audibly, unprepared for the wave of weakness that threatened to overwhelm her. Deep in her mind she knew she should be screaming for aid. Fear had been dulled by an intense, escalating thrill of excitement.

The pale eyes held her gaze, seeming to draw her soul from her. She was unable, to resist the alluring, intense presence.

“Are you afraid?”

This time she noticed the hint of accent that textured his voice. He walked toward her, graceful in his motion, then sat down on the edge of the bed, the stillness eased out of the room's frozen atmosphere. The cry of the wind was no longer muted, now its haunted and sorrowful music caught at her heart, evoking an old loneliness inside her.

“Who are you?” She heard the small, tremulous words she spoke, yet they felt as though someone else had uttered them.

“Your devoted slave.”

The silky richness of his voice brought a ripple of sensual awareness into her mind. He smiled, a ghost of mocking arrogance in the unfathomable darkness of his eyes. He lifted her hand to his lips. Instead of the light caress she was anticipating, he pressed his mouth to the soft skin of her wrist. The cool firmness of his kiss raised a wild, searing pang of desire within her. The fierce pounding of her heart began anew, but there was no longer fear inside her.

She was confused, disoriented. Almost instantly her eyes were drawn back to the man before her -- and everything beyond him suddenly ceased to exist.

A sigh escaped her lips when his tongue touched the throbbing pulse at the base of her hand, and lingered persuasively there. Her breathing was ragged when finally she reached out to touch the fair head. He looked up and the blue eyes that blazed back at her were alive with hunger. The force of that need flooded into her eager mind and found itself twinned.

She smiled, an expression suddenly wild with abandon and burning passion. She moved into his arms without hesitation, consumed by the inferno that raged within his eyes. Tears slid from her eyes and she almost sobbed as he pulled her across him and sat up. The lacy shirt he wore had been torn open and she pressed herself against the

smoothness of his exposed skin. She shook her head in agonized protest when he eased her back. Her breaths were broken rasps now as her eyes begged him to end the exquisite agony he had aroused in her. A languid warmth seeped into her mind and she moaned softly. Her lips trailed soft kisses along his neck, and she pressed against him with renewed urgency.

Without warning the hypnotic hold on her mind released her, and the spell of desire shattered. The coldness of death descended on the room again. He jerked her head to one side and her scream died in her throat as sharp fangs were savagely buried in her soft, exposed flesh. The room careened wildly in her fading vision, and her cries quickly became feeble whimpers. Then they, too, drifted into silence. He vanished, a cold wind passing through the night....

## *Because I Am Yours...*

I am sitting here, and my thoughts have wandered to Italy... to you, and what it would be like to be there with you... I'm smiling now because I know you are already wondering just what you'd be walking into when you came home from work – you'd never really know, would you? That would be part of the fun, because I'd still send you messages during the day telling you how sexy you are, and how I can't wait to see you... and touch you... how hot and wet I get thinking about having you inside me...

So... let's play the fantasy that will one day be real...

You arrive home after another of the endlessly long days you work, but this time, you know I'm waiting for you... wanting to surprise and seduce you... and I will do both.

So, the door opens and you are home. I will greet you with a kiss and tell you how much I've missed you today – because I will always miss you in the hours when you are not with me. I pour a glass of wine and tell you to relax while you check the mail, but while you are doing that, I am already planning what I will do when I have you naked... and it won't be very long before that happens. While you read your messages, I will rub your shoulders and ease the tension that has settled into your muscles. Of course, while I do that I will also be telling you what I am going to do next, so you really won't relax very much at all, will you?

Once you have decided that reading the mail is useless, I will suggest that you let me take you to bed. I don't think you will object. I take your hands and walk with you to the bed, but make you stand while I begin to remove each piece of clothing you are wearing. I love the feel of your skin, the tastes and textures of it... there are such beautiful places to touch you... the hollow at the base of your throat... when my tongue plays over that spot, you will feel it, my darling... All the way to your cock...

Let me run my hands along your sides, scratching so softly with the tips of my fingernails... Sending shivers through you... piece by piece until all you have on is the sexy black briefs that are not really enough to cover you at this moment... your eyes close when my hand traces the solid ridge of your dick pressing against the softness of the fabric.... and when I kiss your chest, and put my head against you, I can hear the beat of your heart, quicker now because you have no idea what is coming next, only that you want it....

I push you back onto the bed and finish undressing you, freeing your beautiful dick to my kiss... I lick the weeping tip and finally crawl over you so I can kiss you, deeply and with the full force of this passion you inspire in me.... I want you, *tesoro mio* - I always want you... you are like a drug that I have become addicted to, and I do adore you.... While I tell you just how much I need you, I tell you to close your eyes.... to let me do

what I want to do with you. You are smiling now, but agree. I tie your hands so you cannot touch me - and tell you to sit up, with your back to the wall. Then I tell you to watch what I will do next.

Piece by piece I will remove my clothes now.... while you smile at me, your handsome face telling me you are enjoying this as much as I am. I lick my fingers and touch my nipples, tracing them until they are wet and hard.... then I will show you my new toys.... the smooth little vibrator, and the plastic dick you once told me I should buy.... I tell you to spread your legs, then I sit on the bed to face you, and put my legs over yours so you can't move, just watch. I know it excites you to see this little vibrator slipping in and out of my wet pussy, the hum of it as I let it quiver against my clit until the orgasm hits me and makes me shudder with pleasure. I am wide open to your view, we have no secrets... and I can see your pleasure, as well as hear the rasp of your breathing, tight with excitement, and anticipation...

Now it's your turn, and I will crawl forward, so that I can take your cock into my mouth and enjoy it. But what if I take the vibrator, still wet from my body, and slide it very carefully into your ass while I suck you? Can you imagine how it will feel? This vibrating, sliding in out of you while my tongue licks you, all over.... soft one moment, harder the next.... Should I leave the plastic dick quivering inside you while I sit across your hips and hold your dick in my hands, stroking slowly... while you try to breathe? I think I will leave it there, the rise of your hips is telling me how good it feels..... so, I can climb across your gorgeous body and put your dick into my dripping pussy while I ease you down onto your back and lie with you. If I close my legs you are so deep inside me, held so tight... we can stay like this until it's unbearable, *amore mio*.... until we have to move because nothing else matters....

Every night we can find a new way to love and a new experience to share.... I want you, my sexy darling – like I have never wanted any other man.... Do you want to live these things with me??? Now you have another secret no one else has ever known about me.... I have given you another fantasy I have never spoken of to anyone else.... because I am yours...

## *Ancient Magic*

The air is scented lightly with the sheer agelessness of this world. The twilight colours of the sky paint a pattern that echoes the voices of Gods and heroes upon my heart, bewitching an imagination that is easily filled with wonders and magics. Stars wink, the playful flirtatiousness of Zeus, perhaps? Or the watchful eyes of the wrathful Hera?

I came here, alone, lost. In this timeless place of myth and legend; home of the mighty Gods of a past that reaches across all barriers to become the reality of my spirit.

Ares, proud and defiant; harbinger of doom, death, and perverse seduction. A War God, symbol of all that I abhor. Yet, I cannot deny his allure.

Aphrodite, sensual temptress, paragon of beauty and passion. The lingering memory that is inborn to all women who accept their truest natures.

The fierce demi-god, Hercules; Champion of the people, despite his own all too human weaknesses. Bound by honour, to be revered by all who walk this world after him; this was a man who embraced his destiny and did all that was demanded of him.

Wicked Dionysus, who indulged the weaknesses of mortal men, and laughed as only the Gods could.

Artemis... Hephaestus... Poseidon... Hades... Apollo... Athena...

My mind reels with the stories, the possibilities.

And among this splendour, this vast, enchanting world, he smiles for me; and I know that I would trade none of that Ancient sorcery for these precious hours in his company.

My dream walks at my side in this Greek island paradise. The deepening night is not dark enough to cast the nightshade of his hair into formless shadow. His smile is the sun, and my heart races to see it.

He holds out his hand to me, beckons me into his orbit; a place that feels more like home than any place I have ever known.

The touch of his fingers as they curl around mine creates a warmth that floods into my veins; Ambrosia of the soul—the Gods themselves could have possessed nothing as sweet.

In the distance, the lilting reverberations of music; tempos at once wild and melodious.

“How long do you want to stay?”

*Forever*, my mind whispers. “Tonight is long enough,” answers the part of me which demands no less than honesty.

He stops, stares intently at me; measuring truth against longing. Silently, he draws me closer, and turns toward the ocean waters. The azure depths have grown ebony now, the reflected glory of the heavens dancing on the tips of shore-bound waves that lap gently at the sands. On the glittering surface of the eternal vastness of the sea, pale silver moonlight illuminates a path that leads to another place and time.

“I feel like the Gods are striving to seduce us into Olympus,” I murmured, entranced by the vista before us. Grey eyes are dark, unfathomable as the depths of Poseidon’s domain when I look up at him.

His smile, a breath of curve to his lips, is enigmatic and erotic. The brush of his hands skimming the contours of my arms as he draws me against him makes me shiver.

“Are you cold?”

I laugh, he knows better; it’s in his voice. He knows that his very presence is the cause of my tremors. That I am held captive by the smooth, soft cadence of his tones, the silk of his shoulder-length hair, the supple strength in his slender muscles. But, mostly, my heart aches for his love.

“You’re a romantic,” he teased, with profound gentleness.

“You’ve known that from the moment we met,” I answered. “Before we met.”

He nodded, and leaned closer, placed a feather-like kiss on my forehead. Then, I felt the languid sway of his body as he began to draw me into a dance.

Breathing deeply, I sent a prayer to the divine Goddess of Love. Long minutes later, when he lowered his lips to mine, I knew she’d heard me; and answered my heart’s deepest desire...

He loves me, too. Forever just might be one night, but with this man, it can be enough.

## *Pipe Dreams*

Jill Boyd stared out at the winding driveway that led into her secluded cabin property, her stomach twitchy as she considered cancelling the service call she'd made only an hour earlier. Buying the cabin had been the fulfillment of a dream when she'd first found the place. Now, it wasn't so much a dream, as an excuse to indulge in a secret fantasy. The second week after she'd moved in, she'd had to call a plumber to fix the ancient pipes. One of the residents in the nearby town had recommended Silverwolf Plumbing and Heating. What they had failed to mention at the time was the owner of the company, and Jill had soon discovered that the heart and soul of Silverwolf, was the man himself.

