

BLOODBOND



BLOODBOND



A Beauty and the Beast novel by

Rhonda Collins

Based on the series created by Ron Koslow

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Once again, my thanks to Ron Koslow, all the writers, actors, cast, crew and production—the magicians who gave us the magic.

Thanks also to the original members of the Unit 210, for whom this story was originally conceived and written. It was great therapy while it lasted. And to those particular individuals on the 210 who contributed small portions of this story...I'll do you a favor and not mention your names!

This is an amateur publication, by and for the lovers of BEAUTY AND THE BEAST and does not intend to infringe upon any rights held by Ron Koslow, Republic Pictures, Witt-Thomas Productions, Carolco, or any other rights-holders of BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

BLOODBOND is copyright August, 1997 by Rhonda Collins, Printed and bound in the United States of America. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission from the author/publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review. Published by Rhonda Collins, 4511 Allegheny, San Antonio, Texas, 78229.



Author's Preface

This story began as a bad joke and was originally never intended for publication. I suppose I was frustrated with the many fans who refused to see the show as one entity and insisted that Catherine hadn't died. Poor Cathy has been brought back in so many ways already—all of them rather improbable, considering everything we were shown on screen, and the scenarios have been used over and over. So, I figured, why not push the envelope and bring her back in a *really* different way? I suppose this way is no more or less believable than any of the others, considering that Catherine and the story were fiction anyway, and in fiction you allow for the reader/viewer's "willing suspension of disbelief." It's fantasy, right? Cathy Chandler is dead, and the dead don't rise...and vampire's don't really exist.

Or do they?

I suppose this story should also come with a apology...but what the heck. Anyone who sees Catherine as Saint Catherine and believes she walks on water...well...don't read this. I make no apologies and no promises. The story is the story. This is what the characters told me to say, and I wrote the story as it was "told" to me.

BLOODBOND is cheerfully dedicated to all the fans who were tired of seeing Cathy come back from the dead.

BLOODBOND
by Rhonda Collins

My life closed twice before its close
It yet remains to see
If Immortality unveil
A third event to me

So huge, so hopeless to conceive
As these that twice befell
Parting is all we know of Heaven
And all we need of Hell

Emily Dickenson

...

It was dark. So dark. A stygian blackness she'd never imagined in her worst nightmares. She couldn't breathe. *What's wrong?* she thought with growing anxiety.

Cathy tried to move and managed to twitch her hand. Something ran over it, making her shudder in revulsion. Trying again, she moved in jerky motions, crab-walking her hand up her stomach as stiff joints protested. She felt cautiously above her, but her range of motion was restricted: there was something heavy in the way. On top of her...to the sides. *A box. I'm in a box*, she thought, puzzled.

She tried to open her mouth and found she couldn't. Carefully, with shaking fingers, she patted, feeling her face, her lips. They seemed glued closed. Fear, barely kept in check before, rose suddenly—bringing with it memories of Gabriel, her baby...and Vincent. Her thoughts spun in circles. *Where AM I? Where's Vincent?*

Frantic now, she pushed hard on the surface above her. She realized she was ravenous. Starving. As though she'd been a week without food. Fear, desperation and need gave her immense strength as she shoved against the solid surface above her. She felt it give...heard an audible crack. Something struck her in the face, fell into her eyes, on her mouth. Dirt. She could smell it. Terrified realization struck. *I died and they've buried me! Vincent left me!* She ripped open her lips and screamed in horror...and with a growing anger that anything like this could possibly have happened to HER! Scrabbling furiously at the "ceiling" to her prison, knocking away the falling earth with fury, she snarled. Full of blinding hunger and searing rage, she began in earnest to tunnel through the seven feet of earth separating her from the surface.

...

Vincent awoke, tearing at the neck of his nightshirt. He couldn't breathe, felt as if the walls of his chamber were closing in on him. The darkness around him cloaked him in a blanket of terror. *A dream. It had to be a horrible dream.* He couldn't possibly have heard Catherine scream. She was dead. He'd held her as she died. Her funeral had been six months ago, and their bond had been lost long before that time. But tonight he'd felt *something*. He was sure of it.

Not the same as before, though, more like icy fingers around his heart. Perhaps it was all a dream, her disappearance and death. *No*, he told himself firmly. *It's all too real. Catherine is dead. I'll never see her again. Never hear her voice again...never hold her again.* Even now her face was fading from his memory.

He startled. There it was again--a chill passing over his body; and with a sudden premonitory parental fear, he felt a desperate need to check on his son--to make certain the child was well.

Jacob was awake and sucking on his thumb.

"Are you hungry, little one?" Vincent asked softly as the alert eyes blinked up at him. He took his son from the cradle. "Let's go get something to eat. Suddenly, I'm very hungry."

...

A shadowed figure moved through the graveyard, silent as the mist surrounding it. As it came into the clearing away from the trees and stood before Catherine Chandler's grave, the moonlight reflected on hair so white it stood out like a beacon. Snow joined the other silent figure waiting beside the grave.

"It took you long enough," Gabriel told him acidly, his voice like cold stone in the silence.

Snow shrugged. "No rush," he said smoothly with a slight, mocking smile. "I knew when the change hit." He shook his head as he perched irreverently on the granite headstone. "You shouldn't have done it, Gabe. There'll be hell to pay."

Gabriel turned his cadaverous face up to the moonlight and closed his eyes as though basking in the rays. Snow wondered sometimes what his long-time enemy/comrade thought about...but perhaps it was better not knowing. Gabriel finally sighed and opened his eyes. His smile was ironic, his eyes glittered with hunger. "Perhaps."

Snow crossed his arms and listened. He could hear a faint scratching sound as Catherine Chandler dug her way to the surface. He could sense her hunger and licked his lips unconsciously--then startled as he realized Gabe was watching him. Then, the usual slow fury built. "Why *did* you, then?"

The smile that creased Gabriel's face revealed sharp tips of long canines...fangs...and he turned glittering eyes in Snow's direction. "Because I *wanted* to. She was the perfect specimen." The two creatures glared at one another for a long moment before Gabriel asked, "Why did *you* give the ring to Vincent?"

Crouching down to watch the surface of the grave, Snow glanced up at him and mocked: "Because I knew it would make *you* furious." Gabriel started to say something, but Snow made an impatient gesture and quieted him. "Watch."

The surface of the grave with its soft covering of grass trembled, then buckled. A pale, dirty hand came through first, the nails torn, the skin scratched, but there was no blood. *Of course not*, Snow thought. *She's a vampire, and she hadn't even fed yet.* He chuckled. He felt sorry for the woman, but he couldn't help anticipating the beast--Vincent's--reaction. *I wonder how many ways he'll bisect ol' Gabe?*

Yes, Gabriel was going to be in deep shit this time, and Snow was more than willing to play the game. It was a real bitch being bored.

The earth crumbled and Catherine's head and shoulders broke through into the pale moonlight that washed the area. She was hardly beautiful, this newborn vampire, with the tangled, filthy hair, streaks of dirt and scratches, but her eyes glittered with hunger and Snow couldn't help the surge of almost sexual delight he felt. It disgusted him. It disgusted him even to *be* here--especially at Gabriel's bidding. But he could no more have ignored the call than Gabe could've. *Damn it!* Snow thought

furiously. *He shouldn't have used my damned blood!*

The woman crawled out of the ground, her lovely white gown torn and filthy, hair hanging in her face. She didn't even seem surprised to see them—not even Gabriel, who Snow knew she just *had* to hate.

She turned automatically to Snow as he used a nail to rip a gash in his chest above his heart. Eyes glazed, the woman came to him and closed her mouth hungrily over the wound and began drinking. Snow clutched her to him, shuddering as he felt the blood passing through to her, coming about as close to orgasm as he could ever get. Eventually, Snow pulled her away, knowing he had to leave something for himself. She wiped the blood on her face away with the back of her hand and turned, glaring at Gabriel. “You BASTARD!” she said levelly.

“That’s me,” Gabe said with an evil smile.

...

“What the hell...?” Diana leaned back from the monitor and knuckled her eyes, figuring too much work and too little sleep had loosed the fantasy fairies in her head. She couldn't possibly have seen what she thought she had. She looked again and sure enough, there it was, crystal clear on the computer screen: a report of a vandalism at St. Cleo's cemetery, called in less than an hour ago. That the incident had made it into the city-wide police database so quickly was surprise enough. But that wasn't what had made Diana sit up and take notice.

What shocked her into stunned disbelief were the specifics of the report. Not a simple case of buzzed-up kids knocking over headstones (something that happened with more regularity than you might want to think), but an honest-to-God grave robbing. That was weird enough, all by itself. But what made her fly out of her chair, grabbing jacket, tote and keys in one hand as the other slapped at the button to bring up the elevator, was the name of the missing corpse: Catherine Chandler.

It wasn't until she'd hit the street and was waving down a cab that she wondered just where to go first, the Tunnels or the cemetery. Diana knew that Vincent continued to make frequent trips to Catherine's grave, his pain still as raw now as it'd been when he'd first lost her. The thought of Vincent stumbling onto her empty grave without warning—not to mention the possibility of his running into whatever cops might still be on the scene—made up her mind: the cemetery first, to see what she could find out, then the Tunnels. Diana gave the location to the cabbie and pounded softly on the seat the whole way there, mumbling, “C'mon, c'mon,” under her breath.

The scene was just about wrapped up by the time she got to St. Cleo's. She flashed her shield at the patrolman stationed just outside the yellow crime scene tape that'd been strung up around the plot and ducked under it, staying at the edge of the scene and watching the forensics team as they finished gathering the evidence they'd found. She spotted the two suits on the other side of the grave and registered the name of one of them as the forensics team left the scene and headed for their van. It was only then that Diana approached the grave, trying not to stare too hard at the ragged hole in front of Catherine's headstone.

Definitely a job done in a hurry, dirt and grass flung all around the site as if Catherine's casket had somehow exploded underground. She peeked down into the hole and drew in a sharp breath. The hole that exposed the casket was small, way too small. Whoever had done this obviously hadn't taken the time to uncover the entire thing, choosing instead to make a hole just large enough to break through to the casket and pull the body out. A shiver ran down Diana's spine. Something very strange was going on here and she didn't like the images that were starting to flash through her head.

“Who the hell are you?” The gruff voice startled her and she looked up to find the detective she'd recognized moving toward her. When he saw her face he stopped short. “Oh, okay. Bennett, right? 210 Unit?”

“Yeah. How you doin', Charlie?”

“I was doin' great till I got pulled outta bed for this crap. What are *you* doing here?”

“Caught the report on the database. Thought I'd come down and check it out.”

Diana shuffled from one foot to the other, trying not to act too obvious as she scanned the cemetery for a certain dark, cloaked figure she was terrified would show up at any second. Charlie gave her a puzzled look. "What, you got a sudden interest in grave robbers?" Then his eyes went kind of funny and he pointed a finger at her. "Wait a minute. *Chandler*. Weren't you on that case when she turned up dead?"

"Yeah."

"Well, looks like it might not be over yet. I gotta tell you, Bennett, I seen some strange stuff, but this is fuckin' weird."

Diana responded absently, "Yeah. The whole case was that way."

She thought she'd seen movement in a line of trees about a hundred feet from where she stood, but the light wasn't that great. Could just be her eyes playing tricks on her. Or it could be Vincent. Not about to take any chances, she turned around to Charlie and asked, "Do me a favor, will ya? Fax me the full report when you get it. Forensics and all."

"Sure, no problem. Hey! What's your big hurry?" he asked as she headed off in the direction of the treeline.

Diana swung back and flashed him a smile. "Hot date. Catch you around." She slowed her feet until Charlie's attention was caught by the patrolman, then sprinted the rest of the way. Her huncher had been right: she'd no more than reached the trees when a huge furred hand snaked out and pulled her into the darkness created by the heavy boughs of evergreens.

Vincent wasted no time. Still latched tightly onto her arm, he asked roughly, "What is it, Diana? What's happened?"

She looked up at Vincent and pulled her arm free. His hood was pulled up and the only visible part of his face were his eyes, wide and haunted. She shook her head, dazed and out of breath. "I don't know. Damned if I can figure it out." She shot a look back over her shoulder and grabbed his hand, trying to tug him in the opposite direction. "C'mon, we gotta get you outta here." But Vincent dug in his heels, rooted to the spot, and it was like trying to tow a tree. "Tell me," he demanded stubbornly.

"Okay, look. Something's happened here, and I don't know *what's* going on." Knowing there was no gentle way to tell him, she didn't try to soften the blow. He'd either handle it or he wouldn't. All she could do was say the words and try to convince him that this was absolutely not where he should be. "Somebody dug her up, Vincent; she's gone and I don't know why or how or where. All I know is that we've *got* to get the hell outta here. If anybody spots you, we'll have a bigger problem than we got now."

Vincent rocked back on his feet as though he'd been whacked upside the head with a baseball bat. "What....?"

"I said...she's gone. The body's gone." Diana repeated, and this time when she tugged, he came. She almost pulled him clear over onto his face, he was so limp with shock. "There's nothing we can do here, either of us. Come on back to the loft with me. I'll make some phone calls and try to figure out where to start. Let's go!"

Her fear must have finally oozed past his shock because Vincent nodded his head and followed her after one more quick glance over his shoulder at the place where Catherine had once rested.

"Who would have done such a thing?" he asked quietly. "And why?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. But I promise we'll find out. You've got my word, Vincent."

As the logical side of her brain was putting together what little she had in the way of facts, the other side of her brain, the one that had seen and imagined unexplainable things, was screaming out a warning she couldn't yet understand. All Diana knew was that she was frightened in a way she hadn't ever been before.

...

Catherine stalked angrily away from the ruined grave, brushing with disgust at the filth that dropped in clumps and clods off her dress, from her hair. Behind her, she could hear Gabriel's manic laughter. "This can't be real. Can't be happening," she thought with confused rage and fear. "Things

like this don't happen in real life. I'm certain of it." She stopped and closed her eyes, counted to ten and willed herself to wake. Maybe it was *all* a dream, the months in Gabriel's care, her pregnancy, the loss of the bond....yes...that was it. It was all a dream. She opened her eyes to darkness, to shadowed trees, mist and the night...and the company of cold gravestones. Suddenly, a vise of pain clamped around her, bending her body double and throwing her to her knees. "Nooo!" she screamed, clawing at the damp grass, writhing in agony. Worse than the labor she remembered, she knew she couldn't bear it. "VINCENT!!!" she screamed. "Where ARE you?"

She felt strong arms around her, lifting her from the ground and thought with a momentary flash of gratitude, peace and immense love that Vincent had finally come. The nightmare would be over. But the pain struck again and she had no breath to cry out. A masculine voice she didn't recognize told her, "Hold on. It won't last long." A hand brushed at her hair, caressed her face, and Catherine felt a tug...an intense pull—like someone had stretched a rubber band and suddenly released it—pulling her toward this man. In agony, she tilted her head up to look up through her matted hair, knowing somehow before she saw him who it was: the white-haired monster who'd fed her on his own blood, relieving that immense, ravening hunger. The pain came again and she retched, blood pouring from her mouth, and the monster gently wiped it away with his shirt-tail.

"Damn Gabe," he whispered in a rough voice.

"You're entirely too sentimental, Snow," recognition of the hated voice drifted through the haze of Catherine's pain.

"Get out of here, Gabe. You're pushin' your luck," the man holding her snarled. She could hear suppressed rage in his voice and allowed her bruised, battered and abused body to rest in his care, knowing instinctively that he'd protect her from Gabriel. The pain eased as she quit fighting it.

Gabriel laughed again and Catherine's fury returned at the sound, remembering her months of misery...and the theft of her child...but strong arms tightened, holding her in an immovable band of steel. "Threatening me, Snow?" the mocking, cynical voice asked. "You should know better than that by now."

A growl rumbled through the man holding her...Catherine thought it was a growl, anyway, until she realized the man was laughing. "Someday you'll slip, Gabe. You've let other people kill FOR you for too long. You've lost the knack of REAL blood-thirst. You're too old to recognize fear anymore, and fear is what keeps you alive in the end."

There was a long, pregnant silence and Catherine's attention drifted as her pains came and went. Then, distantly, she heard Gabriel answer. "We'll see, my young friend. We'll see." Then he was gone. How Catherine knew, she wasn't sure, but there was an...emptiness...where he'd been.

The man holding Catherine lifted her to her feet and braced her as she regained her balance. The pains were gone, now, as though they'd never been and she felt...good. Strong. The man released her, turned and walked away from her. The moonlight glittered in his hair like diamond. "Come on, then," he told her, his voice tolerant...resigned.

Catherine paused for a long, indecisive moment as she felt the rubber-band effect of force drawing her to him. She stared around the graveyard and realized she could see with an unearthly clarity, hear the distant sounds of the city as if she were in the midst of a party. Panicked, not knowing what to do, how to handle all the changes she sensed in herself, she lurched forward after him, slowly at first, then faster until she paced beside him. "What the hell's the matter with me?" she asked him. "What happened?"

"You're a vampire. Shut up and let me think."

...

Diana peered cautiously over the top of her monitor to look across her loft at the massive silent figure seated on her couch. Vincent sat slumped with his hands dangling between his knees, his heavy blond mane hung forward, obscuring his face. She could see his shoulders shaking and knew he was crying. She blinked and looked away, back at the monitor. She couldn't focus on it, but that was

okay, at least looking at the screen she didn't have to watch those strong shoulders heaving and resist the urge to go to him. She was just glad she'd managed to drag him away from that madhouse in the cemetery before someone discovered him there. *Jeez*, she thought morosely, *what a mess*. She punched a few keys and sighed. The Net wasn't much help tonight. There were usually indications of some kind of trend when weird shit started happening, but this time there was nothing...and this was *definitely* weird shit.

Vincent stood and paced to the window and Diana craned her neck to watch, not knowing if she should just stay out of his way or go try to comfort him. *How the hell do you comfort someone in a case like this? What can you possibly say?* He turned to look at her and Diana dropped her eyes and looked away, feeling oddly guilty. Realizing what she was doing, she lifted her gaze to his and tried a half-hearted smile. "Want some tea?"

He shrugged. "You and Father. You think tea solves everything."

Shoving the chair back, Diana went to him, hesitated, then patted his arm awkwardly—wishing she had *something* she could offer to mend the disaster.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"Why, Diana?" he murmured in a broken voice. "Why would someone do this? For what possible reason?"

"I don't know," she told him. She thought uneasily of that ravaged grave and shuddered. The ground looked like it had exploded from inside: it hadn't looked like someone had dug her up. That thought had nagged at her all night and the more she thought about it, the more it bothered her. There hadn't been any sign of digging equipment or trampled grass...nothing but that gaping hole with the edges pushed up and the dirt scattered around.

She was apparently quiet for too long and Vincent noticed. "What is it, Diana? You know something, don't you?"

Startled back to reality, Diana stared at him, wide eyed. She didn't want to tell him what nasty little thoughts were running through her mind. She shook her head and turned to the kitchen. "If you don't want tea, I'm makin' some coffee." As she turned away from him, she shivered. That grass on the grave had barely looked disturbed...as though it had been pushed up from underneath and the ground just shoved back...pushed away, like something was coming out of a cocoon.

She didn't want to think about the stories her Gran had told her about the things that walked the darker side of life...and death. Unconsciously, she reached up and touched the cross around her neck.

...

It took Catherine several long moments of total numbness for what the man had said to penetrate her fogged brain...and even then, it didn't make sense. Her mind reeled back to when she'd opened her eyes to this nightmare and quickly replayed everything that had happened since. Something told her that for once she'd better examine the possibilities outside the normal bounds of her reality...release some of the hold on her "certainties." The uncomfortable, sick feeling she'd had lurking in the back of her mind was growing much stronger by the moment...and the strange man with the white hair was getting much farther away. With a sudden, panicked lunge, she took off after his retreating back.

Catching up, Catherine trotted beside him, irritated that he didn't slow for her, like Vincent usually did. Had he no manners whatsoever? She waited for him to say something, and when he didn't...didn't even look over at her, she finally asked, "I'm a VAMPIRE?"

His mocking, sidewise glance told her what she needed to know and she shut up. Okay...so it was improbable, but the evidence showed that she was, indeed, a vampire. *Shit*, she thought, *Just when I thought things couldn't GET any worse....* Swallowing her impatience, Catherine tried to make her next question something she could get him to answer. "What's your name?"

The man gave a huge sigh and stopped dead in his tracks. She almost ran into him, but didn't... then looked up into eyes that held distrust and pain. "Snow. My name's Snow." His gaze looked her up and down and she felt embarrassed by the scrutiny. His mouth moved in an ironic sort of smile. "You

really look like shit, you know that?"

Catherine drew herself up straighter and brushed at her hair, wincing as dirt fell into her eyes. "You don't have to be nasty about it. I mean...well...after all...."

Snow laughed, then. "You're right. It's been a hell of a night." He looked away, out into the night, then back at her. "Look...I've got to feed. You about drained me dry. You may as well come along. You've got to learn sometime."

"Can we try to get me some clean clothes along the way?" Catherine ventured plaintively.

"We'll see," Snow offered benevolently, his stride lengthening. Catherine trotted faster to keep up as he crossed the near-empty street and disappeared into an alley. She followed him as he drifted past the garbage cans, wrinkling her nose in distaste as the smells, which were unbelievably strong. A cat squalled as it darted out of Snow's path, and the shrill sound sent a chill down Catherine's spine.

All this was just too disgusting. *Where, oh where is Vincent?* she thought miserably.

Snow stopped, seeming to listen, and Catherine caught up with him. She looked up at his pale face and snow-white hair and found herself thinking that he really wasn't bad-looking. Kind of rugged. He licked his lips and the tips of fangs showed, and Catherine trembled. *Damn*, she thought. *I think my association with Vincent has given me a fang-fetish!*

Snow moved off quickly and Catherine followed. There was a woman ahead—a prostitute, from the way she was dressed—standing in the glow of a streetlight up ahead. Snow moved closer, calling to her, and she turned with a smile. Catherine started to say something...to warn her...but Snow was too fast: the embrace happened so quickly that Catherine was stunned into silence. The woman made a low sound, like a moan, but didn't cry out as Snow held her, his teeth fastened in her throat. Catherine couldn't tear her eyes away from the scene...it was like watching Vincent when he killed for her: the effect was the same. She felt a rush of pleasure and fondness for Snow. *Maybe being dead won't be so bad after all.*

Snow raised his head, blood dripping from the side of his mouth. He swept the woman's body up and carried her back to Catherine and laid it at her feet. "Here. Change clothes."

Catherine's eyes went to the body of the woman—to the skimpy red dress, then back to Snow. "You expect me to wear THAT?"