Shane Silverwolf... Just the mental whisper of his name made her tingle in anticipation of his presence. Assuming he'd come again himself, and not send one of his employees to see what was falling apart this time. She'd become a regular customer in the past six months, and most of the time he was the one who showed up when she called. The first time she'd seen him had been the most pleasant shock of her life. Shane was the walking dream man she'd been writing about for most of her adulthood. Unlike her stunning heroines, though, Jill wasn't witty and charming, or irresistible to the men she encountered.

Pulling the mental image of Shane into focus wasn't a difficult task, he was with her most of the time anyway in her heart. But, the vision was hard to ignore when it wanted to be looked at, and she allowed herself the familiar indulgence. At six-feet-three inches tall, Shane towered over her less than five and half foot height. He was pure-bred Native American, with the glossy blue-black hair of his ancestors, and the most incredible ebony eyes she'd ever seen. High cheekbones contoured his face, and there was sensuality to the curve of his mouth that made her long to know just how sweet his kiss might be.

She was jolted back to awareness by the roar of an engine and stepped back from the upstairs window the instant a van pulled up in front of the cabin. The snarling silver-grey wolf on the side of the truck heralded the arrival of the plumber.

*But who would it be?*

Jill ignored the mocking internal voice and went to answer the knock at her door.

Dragging in a deep, steadying breath, Jill pulled open the heavy oak panel that was the entrance to her home. Somewhere between her mouth and her brain a short-circuit occurred and she stared. Shane's face split into a teasing grin.

"Don't look so surprised to see me, Jill," he drawled, "you called this morning."

Swallowing back the lump that was firmly lodged in her throat, Jill smiled weakly. “It’s been a long day already, Shane.”

For a moment he was thoughtful, his sharp eyes scanning her features with clear concern.

“You okay, baby?” He asked the question softly, his voice like the brush of roughened velvet over cool marble.

Jill wanted to melt into a puddle at his feel, but given that was both impossible and impractical, she shrugged and offered him a small laugh. “Yeah, I’m okay, Shane. Just tired.”

He held her gaze for a moment longer, then nodded. “Where’s the leak this time, honey?”

“Bathroom.” As he walked past her, she shook her head. How could it be so easy to be near him, but never be able to actually express herself?

Following him through the spacious living room that encompassed most of the main floor, Jill watched the play of muscles as he walked, perfectly at home in her space.

“You’re going to have let me get a crew in here, Jill,” Shane told her as he entered the bathroom and took a good look at the leaking, ancient faucets on her vanity basin. There was a second leak under the flush-box, as well. The pile of wet towels there testified to that. “This whole place needs serious work, honey.”

“And I need serious money for that kind of project, Shane,” she replied with very mild censure. “We’ve talked about this before. I can’t afford to have the plumbing redone for the entire cabin.”

“You keep calling me out here like this, and you’re gonna spend just as much in the end anyway, Jill.” He was stretching out on the floor as he was talking, and his gaze glanced toward her for a moment. “I don’t mind coming out here; I just hate taking your money for things I know are only patch jobs.”

“Can you do anything with this?” She indicated the basin and its taps.

He laughed. “I’ll have to replace them. It’s almost noon, so why don’t I fix the leak under the tank there, pick up new gear for the basin, and come back?”

She nodded and drifted off when he went straight to work and pretty much ignored her presence.

While she contemplated the blank page that was the computer screen, she tried not to be aware of every sound he made as he worked, occasionally cursing softly when something

didn't go exactly as it should. She was finally able to deafen herself to him and begin working on a new chapter of her current novel when his voice jolted her so badly she actually gasped.

"Jill! Can you come in here for a minute, honey?"

She saved her file and was in the bathroom doorway in about twenty seconds.

"Get me a bucket," he ordered. "I have to pull this shit apart and there's gonna be water everywhere even after you turn it off."

She turned and went to cut the water, then collected a bucket to bring back to him.

"Hang onto the faucet base while I pull things free down here," Shane requested the instant she returned.

He was sprawled across the floor and the only way to get near the vanity was to step over him so that she was standing with her feet against his hips on both sides, then she leaned in to grasp the fixture.

"Have you got it, Jill?"

"Yes."

She almost lost her balance when he pulled hard on something under the sink and her grip on the taps slipped. Water sprayed, very cold water, and she was sputtering as she tried desperately to get a solid hold on the fixture again.

"Got it," Shane mumbled with obvious triumph, and he started to slide out from under the vanity. He got halfway before he had to stop or risk toppling Jill. "You can let go now, honey."

She did, with a gasp, and stumbled back, groping for a towel. Shane stood up, then touched her arm to steady her.

"I'll get this cleaned up for you when I come back, Jill," he said when she was looking at him again, the towel still clutched in her hands.

She nodded. "Thanks. Can I fix you lunch after you're done?"

He grinned. "Sounds great. I'll take a run into town and pick up the gear I need, and will be back as quick as I can."

\* \* \*

When he was safely in his truck, Shane crossed his arms over the steering wheel and let a long-suppressed groan escape him. He should have sent someone else to do the repair,

he knew that. But, the thought of seeing Jill was a lure he couldn't resist. When he'd slid out from under the vanity to see her standing over him, her baggy shirt plastered to her skin, he was sure she'd see the sudden strain in the front of his jeans. It has taken all his control not to stare at the thrusting nipples that crested her shapely breasts. Jill Boyd was a pretty woman, in a very down-to-earth, wholly natural way. She seldom bothered with make-up that he'd seen, wore casual clothes with elegance that was simply part of her nature. She was shapely, in a curvaceous, utterly feminine way, though she appeared almost ignorant to her appeal.

Jill's hair was the color of mahogany, with burnished copper highlights. Her eyes were dark blue, and when she laughed it was like being kissed by liquid sunshine. Shane had wanted her the moment he'd first heard that sweet, pure happiness, but she maintained distance from everyone, preferring her own company for the most part.

Some part of Shane knew how she'd feel against him. When he was alone in his bed at night, he thought about Jill. How her small, perfect breasts would fill his hands, and her generous curves would fit the long lines of his body like she was made to belong to him. He'd never fantasized about a woman in his adult years, until Jill. Most of the time he didn't have to create a dream, a surprising number of women were more than happy to make him offers. If it had been his nature, he'd get laid by a different woman every night of the week. But none of them would be the woman he really wanted to make love to, so he kept his self-imposed celibacy. The last woman he'd been with had been his wife, and their divorce had been final over a year and half earlier.

Shane took a last look at the closed front door of the cabin, then jabbed the key into the ignition and pulled away, mentally chastising himself for being a complete idiot.

\* \* \*

An hour after he'd left, there was still no sign of Shane returning. Disappointed much more than she should be, Jill left the kitchen and went to look out the front windows again. As before, the driveway stood empty. She hugged herself and paced for a few minutes, torn between frustration and the restless longing that always plagued her mood when Shane had been to her home.

She'd changed into a soft, silky sweater and plain denim skirt. Her heavy mane of waist-length hair had been swept into a tidy coil, and she'd even gone as far as applying a little mascara and shadow to accentuate her wide-set eyes. She now felt like a foolish sixteen year old in the throes of her first crush. Try as she might to ignore it, every part of her thrummed with energy, the kind of energy that was born purely in sexual need.

Sighing, she went upstairs and into her bedroom to change again into her usual sweats. She might as well be comfortable. Shane would be back eventually, but there was no way to know when. She was passing the mirror on her way to the closet when she stopped and looked closely at her reflection. The woman in the glass was vividly alive, the spark in her eyes bright with emotion. She was almost pretty, she conceded silently.

Her gaze moved lower, to the front of her pale peach sweater. It was a snug fit, but not tight, and it outlined the soft swell of her breasts, and the visible buds of her very hard nipples. She touched the rigid tips, her fingers a brush of movement over the cashmere wool of her top. She seldom wore a bra, there was no need for one with her small breasts. She peeled off the sweater, tossed it into a nearby chair and looked at herself again. As she caressed her sensitive breasts and tugged on the distended nipples she imagined Shane's beautiful long fingers playing over her flesh.

She wet her fingers and stroked circles of touch around her nipples, pinching gently, then pulling a little harder as she closed her eyes and pretended the tugging sensation was caused by Shane's mouth, suckling and nipping the tender tips. Falling into the familiar fantasy, Jill unzipped her skirt and let it drop to the floor, then she stepped out of it. She kicked her shoes off and looked at the woman in the mirror again. She wore nothing but lacy underwear now, and between her thighs the steady throb of hunger was seeping wetness into the flimsy silk that covered her.

Jill turned her back on the reflection and went to the bedside table, taking out the sex toy that had been purchased by a friend who loved to torment her about her torrid romances and the lack of any real romance in her life. She'd been mortified when Georgia had sent it, but curiosity had compelled her to actually use it the first time. She didn't take it out often, but more and more, thoughts of Shane sent her for it.

She sat in the center of the bed and contemplated the ridiculous pink dildo for several minutes, all the while squeezing her breasts and caressing them until her nipples felt like they were going to burst. She settled back onto the pillows and wriggled free of her panties. Then she ran her fingers through the damp tangle of silky hair at the juncture of her thighs, spreading her legs wide as she encountered slick, wet heat. The sound of her fingers sliding into her dripping channel was exciting, and she started a slow, steady rhythm of thrusting, stopping occasionally to tease the pulsing bud of her clit.

She picked up the dildo and pushed it into her hungry body, thrusting hard and deep. The effect was amazing, and she closed her eyes while she created the image of Shane's incredible body over hers, his hard length driving into her. Her hips answered the vision inside her head and she was lost, her body striving for desperate release.

\* \* \*

Shane went up the stairs cautiously, genuinely curious about why she hadn't answered his knock. She got involved with her work, and some times didn't hear. That had happened before. He'd let himself in and let her know he was back when that occurred. He was about to call out when he saw the partly closed bedroom door, and heard the soft moans and sounds of sex. For a moment he thought his rage would blind him, then through the sudden pounding of his heart, he heard Jill's voice saying his name.