He shrugged and wiped his mouth. "It's your choice. At least it's clean. Hurry up...we don't have all night."

...

Vincent stared uneasily out of Diana's window. He cradled the warmth of his teacup in his hands, though he didn't drink it. He was very aware of Diana's attention on him, though it wasn't really empathy. His empathic powers were still very intermittent, but it was difficult not to be aware of that calculating blue-eyed stare of hers. It made him feel a bit like a specimen under Father's microscope. Dawn was coming and he knew he had to leave. He turned and walked past Diana to the kitchen, emptied his teacup and washed it, then returned to the other room, where Diana sat curled on her couch.

Picking up his cloak and shrugging the weight of it onto his shoulders, he told her gently, "I must go, Diana." She didn't say anything, but her worried gaze prompted him to add, "I'm fine. Truly."

Diana stared a moment longer, then her expression softened as she nodded. "I know. But I know it's rough, too." She uncurled and stood, coming to him and stopping just a foot or so away. Her hand lifted as though she wanted to touch him, then dropped to her side. "Just remember, Vincent...it's just her body. No matter what happens...the Cathy you knew and loved isn't there anymore."

A great pain seized his heart. "I know."

Diana's face twisted in sorrow. "I'm so sorry, Vincent. I wish there was something...."

The lightening sky urged him toward the roof. "I know that, too, Diana. I must go Below and sleep. Jacob will be waking before long."

"Go on, then. I'll see if I can find out anything."

He paused on the stairs and looked back at her. She stood with her arms wrapped around herself, looking very alone and immensely tired. Despite everything that had happened to him in the past year, he felt an immense gratitude for this friendship that tragedy had brought him. He'd lost count of the nights this lovely, generous woman had gone sleepless because of him.

He smiled down at her just before leaving. "Thank you, Diana." She nodded, accepting his thanks, but didn't speak.

...

Catherine stared in shock as Snow turned to walk away, leaving her standing over the body of the woman he'd just killed. She shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, unsure what to do. "Wait... Oh...wait, please."

The white-haired vampire stopped and turned back to her. The mist swirled around his feet and a streetlight from the corner touched his hair, turning it a glistening silver. "Is there a problem?"

"I can't," she stuttered. "I mean...she's dead." She could swear she saw a smile and his eyes almost danced, but he just cocked his head and crossed his arms. "Please?" she begged.

He sighed. "Oh, all right. I can see that if we're going to get to bed before sunrise I'd better help."

To her vast relief, he knelt and stripped the dress from the woman's body, and though Catherine was disgusted and sickened by the whole scenario, she snatched the dress from him with gratitude when he held it out to her. *Anything* to be out of the filthy rag she was wearing.

Snow just chuckled and gave her a mocking smile as he turned politely away to let her dress. He seemed to be looking through the woman's purse...at her driver's license, which seemed to her to be an odd thing for him to do, unless he wanted to know who she was. Catherine struggled to remove the clothes she was buried in, appalled at the condition of the fabric. It was tearing as she pulled it down over her hips and she dropped the torn material into a puddle at her feet. Stepping out of it, she kicked it aside, then slipped the tight dress over her head. It was skimpy, but it was a good fit. She looked down at the body of the poor, hapless woman who'd owned it, and knelt beside her, dragging the filthy fabric of her former attire over the body to try to cover it.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't know..." she started to say, but she knew that was a lie. She'd known what Snow was about to do, and she could have warned the woman. Not that it would've done any good, of course, but she could have *tried* anyway.

"Are you ready to go, now?" Snow asked from behind her. "We *do* have a bit of a pressing problem."

Catherine stood and wiped her hands on her skirt. "What's that?" she murmured. "Daylight is *not* your friend. Fortunately, we don't have far to go." Snow took her by the hand and led her away from the woman's body, and Catherine followed, feeling more like a zombie than a vampire. It was all too unreal. She stumbled after him for blocks, with the sky getting lighter and lighter around them. And Catherine began to feel a touch of fear. She thought of all the vampire movies she'd seen and of what happened to the vampires when they were caught in the sun.

"What would happen?"

He spared her a glance that had no trace of humor. "You don't want to know."

That did *not* reassure her at all.

They reached an old, vacant building and Snow opened the door and led her inside. Catherine followed him as he wove his way through the debris that littered the floor until he reached what looked like a door to the basement. He released her hand and knelt, producing a key to unlock the door. Catherine waited, wondering if indeed, this was all a bad dream and she'd wake, but Snow lifted the door open and gestured to her to go through. About that time, a shaft of sunlight pierced the darkness as it streamed through a window, and as it touched Catherine's face, it burned. She practically dove for the dark hole below her. There were stairs beyond the door and Catherine almost fell, but Snow reached out and caught her around the waist, steadying her. He held her a moment only, then released her.

"Careful. You're safe. You don't want to tear that pretty dress."

Catherine grabbed the handrail beside the stairs, noticing it for the first time, then made her way down the stairs.

Although there was no light in the basement, everything was clearly visible to her once her eyes adjusted. There, in the middle of the room was a large, mahogany coffin. She swallowed the lump that was forming in her throat. She looked back just in time to see Snow locking the door above them. Visions of vampire hunters with stakes flashed through her mind and she covered her mouth with one hand to prevent hysterical giggles.

Snow's voice beside her steadied her. It was soft and gentle. "Home sweet home, Cat."

Lifting the lid of the coffin, Snow climbed in, then held out his hand and took hers.

"I'm supposed to get in there, too?" she asked, feeling bewildered.

His mouth moved in an odd smile. "Unless you'd rather just fall asleep up there all alone. Once it's light, your body knows, and you sleep."

Catherine knew he was right. She was already beginning to feel very lethargic. Gulping, swallowing her fear, she slid her rump over the edge and thumped down on top of Snow. He laughed as he pulled her down to lie with her head on his shoulder. He brushed at the dry mud and she yawned.

With her last ounce of energy, she asked, "Why do you call me 'Cat'?"

Snow pulled the lid of the coffin closed, and murmured, "Because you looked like a muddy, mad cat when you fought your way out of that grave."

Catherine wanted to get mad, but couldn't muster the energy, so she just snuggled closer to Snow's hard body, appreciating the feel of it beneath her. She felt oddly comfortable with him. As her eyes closed and the darkness took her, she slept, dreaming odd, disjointed dreams of Gabriel, Vincent...her baby...and Snow.

...

Vincent returned Below to his chamber and tried to sleep, but it was useless. He lay staring at the wall and listening to the distant rumble of the IRT. Beyond the quiet of the Home tunnels, beyond the far away rumble of the train, was an indistinct, nagging "wrongness" that Vincent could only attribute to knowing that Catherine's grave was empty. He tossed and turned for a good hour before he knew there was no way he could rest and finally gave up the battle.

Throwing off his quilts, he dressed quickly and padded quietly down the dark corridors to the nursery, where Catherine's son was sleeping. Standing over the crib with the bright-haired sleeping child, Vincent thought of all the dreams he and Catherine had shared...some of those dreams more heart-felt than openly spoken. And so many of them ...most, now...past recalling. Yet, here in this sleeping child was the gift and promise that Catherine had left him: that all dreams do not shatter and die, but live on despite death and despair.

He stood watching his son sleep until Mary came in when the first toddler woke, which in turn woke Jacob. In caring for his son, Vincent managed to regain some measure of peace, but despite that, he knew it would be a very long day before he could return to Diana's loft to speak with her about what she'd found.

...

She woke to maddening, ravenous hunger. And she was alone; Snow had left her alone in the coffin. Furious, she shoved at the lid, and was amazed to see it fly up and away. It landed with a splintery crash on the basement floor, and Catherine felt a fleeting moment of smugness. *Serve him right if it's destroyed*, she thought. *He shouldn't have left me here.*

She climbed out of the coffin and smoothed the ridiculously short red skirt down over her hips. She'd have to get new clothes, and soon. There was a horrid buzzing in her head, and everything looked reddish. And every sound was magnified; she could hear the scrape of little cockroach feet in

the corners, and the squeak and scrabble of rats in the wall.

And from above, footsteps.

Catherine's lip lifted in a silent snarl. Someone was coming toward the door to the basement. Two someones, actually—and one of them wasn't happy about it.

She could hear a muffled voice, and sometimes the second set of feet slid and dragged over the floor above her, catching in the debris there. She looked around for a hiding place, but the only thing in the room was the coffin. She went to it and crouched down beside it on the side away from the door, hoping that the coffin stood high enough to screen her from view from the top of the stairs.

The basement door opened, and now she could hear the rapid, stuttering beat of a heart, and labored, ragged breathing. And the other one. Catherine relaxed. It was Snow. She didn't now how she knew, but she did. As though they were connected, somehow.

"Cat!" Snow called down the stairs, "Come out. It's all right. I've brought you breakfast." There was a tinge of humor in his tone.

Catherine scrambled out from behind the coffin, the hunger overriding everything. But when she stood, she saw that Snow was holding a skinny kid, about nineteen, one hand clamped over his mouth and the other arm around his chest. The kid's feet dangled about three inches off the floor, and he was struggling desperately, kicking and flailing, but Snow seemed not to notice.

"Ah," Snow said when he saw her. "You're awake. Good." He carried the kid down the steps as though he were no more burden than a kitten and set him down in front of Catherine. "Here," he said, "You must be ravenous."

Catherine shrank back from the kid. He reeked of sweat and fear and urine and something else, something unhealthy, but underneath all that was another scent, something rich and hot that made her mouth water and sent the gnawing hunger spiraling up beyond bearing. She bit her lip, and was shocked to feel the two upper canines first. They were longer, and wickedly sharp; one of them punctured her lower lip, and without thinking she licked away the small bead of blood that welled up. And then she knew what that hot, rich smell was. Suddenly everything, all sound, all sight, all scent shrank to the kid, and she could hear his heart pounding, could feel the vibration in her own chest, and hear the sound of the blood as it pushed through the large vessels. The smell of it was like a promise of satisfaction, an end to the hunger that maddened her. A growl rose in her throat and she reached forward, snatching at the boy, pulling him toward her. He struggled in her grip, but she held him easily, turning him so that his back pressed against her chest, lifting his jaw with one hand to expose the line of his neck. Somewhere in the back of her head a voice screamed, "NO! Stop!" But she couldn't, she was starving, starving.... With a feral snarl, she buried her fangs in his throat.

Hot blood gushed into her mouth and she swallowed. It was glorious, and hideous, and she wanted more. She began to suck greedily at the wound she'd made. The boy moaned, not as though he were in pain, rather as if he were experiencing something intensely pleasurable. And then he shuddered and went slack in her arms. His heartbeat stuttered and slowed, slowed, and then...stopped. For a moment Catherine held him, her mouth still fastened on his throat. The consuming hunger was gone, and so was the red haze that had seemed to cloud her vision when she woke. Then Snow came to her and gently pulled the boy from her grasp.

"There, now," he said. "It's done. I'll take care of him now." He lifted the limp body away from her and carried it up the stairs and out of the abandoned building.

Catherine sank to her knees on the hard basement floor. She passed a trembling hand over her mouth, and when she looked down at it, it was covered with blood. Her eyes went wide. "Oh, no! What have I *done*?"

...

Vincent crouched beside the tunnel wall, hand over his pounding heart, trying to banish the red mist of rage and desire that clouded his vision. The coppery tang of blood was in his mouth and his traitorous body was reacting with a fierce surge of desire that he'd thought he'd managed to banish

from his life. "I will NOT do this!" he growled. "NO MORE!" He roared. Vincent shook his head violently to clear it, ragged breaths tore through him as he gradually forced away the violent images in his mind: the joy, the blood...and Catherine's body warm against his. He would NOT allow such images to taint his thoughts of Catherine ever again. She no longer needed his rage...his strength. The beast should be quiet. WOULD be quiet. As the hunger and desire ebbed, Vincent wept. Great, wracking sobs that twisted through him, wringing him dry of tears and any emotion but sorrow and regret. "Oh, Catherine," he gasped roughly, "will I never rediscover you? Where is the remembered music of our love?" He blinked tears away and saw in the blurred aureole of light around the torch a radiant vision of Catherine's lovely face and he clung to that vision as a drowning man to his rescuer.

...

Diana managed a bit of sleep after Vincent left, but she was up long before noon and hitting the Net tracking down information on grave robberies and other related mischiefs. When that didn't turn anything substantial up, she started checking out other recent "weird shit" that had turned up since last night. It didn't take long.

There it was, in plain print...what had been haunting the thoughts in the back of her mind ever since this whole thing started. She chewed her knuckles and frowned at the screen, counting to ten slowly to calm herself before picking up the phone to call the lab.

"Hey, Bowman..." she greeted the lab assistant when he answered the phone. "Yeah...I know. I never call unless I want something." She just kept staring at the monitor, wishing what was there would go away. As Sam Bowman joked with her on the other end of the line, Diana was trying to figure a way to find out what she needed to know. When the patter slowed, she asked, "Um...Sam...you had a prostitute murdered over on the East side last night, right?"

The young cop confirmed that there had been, and that there was a lot of talk about the murder, because it had some really strange things about it. "What kind of things? You know 'strange' is my business. I'll probably end up with the case anyway."

It was easier than she'd thought it would be. Young Bowman was so anxious to talk about it to somebody she didn't even have to prod. When she hung up the phone, she felt as bloodless as that corpse was reputed to have been. She spun her chair around and launched herself across the room, then raced back. "This can't be happening..." she said aloud, though she knew it could. She was very aware of the weird things that could happen in this world: she lived with "weird." "Weird" was her life. But this was different. Always before she could shut enough of it out that she could separate from it—stay objective. This was Cathy, and Cathy had become closer to her—more real to her—than some of her family was. Because of Vincent. Because Vincent loved Cathy, she loved Cathy. She'd learned to love her through Vincent long before she ever met him by piecing together the bits and pieces of the love they'd shared. She was trying to help Vincent through his grief, and through that, she was grieving right along with him.

"This is gonna kill him," she muttered to herself. Kneeling in front of Cathy's rosebush, she fingered the velvet-soft petals of the one red rose it had managed to produce. "Where are you, Cathy?" she breathed intently. "What would you do in this situation?"

Closing her eyes, Diana let her mind drift as her fingers cupped the rose, but in a few moments her eyes flew open and she gasped. She knew exactly what Catherine Chandler would do when she realized what she'd become: her first instinct would be to go to Vincent for help, and she'd seek him out. And Diana couldn't let that happen. Without further thought, she grabbed her gun and carryall and headed out....

...

As Catherine traveled, she kept to the alleys, not wanting to be seen by anyone. She felt as though the stigma of what she had become was branded across her forehead. She couldn't get the

thought of that boy out of her mind...couldn't believe what she'd done to him, nor the fierce pleasure it had been. Even now, the thought sickened her, even as it made her thirst again. The world around her was a cacophony of sound and smell that made her dizzy. It shocked her when she stopped to look in an old cracked mirror: who was that stranger in the red dress...the roughly combed hair? And if she was really a vampire, why could she see herself at all? She reached down and touched the smooth surface of the mirror, almost expecting her hand to go through, like it was a window...not a solid surface at all. But the surface felt hard and slick. She lifted shaking fingers to her face...to her hair, which still had clumps of mud in it. Pushing back her hair from her forehead, she felt a rough ridge across the top of her brow. It felt like a scar...like she'd had some terrible wound there, but it had healed. Puzzled, she pushed her hair back further and peered into the mirror to see the thin white line of scar tissue. With horror, she remembered that they did autopsies on people who had been murdered.

She stood, frozen for several long moments as all the implications sank in, then she turned and ran. Ran for the tunnels and Vincent. Vincent was sanity. He was love. He could fix anything, and he'd love her no matter what.

...

Vincent reached Diana's loft only to find it locked and dark. She was gone. Frustrated, confused and exhausted, he leaned heavily against the low wall surrounding the rooftop and surveyed the city below him. The traffic crawled through the city streets and the lights were just as bright as they'd been before this tragedy. Everything looked the same, but he knew it wasn't: his world had once more tilted crazily, upsetting the peaceful flow of life. He hadn't any idea what to do next...no idea where Diana might be. He knew if he left this rooftop he'd soon find himself back at Catherine's ruined grave. He shuddered and turned his thoughts toward Diana. *Perhaps she's found something, or is out investigating a lead*, he thought hopefully. There was nothing else he *could* believe. Diana had promised him she'd find out what happened, and he trusted her implicitly. He couldn't imagine her forgetting her promise to him. Deciding that the logical thing to do would be to wait for her to return, Vincent lowered himself to the rooftop and sat, back to the wall to wait. Drawing his knees up, he crossed his arms over them and put his head down to try to rest while he waited. *She'll find something*, he thought with conviction. *She always does*.

...

Snow trailed after Catherine when she left, watching as she made her way to the park. His emotions were in turmoil and he tried desperately to lock everything down tight, where it belonged. But it didn't work. Nothing seemed to work right or feel the same since he'd brought Catherine across. *Damn it!* he thought furiously, not sure where to direct his anger. He *wanted* to be angry with Catherine, but he couldn't be. He knew how troubled she was by what she'd become. It had been a good five hundred years since he'd come over, but his memories of that night were still clear in his mind, and he knew it would take her a long time to reconcile herself to the change—assuming she ever could. Some never could. Snow had learned to deal with it by continuing to be what he'd always been: a hunter.

He smiled as he watched her glide gracefully through the trees, instinctively keeping to the shadows. Cat was a curious mixture of innocence, sophistication, and beauty that took his breath away, and he could understand why Vincent loved her. No. It wasn't Catherine he needed to be angry with. It was Gabriel.

Catherine crossed the street and darted into the park, and after a short interval, Snow followed. At first, he thought that for some reason she was headed back to her grave, but then it occurred to him she was headed for the drainage tunnel: the same one he'd blasted through to get down to those damned labyrinths. She was going to *him*. Going to Vincent. With an unconscious snarl, Snow slipped through the shadows after her. Now his anger was transferred to someone a trifle nearer and more accessible than Gabriel.

As Catherine neared the tunnel opening, she stopped, lifting her head alertly. Snow knew why. He could smell her, the woman in the shadows, before she ever stepped out into the clearing. The sweet aroma of her blood came to him, causing the hunger to wake. He hadn't fed tonight. He could almost sense the hot rush of it through her veins and touched the tip of his tongue to lips that suddenly seemed parched.

Moving silently toward the two women, he paused when he realized that Cat and the woman were talking...discussing the beast-man Vincent and Cat's baby—the one that Gabriel had called his son. Snow smiled as he thought of Gabriel's ignominious defeat. *Does him good to be taken down a few pegs once every fifty years or so. And to have him killed by a woman, when he was such a misogynist was the best of all.* Snow had done a little research and learned that Gabriel had been "killed" by a certain red-haired female detective named Diana Bennett: as he watched the strange woman move out into the moonlight, listened to the dialogue, he realized this woman must be that same Diana Bennett.

As Cat and Diana walked away from him, with Cat chatting amiably with the other woman, Snow swallowed his hunger and looked for other fare. Diana deserved to live: any hunter who'd bested Gabriel—even temporarily—deserved respect. He'd catch up with them later. After he'd fed.

...

Diana waited impatiently in the shrubbery near the drainage tunnel. Occasionally her hand brushed against the cold metal of her gun, reassuring herself that it was within handy reach. *A bullet might not stop a vampire permanently, but it'll certainly slow one down,* she told herself anxiously. She thought of Gabriel and his smug attitude and wondered if that slug through the heart had only slowed him...all this horror had to be coming from somewhere, and she couldn't think of a more likely source.

Out of the corner of her eye, Diana caught a flash of movement at the edge of the clearing. A woman stepped out of the shadows: it was Catherine, and she was moving with a liquid grace slowly, hesitantly, toward the tunnel entrance. Diana watched, fascinated as Catherine lifted her head alertly, like a deer testing the wind. There was a wild awareness to her, and Diana couldn't help wondering if she'd been like that before...before *this*.

Catherine's very existence stunned Diana into a frozen immobility. Despite the things she knew to be possible...despite the things she'd seen, this was almost too much for her to digest. *Cathy is DEAD,* she told herself. *She's dead. I watched her autopsy. Watched them put her in the ground.* But despite that, the woman in the clearing was definitely Catherine Chandler...Diana knew her as well as she knew her own sister.

Remembering to breathe, Diana felt again for her gun. At that same moment, Catherine stopped abruptly and turned her gaze toward her, her expression suspicious. Diana swallowed, forcing the lump down her throat: Cathy knew she was here. Knowing she had to face her fear, Diana wiped sweaty palms on her pants and stepped out from behind the tree.

Diana felt uneasy under Cathy's scrutiny and wondered what was going on in her mind. She knew Cathy must be confused and frightened. Now that she was closer, Diana could see that Cathy's hair was disordered and there were traces of mud still clinging to it. An immense sympathy for Vincent's Catherine lanced through her and she started forward....

The woman...the creature...before her changed suddenly, crouching defensively, appearing more animal than woman. Diana heard a low, vicious hissing coming from her, and aghast, retreated a step or two...remembering with dismay that this creature was NOT Vincent's Catherine any longer. Her Gran had told her that just as a drug addict would steal, kill, even starve their own child to get money for their next fix, a vampire was ruled by the bloodthirst and a deep desire for life.

Forcing her hand away from her gun, Diana held her empty hands up and spoke softly to the savage, frightened creature. "Cathy...it's okay, Cath. I'm not here to hurt you."

Some vestige of the old Catherine must have remained and the creature's fear and fury seemed to drain away. Diana could feel the difference in the air around her as Catherine drew herself up and

asked in an odd, strained voice, "Who are you? How do you know who I am?"

"My name's Diana Bennett. I'm...I'm a police detective. Joe Maxwell...Joe put me on your murder investigation...to find your killer."

Catherine put her hand to her head. Her eyes drifted to the tunnel entrance, then back to Diana. Their eyes met. "You know what I am. Don't you?"

Mouth dry with fear, Diana nodded. She forced the words out. "You can't go in there, Cathy. You can't let him know. It'll kill him."

"You know about him, too?" Cathy seemed bewildered.

Diana was getting nervous...afraid Vincent might come back this way. She nodded. "Cathy, can we go somewhere? Talk?"

Cathy started for the tunnel entrance. "I have to see him. He has to help my baby."

Diana lurched forward and caught her by the arm and Cathy spun, snarling, flinging her four feet into the air. Diana landed forcefully on her back, with the breath knocked out of her. Lifting her head, gasping against the stabbing pain in her ribs, she forced herself to draw breath so she could call out to the woman's retreating back: "Ca...Cathy! STOP!" Holding her side, Diana scrabbled to her feet and called again. "Your baby's safe, Cathy! Gabriel's dead."