He walked the last few steps and dared to look inside. His cock felt like it was going to split the front of his jeans when he saw her on the bed, legs spread wide, a dildo moving in and out of her dripping pussy so fast that he wondered for a moment if she was

hurting herself.

“Shane...”

It was a frantic whisper and every nerve in his body responded to it. He knew he should walk away and never let her know he'd seen her, but all his mind would focus on was the desperate need to replace the dildo with his dick, and show her how good the real thing could be. He pulled his t-shirt over his head, tossed it, and went to work on the rest of his clothes. When he pushed open the door to her bedroom, he was fully naked, and stroking his rigid cock as he walked to the bed.

Jill's hips were thrusting upward, well into the rhythm of her hand moving between her thighs. When she moaned his name again as she reached her peak, Shane's fingers closed around her wrist and stopped the motion. Her eyes flew open and she stared at him in dazed shock.

“I'm right here, baby,” he whispered, barely recognizing the thick rasp of his voice.

Jill gazed at him and beyond the shock he could see the absolute thrill she was feeling at being caught, by him. He pulled the dildo from her body and she opened her arms to him. He tossed aside the toy, and settled between her legs, sliding up and into her with a suddenness that made her hips rise from the bed and her spine arch.

She felt incredible, like a tight vise of molten heat rippling around the thick length of his swollen shaft. He pulled out, drove deeper into her again, and she locked her legs around his waist, pushing upward against him as he started to pound into her with a force that was brutal in its frenzied desperation. Much too soon he was spilling into her, and she was almost screaming his name as she convulsed around his shuddering cock, clutching him so tight it almost hurt. It was the sweetest pain he'd ever felt, and he didn't care how long it went on.

\* \* \*

When Shane slid off her and collapsed on his back, still breathing heavily, Jill shivered violently at the loss of contact. Now that it was over, she found herself unable to look at him. She was halfway into sitting up to leave the bed when Shane's hand on her arm made her look back at him.

The concern and worry in his dark gaze was impossible to miss, and she wasn't up to pretending.

“Its okay, Shane,” she murmured. “This was my fault, not yours.”

His eyebrows rose and he looked at her in what could only be described as stunned disbelief.

“I wanted this from the day we met, Jill,” he told her, tone quiet and thoughtful. “I think

it would have been better if we'd had a chance to plan it a little, but I sure as hell won't tell you I'm not happy about it."

"Shane," she sighed and continued, "you don't have to say nice things because we've just had a roll in the hay." She pulled away from him and escaped his hold with no effort at all. Somehow that lack of objection from him made her feel even worse.

"Where are you going?"

She stopped halfway across the room. "To take a shower."

He laughed. "There's no water, sweetheart. I have to finish the job you asked me to do."

She wasn't sure, but for an instant she thought she heard bitterness in his beautiful voice.

"How long will it take?"

He pushed himself off the bed and gathered his clothes, dressing while she watched, utterly without self-consciousness about his body. Then again, she mused, why would he be ill at ease with a body that was perfect. When he was dressed and she was still stark naked, she felt even more like crawling into a hole and dying.

Shane looked at her again for several moments, his ebony eyes unsettled and dangerous. She shivered inwardly, a flicker of warning telling her there was a storm brewing inside the handsome man in front of her. A storm that was going to toss her onto the rocks of her own foolhardiness before too much time passed.

In less than an hour, Shane found her in the kitchen, sipping coffee. She heard him, but didn't know how close he was until he had her pinned to the countertop she'd been leaning on. He pressed tightly to her and the solid ridge of his erection nestled between the rounded cheeks of her ass. His hands glided under the loose shirt she'd put on and she spilled her coffee when he cupped her breasts in his hands and started kneading her flesh. She put the coffee mug on the countertop and gripped the smooth, cool edge.

"Shane...?"

"Do you know how many times I wanted to do this?" He growled in her ear. "I dream about this when I'm in my bed, baby. I fantasize about what it would be like to suck your lush little tits, and the taste of your pussy, and how fucking good it would feel to drive my cock so far into you that you can't think about anything else for days."

The whole time he spoke, he was tugging her nipples, and squeezing her breasts. His hips pushed into her and she was helpless to stop any of it. He stepped back long enough to turn her to face him, then his hands moved again, lifting her skirt so he could delve into her panties.

“How wet are you now, Jill?” He answered his own gasping query when his fingers pushed aside the crotch of her panties and plundered her seeping channel, the slick wet sound loud in the stillness of the kitchen.

“Tell me you don’t want me, baby.”

He started gently rubbing her clit and she moaned softly. Moments later an explosive orgasm rocked her and she fell against the broad wall of his chest, gasping and crying. Shane’s arms went around her and held her, his soft, purring voice soothing both her fears and the aftershocks of sensation that still shook her.

Finally, she eased away just enough to look up into his eyes. The anger wasn’t lurking there anymore, it had been replaced by loving warmth. He smiled, and held her head between his hands as he bent to cover her lips with a kiss that promised her everything she’d ever dreamed about, and more. It was a long time before he drew back and she smiled up at him.

“That was the first time you kissed me.”

“I plan to kiss you a lot more before we go to sleep,” he assured her.

“Shane, this is crazy. You don’t have to stay because of what happened.”

The glitter of anger flickered in his eyes again for a moment, then he smiled. “I have one more call to make, then I’ll be back here. We’re going to have dinner, and talk.” He kissed her again, a slow, sensuous caress that explored the recesses of her mouth and provoked her into a sweet, exotic duel with his probing tongue. “Once you know I’m here because it’s what we both want, then we’re going to make love properly,” he whispered, his mouth still so close she felt his words as much as she heard them. “I’ve dreamed about making love to you, Jill. That’s not what just happened, and I’m sorry about that.”

She touched his mouth and silenced him. “I can’t believe you’re saying things like this to me, Shane.”

“Why?”

He looked genuinely puzzled and she smiled, the expression self-deprecating.

“Honestly?”

He nodded, his eyes never losing contact with her gaze.

“Guys like you have ignored me my whole life.”

“Guys like me?”

“Yes,” she repeated firmly. “The tall, dark, seriously sexy type.”

He grinned. “Nice. I like that. But I’m not a type, honey. I’m just a guy who wants to know the woman he’s falling in love with.”

“Love?” She shook her head. “Don’t start saying things you’re likely to regret, Shane.”

“I don’t,” he assured her, bending to steal another kiss from her lips before she could continue. When he finally drew back, he laughed, visibly pleased by the no doubt dopey look on her face. “The water’s back on, take a bath, relax, and I’ll be back as soon as I can get the rest of the afternoon’s calls reassigned.”

\* \* \*

Relax!

Jill was about as relaxed as a tightly strung crossbow...

She peered at the reflection in the mirror and tried not to scream her frustration. Shane’s hour was almost up and she’d discarded virtually every decent outfit she owned as not sexy enough... not pretty enough... not whatever enough... She was presently dressed in the last decent dress she owned, a pretty indigo blue silk number with a full, flowing skirt cut with a jagged hemline and a daring plunged neckline. On the right woman it would have been gorgeous. To Jill, she looked ridiculously desperate to create an illusion of sexy appeal.

She was about to strip down again when the doorbell rang and her heart tried to escape her chest. She cast a last disdainful glance at the mirror, grabbed her shoes, and ran down the stairs. She was just wiggling her toes into the silver high heels when the bell sounded again. A quick twist of the knob and the door swung open. Her heart did another wild pirouette inside her and she stared, not quite gaping, but close enough to make Shane’s contoured features split into a teasing grin.

She couldn’t help the sense of shock.

He was even more devastating to her nerves when he wasn’t in his casual work clothes. The man standing in the doorway was like a bronzed God from legend. Shane had obviously been home as well as to the office. His jeans and t-shirt had been replaced by form-fitting black pants, and a pale blue shirt that was open at the throat to expose tanned skin. His glossy black hair was tied at the nape, and silver arrowheads dangled from his ears, two on one side, and a third on the other.

“You gonna let me in, baby?”

Biting back a nervous quip, she stepped aside and let him into the cabin. When she gave the door a push and it settled firmly in place, she turned to look at him again. He handed her a single red rose, and leaned forward to kiss her forehead.

“You look beautiful, Jill.” He smiled. “You always look beautiful. I don’t think you realize that, though.”

“I’m starting to feel beautiful around you, Shane.”

“Have you got any wine?”

She nodded.

“Good, I’ll be right back.”

He went out the door while she went to take a bottle from the rack in the kitchen, and headed into her small dining room to find he was already back from his car. He was taking plates from her china cabinet and she smiled at how right it felt to have him in her home, so much at ease. Like he really did belong here. *Maybe he does?* She ignored the whisper in her head and went to get some candles. Before long they were seated at the table, and Shane was smiling at her over the dancing candle flames.

“What made you move to a little place like this, Jill?”

“I wanted to be away from the city. I always wanted to have a mountain cabin getaway, or a ranch. This was the compromise I made, close enough to a town not to be out in the middle of nowhere, but still isolated enough to give me some peace.” She picked up her wine and sipped. “What about you?”

Shane shrugged. “I was born in this town. Went to school in Chicago, hated it, and came back.”

“That’s it?” She was skeptical.

He put down his glass and pushed aside his plate, leaning forward to meet her gaze. “I came home, got married, started my business, and planned a life that didn’t quite work out the way it was supposed to.”

“You’re married.” She thought the words would choke her, but she forced them past her suddenly parched throat anyway.

“Divorced. Over a year ago.”

“Why would anyone divorce you?”

The question fell between them, and Jill was mortified. Shane looked at her for several seconds, then his laughter trembled in the space between them, slowly expanding until she was laughing with him.

“I think I do love you, Jillian Boyd,” he said after he’d wiped the tears from his eyes. “You make me feel like the most wanted man alive.”

“I just can’t imagine any woman wanting to send you away. All I’ve been able to think about was how nice it would be to keep you around.”

He grinned. “Like a favorite pet?”

She made a face at him. “Yeah, pet... Like a wolf... A wild, unpredictable animal.”

“Wolves mate for life, baby, and that’s what I’m banking on here.” He stood up and came around the table to pull her into his arms. “I want you. For life.”

Shane’s whispered words were like a soft breath of air touching Jill’s face as he leaned forward to cover her lips with a tender kiss. Jill moved into the caress with a desperate gasp. She clung to Shane as his tongue slipped into her mouth with a possessive hunger she instantly matched.

Shane tightened the hold, molding her body to his with a thrust of his hips. His hands ran through Jill’s hair then slid over the smooth curve of her back. He felt the edge of the heavy table against his knuckles when his hands cupped her ass and pressed her tighter into him.

Jill broke the intense kiss and her head fell back as a sigh of relief and pleasure slipped from her as a low murmur of sound. She wrapped her arms around Shane’s neck, then buried her face against his broad shoulder. She smiled at the slight hoarseness she heard in Shane’s breathing already, then shuddered when Shane’s hands undid the knot at the nape of her neck and her dress slid down to expose her naked breasts to his touch. She tried to step back, only to find she was trapped by the table behind her.

Jill arched her back into his embrace and let her fingers smooth over broad shoulders, then slip lower to begin opening the buttons of Shane’s shirt. She wanted the feel of his skin against hers, and he wasn’t hurrying about getting undressed. Her fingers clutched at the shirt when he leaned over her, pressing her back to lie on the hard surface of the tabletop. She gasped when he broke their kiss and his lips moved to her throat.

Shane’s tongue played in the hollow of Jill’s throat, feeling her shaky breaths, then he continued his trek downward. He felt the ripples of reaction in her body and let his hands move to her hips in gentle restraint as his lips teased over one taut nipple. His teeth closed on the hard tip and Jill arched in response to the caress, a tiny moan escaping her when he began to suck on the sensitive nipple. Another shudder shook Jill when his hand moved under the skirt of her dress and began to tug at her panties.

Shane drew back enough to look down into Jill’s face, softened by passion and the flickering shadows generated by the fire burning in the adjoining room. Dazed blue eyes stared up at him, and the unconcealed passion he read in her expression made him shiver.

“We’re not really going to do this on the table, are we?” Jill asked, both her grin and her voice decidedly shaky.

Shane let his fingers brush over the insides of her thighs, enjoying the sudden catch in her breath. “You got any other suggestions?” he teased.

Jill managed to push up on her elbows and she gazed at Shane with glowing eyes. “How about my bed?”

“We’ll work on your sense of adventure later,” Shane remarked with a laugh. He hooked his fingers in the waistband of her panties and eased them down the length of her legs.

Shane’s eyes closed briefly as he tried to quiet the pounding of his heartbeat. The effort was lost when he gazed down at Jill again, and he lowered his lips to her mouth in a caress that was filled with passion and promise. His hands brushed over the smooth, flawless skin of Jill’s body, lingering along the curve of her hips before dipping between her spread thighs.

Jill squirmed on the solid surface of the table, and shook her head in protest at the gentle restraint when Shane’s hands closed on her wrists and held them against the wood. “No...” The objection died on her lips when Shane’s mouth trailed across the curving plane of her stomach before his tongue slid between the weeping folds between her legs. She gave up on any effort to gain her freedom as her body moved into the waves of euphoric pleasure Shane was creating within her.

Blissful ecstasy arced through Jill’s body as Shane’s tongue probed into her, then he began to suck the hypersensitive bud of her clit. Her hands clutched the silken darkness of his hair as her hips bucked. Jill’s head fell back, and she was completely oblivious to the thud of her skull hitting the oak tabletop. She was too caught up in the spasms of passion exploding throughout her body. Minutes later, Shane’s hands moved to hold her hips as release shuddered through her. His name was lost in a ragged cry as Jill’s fingers tangled in his hair.

Very slowly, Shane released her and used the tabletop to support himself as he stared down into her flushed features. Tremors still ran through her supple body, and Shane grinned at the slightly parted lips that curved into a shadow of smile as she tried to get her breath back. Jill’s eyes opened slowly and she held out her hand; Shane took it and pulled her up and into his arms, holding on with fierce strength.

It was a long time before Jill stirred in the embrace and eased back to look into his dark eyes. She traced the curve of Shane’s mouth with her fingertips, then pulled him forward to meet her kiss. He melted into the caress with a soft moan, and Jill let her hands begin to wander. She was fully aware of the shivers of reaction her touch was creating, and she eased back to stare at him, expression thoughtful.

“Get undressed and fix the fire,” she whispered with a grin, and pulled out of his embrace. “I’ll be right back.”

By the time Jill returned, the fire was blazing with new energy, and Shane was sitting in front of the hearth, wine glass in hand. His clothes had been tossed on the couch. He watched Jill with undisguised appreciation as she unfurled the plush blanket she’d

retrieved from the bedroom, then dropped into a cross-legged seat in the middle of the blanket. Shane set his drink on the stone hearth, and stretched out next to her.

“Do you really intend for us to sleep on the floor tonight, baby?”

“We’ll work on your sense of adventure later, Shane.” She laughed, then pulled his head down to hers.

His smile was lost in the thrust of Jill’s tongue as she arched into an embrace that had them molded together in a single motion. He rolled slowly until Jill was pressed against the soft cushion of carpeting and blanket. He was slightly disoriented a minute later when she pulled back with a shake of her head and quickly reversed their positions. Jill climbed across his hips and sat up.

“Tell me what you’d really like right now?”

“I don’t want you to do anything except what you want to do,” he replied, an old hurt haunting him at the worst possible moment.

“I want to give you whatever you want,” she stated, her eyes repeating the simple honesty when she smiled down at him.

He took her hands and closed them over his erection, his breath escaping in a hiss of delight when she started stroking the rigid length. When she bent over him and guided him into her mouth his entire body shook in reaction.

Shane’s hand raked through the heavy thickness of her hair, and smoothed over her back as he closed his eyes and let his body absorb every soft, gentle touch of her loving. His chest heaved with the growing effort to breathe, and he was aching with desire. He shuddered moments later when she really started sucking his cock. Her tongue ran the length of his straining shaft, and he couldn’t suppress a responsive moan at the pleasure that spasmed through his whole body.

Jill’s teeth whispered over the rigid shaft in a barely perceptible touch, and his hips thrust upward in response to the caress, filling her mouth again. She sucked the shaft deep into her throat and continued running her tongue over the hard length. He shuddered again when she released him and moved lower to caress taut balls with her tongue as her fingertips slipped behind them to stroke the sensitive skin there.

Shane arched into the touch as another wave of passion swept through him, and he finally eased her away to pull her back into his arms.

“Is that what you wanted me to do?”

He nodded. “My wife... She’d never...”

Jill put a finger to his lips and shook her head. “Anything you want, Shane,” she whispered.

“I mean that.”

“All I want is to make love with you, Jill. Every night for the rest of my life.”

“Why don’t we just concentrate on tonight,” she suggested. “Then we’ll worry about the rest of our lives?”

If he was going to make any objection, it got lost in a low groan of agonized pleasure when Jill shifted position and guided his throbbing cock into her wet heat. She sat up and Shane surrendered himself to the pleasure of watching her writhe over him as she rose and fell in sensual frenzy, taking them both into an abyss of explosive, perfect bliss...

## *Rage... And Vengeance...*

*Rage.*

*Not anger...*

*Or annoyance...*

*Plain and simple rage.*

It burned through her, fired her veins until she felt her blood would boil and her skin would smoulder. A distant, calm and rational part of her mind insisted she was overreacting— again. She wasn't in the mood to listen, even to her own good sense. This was becoming the most tiresome and intolerable situation of her life, but it was costing in such vast ways that it couldn't be dismissed, despite her desire to do precisely that. If it hadn't been doing so much genuinely serious damage, it could have been ludicrous.

She fumed in silence as she walked the dark streets of Toronto. Everywhere she looked she spotted some reminder, some small and insignificant symbol of his presence in her world. His presence, and that of the bitch he'd joined forces with in his effort to destroy her life and her reputation.

Hilary Davenport was a highly respected criminologist and teacher. She was also a first class novelist who was enjoying the success of a string of best-selling mystery books. Her temporary residence in Toronto was due to the fact that she was currently lecturing at the city's largest University. That's where she'd first met the woman who'd quickly become the bane of her existence. She had several more weeks to fulfil her contract with the University, and what had begun as a joyous engagement was ending in something dark and insidious. She was getting an '*up-close-and-personal*' look at the workings of a twisted mind. Unfortunately, her understanding of the criminal psychology reminded her all too clearly of the futility of attempting to deal with the couple in a reasonable fashion.

Kenneth and Mirabelle Cartier had been married within a month of Hilary's introducing them. She'd been happy that they'd found each other, and was secretly pleased that she'd helped in some small way to ease two people's loneliness. Then the trouble started. They'd arrived home from their honeymoon, and quietly went to work trying to discredit her. It wasn't overly difficult to spot the motivation, Mirabelle wanted Hilary's position; whether or not she possessed the experience to make herself a viable replacement didn't seem to concern the newlyweds.

Hilary sighed as she stopped at an intersection and waited for the 'walk' light to change. The frosty night air was doing nothing to cool her temper. She seethed all the more as she permitted Kenneth's face to momentarily fill her mind's eye. They'd been friends for how many years? At least a dozen, she calculated. A dozen years, undone in a matter of weeks. Hilary couldn't decide whether it was overactive hormones, a mid-life crisis, or simply a sudden glitch in Ken's mental systems, but he'd become a stranger to her. A stranger she'd

cheerfully throttle, given a chance or an opportunity to do it without getting caught.

As the light changed and she crossed the street, Hilary smiled. Plotting anyone's demise wasn't something she did on a regular basis. She reserved those thoughts for her mystery novels, and the intricacies of the crimes she created, then solved, on paper, for millions of avid readers. She was so engrossed in her dark thoughts, she didn't spot the man who was stepping into the street from a dimly lit building. Hilary walked straight into him, cursed under her breath, then looked up.

"I'm very sorry," she gasped softly, her manners making the social amenity of an apology automatic. When he made no attempt to answer her, she looked closer and her gaze suddenly riveted to the tall stranger. The cold air seemed balmy when compared to the ice in his unflinching stare, but something about those glittering blue eyes reached inside her and re-ignited the inferno of her rage. Or, was it something else that seared her senses when he slowly smiled down at her?