Cathy stopped, then and turned back. Her face was a grimace of rage. She came at Diana so quickly that Diana barely had time to register that she was coming...she'd never seen anything move so fast. She found herself being held in a vise-like grip, her face dragged down to Cathy's eye-level, and as Cathy spoke, Diana realized Cathy's canines were longer, sharper than she remembered them.

"Gabriel's NOT dead!" Catherine released Diana so abruptly that she fell to her knees. She tried desperately not to try to run: she knew she'd lose. Catherine was shaking with rage as she glowered down at her. "That bastard made me what I am," she hissed. "I don't know how...I don't know why. My baby...what do you know of my baby?"

Catherine's demeanor had turned abruptly from rage to tremulous hope, and Diana's hope grew as well that she might actually live through this if Catherine's love for her child and Vincent could still outweigh the bloodlust. Rising cautiously to her feet, Diana said gently, "The baby is fine. He's with his father."

Catherine's relief was evident. The smile she gave Diana was almost radiant...if you could just ignore the fangs. "You're SURE? You're CERTAIN he's fine?"

The sudden, almost sure belief that the danger was past was dizzying, and Cathy's smile was contagious. Smiling back at the anxious mother, Diana nodded. "He's a beautiful, healthy, happy baby."

Cathy studied her with greater interest. "How do you know about Vincent?"

Looking away from those glittering, anxious eyes, Diana stammered: "I...found him. After an explosion." She looked up to meet Catherine's gaze. "He'd gone to your grave to die."

The expression on Catherine's face was unreadable as she stared intently at Diana. Finally, she turned her eyes to the tunnel entrance, then sighed. Without looking back at Diana, she said stonily, "I've lost him. We waited too long, and now..." she shook her head. "I can't go back."

Her heart breaking, Diana murmured, "No."

There was a long, painful silence, then Cathy turned back to Diana. "What does Vincent think of him? Is Vincent managing OK? Without me, I mean?"

Diana held out her hand and Cathy took it. "Come on. Let's go. I don't like being here...he could come through here any time. Come with me and I'll tell you anything you want to know." Cathy hesitated, then came with her.

"Do you have a comb?" Cathy asked plaintively. "I REALLY could use comb."

Diana dug through her carryall and found a comb, handing it to her without a word. They found a bench and Cathy settled on it and began combing the clumps of mud out of her hair. Diana swallowed the lump in her throat as she watched the silent woman. She was angry and sad at the same time as she thought of Vincent and Jacob—Vincent without his beloved and Jacob without his mother. Diana straddled the bench and wiped her sweating hands on the knees of her jeans, her mind jumping ahead to the future and the various disasters that could occur. She had to know what Cathy was going to do.

She finally worked up the nerve to ask: "So, what's next, Cath? What happens now?"

Cathy paused a moment in her grooming, then continued, still without looking over at Diana. After a few long moments, she murmured softly, "I don't know. I want to see him...."

"Vincent?" Diana's heart was pounding: she HAD to think of some way to keep that from happening.

Cathy shook her head. "No. It wouldn't be fair to Vincent to know what's happened to me. It would only hurt him. I mean my baby. I never even got to hold him." Glancing up to meet Diana's eyes, Cathy pleaded, "Will you help me?"

"I...don't..." Diana stammered a little. She hadn't any idea how she could even manage such a thing...much less if she SHOULD. "I don't know, Cath."

"I just want to SEE him, Diana. Hold him," Cathy begged. "Please. You're the only one who can help me."

Diana drew a deep breath and stared around the silent, dark park. *I can't believe this is happening. Out in friggin' Central Park in the middle of the night talking to a vampire about sneaking Vincent's son away from him so that vampire can HOLD him.* She dropped her gaze back to Catherine and studied her. She looked so sweet and ethereal...her skin almost translucent. It was hard to believe she was an undead creature...a killer. *I can't believe I'm even considering this!* Diana sighed in defeat. "I'll do what I can. I can't promise anything."

Catherine smiled and Diana shivered as she glimpsed the tips of fangs. "That's all I can ask."

Cathy rose and held out the comb. "Can I keep this?"

Diana nodded silently, then asked as Catherine turned away: "You...got a place to stay? I mean...you gonna be all right?"

An odd look moved across Cathy's face, but she nodded. "I've got someplace. I'll be fine."

"How'll I find you?" Diana queried.

"I'll find *you*."

Cathy turned and within moments disappeared into the darkness as though she'd never been there, and Diana shivered again. "Bennett," she said aloud, "you've been in some crazy situations...done some weird things, but this has gotta take the cake." With a rueful shake of her head, Diana started home...wondering what she was going to tell Vincent when she got there.

...

Snow felt her before he saw her: the taut, tingling pull of the bond between them was like nothing he'd felt since Gabriel first made him. He raised his head to look at her as she moved toward him, and with the back of his hand he wiped his victim's blood from his mouth. She was a vision in that blood-red, body-hugging dress, slim legs and arms, the rest of her soft...her hair touched with moonlight and drifting in the breeze. For a moment he forgot who and what he was. For a moment, he was alive. He rose to greet her, but she spoke first as she stared down at his kill.

"Who was he?" she asked softly, her eyes sad.

Suddenly, acutely ashamed for the first time in a hundred years, Snow pulled the body to a sitting position and backed away. "A man. Not a good man, but he didn't deserve to die, I suppose."

She stared at him for a long, silent moment, then asked, "Then why?" She gestured elegantly at the city behind her. "Out of all the beasts that prowl this city, why choose him?" She fingered her dress. "Or the poor woman who wore this? Weren't there others out there who deserved it a lot more? People whose absence would be welcomed?"

Snow watched as Cat knelt and dug through the man's pockets, pulling out a wallet, which she opened to reveal several large bills. With a wry smile, she commented, "You may have some things to teach ME, but I have a few to teach you, too." Holding her hand out for him to take it, she told him, "Come on. Wash up. We're going shopping. I have no intention of wearing this rag another night. And I intend to sleep in a decent hotel tomorrow...NOT in a coffin in a cellar."

"Shopping?" Snow followed willingly enough, though he wondered a bit at going shopping with

a woman like Cat. His idea of shopping was prowling for guns and equipment for his hunts. Other than that, his needs were simple. And the very thought of sleeping someplace without a heavy-duty lock and not far enough away from the light made him VERY uneasy.

"Shopping," she said with a fang-tipped smile.

...

The night was still young as Cathy led Snow through the city. She was exhilarated...ebullient and totally empowered. She had a plan and a purpose, now. *If I can't have Vincent and my "happy life" complete with baby and picket fence, I'll damn well have something ELSE I've wanted for a long time: I'll have an effective way to get some of the scum off the streets without dragging through the system.* It felt wonderful.

Snow paced beside her, his distinctive appearance drawing as many looks of admiration from the women they passed as she did looks from the men. He hadn't said a thing since they'd left the body of his latest "meal" in the alley, and Cathy wondered what he was thinking: though she could sense a strong "connection" between them, and sense that he was amused, she couldn't sense his thoughts. She glanced sidewise at him and he winked.

"You look much nicer with your hair combed," he commented dryly. Embarrassed, Cathy reached up and pulled at his short, white hair as he grinned and ducked away.

"Yeah...well, you don't have much to comb. You have the advantage."

Her companion chuckled. "So where are we heading, my Queen of the Night?"

"Saks."

White eyebrows quirked upward and Snow halted, looking down at his attire: snug-fitting black leather pants and pullover shirt, short boots. "Oh my...am I dressed appropriately?" he queried cheerfully.

Cathy laughed and rolled her eyes. "Oh, come ON. As if you CARE."

It wasn't long before they reached Fifth Avenue and stood before the store. The lights around them were brilliant, and Cathy could smell the heavy blood-scent beneath the women's perfumes and the stink of the cars' exhaust...sense the pulse of it as it moved through their veins. She felt a bit like a hungry grocery shopper going through a deli. Expensively dressed customers were coming and going from the store and it amused Cathy tremendously that no one around her knew they had monsters in their midst. She touched one fang with her tongue and reminded herself not to smile too widely. Linking an arm with Snow's she led him into the store.

"May I help you?" the clerk asked them, a haughty sneer scarcely disguised beneath the otherwise professional demeanor that all Saks personnel conveyed, were carefully trained to convey. But *Riff-raff* was clearly in her eyes as she swept the couple with an appraising look. She'd wait on them; she'd take their money, Cathy knew; yet she'd leave no doubt in their minds that she'd do so only with great distaste. Cathy knew the game. Knew how to play it, too...and far better than this witch did. *I could have you for breakfast, you old biddy* she thought to herself, then stopped short. By God, she really *could*, it occurred to her. That realization skidded around in her mind, headed for her funny bone, and only with great effort did she redirect it before it could cause her to laugh aloud. Her new fangs, after all, she again cautioned herself, had to be kept hidden. Or *did* they...?

"Just browsing," she managed to say with a tiny, closed-lip smile. She let her face and body language both flash a *Don't you mess with me, Lady!* warning to her adversary, then ever so slightly she parted her lips, allowing a fang tip to glitter momentarily. To Cathy's satisfaction, the message clearly hit its mark. The clerk, expression suddenly uncertain, perhaps even mildly alarmed, nodded with a deference that fairly shrieked of surrender, and scurried away.

Cathy caught the sound of a low chuckle from Snow. Glancing at her companion, she saw the pride in his icy eyes, the approval of her carelessly expert one-up-manship, and she felt her chin lift, her neck extend just a fraction more. *And why not?* she thought, savoring the realization which swept through her all at once: All her life, she had depended upon money to give her power. And she now knew

that all that the money had truly bought her was the illusion of respect, the trappings of respectability. Mere money—what a false god, after all! It might've purchased the pretended fawning of a clerk—a clerk! a shop-keeper!—but what was *that* worth?! Nothing, compared to this...*this*...the power she owned now was the highest, headiest coin of all: Life and Death. Death fed by Life. Life sustained by Death....

It was heady, this power. When the subdued clerk returned, Cathy told her: "I want a dress. A simple, sexy dress. Comfortable. And lingerie."

As she followed the clerk, she glanced back at Snow, who followed slowly, his expression carefully blank, but his eyes glittering with amusement.

They passed a mannequin with a lovely, simple black dress and Cathy paused. The dress was form-fitting, low cut in front and back.

"I like this." The clerk nodded and Cathy told Snow, "Go ahead and take a seat and wait. I'll be back shortly."

Snow's cheek twitched with amusement and he chuckled. Silently, he lowered himself to a hassock and crossed his legs to wait. Cathy took her time, sending the clerk scuttling back and forth with various styles of bras, panties, and a couple of different sizes of the dress. The woman also brought her some makeup, which Cathy applied carefully. It tickled her that even without a push-up bra, she looked quite *busty* in this dress...almost as though she'd gained a bit there in her "transformation." Slipping on her new black heels, she left the red dress lying on the bench in the dressing room and went to pay for her purchases and find her companion.

...

Snow was getting restless. He felt uncomfortable with all the people around him. All the lights. He felt very exposed. Women dressed in fine dresses and haughty looks passed him, though those looks tended to change to interest as they noticed him. Uneasily, he crossed and uncrossed his legs, stretching them out as he

tried leaning against a back that wasn't there. He snarled and crossed his arms. Then, there she was—his Cat—transformed from the harlot in the red dress to a sophisticate. Snow was entranced. She glided toward him on lovely, slim legs that seemed to go on forever. His eyes moved slowly up to the deep, plunging vee of the neckline and stopped there for a moment of appreciation, then moved to her face. She smiled, allowing just a touch of fang to show. "Sorry it took so long."

He drew a deep breath to steady himself. That connection: the pull between them was insistent, like a bright, silver thread drawing them together. And he thought he'd never seen anything or anyone so lovely in his long, lonely life. Suddenly, he felt oppressed by all the activity around him—the heaviness of the blood scent—the lights. The cattle. He rose and met her. He wanted her away from here and alone. He took her hand and raised it to his lips, watching the heat he was feeling rise to her face and shine from her eyes. "My Queen. You are exquisite."

...

Cathy shivered as Snow took her hand and kissed it. That bright thread that bound them tightened still further, and the thirst was on her—suddenly—bringing with it a hot chill that set her to trembling. Dizzy, frightened, and fascinated all at once, she craved the taste—not of the metallic and slightly salty tang of the blood—but of the piercing and the drinking and the reveling...in the power. The *real* power....

Snow must have sensed it, for he steadied her with a quick hand to her elbow and turned her with him to guide her outside. Once on the street, he leaned to brush his mouth close to her ear. "It's not a true need, Cat," he whispered. "You're too new to know the difference yet. Trust me and I'll teach you." His hand slipped to her waist as they began walking back in the direction of their hidden home.

But her shaking hadn't stopped; his reassurance was not quite enough. With an enormous effort, Cathy drew from some unknown reserve of discipline and managed to control it enough so that only the occasional shiver still tickled across her shoulder blades. She had to swallow several times before she

could speak. "If it's not to..."—she almost choked, but she said it—"to feed... then what is it?" she asked him. She wanted to slap the coolly controlled expression off his face as he halted their walking and turned to her. How *dare* he look so damned unruffled when she felt as if she were about to fly apart...?

"There are...other hungers, Cat," he said slowly. One hand raised to her throat; a single finger touched the shadow at the base of her neck, then turned so that his knuckle slid in a tantalizing arc that ended between her breasts. Then stopped. Just stopped and rested there, ever so lightly, skin to bare skin, palm still facing outward. Waiting....

It was the clearest invitation she'd ever received. Yet somehow, it wasn't crude, it wasn't coarse. Bold, yes—but Snow was a bold man. A confidant man, supremely so. All the same, right now he was a man who was not demanding. He was offering, and he was *asking*....

And she was answering.

Lifting a hand to his, she turned his fingers toward her then nudged them downward, guiding his hand so that his palm could not mistake the feel of the nipple which was quickly tightening at his touch. Snow's hand slowly closed, as did his eyes for a moment.

"Hungers...hungers, Cat..." he sighed, the sound of his voice like quiet smoke drifting between them, a world of need conveyed in the simple murmur. She no longer wanted to slap him.

"Then feed mine," she said, suddenly as bold as he. And as needful. His eyes snapped open then, and amusement twitched at the corner of his mouth. His head flicked to one side and back, reminding her that they were standing on the street—a shadowy street, to be sure, but none the less a public place. "Here?" he teased. "Now?"

Cathy had to laugh with him as she hastily brushed his hand from her breast, both of them making an exaggerated pretense of returning to their dignified senses. Immediately, though, she missed the heat of his touch on her body, and wished it back. Wished it all over her. Wished it exploring, discovering, matching her own movements as she asked and received, took and gave back. The sexual dance, before. The satisfied sleep, afterward.

"Do you still want that 'decent' hotel?" Snow asked, smiling, apparently willing to indulge her, if that was a condition she wished to place on him. Cathy tilted her head saucily, taking measure of him, and of her own impatience at the same time. "Which one is closer?" she asked. He grinned, and she had her answer.

...

Diana could sense Vincent's presence before stepping from the elevator into her loft; his despair lay like a blanket over her. Dropping her carryall, she pelted up the stairs, taking them three at a time, no matter that she was in danger of breaking her neck in the process. She slammed the roof door open and skidded across the distance between them to wrap her arms around his shaking shoulders.

He was curled against the wall drawing deep, shaking breaths and he turned to bury his face in the curve of her neck. Diana patted and stroked the long, coarse mane and tried to steady her own voice as she asked him gently: "What is it? C'mon. Let it out."

"She's dead, Diana. Gone." His voice was ragged from crying.

Diana couldn't help picturing Cathy as she'd last seen her—lovely, a little sad, but determined to accept what had happened to her and learn to live with it. Diana swallowed the lump in her throat and her hands continued their automatic stroking reassurance. "I know," she murmured. "I know. But it's okay. It'll be okay." She didn't know what else to say...what else to do.

But Vincent wasn't finished. Still shaking, he lifted his head and stared into her eyes. The depth of his suffering shattered her and she began shaking, too. "But if she's gone, Diana...why do I keep sensing her...feeling...the way I do? The bond was gone...but now... there's *something* there. Not the same. But it's there—flowing like a dark river. Is this the madness again?"

Diana's mouth went dry. *What is he feeling*, she thought, panicked. *What on earth is Cathy doing to cause this reaction?* But all she said aloud was, "She *can't* be there, Vincent. You *know* that. C'mon...don't do this to yourself." Diana's mind was awl with confusion. This complicated things

tremendously. She'd thought the bond had been broken. If Vincent could still sense Cathy, eventually he'd find out what she'd become, and Diana was afraid the knowledge would destroy him. Completely. Cathy was coping: she didn't know if Vincent ever could. Not with *this*. As Vincent lowered his head to her shoulder again, Diana simply closed her eyes and held him, and pushed away all her thoughts of this horrible situation. She'd handle events one at a time...each disaster as it came. That's all she could do.

...

Well, it wasn't the Ritz, Cathy acknowledged as surveyed the hotel room, but it wasn't so bad, either. Snow had been adamant with the desk clerk and had made certain their accommodations faced the corridor, and had no windows, no danger of daylight intruding upon their sleep. The bed was large, its covers already neatly turned down, the sheen of satin sheets catching the soft lamplight. Inviting....

But before anything, before any...other hunger...Cathy wanted a bath. A deep, soaking one, luxurious with bubbles, soothing with clean, hot water. Certain she'd never felt so grungy in her life, she worried too about the lovely new clothes; she had to get out of the things before she ruined them. "Will you run me a tub?" she asked Snow prettily. From the look on his lean, handsome face, she felt sure there was yet *another* power she'd be wielding tonight. She suppressed a laugh, for already she well knew that this was not a man to be pushed too far. Flirting he would accept; prick-teasing he absolutely would not.

"Happily, my lovely," Snow replied, moving off toward the bathroom. Soon the sound of cascading water filled the bedroom and Cathy listened with relief. Ah, to be clean again, really and truly clean!

Snow returned to the room, leaving the water to run unattended. He approached Cathy without hesitation, and only lifted an eyebrow to confirm what she was sure she was fully projecting—permission to undress her. Permission to do whatever he pleased, really.... His tenderness was unexpected. He helped her with the dress, sliding it slowly from her shoulders and taking it for her as she stepped out of it. She closed her eyes and sighed as his arms slipped around her, his fingers trailed delicately over her breasts, traced the edges of her bra, then paused to unhook it. His hands were gentle and patient as her body was revealed to him. Cathy felt not the slightest shyness, to her surprise; only a quiet pride as Snow drew in an appreciative breath, as his eyes feasted, frankly admiring her. When he surrounded her with his arms and lifted her off her feet, Cathy was certain he intended to carry her to the bed. She almost spoke up, to remind him of the filling bath, when she realized that he was carrying her in that direction. Sinking down to kneel by the side of the tub, he lowered her into the water carefully, seeming heedless that his long shirtsleeves were soaked to the elbow in the process.

"Your shirt," she murmured, protesting, but he hushed her with a soft, "No matter, no matter," and leaned back to peel the garment off. Then he reached for her again, and Cathy surrendered to a luxury that only the vaguest of childhood memories could call to her mind. He bathed her.

Snow washed her hair for her, pushing her hands away when she tried to help, so she simply lay back, arms floating a little in the deep water, and let his strong hand support the back of her neck while he worked. His fingers massaged in the shampoo, then cupped to lift clear water over her scalp, rinsing and rinsing until she actually heard the tiny squeaks of cleanliness when he was done. Reaching for the soap, he dunked it in the water first, releasing its faint, sweet scent into the air before he began to lather her body with it.

Cathy could have wept with the pleasure of it, as Snow washed her, his touch actually more tender than sexual. He was arousing her, certainly, and quite deliberately, but with a rhythm as slow as a waltz, as dreamy as mist and ocean sounds. There was no hurry, no hurry, no hurry at all....

Cathy gazed down the length of her body, accepting without the least dismay that indeed her shape had changed. She watched Snow's hands drift lazily over breasts that were heavy and full now; along the wider flare of hips that had once been lean; she saw him stroke the voluptuousness that she'd never dreamt would ever be hers. And she loved it. Loved looking like this. Loved being touched like this, by a man who so obviously thought the sight of her marvelous. And she almost wept with the

thought that she and Vincent had never been able to share this. Deliberately and carefully she put those thoughts away to take out and weep over another time. She didn't want to weep, not now. She wanted to make love. She closed her eyes and let herself enjoy *now*.

When Snow whispered that her bath was done and that he wanted a shower now, Cathy rose from the water but didn't leave the tub. While he toed off his boots and peeled away the snug leather britches, she opened the tub's drain and set the shower to running. With a sweep of her hand, she invited him in.

She watched Snow lather himself, not offering help but leaning lazily back into a corner of the tub, enjoying the sight of him. He was neither tall nor heavy, yet his body was as powerful as any weightlifter's. Discipline was apparent in every clearcut muscle, in the grace with which he moved and turned and bent, his whole being one of harmony and balance. And as her eyes drifted over him, she couldn't help wondering with a glimmer of amusement and appreciation if the transformation was responsible for the "enhancement" of certain masculine endowments as well.

It was no surprise to Cathy that he made efficient work of his shower, for that seemed the hallmark of everything he did: Decision; action; completion. *What kind of a lover will that make him?* she wondered idly, not really worried. Then he turned toward her once more, the water splashing against his shoulders, throwing tiny, stinging droplets over her face. His eyes opened and she caught her breath at the intensity of his stare, the laser-blue clarity that pulled her forward and into his arms....

He drew her close to whisper in her ear. His body was hard against hers, and the slick, hot length of him was trapped between them. "It won't be the same, Cat. Know that." Cathy drew back to look into his eyes and he lifted fingers to brush against her lips. "Know, too, that each time we...join...it forges another link in the chain that binds us. For us...this can never be casual."

Catherine couldn't breathe, the need was upon her so strongly, yet his words penetrated her fogged brain. Fleeting images of her life before passed by in a heartbeat and the immense sorrow and regret swept over her again, making her want to weep for chances lost and dreams destroyed. But that life was irrevocably gone. And *this* was what she had now. She forced the words up through a throat tight with sorrow, rage and need: "Do I have a choice?" she hissed.

With a look that told Catherine of his own deep sorrows, Snow released her, then reached up to stroke her damp hair back from her face. "There are always choices, Cat." He stepped away from her and out of the tub, reaching for a towel, and leaving her standing there cold and alone. As he toweled himself dry, his face tight and closed, he told her: "This was forced upon me, too, Cat. Gabriel knew I didn't want this. Very few vampires allow themselves this kind of...connection." He hung the towel and handed her a clean one. "You have to make the decision. I won't be like Gabe." With that, he turned and walked away from her, into the bedroom.

...

Snow was hurt and angry. He wanted to leave—and couldn't. The tie between himself and Catherine was too powerful for him to fight. *Five hundred years*, he thought furiously, chiding himself. *Two centuries I've managed without this, and now I'm like a dog after a bitch in heat.* He snarled and fisted his hands. He wasn't angry with Catherine, but he was furious almost past reason with Gabriel. There was a small movement behind him and he spun to see Catherine standing in the doorway...and he hesitated only an instant when she held out her arms for him. Lifting her, as she wrapped her arms around him, he brushed his lips down her neck and knew he was lost. It might be lust, but it was also love, and he hadn't a chance.

As he bore her down, the cool, slick sheets were a gentle contrast to the warm velvet of her skin...and below it all was the stolen blood pulsing, flowing. He wanted to memorize her without losing a syllable, take his time exploring every hill and down covered valley, but the heat...the hunger was building in both of them after the gentle play of the evening. Beneath him, she trembled as his fangs touched her throat. He drew back, but her eyes glittered with an avid need that called to him. Her fingers cradled the back of his head as she drew him down, her own fangs glittering in the soft lamplight.

Lost in need, Snow fastened his teeth in her neck and felt her own in his. The blood flowed hot and thick into and from him and he was surrounded by warmth and darkness and stars. By Cat.

...

Vincent's emotions were on a roller coaster ride of highs and lows; he was confused, euphoric, and miserable all at once and couldn't understand why. The emotions *felt* like Catherine, yet he knew they couldn't be coming from her. He knew it must be the madness, and was so frightened of losing himself again. Diana was his anchor to reality, solid and comforting. Her hands were gentle and soft, her voice warm, soothing. As Vincent's panic settled, he became acutely aware of the lush fragrance of her sunbright hair, the pulse of her blood so near under the delicate skin. And her words... delicate, dimensional...full, along with her scent, her touch, washed over him, making him warm, lavish promises... not in the words themselves, but in the essence of the emotions behind them—promises of new hopes and fresh beginnings. A sense of spring after a long, dark winter.

Hesitantly, Vincent lifted his head from her shoulder and met her gaze. Colorless in this moonlit night, her eyes were bright, liquid, her long hair was coming loose from the braid and framed her lovely face in a soft, untidy halo.

She opened her mouth to speak, and the words seemed born, not spoken at all, and his name... ah...his name was like warm velvet. His awareness of her was shattering. The world—his world—narrowed to one point, one precious moment. Here. Now. All the lost dreams of his past—his shattered hopes—were still remembered, the sorrow no less poignant or painful, yet...through these tender eyes he could believe in love again...dare once more to dream.

"Vincent?" she questioned gently, and his whole being attended the graceful curve of her neck, the vital pulse in her throat. She seemed concerned, and he, moving nearer still to her, stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. She smiled, lips parted, her hand covered his. Without thought, he leaned forward, his arm encircled her and drew her close.

"Vin.." she began, but he silenced her, covering her mouth with his. At first, startled by this unexpected development, she stiffened, then her mouth grew soft under his, opening, parting for him, her hands reaching hungrily to help him shrug his vest off his shoulders.

He entered into the deep forest of her...she was dark and light...the bright city and the dark, lonely streets. And so warm. A mirror of himself and a door to life.

...

Catherine lay beside Snow, her head resting on his forearm. She kept her eyes closed to avoid looking at him as he contentedly stroked her, his touch delicate and loving. She snuggled closer and he adjusted to fit his body to hers. Cathy felt like weeping. She was so unbearably sad. The strange, immensely powerful lovemaking with Snow had been satisfying, but the sadness remained and she couldn't shake it.

Eventually, Snow paused in his caresses and lifted her chin with his fingers. "What is it, Cat? Look at me."

Cathy pulled her face away and shook her head as she started to rise, but Snow drew her back down to the bed, to the satin sheets and him. He knelt, wrapping his arms around her from behind, his thighs trapping her between them. She could feel the length of him—his useless manhood—behind her. *Useless* she thought bitterly, *because he isn't a man*. And their lovemaking had proved *that* beyond a doubt. But then again, she wasn't a woman anymore, either. The thought scared hell out of her.

Snow spent several long moments combing through her hair with the fingers of one hand, gently smoothing it, then he murmured quietly, softly, with an immense understanding that brought tears to her eyes: "Catherine..."

"Don't call me that," she told him fiercely, with a sob, thinking of Vincent's gentle voice when he said her name. He'd always made it sound like something precious he was caressing: she didn't want

to hear herself called that ever again. Not with what she'd become.

Snow hugged her more tightly, rested his forehead against her hair and sighed. "It will get easier, Cat."

"You don't understand..."

"Don't I?" he queried gently. "Once, I was like you. I'd had a life, a love. I wasn't a perfect man. In fact, by your standards now, I was a criminal. But then, five hundred years ago, I was respected, if not loved. An assassin's life is like that."

Intrigued despite her own misery, Cathy turned in his arms and he lay back against the soft, smooth sheets and held out his arms for her. After a moment's hesitation, she accepted the invitation and he continued his story.

"I've killed thousands of men, women and children in my long life, Cat. Many...no...most of them far less deserving of death than I."

Cathy's throat was tight as she asked through her misery and anger, "Then why did you do it? And why did you try to kill Vincent? He'd never harmed you."

"How did you know?" Snow asked.

"I don't know," she admitted, temporarily diverted by the question. "I just...*knew*, somehow," then, angry because he'd managed to avoid the question, she stared at him and demanded again: "Why did you try to kill him?"

Without looking away, he admitted, "Because Gabriel asked me to."

Her fury escalating, Cathy sat up and glared at him through her long bangs. Everything came back to Gabriel. "And do you do *everything* your master asks you to do?"

His face grown hard, Snow glared back. "Only when I feel like it. And I felt like hunting Vincent." Before she could answer, he continued. "Ask me why again in a hundred years, Cat. But then, in a hundred years, you won't *have* to ask."

"That's not an answer," she spat at him with a snarl.

"Perhaps not. But it's the only one I have to offer. The only one you'll get. Believe it or not, by the end of the hunt I didn't really want to kill him. He's a valiant warrior, your Vincent. I don't meet many of those anymore. I think...by the end, I loved him a bit myself. We're much alike, he and I."

"Vincent's not at *all* like you. And you would've killed him if you'd had the chance," she said bitterly.

"Yes," Snow admitted blandly, without the least amount of rancor. "But in the end, I defeated myself with my own stupidity."

Cathy was silent for a time, thinking of what that hunt must have been like; how Vincent must have felt, being hunted like an animal yet again. Her anger had faded to despair. "I don't want to be this way, Snow. I *want* Vincent...and my baby." Her voice broke in a sob.

She was crying now, and Snow held her tenderly, gently kissing her face and licking away the blood tears. When she calmed a little, he wound his fingers through hers and told her, "From a distance, I watched the woman I loved bear another man's children, watched her grow old and die." Snow lay beside her, his head on her breast and Cathy felt an immense, helpless tenderness toward him. She tried to be angry with him, not to care...but somehow, she couldn't help herself. She stroked his short, white hair as he talked. "Don't do that to yourself, Cat. That life is gone."

Snow rose from where he lay and gathered her into his arms once more. There were no more tears left, and Cathy resolved to herself that she would make Gabriel pay for what he'd done.

...

Diana lay chin in hand, beside Vincent. Watching him sleep. She'd never seen him look so at peace. She wanted to reach out and brush his heavy mane back...to kiss all the sharp angles of his face...his eyes, lips. But she resisted the temptation: he was exhausted, and she knew it. He'd been running on adrenaline for so long, he desperately needed his rest, now that he seemed to be *able* to rest. She chuckled and gave herself due credit for both his current peace *and* a bit of his exhaustion.

He sighed in his sleep, murmuring her name and she carefully lowered herself back down to snuggle against him. His arm drew her in close to him, automatically holding her as near as possible. Diana stared out into the darkness of the bedroom—intensely aware of the warmth of Vincent’s body, of his love and trust in her.

Remembering Cathy’s request that Diana help her see her baby, Diana sighed, almost glad that Vincent had fallen asleep so quickly, so she wouldn’t have to answer any questions. She felt trapped in the middle ...unable to say *No* to Cathy and unable to lie to Vincent, either. *There has to be a way*, she thought wearily, forcing her eyes closed. *I’ll think about it tomorrow.*

...

The sun slid behind the towers of New York, and at the same time, Snow woke. He stretched luxuriously as Cat stirred beside him. He hadn’t felt this good in at least a century.

“Women are a weakness, Snow. You disappoint me.”

The dry, sardonic voice floating to him out of the dark snapped Snow to complete attention and he bolted upright. Gabriel’s eyes glittered from across the room, though even with vampiric eyesight, Snow could barely discern his silhouette. Cat murmured, beginning to wake, and he automatically rested his hand protectively on her hair, gentling her back to her rest. When he was certain Cat was back in her deep sleep, Snow rose, his rage battering him from within. With his hands tightly fisted in frustration, his lip lifted in a silent snarl, he moved soundlessly across the distance between him and Gabriel. When he stood nearly toe-to-toe with his enemy, Snow became aware that his fury and frustration made him totally impotent: he forced his mind clear. Forced the red rage down for the hundred thousandth time.

“Get out of here. Now.” His voice was level. Emotionless.

He couldn’t see Gabriel’s expression. Didn’t have to. He knew Gabriel was laughing at him; enjoying the situation he’d created. The damage he’d done. Like he always did. The shadow shifted as Gabriel moved to go around him. Snow grasped his arm with an iron grip and Gabriel stopped. Snow could feel the inhumanly hard muscles tense beneath his palm as his nemesis turned to meet the challenge.

Gabriel’s hand lifted and effortlessly peeled Snow’s fingers loose. “Another time, then,” he said with a small, evil chuckle. “Enjoy yourselves ...while you can.”

The darkness that was Gabriel faded into the other shadows and was gone.

Snow was still shaking with suppressed fury when Cat called to him from the bed. “Snow? What is it?” Her voice was heavy with sleep, still.

He closed his eyes, pushed his fingers roughly through his short-cropped hair, then went unerringly to her in the dark, trailing his hand over her cool skin, cupping her breast in his palm. “The sun has set,” he murmured. “Can you feel it?”

She stretched and slid her arms around his neck. “Um. I feel...hungry,” Cat replied, nudging at his neck.

He pushed her away with a laugh. “No more of that! We need *sustenance*, not...” He fell back as Cat shoved him to the floor and leapt upon him with tiny growls. After a few moments of playful wrestling, he took her face in his hands...delicately traced the line of her lower lip with his thumb.

“I’m *hungry*,” she purred insistently, nipping at his thumb. Snow couldn’t help laughing. That was something else he hadn’t done in a long time. “Then get off me, kid. Breakfast awaits.”

...

Feeling contented and more relaxed than he could ever remember, Vincent lay with his eyes closed, and in that drowsy, perfect time between waking and sleep, he was not quite certain exactly where he was. He only knew he wanted to remain there. His face was lying against something exquisitely soft and deliciously scented. He drew in a deep breath, savoring the fragrance, letting it envelop him.

Diana.

The heavy scent of their love surrounded him. Permeated his very being. Afraid the memory of it was a lie...all some dream born of his madness, he cautiously opened his eyes.

Diana.

She slept peacefully, in total relaxed abandon, naked beside him. Naked. Her skin alabaster and roses, her hair trailing liquid fire in bright contrast against such delicate skin. Afraid to move, afraid even to breathe lest he break the spell, he drank in the sight of her, wondering with delight at the sweet, soft curves pressed tightly against him. He was humbled by her trust. Made proud by her love.

She stirred, turning in his arms, murmuring his name, and thoroughly enwrapped in the most delightful tangle of soft skin and firm arms and legs, Vincent finally drew a deep, thankful breath, closed his eyes and finally allowed himself to put his arm around her and relax back into sleep. With trust based on nothing more than faith that she'd be there when he woke.

...

Snow followed Cat through the back alleys behind the hotel. He watched her as she wove her way through the trash and debris that littered the ground and deftly stepped over and around the puddles of oily water. She was both disdainful of the filth, yet curiously at home in it.

Quite a paradox.

He saw her stop to examine a rag-covered man sleeping in an alcove...obviously never considering him when it came to satisfying her thirst, and in fact, taking time to cover him carefully with the dirty blanket. *Still patrician, my Cat*, he thought with an amazed shake of his head.

He looked away from her and up to the brightly lit towers of the city. It never ceased to amaze him how such affluence and wealth as the hotel they'd just left could co-exist in such close proximity to filth and human degradation. But he remembered centuries of back alleys... and somehow, they never really changed.

With a mental shrug, he wondered how much he, himself, had changed over those centuries. Changed, grown, and adjusted to his environment so he could feed on it. *Like a parasitic chameleon*, he thought wryly.

Cat was beckoning to him, and he went to her. He wondered at her rapid adjustment to her bizarre situation. She seemed every inch a huntress on the prowl instead of a socialite. And certainly not an Assistant D.A. He came up behind her, placing his hands possessively upon her slim, strong shoulders; she tilted her head up and back, tossing her honey hair... *So lovely*, he thought appreciatively.

"There," she said softly, the word almost a hiss. Snow's gaze followed where she pointed. An absurdly long, sleek limousine was parked at the corner where a tall, flashily dressed pimp was busy disciplining one of his girls.

"The woman?" Snow asked, curious about her choice.

She licked her full lips, touching the tip of a fang with her tongue, eyes glittering in the half-light. "No. Him."

More curious than before, he asked, "Why him? Why not the woman?"

Cat's expression was intense. Avid. The hunger was obviously upon her heavily, and he was amazed at her restraint. For him, the thirst was controllable after so very long, but even after all the years, he still remembered the intensity of those first few kills. Her voice was low and throaty...infinitely exciting. "Do you see him, Snow? Do you see how he treats her? As though she's unimportant. Totally insignificant. Nothing. She has no existence, no purpose except what *he* wants."

Puzzled, Snow watched the man, trying to see him through Cat's eyes, and he could see what she meant...but he couldn't fathom why it seemed so...personal...to her.

"I see. Do you want me to help you?"

She just smiled and lifted half-hooded eyes to his. The look in those eyes made him very glad that *he* wasn't her intended victim...and he decided then and there that he would *always* treat this lovely creature with the respect she deserved. After all, a little self-preservation never hurt.

"I think I can manage," she said, her voice a sensual purr.

She turned, then, and started across the street, her shapely legs and curvaceous behind moving with mesmerizing grace. She caught the pimp's eye immediately, and Snow could see the indecision on the man's face. It was obvious he liked what he saw; wanted it, but Snow could almost see him looking for the attached strings. The pimp opened the door of the limo for Cat and she smiled sweetly at him as she slid inside. Snow fought the urge to protect her: there was nothing that could harm her...at least not in that limo.

He leaned back against the wall, forcing himself to relax. His own thirst was making him edgy, and he wished he could see through that dark-tinted glass.

...

Vincent stirred restlessly. The taste of blood was in his mouth, coppery and rich. The scent of it filled his lungs, and he could sense something terrible inside himself stirring to life. He couldn't think at all, confused as he was by the odd feeling of contact that was—and wasn't—like his bond with Catherine and by a raging blood-thirst. He could feel his fangs sinking into flesh, taste the thick river of blood that gushed into his mouth, down his throat: sweet, hot, velvet smooth...life-giving. *Madness...madness.*

He woke with Diana screaming at him. Screaming. "WAKE UP! DAMN IT! WAKE UP!" He woke to pain: Diana had his hair in her hands, forcing his head back—away from her throat. Blood. In his mouth. The sight of her shocked him, and horrified, he looked to see where he'd hurt her. But there was no blood. No blood. Only the taste...the memory of the taste in his mouth. *Madness and blood,* he thought. *It's happening again.*

Diana looked so panicked—so terrified—of him, or for him, he couldn't tell.

"Diana," he croaked, "Diana. I'm awake." She released the fistfuls of hair and threw herself into his arms. "Did I hurt you, Diana?" Her arms were strangling him, she held so tightly, but he didn't want her to let him go: as long as she held him, he was safe from the madness. From the blood.

"No, no," she managed. "I'm fine. Are *you* all right?"

He shook his head, "I don't know, Diana. I...felt it again. That feeling that was Catherine...but... *not* Catherine." He looked away. "And the taste of blood. Of death. Diana...am I...going mad again? I don't understand." When Diana didn't answer immediately, he finally met her gaze, and what he saw there only caused him more concern. "What *is* it, Diana? You know something...tell me!"

Diana patted at his face and backed away, scooted off the bed and reached for her sweats. She was avoiding looking at him, and *that* more than anything else convinced him that Diana knew what was going on...and that she had some reason for not telling him.

With extreme care, Vincent forced his questions back while he thought through what could be causing such a reaction in Diana. As she dressed, he silently rolled off the bed and pulled on his jeans... the whole while watching the woman he'd just finished making love to, and who had now become a silent stranger.

By the time he'd pulled on his sweater, Diana was standing by the window, staring out. Her arms crossed in front of her in her customary shield. He went to her, hesitated, then put his arms around her. "What is it, Diana?" he whispered into her hair. His own terror made his stomach knot. "What is it that you feel you cannot tell me?" Dark thoughts crossed his mind: perhaps he'd done something he couldn't remember...something so horrible that Diana felt she had to protect him from himself...from some terrible knowledge of himself.... He trembled, not certain he wanted to know something that was such that even his Diana—honest, brave Diana—would hesitate to speak honestly of it to him.

...

Cathy shoved the pimp's corpse away from her and watched as it slumped limply against the door, then she stretched luxuriously, feeling as full and satiated as if she'd finished a holiday meal... except rather than lazy, she felt invigorated. Empowered. A glance around the interior of the limo revealed several pull-down mirrors, and she availed herself of one.

She delicately wiped the dampness from her lips with an index finger, examined the bright blood and popped the finger into her mouth to lick it clean. She fluffed her hair, adjusted her dress, then opened the door to leave. She paused then, considering the driver, and frowned, wondering what she should do about him...or if she should do *anything*.

As she was considering, she saw Snow coming toward her. Lean and oddly handsome, he smiled at her, then leaned over to knock on the window to speak to the driver, and Cathy relaxed – confident that Snow would do whatever was necessary. *Besides*, she thought, as she took her compact out and dusted her face, *he hasn't had breakfast, anyway*. Stepping out of the car, she closed the door.

There was a small, muffled scream from within the limo and the car rocked a bit.

Cathy looked up and down the street; though there were a few scantily-clad women leisurely walking back and forth at the far corner, Cathy couldn't see the hooker who was here earlier, and though there were a few cars on the streets, there was no one paying much attention to them.

The window of the limo rolled down, and Snow told her brightly, "Get in, Cat. Let's go for a ride." A bit miffed at being ordered around—and at having to open the door herself (she really *would* have to work on Snow's manners)—Cathy did as she was told and settled herself in the front seat beside her companion. The driver was nowhere to be seen. At her perplexed look, Snow chuckled. "He's in the back...though he *was* a tight squeeze through that window."

Cathy glanced at the dark glass behind her which was liberally smeared with blood. "Yuck," she commented. "What did you *do*, puree him?"

"Not necessary," Snow said with a small smile. "A few minor anatomical adjustments and he fit quite nicely."

Cathy shuddered and her euphoric mood finished evaporating. Drinking someone's blood was one thing...dismembering them was something else. It made her feel like a serial killer—not someone hunting to survive.

Once more, she was repulsed by what she'd become. These thoughts never bothered her when she woke, thirsty and desperate: all that mattered then was that she get what she needed.

She was silent, wrapped in her thoughts as Snow drove through the busy streets. Though she was vaguely curious where they were going and why, the answer really wasn't all that important to her any longer because she suddenly realized something: somehow, now that she had centuries ahead of her—all the time in the world—she had no dreams for the future: all her dreams had been left behind, with Vincent and her baby. *It's damn well not fair*, she thought in frustration. But, Catherine had learned in the past two years that life wasn't always fair, and that sometimes, you just flat got shafted...and even Vincent couldn't fix *this* situation. Deliberately, she turned her thoughts to her present reality, which was all she had.

I have to find some reason to look forward to those centuries, or I'll go mad, she thought.

As she forced her attention to her surroundings, she noticed that Snow had brought them to the river...past the docks. Past most of the lights. He drove to the edge of the river and stopped, turning off the lights. "Get out, Cat," he ordered. Realizing what he meant to do, Cathy opened the door and scrambled out. She thought he'd drive the car into the river, but instead, Snow leisurely walked around to the back and effortlessly pushed it into the water. They both stood silently as the car slowly...slowly disappeared beneath the dark water.

Finally, when there was nothing to be seen except the black expanse of river, Cathy asked, "Why?"

Snow held out his hand and she took it. His hair gleamed whitely in the moonlight, and Cathy swallowed the lump that formed as she superimposed his image with Vincent's. Vincent standing in the moonlight. Her heart hurt.

"Why?" Snow queried. "Why bother, you mean?"

She nodded, genuinely curious now.

"No sense in advertising that there's a vampire...or two. Or three abroad." They were walking hand in hand back toward the lights. "People die every night in this city and every other, Cat; some by violence, some not. But very damn few of them are found with no blood in their bodies. That causes

uncomfortable speculation. We've left a couple out there as it is. I prefer to be the hunter, not the hunted. People aren't *stupid*, you know."

"But people don't *believe* in vampires nowadays. Not really."

He cocked his head and grinned at her, tips of fangs showing. "Really? No shit?"

The look on his face was so ingenuous, she couldn't help but laugh. "No shit."

He released her hand and whirled, dancing in circles for her in a parody of a ballet dancer. "Look at me...I'm invincible!" He spun back and picked her up, twirling her in the air, then setting her back on her feet. He held her close, cradling her face in his hands, then bend to kiss her softly. Suddenly serious, he told her, "Don't even think it, Cat. People believe. They know, deep in their guts that death walks in the night. Vampire, demon...it doesn't matter what they call the things they don't understand. The dark part of their imaginations. Vampires have been hunted for centuries. That isn't going to change anytime soon. Just ask Vincent."

She pulled away, furious. "That's not *fair*! Leave him *out* of this! He's not *like* us!"

"No?" He pulled her back to him, holding her tightly against him. "Did he tell you what it's like when they look at him in fear? When they see all their nightmares in his face? Did he ever tell you how he feels when he kills?"

Cathy tried to look away, but she couldn't. In a small voice, she murmured, "Yes. No," she stammered. "I mean...he doesn't...he doesn't kill people because he wants to. He...he only killed to...to protect. Me."