"I should have been more aware."

She shivered, the response involuntary. It had nothing to do with the night. His voice poured into her like rich Brandy, the stroke of his tone resonant, a caress without touch.

"It's me, really," she stammered, and winced inwardly at the tremor of her voice. It was the cold, she lied to herself. She didn't believe it, but she fervently hoped he did. "I've been walking around in a daze all night. I'm surprised you're the only one I've all but run down." Her smile was self-deprecating, and she took a step back, instinctively placing a small distance between them. His presence was overwhelming, and gave the impression nothing existed outside of his immediate sphere of being.

"You shouldn't be walking alone at night, Miss...?"

She relaxed, smiled up into his eyes as one finely arched eyebrow completed his polite enquiry. He was quite striking, she noted absently. Tall, slender, sharp-eyed, and soft-spoken. His mouth looked almost too inviting as his lips curved into a smile that was both mocking and charming, despite the disparity of the two responses.

"Davenport," she supplied without thought. "Hilary Davenport." She glanced at the building he'd just left, and her curiosity was piqued. The distinctive logo of NITE Radio was easily spotted, and a furtive look at the watch she wore on her left index finger told her exactly how late it was. She knew who stood before her, his voice should have been unmistakable to her ears. "You're *The Visionary*, aren't you?" she grinned. "Your show is considered one of the hottest things around, at least on the University campus."

"Thank you." The two words dripped with pure mocking amusement.

"I am sorry for almost running you down," Hilary repeated a moment later, and began to ease further back from him. "You're right, it's late, and I really should be getting back to my apartment."

“I’ll walk with you,” he suggested and fell into step beside her before she could protest.

“There’s really no need,” she objected. A flutter of fear woke inside her, inexplicable and unnervingly intense.

“Would you rather walk alone?” he questioned, his tone deliberately bland.

“I don’t even know your name,” she whispered, astounded by the stupidity of the remark. As if knowing his name would make a difference if he was some sort of depraved nut. She’d listened to his show numerous times, and this was one personality she simply couldn’t begin to dissect. She hadn’t decided if he was a total fruitcake, or merely delusional on a grand scale. He talked in riddles, and terrorized with that silken, hypnotic voice of his.

“LeRoux,” he informed her with another of those quirky half-smiles. “And, I assure you, Miss Davenport, I am neither a fruitcake, nor delusional.” She flushed scarlet, and the rise in body heat accelerated her heartbeat. When his eyes dropped to the inviting pulse at the side of her neck, Hilary had the definite conviction LeRoux heard the erratic pounding inside her chest. She shook off the ridiculous whimsy and tried to pull her thoughts into some kind of order.

“How did you know what I was...” Her words trailed into an awkward silence and she tried a second time to compose her shaken nerves before making another attempt. “I’m sorry, again. It’s just that you never know what sort of nut is running about.” She sighed heavily. “Oh, shit!” she muttered to herself. “I’m not saying anything right tonight.”

“Stop trying so hard,” LeRoux advised with a low laugh.

They walked in silence for a few minutes.

“Why are you so angry, Hilary?”

“What?” She was startled out of her brooding reverie, and stopped their steps to look up at him.

“Your rage is like a cloud hanging over you,” LeRoux observed softly. His eyes raked over her shivering form, unconsciously assessed her strength. She was of average height, the top of her head near his shoulder. She had short, dark hair, and equally dark eyes. She was not beautiful, nor was she plain. Intelligence shone in the inky eyes that spit invisible daggers as she glared up at him. He could feel her enticing heat even with the space that separated them.

“I’ve got my reasons for being pissed off, Mr. LeRoux,” she snarled. “They don’t concern you.”

“The rage you feel demands vengeance,” he said with a casual shrug.

“That sounds like something you’d say to one of your weird callers,” she retorted impulsively.

LeRoux smiled again, indifferent to her provocation.

“Why are you afraid to admit you hunger for blood tonight?” he asked when they had resumed their walk.

“I’m a teacher, not a killer,” she told him, her tone pointed. “Although, at the moment, it’s a fine-line distinction.”

“Betrayal is a potent motivator.”

“How in hell do you know what I’m thinking?”

“Your mind is clear, concise in thought pattern. You’re easily read,” LeRoux said, sounding bored with the conversation.

The ripple of fear returned to haunt her, and Hilary had the fleeting impression of countless deaths in this man’s history. A stark, horrifying image of him, covered in gore and smiling, sprang into her mind. She stumbled back as she recognized the distended teeth that dripped crimson blood, and the feral eyes lit by inhuman hunger. She would have fallen, but LeRoux’s hand on her arm prevented the fall. She stared up at him, and saw only deep blue eyes and even, very human teeth framed by lips that looked warm and alluring as they curved into an amused smile.

“Who the hell are you?” she murmured, dazed and quivering.

“Your avenging angel,” he whispered.

She watched, perversely fascinated, snared like a butterfly pinned to a board, as his sapphire eyes flared and mutated into glowing fire. His smile revealed razor-edged fangs, and a low growl rumbled in his chest when he bent to kiss her throat.

“Jesus! You are nuts!” she shrieked, and pushed him away with a strength born of pure panic.

LeRoux’s laughter was dark, and dangerous. He released his hold on her arm, but she remained helplessly trapped by his gaze.

“You want vengeance, I can give you the power to do as you wish, and not suffer the consequences you fear.”

“Why?” She fidgeted, and berated herself for being a total moron for buying his line.

“Because I feel like it,” he shrugged. “Your honest rage is refreshing, even if your fear is monotonous.”

“You’re unbelievable,” she breathed in wonder. “You are a vampire, aren’t you?” She ignored the leap of abject terror that threatened to empty her stomach on the spot.

LeRoux’s eyes bored into her until she trembled violently.

“Do you enjoy your life, Hilary?”

“Not much, no,” she admitted. “Not enough to want forever.”

LeRoux’s smile grew softer, sensual. “I could teach you to want eternity, Hilary. Eternity, and a great many other things.”

*I’ll bet you could!* she thought with a sudden, unwelcome jolt of awareness. She did not want to want this guy! she told herself repeatedly. She also realised she was lying to herself again.

“How angry are you?”

She considered it honestly. “I’ve been fighting my life for months, struggling to gain some control of what’s happening around me. It’s useless. The poison’s gone too deep. To be frank with you, I don’t see a helluva lot of point to anything anymore.”

The silence grew, encompassed them for an infinity of minutes as LeRoux’s eyes filled her vision, drew her irresistibly inward. Slowly, she leaned closer to him, sighed as his mouth brushed hers. She tilted her head back, scanned the diamond studded sky above them, and clung to him when the stars exploded into a million pinpoints of glittering brilliance...

\* \* \*

“Why, LeRoux?”

The master vampire smiled and leaned back in his seat. He studied the younger man with interest, felt the waves of anger that emanated from the former Valenti, and the uncertainty that had driven Vittorio to seek him out again.

“You’ll have to be a little more specific, Vittorio,” he finally answered, his smile reflecting more amusement when Valenti speared him with a look of scowling annoyance.

“You know who’s responsible, don’t you?”

“It’s a personal matter, Vittorio,” he said casually. “I suggest you let it be.”

“Two people are dead, LeRoux,” Vito stated quietly. “It’s my job to find out who killed them.”

“And what will you do then, Vittorio?” LeRoux wondered. “Will you arrest one of us? That

might be a bit tricky, wouldn't you think?"

"Who?"

"I don't think that's any of your business."

"LeRoux!"

LeRoux moved, rose with graceful, eerie swiftness. He stood before Vito, their gazes locked intently.

"Vengeance, dear boy, is between the victim and the fool who believes himself capable of playing God with another's life. That lesson is one none of us forgets."

Vito wanted to deny his master's words, but the truth was something he honoured too deeply. Time hung suspended, and minutes dragged as the intangible challenge filled the small space between them. Eventually, Vito walked away. He stopped at the door of the studio, then spoke without glancing back.

"If this was vengeance, then it ends with these deaths?"

LeRoux hesitated until Valenti was forced to look at him again. "Of course, Vittorio," he assured softly, a hint of mocking laughter in his tone.

Vito wanted to push him into a promise, but he knew it would never happen. No one pushed LeRoux, and it wouldn't matter anyway, the master vampire was not the one who had killed the couple. He gave LeRoux a curt nod and left the radio station.

\* \* \*

LeRoux settled into his chair and fingered the control panel for a moment before he flicked a switch and leaned toward the microphone. As he spoke, he smiled at the woman who stood with her back to the door, her dark, glowing eyes filled with adoration and anticipation. She'd be an interesting diversion, for awhile.

"Do you feel safe out there, gentle listeners? Are you sure there's no one lurking in the blackness of your conscience, waiting for you? Are your secrets hidden well enough?" he purred seductively. "Be careful out there, boys and girls. The night is unforgiving, a place of cold... and darkness... filled with rage... and vengeance..."

## *Anticipation*

The heat of the day wasn't cooling fast enough, and she was in desperate need of a change of scenery. Familiar sounds droned in the background, and the air was heavy with moisture, heat, and fragrance from the flower boxes in the neighborhood. Life had a softer rhythm in New Orleans, one that she'd grown to love. Evening was chasing the sundown and the shadows were reaching across the city, darkness breathing chillier air into the heat-waves, calming them into quiescence.

She went into the bedroom of her small flat and flung open the closet door, surveying her options for a dress that suited her mood. She had a special date tonight, and wanted it to be perfect. Her smile was slow and thoughtful, something she couldn't repress. She'd never been *lucky* in love, but somehow Fate had given her another chance, with a man who was easily the most remarkable person she'd ever met. They'd been friends for almost a year, they had only been dating for a couple of weeks, and it was an unspoken understanding between them that the pace would be slow—neither of them was prepared to risk losing the relationship they had.

The shimmer of red satin caught her eye, and she pulled out the strapless dress. It was simple, gathered at the waist, a softly flowing skirt with slits on the sides. Comfortable, but also very chic. She tossed it onto the bed and went to the chest of drawers. A quick search turned up the lacy black stockings she'd bought ages ago for one of the dates she never went on. Even if he never saw the sexy underwear she was going to put on, it would make her feel beautiful... something she'd rarely felt in her life.