Snow tangled his fingers in her hair, pulled her head back and kissed her. Hard. Then the words trembled in her ear: "That doesn't mean he didn't enjoy it."

Shaken, aroused...both from the kiss and from the memory of how she'd felt when Vincent killed for her—when the bond caught and held her in its thrall—Cathy couldn't think of anything to say.

...

"NO!" Vincent hissed at her, fangs bared. He was backed into the corner, as far as he could get from her, and Diana's heart was breaking.

Why...oh, WHY did I tell him the truth? she thought frantically. But she knew why: because he'd *know*. He'd have read her like a book and she'd never have been able to keep lying...and it'd only have been worse when he'd found out the truth...although how the *hell* it could be much worse than this, she couldn't figure.

Vincent was shuddering with revulsion at the thought of what she'd told him. Diana reached out to touch him and he flinched away. Furious eyes held hers. "It's a lie! Vampires don't exist!"

Hurt beyond any time she could remember, Diana put aside her own pain and thought only of his. *His* pain was what mattered right now. She'd known he'd freak if he found out about Cathy...but once he'd realized that Diana was hiding something...something about Cathy...there was nothing else she could do.

Diana drew a deep, trembling breath and forced her voice into a low, (hopefully) calming tone. "Vincent...think about it. *Feel* it. Would I lie to you...especially about something like *that*? And if I did, wouldn't you know?" His brows came together in a furious frown as he tried to assimilate her logic. "Think about it. Take my hand..." She reached out to him again and though he didn't flinch away, neither did he reach back. She touched his face and the fury in his eyes slowly changed to pain. "So do you believe me, or not?"

"How, Diana? What...?"

Diana could see the reason returning to his eyes...and a bit of the anger as well. But at least the anger wasn't directed at *her* this time. Vincent had been emotionally fragile once, but he'd gotten tougher. More resilient. She was immensely proud of him. She attempted to explain. "I don't know *how*. Neither does *she*. She only knows Gabriel is responsible, somehow."

"A vampire," he said, more to himself than to her. "Vampires kill...drink the blood of their victims."

He covered his face with his hands, and she could hear him murmuring something about the dreams. The bond. He leaned heavily on the back of the couch, his head hanging, hair obscuring his face. He sighed. "I suppose I must. Believe you. But Diana...none of the books I've ever read has indicated that vampires truly exist."

She muttered, "You must've been readin' the wrong books."

He flung himself past her and began pacing with the energy and passion that always amazed her. Whether he was furious or delighted—it made no difference: Vincent did it beautifully. She couldn't help but admire him. Want him. But all that energy and passion wasn't for *her* or directed at her. It was for Catherine. Always for Catherine. Diana sighed and thought with wry humor, *Leave it to you, Bennett, to fall in love with someone whose lover has died...and then the bitch refuses to stay DEAD!* She chuckled and Vincent glared suspiciously at her.

"You find this *amusing*?"

Startled into realizing he'd heard her, she shrugged with embarrassment and poked at some of the stray wisps of hair around her face. Visions of her chasing Cathy with a stake *almost* made her giggle again, but she restrained her impending hysteria. She shook her head and muttered, "No. I was laughing at myself. At something else, I mean." Changing the subject before she made herself look even more foolish, she shrugged. "I *killed* Gabriel, Vincent. Plugged him right through the heart. Now Cathy climbs up out of her grave and I find out that she AND Gabriel are vampires? I'm sorry...it's just all so...weird."

He lifted his head and looked at her. "No. *I'm* sorry, Diana. I had no right to accuse you of lying. I know you wouldn't do that."

Embarrassed by the fact that she'd been trying her damndest to figure out how to do just that, she shrugged. "S'okay."

He shook his head and came to her, drawing her into his arms. Holding her gently. "No. It's not. Whatever Catherine has been...and always will be...to me...has nothing to do with what we are to one another."

Diana wanted to weep, but she couldn't. She couldn't even look at him, but only mutter into the soft weave of his sweater, "And what is *that*? What *am* I to you, Vincent?"

He rested his head against hers for a long moment. Then he said gently, "Truth. And reason. You have been my door to life, Diana. When the timeless night was all around me, you were the single star that guided me. My only light on those dark streets." He paused, then murmured roughly, "And after tonight, do you still doubt that we are a part of one another?"

Hopefully, she dared to look at him, and he brushed a soft kiss across her lips, and the velvet touch of them completely did her in. She wanted to tell him how much she loved him, but she was afraid to. *Love* wasn't a word she'd ever used lightly, or frequently. And right now, she was too afraid of being hurt. Neither had he said he loved *her*. Finally, she spoke past the lump in her throat. "What about Catherine, Vincent? What are you going to do?"

He released her, but brushed softly, almost absently, at her hair. His eyes had gone distant and sad. "I don't know, Diana, what *can* I do?" When she didn't answer immediately, he asked her, "What is she like, now, Diana? I cannot imagine..."

Feeling very shy, Diana tried to convey to Vincent what Cathy was like, now. To try to help him through this. It was difficult for her because she'd never known the living woman, except in her imagination. She pictured the lovely, tormented creature she'd met. "She's still beautiful. She's...perplexed. Unhappy, but...resigned, I guess, to what has happened. She...well...she said she didn't want you to know about her, but she wants to see her baby."

"You make her sound...very human. Vampires are supposedly evil, Diana. They live by drinking the blood of the living."

Vincent looked so confused. So forlorn. Diana told him gently, "My Gran used to tell me that vampires weren't any more or less evil than people. What they are as vampires depends a lot on what they were when they were alive."

"But Diana...they *kill* to live..."

Diana raked fingers through her heavy fall of hair, trying to think of how to make him understand what she was only *beginning* to get a feel for. "So do any other predators, Vincent. That doesn't necessarily make them evil. They only have two choices: live or die...and life is real tenacious. And another thing: Gran said that a vampire's thirst is like...like being addicted to a drug. An addict, no matter how moral or good he was before he became addicted, will lie, steal or kill if necessary to get his fix."

"I know one thing I can do," Vincent stated with a low growl. "I can find Gabriel and destroy him... *permanently* this time!"

...

Cat was silent for so long, Snow was beginning to be a little concerned he'd overstepped some unknown boundary with her and pissed her off. It was hard for him to orient himself to mortal thinking again after so long, and in order to understand his new companion, he was going to have to do some remembering.

Frowning, he hung back a little and watched as she strode purposefully, lithely weaving her way through the motley late-night denizens of the street—ignoring them as though they were far below her. *Which they are*, the vampire thought with amusement.

With that tight, short dress and plummeting neckline, the stiletto heels and that *damn* nice figure, she was attracting a lot of attention. The young street toughs loping along beside her were ignored as if they were nothing more than a pack of yapping dogs, and rather than her behavior spurring them to more aggressive attempts to get her attention, they merely aimed a few obscene gestures her way and turned to slink away in defeat. The hookers in their skimpy and garish plumage frowned as Cat passed them by, but seemed to recognize they were looking at class. *Where the hell is she going?* he wondered. Because she was obviously headed *somewhere* and expected him to follow.

He hissed, showing his fangs at the first young street rebel attempting to slow his advance, then laughed aloud as the whole pack scattered in panic. Hooking his thumbs in his belt, he swaggered past them after Cat, tickled by the absurdity of the entire thing. *Some of us got it and some of us don't*, he thought cheerfully.

He finally caught up with his companion at the next corner, where she stood staring at him with a look of irritation.

"Am I wrong, or can vampires fly?" Cat asked abruptly, her tone deadly serious.

"You wanna fly, catch a jet. Of course we can't fly. That's movie hype."

Cat heaved a huge sigh and pushed her bangs back out of her eyes. "Oh." She sounded terrifically disappointed. "Wish I had cab fare...or that you hadn't dumped the limousine."

Digging in his pocket, Snow came out with a wad of bills and handed them to her, delighted with her surprise. "I never said I went around penniless. You learn after a bit to acquire money from your kills. Pimps make good banks...they've always got a lot of cash. Where are we going?"

"Tribeca. That's where Diana lives."

Snow's better instincts told him that Cat was trying to hang onto the past—something he knew from bitter experience was *not* a good idea, but if Cat wanted to go to Tribeca to see the redheaded cop, then that's what they'd do.

Some things just have to be learned the hard way, he thought philosophically. But he was still disturbed. He should tell her of Gabriel's plan...but somehow, he couldn't force himself to do it just yet.

...

The night was half gone and Vincent was still pacing back and forth across Diana's worn rug. Diana was so tired she could barely keep her eyes open, and she wished she could talk him into settling down and sleeping for a while. But his fury over what Gabriel had done was consuming him; he couldn't think of anything else. Not that she could blame him; Gabriel had killed all his dreams when he killed

Catherine... Or when he **didn't** kill her, she thought wearily. *I'm so confused.* She wished her Gran was still alive so she could give her some direction on this thing. There was so little she knew about vampires. After all, it wasn't something she ever thought she'd have to deal with. *I should've paid more attention to Gran when she told me stories about this stuff.* Elbows on the table, her chin in her hands, Diana peered through half-closed eyes and waited for Vincent to wear himself out enough to where he could reason things through...to where they could *both* reason things through. *As if there's any reasonable solution to this impossible mess,* she thought as her eyes drifted closed.

She'd just dozed off when the intercom buzzer from downstairs went off and jolted her awake.

Vincent froze, finally ceasing his endless pacing, and Diana bolted past him to the elevator, certain it must be Joe or Greg at the other end...unpleasant surprises in the middle of the night usually *did* have their names on them.

Pressing the intercom button, Diana barked, "In case you hadn't noticed, it's the middle of the night. This better be good."

A soft, hesitant feminine voice answered her. "Diana? It's Cathy. Can I come up?"

Diana felt her heart lurch into her throat as she turned to face Vincent. He was coming slowly toward her, the expression on his face indecipherable. Passing her by, he placed both hands on the wall on either side of the intercom where Cathy's plaintive voice came through loud and clear. "Diana...? Are you there?"

Diana brushed his hair back and could see that his face was wet: he was crying. "It's her," he murmured incredulously. "Catherine. She's alive..."

Diana couldn't bear the pain and hope in his voice. Or the confusion and sorrow in Catherine's. And for the record, *she* didn't feel so hot, either. She'd never felt so miserable, or so much in the middle.

Drawing a deep, shaking breath, she told Vincent gently, "She's not...*alive* ...Vincent. Not like she was. She looks the same...she sounds the same, but she's NOT the same. You *have* to remember that she's not the Catherine you remember."

He turned to her, but his eyes were unseeing...or seeing something beyond her, but he nodded, indicating he understood.

Diana pressed the intercom button and told Cathy, "I'm here. Wait a minute and I'll let you up."

Before releasing the elevator for Cathy, Diana told Vincent, "She won't be expecting to see you. She didn't even want you to *know* about her, Vincent....I feel like...like I betrayed a confidence in telling you about her. She didn't want you hurt...and neither did I. Maybe you should wait in the bedroom...at least until I can tell her you're here."

Vincent swallowed his tears and nodded. As he walked slowly toward the bedroom, Diana dropped her head into her hands and slumped against the wall. *Get it together, Bennett. Try to find some objectivity. Separate, damn it! Don't get sucked in, or you'll just make it worse!* Drawing a deep breath, she muttered to herself, "Yeah, sure. I *live* by Murphy's Law. Face it...it'll get worse no matter *what* I do. Of course, inviting a vampire into your home isn't the greatest idea in the world, either...or so I've heard." She hit the button to release the elevator and waited stoically for the next stage of the nightmare to unfold.

...

Catherine and Snow were silent as they rode the elevator up to Diana's loft. Catherine glanced at her companion a time or two, but looked away quickly: she could tell he didn't approve. And she knew he was right, but she couldn't help herself. She had to see her baby, and this was the only way. As the lift jerked to a stop, Snow reached out to pull back the screen and Catherine could see that Diana wasn't happy, and she looked decidedly nervous. The redhead stood with her hands on her slim hips and asked suspiciously, "So who's your friend, Cathy?"

Snow gave Diana a small smile—not wide enough to show his fangs—and introduced himself. "They call me 'Snow,' Ms. Bennett." He held out a hand to shake hers.

"Yeah?" Diana queried, not taking his hand. "Who's 'they' and how is it you know Cathy?"

Catherine lifted her gaze past Diana to the bedroom door behind her. She felt like melting into the floor: Vincent stood in the doorway, tall and golden and beautiful—and as coldly furious as she'd ever seen him. Diana turned and went to him, touching him with such gentleness...such love...that Cathy thought she'd die, it hurt so bad to see it. It hurt, too, that the anger in Vincent's eyes dimmed a bit as she spoke to him. Once, only *she* had held that power over him. He put his hand to Diana's face... touched her hair and said something Cathy couldn't catch, then turned to face Snow—ignoring her as if she wasn't there. His voice was cold and hard. "I killed you once."

Cathy looked from Vincent to Snow in horror—remembering Snow's story. But Snow just smiled... this time showing his fangs. "Poor judgment on my part. I underestimated you. Tried to play the game on mortal terms. I'll know better the next time."

"Snow! No!" Cathy squeaked.

Snow didn't answer, but Vincent responded firmly, "Stay out of this, Catherine."

There was a pause, then Catherine planted herself between the advancing Titans. She squared off with Vincent. "Like *hell* I will! Leave Snow out of this. I came here to ask Diana to help me see my son...but now that you're here, I'll just ask you."

Vincent dropped his gaze to hers and the anger seemed to dim a bit. He started to speak, then Snow spoke from behind her: "You can't do that. Can't bring the baby up here."

The flames began in Vincent's eyes again and Catherine could hear a low growl as he frowned in Snow's direction again and told him roughly, "My son is not your affair and you'd do well to stay out of this discussion."

There was a quiet *snick* as Diana put a bullet in the chamber of her gun, and all heads turned to her. She was sitting on the couch, one foot under her, the other knee providing a handy rest for her elbow as she held her gun. "This is all real interesting, folks, but this is neutral ground. Or it damn well better be. I may not be able to *keep* a vampire down with one of these, but I can damn well put one down temporarily—I proved that with Gabriel." "Diana..." Vincent began.

"Oh, shut UP! I've had just about enough for one night!"

Cathy chuckled, "PMS and a handgun...I think you boys had better behave."

...

Vincent was absolutely furious...but it wasn't the hot, blood red rage he felt when defending Catherine—when losing himself to that other, darker part of himself. This was the same cold, calculating fury he'd felt when the Tong attacked his home...the same as he'd felt when Gabriel's assassin invaded his life the last time—when he'd left Stephen and Old Sam dead. *How dare Catherine bring this monster here? How can she associate with...him? And what business did this creature have telling him what he could and couldn't do with his son?* He was *almost* as astounded at Diana's attitude. She seemed angry with *all* of them, him included, and he couldn't understand why. *After all*, he thought indignantly, *I've done nothing wrong...*

He started to say something, but Diana glared and told him again, "I *said* SHUT UP! And that includes *you*! I am *not* a happy camper. I've had almost *no* sleep, the man I love gets up from making love to me and cries over his ex-girlfriend—who just happens to not be courteous enough even to stay dead, thank you very much, and now I've got two vampires in my living room...and quite frankly, I've half a mind to shoot *all* of you and go to bed!"

Catherine's mouth dropped open in astonishment as she temporarily forgot about her baby. Her fangs flashed as she looked daggers at him. Vincent squirmed. "You made love to *her*?"

As Vincent tried to think of something to say, the white haired vampire stepped forward and tried to placate Catherine, but she shrugged him off with a snarl. "YOU shut up! *This* is between Vincent and *me*!"

Vincent met Snow's eyes and suddenly *knew* just how much Catherine had changed... how close she and the vampire had become. He felt as though he'd been knifed in the heart. Then, just as

suddenly, a peace came over him as he thought of the changes in his own life. Diana was right: it was over. He loved Catherine and would love her until his death and beyond, and knew she still loved him, despite what she'd become. But Diana had spoken the truth: life (and love) *was* most tenacious, and Catherine had taken it where she found it. As had he.

Reluctantly—and realistically—he realized that Catherine needed, and deserved, not to be alone... as he was no longer alone. And she had few choices of companion.

He still loathed the monster, but he nodded to Snow, and without preamble, the vampire picked Catherine up and threw her over his shoulder. And strong as she was as a vampire, Snow was obviously much stronger.

Catherine shrieked at Vincent as she pounded on Snow's back, "Aren't you going to *stop* him?"

Vincent considered, then shook his head. "I don't believe so, Catherine. This is between you and Snow."

Snow looked back and smiled at them, saying politely, "Sorry for the interruption. We'll be back when she settles down. Just take my advice and leave that kid down in those tunnels."

Diana came over to Vincent and slipped her arm around him as she gestured to her "guests" with her .38. "We'll be expecting you," she said quietly. "Truce?"

"TRUCE?" Catherine yelled.

"Shut up, Cat," Snow said gently and nodded to Diana. "Truce." He carried a fuming—but silent—Catherine into the elevator and Vincent and Diana watched until they disappeared.

Diana looked up at him, heaved a sigh, then walked over to the desk to put her gun away. "Well. That was fun," she said with sarcasm.

"I'm sorry, Diana...I...."

"For what, Vincent? For still loving Catherine?" Diana turned away and began pulling her hair back into a pony tail. Vincent hardly needed his empathy to realize she was hurting.

"Diana...I'm sorry. Yes, I still love Catherine, but that doesn't change how I feel about you." He was desperate for her to understand that nothing had changed between *them* just because Catherine had returned. "I can't say it doesn't hurt to...hear her voice...to see her, as she is, now." He added bitterly, "To see her with *him*."

Diana turned back to him after finishing with her hair. She was more composed, but she looked exhausted. And defeated. She shook her head wearily. "I know." She came to him then and leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder as he embraced her. "I know that," she murmured. "But Vincent...what are we going to *do* about this insanity? And why the *hell* doesn't Snow want you to bring Jacob up here?"

Closing his eyes, Vincent concentrated on Diana's presence, her curves against him, the scent of her hair. Her reality. His future. But he whispered, "I don't know".

...

"How could you *DO* that to me?" Cat asked him, in a volume approaching a scream.

Snow was quickly losing patience with her shrew-like behavior and was silently cursing Gabriel even more fervently than usual. After making it clear to Cat that he wasn't going to allow her to go back up there until she'd had time to come to her senses, he'd lapsed into a sullen silence as he listened to her tirade. Understanding how she felt did *not* make it any easier to tolerate. Finally, he stopped and silenced her with a glare. "Cat. Look at yourself. *Listen* to yourself. What do you expect of him?"

With a look of hurt betrayal, Cat crossed her arms and muttered, "A little fidelity, maybe. A few tears." She glared back. "I *didn't* expect him to jump into bed with the first bimbo he met!"

"Does Diana Bennett seem like a bimbo?" Cat was silent and refused to look at him. "Come *on* Cat. You were in that grave for six months with Gabriel's little experiment. Even *Gabriel* didn't know what was going to happen. To Vincent—to everybody—you were *dead*. He *did* mourn for you. I watched that damn tape Gabe made of him...he was frantic to get to you then, when he thought you were still alive." Cat's rigid posture was thawing just a bit. "And after he *dispatched* me, I kept an eye on him—

he's rather unique, your Vincent. Your death almost drove him crazy, and finding your son and Gabriel became his obsession. He would've ended up dead or insane if it hadn't been for a certain red-haired lady cop who helped him find your son and kill Gabriel. At least she *thought* she'd killed him."

"All right," Cat admitted, obviously with reluctance. "So she's not a bimbo."

"Do you really want him to pine away for you the rest of his life?" Snow asked gently. "Fate gave him a second chance at happiness. Are you going to ruin that for him?"

Cat scowled up at him. "Are you a vampire or a psychiatrist?"

Snow chuckled. He knew she was starting to see reason. "I can be anything you need me to be. Vampires have the advantage of time." He held his hand out and she slipped hers into it. "It'll be morning soon. Shall we find another hotel?"

"I suppose," she said quietly, though she sounded indifferent. "Do we have enough money, or should we go back to your cellar hideaway?" Now that she was no longer screaming, Cat seemed tired, and very sad.

"Believe me, Cat, I have more money than I know what to do with. If you'd rather sleep in hotels, then hotels it will be." Putting his arm around his subdued companion, Snow walked with her through the night to look for a hotel that could accommodate their special needs.

...

Gabriel stood silently watching as Snow took his new companion away from Diana Bennett's apartment building. When they turned the corner and were out of his line of sight, he lifted his face to the sky, closing his eyes against the fine mist that was beginning to fall. The moisture felt cool even on his cool skin. After a long moment, he opened his eyes, shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his coat and turned toward home. He felt neither joy nor sadness, triumph or defeat. He couldn't even summon up enough hate to direct toward Snow for complicating his plan. *Perhaps when I have the child again*, he thought. *The child will give things meaning again.* He moved silently through the night. Things were progressing splendidly, despite Snow's defection. He had others to do his bidding. Pope had failed him before and was anxious to prove himself. *A little longer. What is time, to me?*

Rounding the corner, he walked the half-block up to where his limousine waited. His driver saw him coming, opened the door for him, and Gabriel slid into the back seat. His driver was well-trained; he knew Gabriel wanted obedience, not conversation.

The trip back to his mansion was peaceful. Gabriel valued peace and quiet. He appreciated his secluded mansion with its well-planned, pleasant gardens. It had been the first thing he'd managed to re-acquire—under a different name, of course. If Gabriel could be said to love anything other than power itself, it was the unique and priceless art humanity produced and he collected. And of course, that art needed appropriate surroundings to properly appreciate it.

Mankind fascinated him. Perfection fascinated him. And the brief spark of creativity that was mortal man fascinated him more than anything, and the brevity of their life spans only made that momentary spark that much more precious. The unique, the beautiful, and the powerful: and Vincent was all three. And the child was unique in still another way...a way that could change the world...

...

The following evening, Vincent and Diana awaited the arrival of their "guests" with a certain amount of trepidation. Vincent perched on the edge of Diana's couch, so tense that Diana was certain if she touched him he'd fly apart in a million tiny pieces. *Like all the little pieces of glass in an exploding kaleidoscope*, Diana thought, trying to squelch her own nervousness.

Tonight it was *she* who was pacing, wearing her gun in its holster under a concealing jacket and her grandmother's crucifix around her neck.

She passed close to Vincent and glanced down at him. He sat with his hands tightly clasped between his knees as if he were afraid of that same explosion she visualized. She felt a sudden urge

to reach out to him to comfort him, but restrained herself...again, just a bit afraid of that explosion.

Wiping her sweaty hands on her slacks, she told him gently, "Take some deep breaths. Try to relax. I mean...it can't get much worse, can it? What could be worse than Cathy coming back as a vampire with Gabriel's assassin—also a vampire—in tow?" She was trying to lighten things, but she was serious at the same time... *Surely nothing worse can happen*, she told herself hopefully.