Humming softly she headed for the bathroom and decided on a scented bath instead of a quick shower. She hit play on the CD system before she dropped her clothes and headed to the bathtub... the sounds of smooth, sultry jazz drifted into the room after her and she closed her eyes as the silken water caressed her. She indulged herself in the pleasant idyll for forty-five minutes, and then dressed. She finished the outfit with lovely red heels, and left her auburn hair flowing in waves down her back—heat or not, it was easier than trying to contain it in any kind of style. Minimal makeup, and a spritz of scent on her bare shoulders was the last touch. A glance at the clock told her she had fifteen minutes to get to the club where she'd arranged to meet him.

Jazz clubs were among the most prolific and popular aspects of New Orleans, each one of them unique, but also sharing inherent similarities. The music—rich, pulsing, sensual rhythms that told stories to those who really listened—was as intrinsic to the city as the laid-back pace and culture that merged to make it a place unlike any other. She straightened the silk scarf that was on one shoulder, and went inside, smiling without real thought. Her eyes adjusted quickly, and she looked toward the bar.

“Looking for someone?”

Startled a great deal more than she should have been, she whirled to face him, and laughed when she saw he was smiling broadly at her. When his gaze slid over her, heat flushed through her veins and left her shaking. He took his time, appraising her with blatant hunger, and she'd never felt more beautiful in her life than when his dazzling blue eyes once again locked with hers.

"You look more beautiful every time I see you, *mon amour*," he breathed in a tone of unabashed appreciation.

She blushed, unable to stop the response, and reached up to touch the side of his face, knowing there was little need to even attempt a reply. In that moment, the world narrowed until it was encompassed totally in the blue eyes that watched her. How could she have known him for so long and not noticed how devastatingly handsome he was? It seemed impossible to recall that until recently they'd seen each other as friends only, and now they were taking a huge risk, hoping that love's many faces could merge into a perfect blend between their hearts.

Music throbbed in the air, slowly washing over them, the steady pulse magically matching the rhythm of the jazz beat. Rémy's sapphire stare darkened and he took her hands and drew her onto the dance floor. She followed, her smile growing with each step they took. She shivered in the moment it took for him to pull her closer, when their bodies met, she bit back a sigh, but knew he'd heard it anyway when a low growl sounded next to her ear, and mutated into laughter that poured into her veins and slid along her spine like silk. She almost purred with pleasure.

"Don't think," he murmured smoothly, "just feel the music, and the night."

"And you," she whispered before leaning into him and allowing everything to fade into the background. All that existed was Rémy, and the surge of wild excitement she felt in his arms. She leaned into him; let the slow rhythm of his movement draw her into his very soul. The scent of his skin was intoxicating, the feel of smooth muscles pressed to her sent endless ripples of heat tingling along her veins, and the sultry pulse of the music drummed in her ears like a racing heartbeat. All that was missing was the taste of his kiss...

Rémy heard her thought, or so it seemed. His hand slid into her hair, and he gently drew her head from his shoulder, just far enough to look into her eyes. They were still moving, but his smoldering gaze was locked with hers for an eternity of moments before he bent his head to hers. For just an instant, all she was aware of was the soft curve of his lips as he smiled before he covered her mouth with his. His kiss was slow and gentle, exploring and teasing as they experienced their first taste of each other. When he finally ended the kiss and they stared at each other in bemused surprise, he laughed a little.

"I've wanted to do that for a long time, *ma cher*."

"What else have you wanted to do?"

His grin created a minor earthquake inside her and heat rose in her cheeks. She knew he'd seen it when he pulled her tightly to him and the rumble of his laughter was all she could hear.

“Anticipation is everything, *mon amour*... enjoy it.”

Sighing, she nodded, and knew it would be more than worth the wait...

## *Behold, My Rahve*

She watched him, eyes caressing with a combination of hunger and adoration, her heartbeat tapping like the staccato rhythm of stiletto heels on a sidewalk. She suspected he could hear the erratic pulse of her life, but he didn't move, not even to glance in her direction. She leaned on the doorframe, permitted her dreams to venture forth and speak within her mind. He was a remarkable male, handsome like so many of his kind, but also different from them. In this one power and passion seethed just below the surface, contained by the force of his will, and a need to remain apart. All of the knowledge she should not have began to coalesce and make itself known inside her, and with each new piece of the puzzle her heart became his possession.

Despite the warning that told her this was not a male to be casually examined, she continued to process the influx of responses that were lighting a trail of fire along the course of her veins. That she wanted him was of little consequence, that was a given, or she wouldn't have been there at all. The complexity of his presence was a drug, an addiction pleading to be fed. He could have owned her soul without expending more effort than it took to gaze at her, but he chose to stand back and allow her the freedom to choose her dreams, and control the destiny she would live because of it.

The air around them was a living thing, warm, sinuous, caressing heightened senses with promises and threats that were equally alluring. With him, a thing as simple as a kiss would be layered in mysteries that required answers drawn from the soul. And he would know how to extract what he wanted, from her mind, her body, and the heart that now beat in steady reply to his.

He finally turned to look at her, and she shuddered at the impact of his eyes. Amethyst gemstones, but beyond the brilliance of his intellect there was fire and fury. A flame that burned inside him, searing all it touched, purging the ugliness of lies, leaving only the naked truth to be gazed upon. In those brief, life-spanning moments, he saw all there was to know in her, and in the next heartbeats it was judged and understood.

He leaned back in his chair for a moment, his jewelled gaze speculative. After a minute he rose and walked toward her. Each step that brought him closer made her feel as though a blanket was being wrapped around her, enveloping her in warmth that was rapidly becoming heated desire. He stopped, just short of touching her, and the corners of his mouth curved upward, a whisper of smile reaching his eyes.

“Why are you here?”

His voice poured over her senses, the richly timbered bass textured with seduction and curiosity. She straightened and still had to look up at him, but words were lost in the tide of longing that was crashing over her in battering waves. She stared at him,

entranced by everything about him. He touched her cheek, a breath of contact, and she felt the quiver of response tingle to the core of her being. Surprise flickered in his eyes, followed by satisfaction. She knew, in that single moment he had read it all...claimed what was already his, and made the choice to keep it.

He bent to touch her forehead to his, and smiled.

“Why are you here?”

She opened her mouth and he claimed her lips, the slow stroke of his tongue gaining entrance as she sighed into his touch. Inside her head, the world became a rush of sensual fireworks, her body as alive and captivated as her mind had been moments before. All that existed was the madness he lit inside her, the hunger to be consumed by him. And, in spite of the paradox, with the promise of his possession came the certainty that Fate had just righted a lifetime of wrongs.

When he drew back endless moments later, she smiled up at him, trembling against him.

“Behold, my Rahve...”

His smile dazzled her, and the warm ring of his laughter fell over her like summer rain, washing away the past terrors of her world, cleansing a life and a heart, making them worthy of him...worthy of love itself.

## *And How Was Your Day?*

“And how was your day?”

Deanna Carlisle turned at the sound of his voice, the smile beyond her control, instinctive response to the softly modulated purr of his tone. She loved his voice. When he spoke to her there was a difference to the pitch, subtle, but there, designed to reach that part of her that belonged to him, and only him. She enjoyed being Vittorio D’Angelo’s woman, more than she would have ever believed possible.

They’d known each other for several years, but it was only the past few months that had changed the dynamics of their relationship from business acquaintances who flirted and laughed together to passionate and sometimes battling lovers. Vittorio was a strong, intelligence, enigmatic man. He had secrets that she was smart enough not to challenge or question, but she was completely aware of them.

“Just another day,” she murmured in response to his question. He stopped behind her, hands resting lightly on her shoulders as he looked at the computer screen in front of her.

“Productive?”

She shrugged. “Not bad. I can think of things I’d have rather spent the day doing.”

He laughed, she felt the rumble he was so close to her.

“What would you rather have been doing?”

“Fucking you for real, not just on paper...”

He laughed quietly and leaned closer, hands gliding over the silky camisole until he was cupping her breasts and caressing just the way she liked it.

“Tell me more?”

“We have a party to go to in about twenty minutes,” she reminded him.

“That gives us ten minutes to spare.”

She stood up and turned to face him.

“We could be fashionably late?”

“We could,” he agreed. “What have you got in mind?”

“You tell me.”

“It’s your fantasy, baby.”

“Pick out a dress for me,” she suggested, laughing a little. “One that makes the women hate me and the men want to fuck me—the way they know you will before the night is over.”

Smiling, he went to the closet and considered the array of classy clothes that were there. He chose the proverbial little black dress, except this one had no sides, only lacing that criss-crossed from mid-thigh to under her arm – and would make it apparent at a glance that there was nothing but the shimmering silk covering equally smooth skin.

He offered it to her and she grinned.

“You want them all to know, don’t you?” She tossed the dress on the bed and turned to face him. “All in black, honey – classy, and sexy – the way the women love you.”

He walked to the edge of the bed and smiled down at her, pushing a loose strap off her shoulder and baring her breast.

“Lick my nipples, baby,” she whispered. “I want you to suck my tits.”

He slid the second strap down her arms and let the silk puddle around her waist as he cupped her beautiful breasts and suckled gently, licking first, nipping with his teeth, then sucking intently, moving from one to the other repeatedly.

“We have less than fifteen minutes,” she gasped when he pushed her onto the bed and grabbed her ankles, spreading her legs wide.

“We’re going to be late,” he declared, his voice revealing the strain of repressed lust.

“How late?” Her hips rose off the mattress when he buried two fingers in her wet pussy and started a rapid rhythm, fucking her with his fingers.

“I don’t think we’ll be too late, baby,” he replied. “Just long enough to get you really wet and wanting before we leave....”

Her hips rose, pushing into his thrusting fingers, and within moments she moaned loudly, the orgasm hitting her hard, his name like a prayer spilling from her lips.... He eased free of her and bent to kiss her stomach.

“Party time, angel,” he reminded her. “We’ll save the good stuff for later...”

“What if I want the *good stuff* now?”

His laughter was infectious. “Imagine how much better it’ll be when we get this party over with?”

“Are we taking our car, or have you hired a limo again?”