He lifted his head, his long golden mane falling away from his face. His eyes were the dark, deep blue of the sky just before a storm. "How can I relax, Diana? I don't know how I'm going to...control myself when *he* comes back. All I keep seeing... thinking of...are Stephen and Sam. And how casually he killed them." He closed his eyes, murmured, "I keep wondering...how many people Catherine has killed.... I want to reach out and hold her, but I can't...she's not *my* Catherine any longer." His misery was evident in his voice. "I don't know what to *do* Diana...what to think. Where to turn."

Diana crossed her arms tightly across her breast, hugging her pain close. Her throat was closed so tight she almost couldn't breathe—much less speak. This was so damned *hard*. "You can always turn to me," she told him softly.

He opened his eyes, held his arms out to her and she went to him, wrapping her arms around him so tightly there was no way...no way he could fly apart. "I know," he murmured. "I know that, Diana."

A few moments later the buzzer startled them apart. Their eyes met and she could see her own uncertainty mirrored in his eyes. "Can you keep your temper?"

"I'll try," he offered, obviously unsure.

...

Catherine shifted uneasily from one stiletto heel to the other as she peered through her bangs at her companion. Snow had been uncharacteristically quiet since last night, refusing to argue with her further over either Diana's shortfalls or Vincent's perfidy, and also refusing to elaborate on why he didn't want Jacob brought Above. Even now, he avoided meeting her eyes and leaned against the wall of the elevator, staying as far from her as he could.

They'd fed before they came, of course, sharing their kill this time—a well-known drug dealer that Catherine knew Joe had been trying to get off the streets for months. Snow had let her choose the kill, and it had pleased her tremendously. *At least if I have to kill to live, I can rid the world of some scum at the same time*, she thought with muted satisfaction.

As the elevator jerked to a stop, Snow finally glanced up at her and held his hand out for her to lead her into Diana's loft, and she only hesitated a moment before taking it. *Let Vincent think what he wants...after all, he has Diana, now—and our son—and all I have now is Snow*.

As they stepped into Diana's loft, Catherine found herself avoiding Vincent's eyes, and feeling awkward. She met Diana's instead. The redhead looked uneasy, but she stood beside Vincent, who was seated on the couch. Her hand was on his shoulder, and momentarily, Catherine hated her again.

Diana pointed to an afghan-covered loveseat next to the wall. "Go ahead and sit down," she said politely. "We may as well get this over with."

Catherine nodded to her and seated herself, but Snow shook his head, and told her, "I think I'll stand, but thank you for your hospitality." Snow stood beside her, but didn't touch her as Diana was touching Vincent. It made Catherine feel alone.

Vincent finally spoke, his voice rough with emotion. "You had something to tell us. So tell it."

Snow hesitated, standing with his head bent as if in deep thought. When he looked up, he met Catherine's eyes, then looked away—to Vincent. "I told you not to bring the child up here, because Gabriel wants him and is most likely watching every move we make."

"Why doesn't he simply go Below and get him himself? Isn't *he* a vampire as well?" Diana asked.

Quietly, with an inflectionless, monotone voice, Vincent murmured: "He...is accustomed to sending others...to do his dirty work." He glared up at Snow. "As he sent you...to kill me. He's been too long from the hunt to feel comfortable with it."

Cathy found herself gazing with fascination first at Vincent, then at Snow. *They understand each other!* she thought in amazement...not sure *she* understood either one of them.

Again, Snow nodded. "That's true. Gabriel doesn't even kill for his food anymore—he has someone else bring him the blood. But it's more than that. You see, Gabriel has a weakness: he cannot bear enclosed spaces. When he was a child...still human...his father sold him into slavery."

Catherine gasped, furious at the thought of a child sold into slavery—even Gabriel. But then she remembered...Snow had told her he was several centuries old. "How old *is* Gabriel anyway?" she asked.

Snow hesitated even longer this time before answering. "Gabriel is almost one thousand years old, Cat." At the collective gasp that statement brought, Snow laughed. "May I finish?" Taking the ensuing awed silence as assent, Snow truly began his story. "The man who bought Gabriel put him in the mines, where he spent fifteen years mining salt. It's something Gabe's never recovered from. Eventually, his master died and Gabriel was free. And he met a vampire. The vampire offered him all the things he'd craved: freedom, power, and an eternity of time to enjoy them."

When Snow paused again, Diana interrupted. "Okay...so Gabriel won't go Below. But why doesn't he just send someone else? It's not like he doesn't have an army he could send."

Catherine felt like an outsider...Snow, Vincent, Diana...they all seemed to be following all this, but no one was asking the one question she wanted to know the answer to. Finally, she asked it. "Why does he *want* my baby, Snow? What possible use can he have for him?"

Vincent took a deep breath and said quietly, "I've been afraid to ask...but yes...what does Gabriel want with our son? It's because I am his father, I know...but there's more, isn't there?"

Snow glared at them and Catherine bit her lip, sorry she interrupted.

"Gabriel made a good vampire. Most vampires don't survive long—despair, inability to adapt, loneliness—eventually they simply give up. Stop hunting to live, expose themselves to the heat of the sun." He shook his head. "Not Gabriel. He prefers being alone, and having ten centuries to build his power has made him the most powerful single entity in the world. But he still isn't satisfied. Other vampires have the potential of becoming as powerful as he is...and that threatens him."

Vincent started to rise, his anger obviously building. "You're not answering our questions...."

"SIT DOWN!" Snow roared...and Vincent sat...not frightened, but startled into it. In a more normal voice, Snow continued. "I'm *getting* there. Be patient. About one hundred years ago, Gabe became obsessed with finding out exactly what causes vampirism, and in recent years he finally found the cause. Vampirism is a virus that is passed by either the ingestion or injection of the infected blood...but since vampires don't *give* blood, but rather take it, the only practical way to pass it on is for the vampire to deliberately create another vampire."

Diana fingered the cross around her neck, and Snow chuckled as he noticed. "Yes, Ms. Bennett...I'm afraid that cross is useless against us. Unless, of course, you happen upon a religiously fixated vampire who *believes* strongly enough that it can harm him. As for myself, the gods I once worshipped are long gone and exist only in history books." His wry smile showed the flash of fangs. "We're not supernatural beings, to be chased away with crosses or holy water, but merely a derivative of a mutated virus which gives us incredible healing powers, increased strength, more acute senses... but evens that out by making us violently sensitive to sunlight and only able to survive by drinking blood...preferably human. How mundane in comparison."

Catherine, frustrated by the length of the story and desperate for the answer of how her baby was involved, asked again, "But *what* does that have to do with our son—Vincent's and mine, Snow? Please...tell us."

"Gabriel spent years on experiments. Catherine was not the first human he used in his search for a cure for vampirism." At their startled looks, Snow continued: "Yes...a *cure*—but not for himself. Think about it. If he were the *ONLY* vampire, his power would be totally uncontested. And...in addition, there is this: how valuable would it be...what price would humanity pay for the cure for every disease plaguing it? Before someone dies, Gabriel could turn them into a vampire, then once they were healed, he could *cure* them of that disease as well."

"Oh, my God..." Diana whispered. "Virtual immortality."

"Precisely. But not for everyone...only those Gabriel favored. And he'd never allow anyone to *stay* a vampire, but would immediately give them the *cure* to make them merely human again: healthy...their disease cured, but still mortal. He spent years, trying to have a woman come to term with a child while he repeatedly injected her with vampire-infected blood. The child always died, and the woman as well. When he realized you were pregnant," he said to Catherine, an apologetic, regretful look on his face, "he decided to use you in his next experiment...not expecting it to turn out any differently than it had before. But in your case, there was an added factor which apparently protected both you and the fetus...."

"I was the baby's father," Vincent growled.

"Exactly. And the baby not only lived, but so did Catherine. So when she had the baby, he had the doctor inject her with morphine...but he also included one last dose of...my blood. Just to see what would happen."

Vincent rose, then, and went to Snow. "He wants Jacob so he can create an antivirus. But viruses don't work that way. An antivirus can give you a resistance to a virus...but it can't cure it. Why does he believe this virus is different? And why are you helping us?"

Snow faced Vincent fearlessly. "Vampirism *is* a type of virus. But it's unlike most other viruses in that rather than causing illness, it creates a complete change of metabolism for the host...makes it virtually invulnerable. Gabriel *isn't* certain that whatever serum he could create from the child's blood will cure the vampirism...he merely suspects it might. But because the child was strong enough to survive, and has not developed the disease...he's hoping that because of Vincent's different blood chemistry, the virus may have mutated into something stronger...and different from the original." Snow glanced over at Catherine, and his expression made her want to reach out and hold him. Sad eyes still locked with hers, he asked quietly, "Has it not yet occurred to you that if Gabriel's antivirus were to work, you could have Catherine back...no longer a vampire?"

The silence in the room was deafening, and Catherine felt as if she were going to faint.

...

As Diana met Snow's eyes, she felt as if she'd suddenly stepped into a vacuum: air ceased to exist. She couldn't breathe, and it felt like time was standing still. When she was finally able to draw breath, she realized that only moments had passed. And then the pain began...a pain that left her empty and aching. Swallowing with difficulty, she tore her gaze from Snow's to look at Vincent—but he and Catherine had eyes only for each other. She and Snow might as well not exist. She closed her eyes and turned away, walking to the kitchen to get some coffee. Or maybe some bourbon. She *needed* something right then...something to steady her...and an excuse to look somewhere else except at the death of her dreams. *I should've known*, she told herself grimly, as she fumbled with shaking hands with the coffee pot and cup, only succeeding in pouring hot coffee on her hand. With a yelp, she dropped the cup, spraying the hot liquid and only making matters worse. She slapped the faucet handle and stuck her hand under the cold water while hot, burning tears flowed in rivers down her face.

There was a movement behind her and she felt Vincent's arms around her, steadying her. He rested his face against hers and tenderly took her injured hand in his, and she tried desperately to swallow her tears, choking on them as they kept coming.

Without a word, Vincent led her to the table, made her sit down, and began tending her hand. He handed her a paper towel and she wiped her eyes and blew her nose...all the while avoiding his eyes. As he bandaged her hand, she looked past him to see that Snow and Catherine were gone.

Finally, Vincent said very gently, "It will be all right."

She cradled her bandaged hand close to her breast and nodded, tears threatening again. "Yeah. I know. It wasn't burned that bad, and...."

He lifted her chin with his fingers, forcing her to look at him. His eyes were solemn and dark. "Not the hand, Diana."

She choked back on the small flame of hope that struggled to live within her: she'd seen the way he and Catherine had looked at each other. No man had ever looked at her that way. She forced a smile and patted at his arm with her unbandaged hand. "Yeah. I'm sure it will be," she said, forcing a smile. The time on the clock said 4:30 am, and she told him, "Guess you better be going...if you wanna get any sleep. I need some rest, myself." With a deep, shaky breath she rose...mostly so she could keep those penetrating eyes of his from seeing into her soul. Leaving him at the table, she went back in and cleaned up the spilled coffee.

She didn't hear him leave.

...

Snow watched Diana as he spoke, and he shared her misery. He didn't have to look at Vincent, or Catherine to know what was going on in *their* minds. When the shaken redhead left the room to go into the kitchen, Snow finally forced himself to go to Cat. She peered up at him through her bangs and asked hesitantly, hope written in her eyes: "Is it really possible?"

"I don't know, Cat," he answered honestly. "It's only a theory. But...I thought you should know."

Cat looked from Snow to Vincent—who was standing, statue-still, across the room, then back again. She caught her full lower lip in her teeth, then murmured, "Thank you."

Vincent still hadn't spoken, and Snow wondered if he was in shock. "We have to go, Cat," he told her gently. "Otherwise, we won't make it to our resting place in time."

Finally, Vincent broke his silence, and in a voice rougher than normal, told them, "I'll see you out, since Diana is...occupied." Snow could tell nothing from Vincent's expression, but Catherine's told him all he needed to know: the hope in them broke his heart. As they entered the elevator, Vincent said levelly, locking eyes with Snow: "We'll speak of this again. I need to speak with...someone."

The elevator descended and Cat remained silent and withdrawn, but she didn't take her hand from his. As they stepped into the foyer, she followed him meekly out into the darkly shadowed street and toward their hotel.

The early hours just before dawn were quieter than usual, but New York, like most huge cities was never completely still, never completely dark, and sometimes Snow missed the old days...the ancient days, when quiet was more than merely the lack of traffic noise, and darkness had a velvet texture and depth...not this shallow shadow of the dark beneath millions of artificial lights. Turning his gaze to Cat, Snow thought of his wife...dead these 460 years. His heart ached. Cat was so like her in some ways...and now, if Gabriel's theory was correct, he would lose her, as well. His eyes were drawn past Cat to an alley where a gaunt figure lurked, and watched. The pale face smiled at him, then Gabriel turned and walked away.

Snow tightened his grip on Cat's hand, the old, deep, abiding hatred flaring to life in his heart. *I want that sonofabitch dead.*

...

Vincent watched Father as the older man tried desperately to absorb what his son was telling him. Father's reality simply didn't allow for such supernatural happenings as vampires, and Vincent knew he was wondering if his son had completely gone *completely* mad this time.

"Vincent," Father finally said after a long period of silence, "I know how difficult it is to admit that someone we love has...er...passed on, but...."

"It's true, Father," Vincent reassured him as patiently as he could manage. I'm *not* mad, nor am I suffering from denial. I've *seen* her. Spoken to her."

Leaning forward, Father took Vincent's hand in his and stared into his eyes. "There *are* no such things, Vincent! I cannot *believe* in such a thing! Surely you cannot *ask* me to!"

Vincent pulled his hand away, and said, "You believe in viruses, do you not? You believe in the ability to inoculate against a virus? So why can you not assume for the sake of argument that

vampirism is caused by a virus? Would you rather believe me mad?"

Father cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses. "Very well. Assuming—for the sake of argument only, mind you—that Catherine *is* a...um...vampire. And assuming we could isolate this virus in Jacob's blood...even assuming such, it's a very different thing to vaccinate someone to make them resistant to a virus than it is to make a similar serum to *kill* a virus. No one has been able to do that successfully. If so, we could make more advances with AIDS. It doesn't *work* that way, Vincent. I'm sorry."

Thoughtful, now, Vincent asked, "Is it not possible that Jacob's blood could be producing something like an antitoxin, which would attack the virus causing the disease? Jacob has not developed the disease. He survived to be born, and has remained healthy...thus, perhaps his body has developed some method of destroying the virus."

Shaking his head—obviously dubious—Father told him, "I'll discuss the matter with Peter. And assuming he doesn't have me committed, we'll see what we can come up with." The older man smiled wearily and muttered, "For the sake of argument, mind you." Father watched as Vincent rose, then told him firmly, "I will consider this as a possibility *only* if you will go to bed and get some rest. You've been dragging in at dawn every night for the past week, and you need some sleep, Vincent."

Nodding wearily, Vincent agreed and went directly to his chamber, but after tossing and turning for an hour or so, he knew he wouldn't sleep until he recorded his feelings in his journal.

My heart doesn't know whether to rejoice or to weep. To have Catherine back—for Jacob to have his mother, and us to have a new start—would be a miracle past belief. A miracle that my soul craves. Yet at the same time, another love would be taken from me. How can I bear to lose Diana now that I've found her? She has become the very air I breathe, the hope I live by. And if Catherine comes back to me, what will Diana do? I felt her pain tonight, her despair, and fed mine back to her. What am I to do? If Catherine is healed and returns to me, there is no choice that I can make. I love her still, and Jacob needs his mother. But what of Diana? What of the love I have for her?

Reluctantly blowing out his candle, Vincent went to bed to attempt to sleep, despite the sound of life around him as people started their day. His exhausted body finally found the sleep it needed, though his heart was far from at peace.

...

Catherine was more confused than she'd been in years. Just when she'd managed to force her mind around the fact that she'd become a vampire and there was no going back to Vincent, or her baby, Snow lays *this* possibility on her! She didn't know if she dared let herself hope, or not. *And what about Vincent?* she thought with a sudden surge of concern. She pictured him as Snow gave them the news, and she couldn't decide how to interpret the look she'd seen on his face—or what she read in his body language. *Hope? Fear? Disbelief? Sorrow?* She sighed. *I never was very good at figuring out what was going on in his mind; that was always one of our problems. He wouldn't talk, and I couldn't read his emotions like he could read mine.* She risked a glance at her companion, who was just as hard to understand.

Snow was walking slowly beside her, obviously engrossed in his own thoughts. He looked sad, and it occurred to Catherine then, that she'd become very attached to this lean, lithe creature of the night. In fact, the pull that drew her to him was more than a mere passing attraction. There was a deep need for him, for his touch...for his love...a bond that rivaled the one she had with Vincent. Remembering what had passed between them...though she wasn't sure whether to call it lovemaking

or not...a hot surge of desire lanced through her. He reached up and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck...a casual gesture that drew her eyes up the strong, corded length of his arm to the slim, strong fingers. Her body remembered how those fingers felt touching it. She licked her lips, tasting the hot blood pulsing through her. She closed her eyes for a moment, remembering the feel of Vincent's hands, the soft, comforting gravel of his voice, his scent, and the limitless blue of his eyes. His love. His calm. She stumbled, and Snow's arms caught her, drawing her to him, holding her close, his body hard against hers, his hands gentle. Catherine buried her face in the soft cotton of his shirt, breathing in *his* scent. *How can I leave one for the other? How?*

"Cat," Snow murmured into her hair, "we can't stay here. It's almost dawn."

She lifted her face so she could see his. A sad, ironic smile twitched at the corners. "Come on, Cat. Let Fate decide, if it's too hard for you."

Fate, Catherine thought, moving out of Snow's arms to walk beside him, comfortably encircled by his arm. *Perhaps that's the only way to look at it: it's not my decision at all.*

...

After only a few short, restless hours of sleep full of visions of loss, betrayal and feelings of impending doom, Diana woke to the sound of the buzzer in the living room, announcing someone waiting to be let up. Dragging herself out of bed, she knuckled her eyes as she stumbled past the couch, tripped on the rug, and made it to the buzzer. "Yeah, yeah. I'm here. Who is it?"

A tinny, unfamiliar voice answered her: "It's Peter Alcott, Ms. Bennett. May I come up?"

Her mind still muzzy from sleep and abrupt awakening, Diana groped over the name. *Alcott? Alcott?...Peter?* "I don't...wait...." Her mind finally supplied an image of a tall, lean, older man, elegant in an expensive suit...a kind smile. Then it took her another moment to realize she'd met him several months back at Jacob's naming ceremony. *A friend of Father's*, she remembered.

"Ms. Bennett?" the voice queried again.

"Yeah...I'm sorry...uh....."

"Peter," he supplied patiently.

"Um...Peter. I'm sorry. You woke me and I'm a little scattered. Can you give me a few minutes?"

"Of course," came the answer. At least that's what she thought he said. As she padded back to the bedroom and pulled on her jeans and tee shirt, she couldn't help wondering what the *hell* this guy wanted.

She got her answer soon enough, and somehow, once she thought about it, it didn't surprise her at all. As soon as he stepped off the elevator, Diana already knew it had to be about Vincent.

Dr. Alcott reached out with an immaculately manicured hand to take hers in a friendly handshake. "Ms. Bennett, I appreciate your seeing me. I know you barely know me...."

She shook her head, simply curious why he was here. "It's okay. What's wrong? I mean, is Vincent all right?" she felt like she was babbling, but tired as she was, it was hard to focus.

Dr. Alcott paused a long moment, then said seriously, "I'd hoped you could tell *me* that. Jacob has told me how close you and Vincent have become, and how much time he's spending Above...I'd hoped that perhaps you could give me a general indication of his...well...his recent mental state."

Relief washed over her as she realized what had brought the good doctor to her door, and she couldn't help smiling. "His mental state?" she inquired. "As in, has he gone completely around the bend lately, wanting Catherine back so badly that he'll even conjure her up as a vampire? As in *that* maybe?"

"You *know* about this...um...theory...then?" Dr. Alcott asked, obviously unsure of how to take her comment.

Diana gestured to the doctor to come with her into the kitchen. "Let's have some coffee, Peter," she suggested. "I need to wake up, and you'll want to be sitting down for this."

...

Night finally came and Vincent left the tunnels to head reluctantly toward Diana's Loft. His life felt completely insane right now. Understandably, Father thought his son was going mad, though he'd agreed to discuss the possibility of vampirism with Peter. The possibility. Father had gone Above while Vincent was still asleep and had still not returned: he'd sent a message with a Helper that he was with Peter, and Vincent could only assume they were discussing that *possibility*.

Vincent walked slowly through the park. He was so very tired. He'd managed to get some rest, but his dreams had been filled with feelings of guilt and sorrow. All he could manage to think of was how Catherine looked...and felt...as Snow made his announcement. And how Diana had felt. Between their conflicting emotions and his own, he didn't know *how* to feel. All he knew was sorrow over the choices he might soon have to make. *How is it, he thought, that something so marvelous—and long desired—as Catherine's potential return from the dead, can make everyone so miserable?* He even felt sympathy for Snow, because he realized the creature loved Catherine enough to look beyond his own desires to hers. *How can I choose? How could anyone?*

He sighed heavily as he stood in the dark alley behind Diana's apartment building, trying to force himself to go to her. To face her.

...

Diana spent all day after Peter Alcott left trying to organize her thoughts. Trying to treat the situation like one of her cases. Trying to be objective. It wasn't working. No matter how she juggled the facts, she still came out the loser. There was no way that Vincent could choose her over Catherine... and she couldn't expect him to. They had too much history behind them...and they had Jacob, who needed his mother. There wasn't any choice to be made, as far as she could see.

Exiting the program with a sigh, she flipped the computer off. She rose, wiping sweaty palms on her jeans and walked to the couch to sit and wait for Vincent's knock. Would they come tonight? Catherine and Snow? They hadn't said. She twisted her fingers together, clenching tightly, until she noticed what she was doing and willed herself to stop fidgeting. *Calm. Detached. I have to find that detachment, or I'll lose him completely.* She couldn't bear that. To lose his friendship, too. She lurched to her feet and paced, then realizing she was pacing, she forced herself to sit. *Can we go back? Can we forget how much we care? How it feels to love one another?* Giving up on detachment, she drew a deep, shuddering breath and tried not to cry. "It's not fair, dammit!" she muttered through clenched teeth.

Life wasn't fair. She knew that intimately...but somehow, never so personally.

She jumped when she heard the expected knock on the window pane. Glancing up, she could see Vincent's bat-like shadow for the brief moment before he turned away to go to the door. She counted to ten, then went to meet him.

She opened the door to the roof and stepped out into the night air. Her steps crunched on the gravel, but he didn't turn. He was leaning on the low wall overlooking the city. She went silently over to join him. The lights twinkled madly all around them, reminding her that the city around and below her was alive with millions of people who had lives and problems, too. The thought just depressed her further.

She tried to smile when she turned to him to say, "Hi," but his look stopped the words in her throat. He was looking at her the way she'd always hoped he would, but had never expected. The way he'd looked at Catherine. Without a word, he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her, burying his face in her hair. His voice was a hoarse whisper when he said, "Let me love you, Diana. Please."

"While you can?" she choked, her own face buried in his mane. Her resolve to stay detached crumbling.

"While I can," he whispered as he led her back into the Loft and down the stairs.

...

Catherine woke from her deep vampiric sleep with Snow's arms around her. When she opened her eyes, he smiled down at her. "Good morning, Sleepyhead. Are you hungry?"

At the question, Catherine realized she didn't feel that ravenous, raging hunger she usually had when she woke. "Yes, I am," she responded. "But not like usual. Why is that?"

Snow shrugged and traced the line of her jaw with a finger. His touch made her shiver with a different type of hunger. "I don't really know, Cat. It just happens that way. After a week or so, the immediacy of the hunger leaves you, and gives you a bit more leeway. After a while, you won't necessarily need to feed every day, though usually you will." A shadow seemed to pass over him, and he added: "Assuming you remain a vampire, that is." His hand dropped lower, his thumb caressing the hollow of her throat.

She swallowed and closed her eyes as he turned his hand, brushing the back of it across her skin, lower...lower...skimming over her breast. Below it. Pausing deliciously as he spread his fingers to cup her. Bent his head to take her in his mouth, flicking the hard nub with his tongue. She caught her lip in her teeth as she arched toward him. Reached around him to pull him closer. Desire lanced through her, heating her blood as his hands moved expertly over her body, seeming to know exactly what she wanted before even she knew. She tried to force herself to ask him to stop... but it was hopeless. She couldn't ask for what she didn't want. He moved from her breast to her mouth, claiming her with a deep, hungry kiss. Her tongue flicked across his fangs as he broke away. She opened her eyes and watched him, fascinated with his power. He was lean and lithe, and beautiful in his own way, and she wanted him...needed him. Capturing her between his thighs, his body arched as he threw his head back and closed his eyes. His open mouth revealed the razor-sharp daggers of his fangs, and she waited breathlessly for the sharp penetration.

Then, he shocked her as he threw himself away from her with a loud, guttural, "NO!"

Shaking with desire and need, stunned by his sudden change in mood, Catherine gathered her scattered wits with difficulty. He knelt, facing away from her, the roped muscles of his bare back tense and hard. She scrambled to her knees and wrapped her arms around him, her face laid against those hard-bunched muscles. She fought her own desire to simply fasten her teeth in his neck...to share with him that give and take of their very life-force. "What *is* it, Snow? What's wrong?"

He threw her off, snarling violently. "DON'T." He crouched beside the bed, his hands upraised in warning. "Don't touch me, Cat. If you do..."

"What?" She held out her arms for him. "If I do...what then?"

His voice sounded as though it were torn from him. "If...you touch me...I won't be able to stop."

Catherine felt like weeping. She knew he was trying to hold back to keep this thing between them from becoming any stronger. To make it easier for both of them when she went back to Vincent. Common sense told her he was right. But the stronger, truer part of herself told her something else. "I don't WANT you to stop," she told him urgently.

He shook his head, sorrowfully backing away. "I love you, Cat. I'm not certain I can give you up."

Catherine knelt, shaking and alone, empty and hungry, as she watched him dress and leave the room. She buried her face in her hands and cried as she thought of Vincent and Snow. "I love you, too," she sobbed. "I love both of you."

...

Vincent lay with Diana curled against him, her head resting on his chest, her long, bright hair mixing with his own. They'd loved fiercely at first, then more quietly, as they'd tried to memorize every inch of each other, knowing this might be all they'd ever have. It wasn't enough. He knew there would never be enough years in their lives for them to learn all they wanted to know about each other; never enough time to explore the wonder of their love.

He thought sadly of Catherine, and how they'd never had the opportunity to share this wonder

even once. Jacob's conception had hardly been a time of true sharing. *I should feel grateful that we may have another chance*, he told himself firmly. And he was, but that gratitude and joy was diminished by the thought of losing what he had with Diana. He sighed and told Diana, "Father would tell me that I'm like a child who wants to have his cake and eat it too."

Of course Diana knew what he was referring to. She always did. She lifted her head from his chest and smiled sadly at him, brushing his hair back and kissing him softly. "It's the only way you *can* feel, Vincent. I wouldn't expect any different. I'd think less of you if you didn't still love Catherine, still want her."

He held her more tightly. "You are so rare a woman, Diana. What are we to do?"

She bent to kiss him, her small tongue darting into his mouth playfully. As he responded, she pulled away long enough to look at him with cornflower blue eyes that held his world. "We love one another this way while we can," she told him solemnly. "And when that's no longer possible, we *still* love one another...as friends."

"I won't lose you, Diana. I couldn't bear it."

"That won't happen," she assured him as she straddled him, lowering herself slowly, taking him inside herself inch by delicious inch. She took his face in her hands and said softly, "I'll always be here. You can't lose me. Ever."

Vincent threaded his fingers through the cascading, fragrant weight of her hair and drew her down to him. Closing his eyes, he moved with her in the timeless rhythm of love...murmuring breathlessly, "I love you....love...you, Diana...." And softer still...only a breath...barely audible..."always...."

...

Eventually driven from the hotel room by her growing thirst, Catherine stalked the alleys and streets looking for a proper victim...and wondering all the while where Snow was. She'd had several chances to feed upon vagrants, but passed those up...still looking for someone who *deserved* to die. She wished most fervently that she could feed upon Gabriel...it'd be sheer pleasure to drain him totally dry, the bastard. *I wonder if it's possible to kill a vampire that way? Probably not*, she figured, *or Snow would've done it by now*. The hunger was driving her closer to desperation now, and she knew that soon she'd take the first chance she got to feed...and the thought terrified her: she didn't want to become a ravening beast, killing without remorse.

Luck was on her side, though, and she came upon a group of young gang members gang-raping a girl. Here were cattle...plentiful and justifiable kills. Her high heels clicked loudly on the pavement as she approached, and the boys turned. "Stop it! Leave her alone!" Catherine ordered, repressing a smile and trying to see herself from their eyes. Knowing what they must think. Their astonished looks turned appreciative, then feral as they released their victim and turned to Catherine.

"Well...looka what we got here. Ain't she pretty?" What appeared to be the oldest of the boys—obviously their leader—approached her and the others followed, circling her like a pack of wolves.

"Stupid, but too damned pretty too waste, don'cha think?" one of the others commented, mimicking his leader in his appraisal of Catherine's appearance.

Catherine in turn appraised them and the situation. None of the boys were armed with more than knives. Reaching out with the speed of a striking snake, she caught the leader's long ponytail and his lapel—swung him off his feet and in a circle, bowling most of the others over like pins in an alley. She tossed her hair back out of her face and hissed, exposing her fangs while she planted a high heel directly in the leader's throat, effectively pinning him to the ground. The others took one horrified look at her and scattered, fleeing into the shadows...leaving her alone with her breakfast.

The boy, too frightened even to scream, babbled incoherently as she pulled him to his feet and buried her fangs in his throat. Hot, thick and rich, the life-giving fluid fed her, pulsing out of him and into her as she sucked him dry. He didn't fight her, but rather wrapped his arms around her neck like a lover seeking his beloved. When she was satisfied, she dropped him and he fell like an empty sack.

"Well done, Ms. Chandler," came the voice out of the darkness.

Catherine whirled to see Gabriel leaning nonchalantly against the brick wall of the tenement, graffiti spelling out obscenities behind him. The pulsing light of a bar sign made his face into even more of a death mask than it normally was. She felt blood trickling down her chin and reached up with the back of a hand to wipe it away. She eyed her enemy watchfully. Within her, a deep, slow-moving darkness stirred, like a sleeper awakening, stretching. Hatred, cold and wary gnawed at her heart and spoke to her in whispers. Summoning all the strength she'd learned from her time as his prisoner, she forced herself to turn...to walk away.

But she was stopped by the next words he uttered: "How does it feel, to have the power over life and death? The terrible wonder of the moment of death...the sudden rush of his life into you...like the onset of some bright madness. The sublime power that makes you god."

Unable to help herself, Catherine turned to face him, struck to the heart by his words. Unable to answer or to leave. She stood, statue-still as he drifted over to her, his feet barely seeming to touch the ground. He walked around her, an odd smile on his skeletal face, examining her as though she were some rare and priceless piece of art.

"I'm not your enemy," he told her softly, gesturing to the dead boy lying at their feet. "*He* was your enemy. And those like him."

Catherine finally found her tongue. "There's no one in this city as evil as you, Gabriel."

His face split in an obscene grin. "What a delightful thought!" He knelt beside the boy, head tilted, his expression almost one of compassion. "Ah...who was he? Will he be missed? Who will remember him when there's nothing and no one left to remember?"

Horried, Catherine felt nauseous, as though the stolen blood—the stolen life—were about to spew onto the street.

Gabriel straightened, came close to Catherine. Touched her face delicately. "You stole his life with the tenderness of a woman making love...ah...vengeance makes blessed and honored murderers of us all."

"Leave her alone, Gabriel." Snow's voice was cracking ice, jagged and tearing.

With a look of sheer delight, Gabriel turned away from Catherine toward his voice. "And will *you* be the one to stop me, Snow? Will you try again, or does failure only spur you on to further idiocies?"

"Someday, Gabe, you'll push me too far, and even the thought of losing yet again won't stop me."

Gabriel laughed lightly, but nonetheless, turned away. "Later, then, my young friend."

As Gabriel disappeared into the shadows, Catherine glared at Snow, furious with both herself *and* him. "Why don't you attack him!? Are you the coward he claims you are?"

Staring out into the night, Snow's hard, lined face seemed chiseled from stone. After a long, pregnant pause, he murmured gently, "Perhaps." He bent his head and met her eyes. "But remember, Cat...I am the only thing that stands between your child and Gabriel. If he defeats me...again...then I can do nothing to help you stop him, and you would be no match for him at all." He held out his hand, and after a small hesitation, Catherine took it. He was right, and she knew it.

As they walked slowly through the night, Catherine asked quietly, "Why didn't you tell me earlier about the virus, or the chance that my son's blood might cure me?"

Snow sighed, but didn't answer immediately. Once more, he looked everywhere but at her. After they'd gone perhaps a block, and Catherine was beginning to wonder if he'd answer her, he finally spoke, and he sounded confused and unhappy. "I don't know *why* I didn't tell you right away. As much as I hate Gabriel, usually the finest entertainment I can imagine is thwarting his plans. But I didn't. Maybe...."

"Maybe what?" Catherine prompted gently.

He glanced quickly at her, then away. "Maybe...I was just tired of being alone." Still avoiding her eyes, he murmured, "I can't even honestly say I'm sorry, even though I knew that with each kill...and each time we...loved...it bound you more to this life and me." His tone grew frustrated, a bit angry as he admitted, "It wasn't fair...to you. But I've never cared before if what I wanted was fair to someone else. If I wanted something, I took it. But you changed everything. Changed the way I looked at the world..."

at myself. You made me see right and wrong...maybe for the first time."

An idea was forming in Catherine's mind, and she asked, "Couldn't you take the serum also? Become human again?"

Snow snorted in disgust. "Me? Human? I'm not sure I ever was human, Cat." He shook his head. "I'm a vampire. I've been one too damned long to go back anymore now." He finally stopped and looked at her, intense eyes boring into her. "And what good would it do, anyway? To become human? You're going back to be with *him*. Where does that leave me?"

"Alone," Catherine whispered, tearing her eyes away from the questions his were asking... questions she couldn't answer.

...

"It's amazing!" Peter exclaimed with awe as he examined the results of his and Father's research. "It's no wonder the child has never been ill, Jacob!"

Father limped over to the nearest chair, and Vincent helped him. Father had been on his feet far too long, but the excitement of doing actual research again had kept him going through his pain. They'd been doing their research in Peter's office lab for the past three nights, and the experiments had progressed much faster than either of them had expected, and they'd asked Vincent to come with them tonight.

Jacob removed his glasses and rubbed tired eyes. "Vincent was always healthy, Peter. You know that. He always seemed immune to all the normal childhood diseases. Even the plague didn't bother him."

Vincent felt a bit of an outsider...though he was intimately involved in the discussion. He would gladly have traded his immunity to disease in order to have been a bit more like everyone else. He still wasn't quite certain how to feel about the results of the research.

Peter held the small vial up to the light, his look oddly quizzical. "Just think, Jacob...vampirism. A reality. Not some fable, or superstition, but merely a medical oddity. And now...."

"And now," Father said crossly, "that *medical oddity* has the potential of turning my grandson into more of a stranger to humanity than his father ever was."

But Peter's excitement couldn't be contained. "Jacob! Just think! Cathy's ALIVE! She was never dead, but merely *recovering* from the damage to her body...damage that would have killed anyone else! Including an *autopsy*, of all things!" Peter stood over his old friend, holding the precious vial up for him to see. "The very virus that changed her metabolism into a vampire kept her alive...actually *regenerated* new organs to replace the ones that were removed. Incredible! And the mutated virus that lives in Jacob's blood can destroy THAT virus and make her *normal* again!"

"But what about Jacob, Peter?" Father asked.

Vincent turned away, and walked over to the laboratory window to look outside. He tried to think of what his son's future might be like. *Differences layered upon differences*, he thought with dismay. It wasn't bad enough that he had to make a choice between the two women he loved more than life, but now he also had to be concerned about how his son was going to be affected by the virus in his blood.

Peter couldn't seem to understand his friend's reluctance to accept this miracle. *He* was obviously excited about their discoveries. "What *about* him, Jacob? He's fine. He'll *always* be fine. Who *knows* how long that child might live, with the immune system he has! Why...we might be able to use his blood to cure some of the worst diseases of mankind!"

Jacob Wells sighed heavily. "Exactly, Peter. Exactly."

...

Diana waited anxiously for Vincent to return from the laboratory. Shortly after he'd left, she received a phone call from Snow: he and Cathy were coming over later. She cradled her coffee cup as she paced between the furniture. As she passed Cathy's rose bush, she knelt and touched one

of the small, velvet buds that were just beginning to open. *Red*, she thought, *for love and passion*. She leaned over to sniff the fragrant bud and thought sadly, *Our love never had a chance to blossom, Vincent*. She shifted her attention to one of the white buds. *Eternity. An eternity without you*. She sighed and rose, went to the kitchen and put her cup in the sink.

The phone rang from the living room, and she returned there to wait for the answering machine to pick up. The call was from Joe...and it was about the tenth call in the past two days asking her to call him back: the police and the D.A. were getting frantic about the killings the city was calling "The Vampire Murders," and Diana was about to go mad trying to justify her own behavior to herself. She was a police officer, and Catherine and Snow were killing people. Morally, ethically and professionally, she was bound to *do* something about the situation. She wrapped her arms around herself as Joe's voice begged her to call as soon as she got in. *I just can't talk to him. I'd never be able to force myself to lie about this....* It didn't help that she was at the point of wishing she could drive a stake into Cathy's heart herself...for very personal reasons. But Vincent would never forgive her if she did.

Diana thought back over the past couple of days. Vincent had spent all his time here, in her loft. They'd spent the time talking, making love. Cherishing the time they had. After the first couple of calls from Joe, Diana had turned the ringer off on the phone and the sound off on the answering machine. While Vincent was here—while he was hers—she wouldn't allow anything to interrupt them.

And now...it was almost over. If the serum worked. If the serum worked, she would lose Vincent. If it didn't...she hadn't a clue what *any* of them were going to do. The only way to stop the killings was to destroy the vampires, and neither she nor Vincent could do that. Finally dropping onto the couch, Diana forced herself to sit still...tried to center herself and gather what little objectivity she had left.

"You'll have to talk to him eventually, Ms. Bennett."

The cold, hated, familiar voice froze her for a moment...then she turned slowly to face him. Gabriel. Her eyes flicked to the open roof door and back to the silent, gaunt figure that defiled her home. She rose carefully, wishing she had her gun—picturing it safely in the drawer of her bedtable. "What do you want, Gabriel?"

He chuckled, and the sound made her skin crawl. "Now, now, Ms. Bennett...you've *always* known what I wanted. The same thing I always wanted: the boy. The only difference is that now you also know *why* I want him."

She thought of Jacob, his eyes smiling as he reached out to her. The thought of him being in Gabriel's clutches again made her stomach churn and her teeth clench. "You can't have him."

Gabriel smiled then and glided effortlessly, lazily, around the couch to stand beside her. She couldn't seem to move. Hypnotized by his eyes, she stood, helpless before him. "My dear Ms. Bennett... why do you fight so hard to defend the very thing that stands in your way?" His expression was almost sympathetic. "He still loves her, you know. And once Ms. Chandler is no longer a vampire, he'll have no more use for you."

Her throat tight and her heart aching, Diana shook her head. "He's not like that."

"All men are like that. He's no different. Bring me the child, Ms. Bennett, and the problem will be solved. *I'll* deal with Snow and his companion and your lover will never know the difference." Placing a hand over his long-dead heart, Gabriel told her, "And then, he'll turn back to you for the comfort that only you can give."

Diana's mouth was dry and she could barely force the words out. "Get out of here, Gabriel."

Thin, cool fingers lifted to her throat, traced along the line of her jaw, then down, pausing as his hand encircled her throat. His eyes never left hers, and still, she couldn't move. He bared his fangs, and trembling, terrified, Diana closed her eyes, expecting him to kill her—and still unable to move. She felt the touch of his fangs...then nothing, as he released her. Weak, sick to her stomach with fear, she opened her eyes to see him standing at the foot of her stairs. With a satisfied smile, he told her softly, "You could be dead right now, Ms. Bennett. Think about it. I'm not your enemy: *she* is."

Long after Gabriel disappeared from sight, Diana stood trembling, staring at the open loft door... acutely aware of the rush of her own blood.

...

Vincent hesitated for a moment when he saw Diana's roof door standing open. She *never* left that door open, though she almost never locked it, either. It didn't *feel* right to him, and he approached cautiously, not wanting to alert any possible intruders within.

Entering the loft as silently as he could, Vincent started down the stairs, all the while searching for any sign that things were not as they should be. He stopped short when he saw Diana sitting on the couch: her back was slumped and she held her head in her hands. She might as well have been shouting her misery to him. He clutched the small ice chest he carried closer to him and called to her softly: "Diana...."

Her head snapped up and for one brief instant Vincent could see the depth of her despair mirrored in her eyes. The scent of fear was in the air and he wondered what had happened to frighten her. But when she saw him, she merely smiled and greeted him quite normally, "Vincent! You're back." She rose smoothly to her feet and brushed the ever-present loose wisps of hair back. "So...how'd it go?"

Startled and saddened by the mask Diana had donned for his benefit, Vincent hesitated, then held up the ice chest.

Her eyes went to the chest then back to him. "The serum?"

He nodded.

"D'you think it'll work?" she queried quietly.

He shrugged. "Father and Peter think perhaps it will...but they don't know, for certain."

She nodded, her lips pursed thoughtfully, her gaze distant. Then, she looked back to him and smiled. "I'm glad you're back. I missed you." She came around the couch and put her arm around him, holding him tightly for a few moments, then releasing him. "Snow and Catherine are on their way over. Snow was kind enough to call this time." She chuckled and shook her head. "Seems really weird, getting a phone call from a vampire."

"No stranger, I suppose, than any of the rest of this."

Taking her hand, he led her back to the couch, where they settled, the ice chest at their feet and Diana resting in Vincent's arms. Where they waited, silently, for the next stage of the drama to be played out.

...

Catherine glanced up at her companion, who hadn't said much since he'd made the call to Diana Bennett to let her know they were coming. She thought of the past few days and sighed heavily. After Snow had rejoined her, he'd been friendly, but casual. No more shared kills, and no more cozy hotel rooms with shared beds and satin sheets—no more hot moments between them. *Oh, no*, she thought, *any of those would've tied me to him more*. She should've been grateful, she supposed, but she wasn't. She'd been miserable the entire time. Snow's expression now was one of resigned sorrow, though whenever he realized she was looking at him, he'd smile. Catherine wondered briefly if Vincent and Diana were as miserable as she and Snow were. *This is crazy*, she thought bitterly. *Absolutely nuts. All I wanted was a nice, normal life with the man I love. And what do I get? Captured, tested like a lab animal...not to mention six months of mental torture...then I get my baby stolen and get murdered...and on top of all that, I couldn't even be allowed to DIE peacefully. Oh, no. That'd be too damned easy. Damn, I hate Gabriel.*

Catherine reached out and slipped her hand into Snow's and was rewarded by a soft smile that even reached his eyes this time. His hand tightened over hers, and though he'd looked away, Catherine felt closer to him than she had in days.

As they approached Diana's apartment building, Snow murmured gently: "We're almost there. Diana said Vincent should be there by the time we arrived." He squeezed her hand and told her, "It won't be long, Cat...and maybe you'll have your life back."

"Maybe," she responded thoughtfully. "But...what about you?" She stared up at him, concerned about him. "Will you be all right, Snow?"

He gave her a crooked smile and cupped her cheek in his hand. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. The last couple of weeks have been...the best part of the last 500 years...and I won't forget them." He smoothed her bangs back and kissed her forehead. "C'mon, Cat. Let's go let Fate determine our futures."

...

Gabriel twirled the wineglass in his fingers, then drained the blood in one long draught. Setting the old crystal aside, he turned his eyes back to the statue that dominated the room. The exquisite sculpture in black marble was of Snow, and Gabriel had spent many thousands of hours studying it and wondering just why he'd commissioned the young Michaelangelo to do it for him. But there was no denying that the power and passion of the sculpture matched Snow's own. *I should have killed him centuries ago*, Gabriel told himself. But he could no more destroy Snow than he could himself. Snow was the only true offspring he was ever likely to have...disloyal as he had proved. Loyalty was the only thing worth having in this world, and Snow had proved himself to be ungrateful and disloyal over and over again. *He never appreciated the gift I gave him. The power.*

There was a knock on the door and at his soft, "Come," Pope entered, then stood nearly as still as the statue until he was given permission to speak. Gabriel still hadn't quite decided if he should let Pope live or not...much less give him the gift he wanted, and Pope was well aware of the fact.