“Limo.” He grinned at her as he started to strip out of his casual pants and shirt. “I remember what happened the last time we went to one of these parties, I think it’s safer if we let someone else drive.”

She pulled the dress on, and went to brush her heavy mane of auburn hair. Her makeup generally took about five minutes, it was always minimal. She started to tie her hair up into a knot and he shook his head.

“Leave it, I like it that way. Natural.”

She dropped the brush and turned to eye him.

“So, are you telling me you want me to suck your cock once we’re safely in the back of the limo?”

He tucked his pristine white shirt into his pants and zipped, then reached for the tie. “I live in hope, baby,” he replied.

“Hope should always be rewarded.”

He laughed. “And do you plan to reward me?”

She tilted her head to one side and smiled, her tongue darting out to lick her lips. “Why don’t you think of a way to persuade me?”

“I’ll fuck you at the party,” he whispered next to her ear as he walked past her and leaned close. “Now, let’s go, the car is waiting.”

She started laughing softly and followed him to the door, which he held open for her, smile solidly in place as she passed through it ahead of him.

“How is the new book coming?” He asked once they were in the limo.

He was sincerely interested in her new career, and she was flattered. He had contacts in the publishing world, and he’d offered to open doors for her when she’d agreed to leave a lucrative advertising agency to live with him. Restless and bored when he was away, she’d started to write, and quickly discovered a talent for it. He read every word she wrote, and critiqued it with an honesty he rarely accorded anyone – he was far too used to dealing with game-players and liars, he’d gotten very good at winning. Deanna had gotten past the armour, and was one of the rare people he was always at ease with, and

always honest to.

“I think it’s good,” she replied with a shrug. “I’m enjoying it.”

“Then it’s good,” he nodded. She smiled, pleased with his certainty, and he gestured for her to sit with him, not across from him. She slipped into his arms and relaxed, curled into his embrace with utter trust.

Ten minutes later they were entering the palatial villa of their nearest neighbour on the small Caribbean Island. Vittorio owned about half the space on the tropical paradise, and most of the other inhabitants were either running from legal troubles or escaping the potential threats that resulted from dealing with the wrong people. They all had too much money, too much time to be bored, and too much arrogance to make any of them truly likeable people. Half the wives were half the age of their husbands, and all the mistresses were younger again – the one thing they had in common was their interest in the mysterious man who only turned up for parties and was seldom seen at any other time. He was a coveted guest, and Deanna knew it amused him no end.

“Smile, darling,” she murmured as they stood for a moment in the entranceway to the villa and observed the mingling crowd.

She handed over her lightweight satin wrap to the indifferent English butler the Bartletts employed, and grinned when Vittorio’s hand moved slowly down the length of her spine and smoothed the curve of her backside.

“I want your ass, baby,” he told her.

“I know, keep that in mind when the hostess is attempting to offer hers as a replacement.”

The glitter of humour sparkled in his eyes when he looked at her.

“Every man here wants you,” he reminded her. “Keep in mind who’s whore you really are, ok?”

“I’m not really likely to forget, am I?” She caught movement coming toward them and leaned up to kiss him quickly. “Show time, darling.”

She felt his heavy sigh and slid an arm around his waist, smiling when his hand moved from her ass to the curve of her waist.

They stepped forward together, and were soon swept into the small talk and chatter that dominated the room they entered.

\* \* \*

An hour or so later, the party had moved into the largest room of the villa, and the

French doors were open, letting in the soft, cooling breeze. Tables were spaced over the large, sprawling patio that ran the length of the villa and overlooked the ocean. No one was currently using them.

Deanna shook her head as yet another man approached her and asked her to dance. They'd all been watching her most of the evening, Vittorio's choice of dress was having precisely the effect he'd known it would have. They all wanted to get close enough to discover if the naked skin they saw was actually bare, or if she was wearing something clingy and transparent under the black silk.

She spotted her lover across the room and headed in that direction, dodging the attempts to get her attention, or the requests for her company. She reached him a few minutes later, engaged in conversation with the host's wife. She stopped next to him, put her hand in his, and turned to look at the irritated woman who was clearly not happy to see her.

"You wouldn't mind if I borrowed Vittorio for just a little while, would you?" Deanna asked with a sweet smile to punctuate her request.

Their hostess, a gorgeous, statuesque raven-haired Goddess among the women present appeared genuinely startled.

"That would be up to him, darling, not me."

"Then we're fine, he won't mind."

Gloria smiled, indulgent. "You're so sure of that."

Deanna nodded. "Of course."

"What do you need that can't wait?"

Vittorio was watching with real amusement, clearly already aware of what was about to cause an outrage at the posh party.

"I need my lover, Gloria," Deanna replied in a theatrical whisper. "I've been watching the rest of you displaying your assets for him all evening. Now it's my turn."

Laughter, tinged with irony and faint disdain tinkled between them, then faded when Vittorio ran his free hand over the tumbling waves of hair that Deanna had left falling free at his request.

"Tell her the truth, baby," he said quietly, his eyes locked with Deanna's green gaze.

"She wouldn't understand the truth...."

"Really?" Gloria commented, sarcasm evident.

“Really,” Deanna repeated. “I doubt you’ve genuinely wanted a man in years. Only what you can get from his wallet.”

“And you want so much more from Vittorio...”

“At the moment, all I want from Vittorio is Vittorio,” Deanne laughed. “And he knows it. I want to take him to the nearest dark corner, suck his cock, and have him fuck me until I can’t walk....”

Vittorio’s laughter rang out and Gloria stared in total shock.

The moment shattered when they were joined by Gloria’s much older husband, and he dragged Vittorio off on to meet someone who was in dire need of business advice.

“I guess you’ll have to wait,” Gloria remarked.

“Not nearly as long as you think,” Deanna assured her, and walked away.

\* \* \*

“You don’t seem to be enjoying yourself much.”

Deanna shivered in response to the caress of his voice close to her ear, and whatever answer she’d been preparing to make was swallowed by a gasp of pleasure when Vittorio’s hands glided around her waist and upward, covering the firm swells of her breasts in a casual stroke of possessive sensuality. They were rarely not touching each other now, it seemed to be the sum total of her existence much of the time. She’d all but abandoned her career and life when she met him and moved into the idyllic island paradise villa he called home. The attraction between them had been fanned to insane heights by their constant proximity, and she was certain one of their frequent bouts of driving passion was going to send her spiraling off the planet one of these days.

“Give me a reason, Vittorio,” she whispered when his strong fingers kneaded her flesh gently, squeezing with just enough pressure to make her heart pound erratically against her ribcage.

“How many of the men here have tried to do this to you tonight?” he asked, then pulled her backside against him, the hard ridge of his erection resting between her rounded buttocks.

“I was waiting for you,” she answered and turned her head so she could meet his kiss as he bent to cover her lips with his. The cool night air chilled her skin suddenly and she knew he’d peeled away the silk of her dress and bared her breasts. His fingers tugged on the rigid tips a moment later and she pulled back from their kiss with a hiss of drawn in breath.

She twisted in his arms, until she could face him. Vittorio's dark eyes gleamed wickedly in the shimmer of lights that filtered from inside the villa at which they were they were guests, and his smile was challenging.

"What do you want, Deanna?" he whispered, his voice an erotic purr in her ear as he leaned closer.

She laughed softly. "You. I want you, you sexy bastard." She bit into his bottom lip and tugged as she eased back. When she released him with a grin, his eyebrow rose.

He pulled her back to his chest, kissing her hard as she began to loosen his belt. A few seconds later, he moaned into her mouth, shuddering against a familiar tide of hunger evoked by her hand sliding into his pants and closing over his pulsing cock.

Vittorio dragged her further into the shadows and reversed their positions, lifting her onto a patio table in the darkest corner of the spacious balcony. Deanna's smile was satisfied and inviting at the same time as she folded back the skirt of her dress and spread her thighs, leaning back on her arms as she watched him. Vittorio's gaze slid over her, the fire in his eyes flaming more intensely when she sat up and began caressing her breasts, pulling on the puckered points of her nipples, peaking them further.

"How wet are you, baby?"

She slid forward a little and drove two fingers into her pussy, the slick sound giving an answer more powerful than words.

"Get yourself off for me, Dee," he ordered, his voice low, the command unmistakable.

She closed her eyes and all that existed for a few moments was the sensation of her fingers gliding from her dripping cunt to circle the throbbing pulse of her clit, until she started rapidly flicking at the sensitive nub. She was almost there, when he moved suddenly, actually managing to startle her when he scooped her off the table and pressed her back to the cool stone wall of the villa. A moment later he stifled her scream with his mouth, kissing her fiercely as he plunged deep into her wet heat in a single, smooth thrust. His hands cupped her bottom and he began to thrust in urgent, strong strokes.

"Harder, Vittorio!" she cried, clutching his shoulders, holding on tight as he answered her with the brutal force she all but begged him for at times. The explosion that rocketed through her body within seconds created a fall of stars behind her closed eyelids, and she clenched her teeth to cut off the scream that wanted to find voice. Her name blurred into a low groan a few moments later and Vittorio's tall frame shook with the onslaught of his climax. The flood of his release filled her and she clung to him, her limbs like liquid for what felt like an eternity before he finally heaved a deep breath and eased free of her. He set her on her feet and they stood, facing each other, foreheads touching, fighting for composure that had been thoroughly shattered.

“This is crazy,” Vittorio breathed softly.

Deanna laughed very slightly, and looked up at him.

“It gets crazier every day,” she murmured, “or haven’t you noticed?”

He finally trusted his legs enough to step back and she smiled as he pulled his pants up and quickly rearranged his clothes into familiar, perfect style. Vittorio was an incredibly sexy man, the aura of danger and eroticism a natural part of him. He was also traditionally tall, dark, and handsome. The full curve of his mouth was the stuff of secret fantasies, and Deanna was well aware that there wasn’t a woman in the villa who didn’t want to fall into bed with him. For the most part, Vittorio flirted and courted them, but nothing more. He enjoyed the attention of all women, but he reserved his passion for her. Vittorio stepped close to her again when he was fully dressed and she finished tugging her dress back into place then slipped into his arms, sighing contentedly.

“When can we leave this party?”

“Why, not exciting enough for you, even now?” He questioned with a grin.

“To restrictive,” she answered softly. “I can’t get naked for you, and...” she purred as she stepped closer to him, “I can’t get you naked.”

“Mmmm....” He nodded, the serious expression belied by the amusement in his eyes. “I see your problem. Maybe it is time to leave.”

“You’re not going to be accosted on the way out, are you?”

He shook his head.

“Let’s say goodnight, baby.”

“My knees are still shaking.”

He laughed quietly and put his arm around her as they headed back inside.

Gloria and her husband Geordie met them almost at the doors. Deanna resisted the urge to purr when Gloria’s gaze swept over her, and the flare of annoyance reached her brilliant blue eyes. She didn’t know what had just occurred on her patio, but she had clear assumptions made.

“We’re leaving early, Geordie,” Vittorio told the host, shaking his hand. “Nice party, as always.”

“We’re always happy to have you join us, Vittorio,” Gloria stated.

“She really means she’d be happy to have you any time, sweetheart,” Deanna interjected

helpfully.

Vittorio's fingers dug into her waist where he was holding her, and she tried not to laugh at the warning.

"Of course."

Gloria smiled, the polar ice in her eyes meant to intimidate, and falling well short of anything more profound than amusing when Deanna leaned her head on Vittorio's shoulder.

"Your car's being brought around now," Geordie informed him.

"Thanks. Goodnight, Gloria." Vittorio lifted her hand to land a kiss on her knuckles, winking at her as he did.

She tried not to look overly flattered.

They continued to murmur goodbyes and within a few minutes had made their way to the door. Deanna's satin wrap was draped over her shoulders, and Vittorio took her by the hand and they left the villa behind.

Settled into the cool comfort of the luxurious limo, Deanne watched him from a seat opposite him. His dark eyes were speculative as he waited to see what she'd do, or say.

"How much business were you forced into tonight?"

"Is that really what you want to talk about?"

She shrugged. "It's as safe a topic as any."

"When did you like playing it safe?"

She grinned. "So what do you want me to talk about?"

"Who says you have to talk?"

The challenge hung between them for a moment, then she leaned forward, her smile deepening when his gaze dropped to the now gaping front of her dress.

She slid forward and settled astride his thighs, then pushed the stringy straps off her shoulders. He drew the dress downward and his mouth closed on one rigid nipple, sucking hard as her spine arched in response. It was almost pain, and the reaction pooled between her legs, making her wet and throbbing within seconds.

She pulled back after a few minutes and went down on her knees in front of him. He laughed when she started pulling at his belt and working the zipper of his pants. A

moment later she held his straining cock in her hand and he groaned quietly as her tongue began to stroke the weeping head. When she took him into her mouth and her head started bobbing in steady rhythm he sighed and let his head fall back against the seat. She knew just where to linger, and how much pressure to apply to keep him hovering on the verge of orgasm, and as her tongue made magic on his shaft, he sank into the comfort of the seat, his hands stroking her hair, whispering words that were all but incoherent as he told her how much he adored her.

The phone inside the limo rang and she ignored it. Vittorio tried, then he relented and made a grab for it. He spoke in a rapid rush of Italian and his hand fisted in her hair, stopping the erotic torture he frequently assured her he never wanted to end.

She looked up and less than a minute later, he snapped the phone off and stared at her.

“Let me guess, you have to go to the mainland?”

He nodded.

“Now?”

He didn’t answer and she backed up and sat across from him again, watching through slitted eyes as he rearranged his clothes.

“We’re diverting to the airport, aren’t we?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck you, Vittorio!”

“That was the plan,” he replied with heavy irony.

“What if I’m not here when you get back?”

His eyebrow rose. “Don’t make threats you won’t follow through with, Deanna.”

“Maybe I should go back to the party?”

“Not recommended, honey.”

“Go to hell.”

He nodded. “Maybe. But I won’t be alone, will I?”

\* \* \*

The light Caribbean breeze lifted the loose tendrils of Deanna’s hair and sent it fluttering around her face. She continued to stare out at the ocean, acutely conscious of the man a

few feet behind her, her body already pulsing with need as she contemplated seducing him on the pristine white sands of his private beachfront. It had been several days since Vittorio had left the island on the sudden *business* trip, and his return a couple of hours earlier had been a pleasant surprise. She hadn't told him that, though, she'd pretended to be unaware of his presence and come to the beach. So far, he hadn't spoken, he'd simply sprawled on a lounge and watched her.

At her back, Vittorio smiled. She was exotic, luscious and beautiful in the brilliant afternoon sunshine. She wore a shimmering tank top of thin silk, and a peasant skirt that must have been several yards of material when the wind caught it. She was still fair, only a slight tinge of bronze on her skin despite months in the island sun. He rose and went to stand directly behind her.

“Aren't you glad to see me?”

“Thrilled,” she replied with acerbic sweetness.

Vittorio laughed and took the final step that put him next to her, without actually touching her back. He bent and brushed his lips against the enticing curve of her shoulder and neck. She shivered, almost imperceptibly, and he licked at the skin behind her ear. One hand pushed aside the tumble of her hair, and the other slid around to cup one firm breast, his fingers stroking the cool, smooth silk that covered her skin.

“Vittorio...”

He smiled as he turned her face toward him, her lips parted and she stared into his eyes for a moment before he covered her mouth with his, the slow, wet, sensuous contact a sweetness he'd missed many, many times over the past few days. After endless seconds of gentle probing, he drew back and she smiled.

“Welcome home,” she whispered, breathless with excitement.

Vittorio stepped closer, pulled her back against him as both hands covered the ample swells of her breasts and squeezed. He continued the seductive play, fingers tracing the familiar curves, lingering lightly against the thrusting tips of her nipples, then he tugged the straps off her shoulders and slowly eased the material downward until naked flesh was finally exposed. He loved to look at this woman completely naked, she was perfect to his eyes. The deep rose nipples that crested her heavy, firm breasts were engorged and rigid, begging for his attention. He touched the very tips with the pads of his index fingers, the contact feather-like, and she hissed in a gasp of air as her spine arched forward. He released her without warning, and she turned around.

Fire burned in the inky dark eyes that stared at her, and Deanna laughed low in her throat. Vittorio loved to incite her to take charge of their lovemaking, and this time he simply watched in smug satisfaction when her hands rose and she began to massage her breasts for him, lifting them to offer the aching points to him. Smiling broadly, she let her breasts go, and enjoyed the bolt of heat that raced along her veins when she saw the

sudden bulge against the front of his pants twitch in response to the bounce of her breasts. She stepped toward him and dropped to her knees. Vittorio laughed softly and spread his legs, bracing himself for the sweet torment that he knew was coming.

Deanna snuggled close to his crotch, blowing hot breaths against the lightweight linen of his pants. She kissed the warm material, and used the fabric as a cushion when she nipped at the hard ridge of his erection thrusting in the confinement of the pants. She sat back on her heels and looked up into his eyes as she unbuckled his belt and drew the zipper down. She tugged the pants down until they pooled at his feet and he lifted one foot to shake free of them. Then she leaned into him again, her tongue flicking at the exposed head of his cock peeking from the waistband of his briefs.

She continued to trail upward, her tongue leaving a wet streak on his exposed skin as she stood on her knees. She backed away just enough for him to watch as she carefully peeled down his briefs then leaned forward so his cock was nestled between her breasts. She squeezed the soft mounds of flesh together and Vittorio laughed. His low chuckle mutated into a sighing moan when she drew back and guided the thick hot length of him into her mouth. She sucked intently, her tongue gliding over him in slow, exploring strokes, then closing her mouth over him and drawing him deep into her throat as she sucked hard and long. She was startled when his hands in her hair pulled her away and he walked to the lounge and stretched out on it again.

Deanna grinned at the image he presented. Long legs, tanned and shadowed with dark hair, that same combination of tones repeated all over his gorgeous body, and thrusting upward from a nest of black was his erect cock, the tip, still shiny from her mouth, was weeping a pearly bead of moisture. She walked over to him and stood with her legs on either side of the lounge, looking down at the inviting picture he offered up for her. Vittorio's fingers began a slow glide over the insides of her thighs as he waited for her to decide what she was going to do next.

She smiled and held his hands for balance as she lowered herself, carefully taking the full length of his rigid shaft into her body. She squirmed a little, unable to stop the shuddering sensation that rippled the course of her spine, and he hissed in response to the motion. Her heavy skirt was draped around them and she'd deliberately "forgotten" to put on underwear when she knew he was back at the villa. Vittorio's hands reached under her skirt and he began to squeeze her bottom as he thrust upward, pushing even deeper into her.

"I love it when you do that," she gasped.

"I know."

She leaned forward and Vittorio caught one engorged nipple between his teeth as he sucked leisurely on it, then nibbled until she moaned in combined discomfort and pleasure. He pulled her closer and she started a deliciously slow glide over him, her hips moving in sensuous, rocking rhythm as she took him deep, then drew back to almost lose him.

“Maybe we should finish this on the blankets?” He made the suggestion with a grin as the lounge wobbled precariously.

She kissed him again, then carefully stood. She lifted the skirt that hid the glistening length of his cock and continued to pull it upward until she had it lifted over her head and tossed aside. Standing over him, gloriously naked in the afternoon sun, Deanna felt wicked, free, and incredibly sexy.

Vittorio lingered on the lounge, clearly enjoying the sight of her for several moments before he rose and settled on the blankets with her as she dropped to her knees then rolled onto her back, laughing softly. Her body was already aching for want of him inside her again, and she cupped his face in her hands as he positioned himself over her.

“I love you, Vittorio,” she whispered. “*Tu sei il respiro che mi dà la vita, mio amore,*” she added in perfect Italian.

Vittorio thrust into her, the possession gentle and loving as he closed his eyes and reveled in the feel of her warmth surrounding him in all ways.

“*E tu, cara mia, sono la vita che ha salvato la mia anima,*” he murmured close to her ear as his hips flowed easily into the slow, sensual rhythm that would take their desire to even greater heights as they drew out the euphoric sensations for as long as possible before they gave in to the desperate need for release.

When they were able to breathe again, he smiled down at her, then kissed her forehead.

“And how was your day, baby?”

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