"Snow and the woman have entered the Bennett woman's apartment building," Pope informed him.

"And Vincent?" Gabriel asked, without taking his eyes from the statue.

"He's there."

"Did he bring the child?"

"No," Pope stated, then added, "however, he *did* bring *something* with him...a box...or case...of some sort."

Gabriel considered. "Perhaps it's time for you to prove your loyalty to me, Pope."

Pulling himself more erect, Pope took a deep breath and nodded. "Anything, sir."

"If you succeed in the little...assignment...I give you, perhaps I'll finally reward you with the immortality you crave."

At Pope's hopeful look, Gabriel almost laughed. The man was so easy to manipulate. "Go find the child and bring him to me. Infiltrate the community and bring him out with no violence. Vincent will be occupied for a time, and they will have no real defenses. Bring Julian back to me, and a never-ending future will be yours for the asking."

After the door closed, Gabriel rose and paced around the statue...staring at it, but not really seeing it. Things were *not* going according to plan. Obviously, Vincent had somehow managed to get the serum produced without bringing the child above: Gabriel was certain of it. And he was equally certain that Vincent had the serum with him when he arrived at the apartment. Gabriel considered going to the apartment himself and forcibly taking the serum: perhaps he could synthesize it. But he hesitated to confront two vampires and Vincent at the same time...and the Bennett woman's gun was a deterrent as well. Strong as he was, Gabriel knew it would be close to impossible to succeed with those odds, and any violent confrontation could result in the serum being destroyed...just as sending someone to the tunnels to forcibly retrieve the child risked injury to the boy. Having Pope infiltrate the tunnels to steal the boy away was much safer, assuming he succeeded. If he didn't, Pope was no great loss.

Furious, Gabriel snarled, clenching his fists to keep himself from lashing out at the statue...which was the only thing in reach. *Why do people continually disappoint me?* he asked himself again. Snow with his disloyalty, Pope with his inefficiency, Vincent with his stubborn refusal to see what he *could* be. Even the two women, Chandler and Bennett refused to be turned to his plans.

*Perhaps Snow's right, he thought bitterly. Perhaps I **am** getting too old...too complacent.*

Turning on his heel, he left the room. *Perhaps Pope will succeed...perhaps, perhaps, perhaps....* Snarling, he muttered, "And perhaps pigs will fly!"

...

Catherine was very quiet after Vincent finished explaining the research that went into creating the serum and the possibilities of its success or failure. In fact, *everyone* seemed subdued. Vincent wondered what thoughts were going through Catherine's mind.

Eventually, Catherine broke the silence. "When can we do it, and how long before we know if it worked?" She spoke quietly, calmly, but Vincent could sense her anxiety, though he couldn't tell if she was anxious because she was afraid it wouldn't work...or if she was afraid it *would*.

He drew a deep breath and shrugged slightly. "I have the serum with me, Catherine. I can give it to you now. But...there is no way of telling how long it will be before we can tell if it has had any effect."

Catherine's forehead creased in a slight frown as she considered what he'd said. She lifted her eyes to his and shrugged. "I don't really have much choice, so let's do it."

"You're certain?" Vincent asked. "Remember, Catherine...we don't know what this serum will do. Be certain."

He could see her characteristic determination and resolve returning...in the flash of her eyes and the lift of her chin. "Vincent...I *really* don't have a choice. I love you and I love our son...and there's no way to go back...except for this." She turned her attention to Diana, who sat, silent and alone on the couch, then back to him. "It all hinges on one thing, Vincent...do you still love me? Still want me? I mean..."

The question took him by surprise. He hadn't expected for her to doubt his love. He swallowed convulsively and forced himself not to look over at Diana, though he felt her pain as if it were his own. Perhaps it was. "Of course I still want you, Catherine. I only want you to be aware of the risks."

"What about Diana?" she asked softly.

He turned, then, to Diana, and smiled...and he knew his smile was as sad and tender as the one she gave back to him. "I love Diana as well, Catherine," he told her truthfully, turning back to his first love. "But that in no way diminishes...or changes...what I feel for you. Diana understands that. But a choice must be made. I made mine, and now you have only to make yours." Vincent was keenly aware of Snow, who stood silent and still beside the kitchen bar. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the slight shake of Snow's head, and knew Catherine saw it as well as she lowered her eyes and smiled the same soft, sad smile he'd seen on Diana's face. When she looked up through her bangs in that determined way he knew so well, she said firmly, "Let's do it, then."

...

Diana watched Vincent as he prepared the serum, competently drawing it up into the syringe: remembering that he was a doctor's son. *Doctor's son, teacher, jack of all trades, protector...lover. **My** lover...no...no longer mine, but **hers***, she thought ruefully. Resentfully. She glanced over at Catherine, who met her eyes and smiled. *Smug bitch*, Diana told herself. *She never deserved him. Used him as a weapon until it drove him crazy...never let him touch her until it was too damned late....*

She startled as she felt a touch on her elbow, and looked up into Snow's weathered face and ancient eyes. "You okay?" he asked gently.

Feeling oddly vulnerable, Diana looked away and bobbed her head in a nod. "Sure. You?"

He smiled as she looked back. At least his face did, even if his eyes didn't. "Not really."

Diana sighed and turned her attention back to Vincent and Catherine...hating the doting looks they were giving one another as he swabbed her skin with alcohol and gave her the injection. *The first time he's even touched her since she came back...* Diana realized abruptly. And wondered why that was. It obviously wasn't because he didn't love her...the looks he gave her...the way he touched her...

all said differently. Abruptly, without looking away from the tableau before her, she asked Snow: "What *is* it about her, Snow? Why is it that every man she meets ends up in love with her? Vincent, Joe, Elliot...you." Her voice sounded pathetically self-conscious and miserable and she hated herself for revealing her feelings to this...creature. Or to anyone, for that matter. She felt raw...like her body had been turned inside-out and she was wearing her every emotion on the outside, but still, she couldn't help asking again: "I don't understand. What *is* it?"

"I don't know if I can explain it," Snow told her with a look of compassion that she wished he'd kept to himself. "She's beautiful and intelligent...but she has flaws." His gaze drifted over to Catherine and stayed. "She...believes herself beautiful... believes everyone will love her. Expects them to. She lost that belief for a while, and that's when she fell in love with him."

Indignant, Diana protested. "Why? Because she figured nobody else would have him?"

Snow shook his head, never taking his eyes off of Catherine. "No. Maybe...because he was the first one who'd ever loved her even when she wasn't beautiful. Who didn't care about who she was or her status in society. He loved her when she didn't feel she deserved to *be* loved. He loved her when she was ugly...inside and out. When the hatred and rage were uglier than the physical scars. He gave her back the belief that she deserved to be loved for who she was...and she's not likely to lose that belief again."

Diana hugged herself as she considered Snow's words. *Can it really be that simple? May be, Bennett. May be.*

...

As Vincent took Catherine's hand, he was relieved to find the feel of her to be the same as always, though perhaps a bit cooler. He'd been afraid to touch her...and find she was so alien to him that he couldn't bear it. A slight shiver of desire ran through him as her fingers tightened on his, and he lifted his eyes to hers.

"I won't bite you..." she said softly, smiling gently and lifted her other hand to smooth his mane.

Releasing her hand, he trailed his fingers up over her forearm. She shivered, then, and Vincent murmured, "Perhaps...after this...you won't be biting *anyone*."

She chuckled, and told him, "Maybe I *should* say, I won't bite you right now...."

Vincent felt himself blushing, and turned away to get the syringe and serum to begin preparing it. As he injected the serum, he was astounded to see the tiny hole from the needle-prick heal over almost instantly.

"Incredible, isn't it?" she whispered in an awe-struck tone.

Speechless, he could only nod.

"I wish we knew what was going to happen," she said wistfully. "...or what to look for."

"All we can do now is wait, Catherine."

"I'm...a little scared, Vincent," she admitted.

He drew her into his arms and held her gently as she rested her head against his chest. "I am, too."

He was acutely aware of Diana and Snow behind them...could hear the murmur of their voices... but for now, his attention, his concern had to be for Catherine. He drew a shaky breath as she snuggled against him.

He closed his eyes and breathed in her scent and his hand stroked down her arm. It was almost as though the last horrible year had never happened. Except for Diana: the tight, bright thread of her presence was just as true, just as much a part of him now, as Catherine's was. That could never be changed or denied. *What is going to happen to us?* he asked himself as he rested his cheek on the soft, silky mass of Catherine's hair. *How can I bear this? If I have one, I lose the other.*

...

Snow was becoming increasingly concerned. The clock was edging its way closer and closer to dawn, and he and Cat were halfway across the city from safety...but although he didn't want to take Catherine away from here—she belonged with Vincent right now—he couldn't bear to leave her yet, either. As he glanced again toward the glass-blocked wall, Diana seemed to realize what was bothering him. With a slight frown, she commented, "Gettin' toward dawn...we've gotta figure out something to do about that."

He surveyed the loft apartment. Too much light overall. Glass block windows, overhead skylight. "What?"

"Well..." Diana muttered thoughtfully, "...for someone who's used to coffins, I don't think we need to rival the Ritz." She motioned to him to follow her, and she led him into the small, windowless bathroom. "Will this do?"

He chuckled and relaxed. "Don't think I've slept in a bathtub before...at least not that I recall." He met Diana's eyes for the first time in a good hour. "Thanks."

Unsmiling, she looked away, seeming a bit embarrassed. "I guess I can lay some blankets and a pillow down in the tub and on the floor...for Catherine, I mean."

"That'll do." He wanted to tell her how grateful he was for her kindness to Cat...that he realized how hard it was for her, but he knew she wouldn't want to hear it. He wanted to say, too, that he couldn't ever remember a time when he'd been willing to sleep someplace not of his choosing...someplace unguarded or unlocked. That he trusted her and Vincent that much. But he knew she wouldn't want to hear *that* either. He sensed, somehow, that absolute trust was something *she* gave almost as rarely as he.

A long silence stretched between them, then Diana shrugged and told him, "Guess I'd better start digging in the closet for what I need." She turned and left him standing alone in the small room.

Suddenly, without warning, there was a hoarse yell from Vincent that sent Snow rushing in a panic toward the living room. Fast as he was, Diana was there ahead of him. When he reached the couch, a wild-eyed Vincent was cradling Catherine in his arms and Diana was bending over them, her hand on Catherine's forehead. "She was fine a half-hour ago, Diana! I don't understand!"

"She's definitely got a high fever...I'll call Peter," Diana told him and rushed toward the telephone.

Snow felt totally useless as he watched Vincent hold the woman he loved...whom he wanted desperately to help, but didn't know how. Vincent gently smoothed Catherine's hair back, and Snow noticed that though the damp sweat was red-tinged, it wasn't blood-thick, as a vampire's tears...and sweat...were. He knelt beside Vincent, and though his hands twitched with the desire to take Catherine from him, he didn't. "I think she'll be all right, Vincent."

"She's burning up, Snow! She's unconscious! I can't even sense her!"

Snow nodded and finally reached out to take one of Catherine's hands, which he held tenderly. "Vampires don't run a temperature, Vincent," he said quietly. "It's her body fighting the serum...and the serum's winning, is all."

Vincent looked up, his eyes full of hope. "Perhaps you're right." His gaze slid past Snow to the window. "It's getting light out. I think perhaps we should get her out of here...just in case."

Snow nodded. "Sounds like a plan. Let's go."

...

Diana got off the phone with Peter Alcott and turned to see Vincent carrying Catherine to the bathroom. She reached back and pulled her braid down and raked her fingers through the heavy, tangled mass of hair, then rubbed her tired eyes. Her life was falling apart around her and there was nothing she could do. *Damn, damn, damn.* She sighed heavily and looked up in time to see Snow standing in the doorway, the lightening sky behind him.

"Take care of her," the white-haired vampire said...then turned to follow Vincent.

Diana hung her head. *Take care of her, he says...like I really have a choice.* She was ashamed of the bitterness she felt. And the rage. She'd spent her life taking care of people, and never once

thought of doing different. Until now. And yet, both Snow and Vincent trusted her to do what had to be done. Suddenly, Diana couldn't bear it anymore. She rushed to the elevator and ran away...from her home, from the love she couldn't bear anymore...and ran to the old church three blocks down.

Dawn was just beginning to break as she pulled the church doors open and stepped inside. It was dark inside, and quiet. Except for her own harsh breathing and the sound of her feet on the hardwood floor. The soft, rosy flush of dawn touched the stained glass with a delicate beauty, and Diana's heart hurt. She didn't want to talk to a priest...she didn't want confession or to be forgiven. She just wanted to find an answer to the darkness she felt roiling inside herself. She walked slowly to the steps and knelt, hesitantly crossing herself. "Father...help me..." she whispered in a hoarse, harsh voice that scarcely sounded like herself. "I've lost myself...."

...

Vincent lay beside Catherine on the floor of Diana's bathroom, carefully washing her face with a cool washcloth. The vampire, Snow, lay in the bathtub, silent as the dead in his daylight sleep. Catherine, however, stirred restlessly in Vincent's arms, murmuring softly. Her temperature was dropping. Snow had been right. He'd heard the hum and rumble of the elevator when Diana left earlier, and wondered where she'd gone...and when Peter was coming, but hadn't felt he should leave Catherine. A short time later, when the elevator came back up, he waited for Diana to come to him, but she didn't come. Instead, it was Peter who opened the door and came into the tiny room. Vincent could sense his concern...see it in his face...and he hastened to reassure him. "She's doing better, Peter. Her temperature is down, and she wakes occasionally."

Peter stared down at Catherine, a combined expression of love, disbelief and awe on his face. Finally, he shook himself into action. "Vincent, you're going to have to get out of here to give me room..." his eyes strayed to the bathtub, where Snow slept, his hands crossed over his chest. "He's the..."

Vincent nodded. "The vampire, Snow."

Peter ran his hand across his mouth and muttered, "God."

Standing and stretching, muscles aching, Vincent inched past Peter. "He won't bother you, Peter. He won't wake until nightfall."

Leaving Peter with his patient, Vincent went to find Diana. He didn't have to go far, as she was lying curled up on the couch, her long mass of bright hair streaming over her shoulders. He knelt beside her, cupped her face in his hand, and her eyes fluttered open. "Are you all right?" he whispered.

Her head moved in a tiny nod and her eyes drifted closed. "Just tired. Catherine?"

He hesitated, then told her, "I think the serum worked, Diana."

A tear appeared at the corner of her eye and slipped slowly down her cheek, but she didn't open her eyes. "I'm glad," she murmured.

Her image shimmered as Vincent's own tears obscured his vision, but he tenderly stroked her hair as her fingers curled around his other hand and she fell into a deep sleep. "I know you are, Diana."

...

Gabriel leaned against the brownstone across from Diana's apartment. He'd done a lot of thinking in the past few hours, and he'd come to a decision. He'd watched Diana leave, and followed her to the church. Far above the building, dark clouds chased one another across the moon...a moon that could barely be seen beyond the lights of the city and the lightening sky. *What does it matter, he thought with satisfaction, who does the final testing? Apparently they've given her the serum, and it must be working...otherwise, the Bennett woman wouldn't have been so upset.* Gabriel could imagine how upset Snow must be, as well, and that thought also gave him a great deal of satisfaction.

The dawn was coming, and even Gabriel couldn't fight the sun, so he waved to his chauffeur, who was waiting in the limousine two blocks down. *I have all the time in the world. And I'll leave Snow*

and his treachery for another time as well. I'll wait...and watch. Perhaps Pope won't fail me this time.

...

Catherine woke to the gentle rumble of Vincent's voice as he murmured to her, to the feel of his fingers on her skin. She didn't want to open her eyes...she was afraid it was only a dream. As she lay there, savoring his touch and the sound of his voice, it occurred to her that she was hungry: not the ravenous blood-thirst, but actually *hungry* for real *food*. She dared to open her eyes.

"Good morning," Vincent said gently, with a tired smile.

She swallowed the lump in her throat and tried to smile back as the import of the greeting reached her. It was *morning* and she was awake. She was hungry, but not for blood. "It really is morning?"

"It really is morning," he assured her. "Diana is making you something to eat...something small, to begin with. I told her you were hungry."

Diana, she thought...*and Snow*. She sat up and brushed impatiently at her bangs. "Snow. Is he all right?"

Vincent nodded slightly, indicating that she should look behind her. She turned to see him pull back the shower curtain, revealing Snow, asleep in the tub. Literally "dead to the world." She felt a vast relief wash over her. He hadn't left her...even now. And knowing how concerned he always was about his sleeping place being secure, she was amazed. Turning back, into Vincent's embrace, she sighed in contentment. "He must trust you and Diana very much."

"He shouldn't." At his tone, Catherine looked up into his eyes...eyes that had turned hard and unyielding. "Other than what he has done for you, Catherine, there is only blood and death between us. He has a great deal to answer for, and debts he can never pay." He turned from Snow, then and helped her to her feet. "Diana is waiting for us. Come."

...

Diana forced herself through the motions of preparing toast and soft-boiled eggs for Catherine. She felt nauseous, with her envy and jealousy eating its way through her. *I've got to put it aside. For his sake. Can't make it any harder on him than it already is.*

She sensed Vincent behind her before she heard them. Felt the immense quiet of him. Closing her eyes, she drew a deep breath and smiled before turning to face them.

Catherine looked so small...so fragile...beside him. His arm was around her, protectively steadying her. Even now, after her miserable, fevered night, she was beautiful. She looked like the girl next door, even if she were dressed more for fright night. And for one fleeting instant, Diana allowed herself to hate her for what she had...and what she'd taken back. Then, Diana saw the look on Vincent's face: his eyes were filled with love and they were looking back at her. She swallowed, despising herself, her eyes filled with tears that she blinked away so she could hide her pain. "Catherine," she said, fumbling with the plate and taking it to the table. "Vincent said you'd be hungry..."

She felt the brief, gentle touch of Vincent's hand on her arm...just a touch, light as a butterfly's wing against her skin...but it gave her enough strength to meet Catherine's eyes and smile. Catherine smiled back beneath her cocker-spaniel bangs and whispered a shy, "Thank you, Diana. For everything." And Diana found it impossible to hate her, even as much as she resented her inopportune return from the grave.

As Catherine ate, Diana and Vincent traded soft, sad glances. His hand rested lightly on Catherine's shoulder. "Peter's coming back with a van to take both of you to the nearest tunnel entrance," Diana told them. "It's safer, y'know...now that it's daylight."

Catherine glanced up, her eyes dancing with excitement. "I can go Below, now? I can see my baby?"

"His name is Jacob," Vincent reminded her gently.

Diana felt wretched simply thinking of the tableau. She'd felt very possessive of Vincent's son since the first moment she'd seen him. And the moment she'd held him, looked into those eyes that were so much like his father's.... The buzzer from downstairs interrupted her thoughts and she gratefully put them aside. "Guess you shouldn't keep Peter waitin'," she murmured.

She followed Vincent and Catherine to the elevator, saw them safely on. Then Catherine asked her, "Diana...one more favor, please?"

"Yeah. Sure," Diana answered. *Why not?* she thought. *That's seems to be my purpose in life.*

"Tell Snow..."

Catherine's voice faded...the words failing. But Diana knew what she meant. "I will."

Vincent was silent, and she could still see the love and pain in his eyes long after the elevator had disappeared down the shaft. *Well, shit,* she thought wearily. *So much for wishful thinking.*

...

Catherine was very quiet on the long trip home. She was a bit unsteady, and Vincent carried her part of the way, but mostly, she wanted to walk. She cocked her head back and forth, listening to the pipes and periodically glancing up at him. There were so many questions in her eyes. Vincent felt oddly shy and unsure of himself around her...it had been so long. But she was so very lovely, and Vincent's mind was turning in circles...his heart swelling with memories so full of love that they hurt to remember. When they were approaching the Hub, Catherine finally ventured to ask a question. "The pipes are alive today...do they know?"

Vincent drew a deep breath, pulling himself back from the past. "They know you're returning. Father made up a story to explain how it is that you're still alive. They won't know the truth."

"What did he tell them?"

"That you were...ill...and in protective custody." He shrugged, not really knowing what else to say. "He will let you embellish the story as you will."

"You realize, it'll be days before we have any privacy," Catherine muttered, obviously dismayed. "I wanted some time to be with you...and our son before we got mobbed."

Now that Catherine had verbalized what was on his own mind, he felt a bit less embarrassed. "Actually," he said with a smile, "Father asked that everyone leave us alone. They will be busy planning a party to welcome you home...several days from now."

Catherine laughed lightly and ducked in under his arm to snuggle against him. "Good. We have a lot to catch up on."

With a rush of the old, familiar desire and longing, Vincent hugged her tightly. "Yes...I suppose we do."

...

The phone rang for the second time and Diana seriously considered letting the machine pick up, but decided at the last minute to answer it. After all, she had to face Joe Maxwell eventually. "Bennett here."

She flinched as Joe started yelling: he was absolutely furious that she hadn't returned his calls, and was letting her know in vivid detail what he was tempted to do to her. "Sorry, Joe, but hey...I'm on *vacation*. You know...kick back, forget about work. Go someplace? I've been gone. Now I'm back."

Joe's tone became a bit more civil, and he apologized for biting her head off, but then the agitation crept back into his voice. "No, I haven't been watching the news," she told him calmly. "The news is like watching a videotape of work. So tell me about this case...start from the beginning."

She dozed while he "filled her in," and after he finished, she told him, "Okay...I'll start working on it. No, you don't need to come by, just send the reports and stuff over on the computer. If I need to see the bodies, I'll go by the morgue." She had to laugh when Joe told her he'd had no intention of sending the bodies over anyway. "Sick, Joe...that's sick. You've been at this too long."

She put the receiver back in the cradle and sat for a long while just staring out the window. There wasn't much "work" she needed to do on this case...after all, she had one of the killers sleeping in her bathtub. *Talk about a conflict of interest, she told herself wryly. Sure, I can just go in and drive a stake through his heart right now...problem solved. Trouble is, I've gotten to where I actually kind of respect him. It's Gabriel I'd like to take out...again. And maybe a certain pretty blonde....* She decided that the most work she was going to do today was working on catching up with lost sleep. Maybe the answers to some of her problems would magically manifest themselves in her dreams. "Yeah, sure, Bennett. More likely, Snow'll wake up and decide you'd make a good breakfast." She yawned hugely and snuggled down into the pillow, thinking stoically, *Well...at least then all my problems would be solved.*

...

"He's so beautiful, Vincent," Catherine whispered as she gazed down at the child in her arms. "He's grown so much." Her voice was wistful. I never thought I'd see him...or you...again."

Vincent knelt beside the chair where Catherine sat holding their son. With one hand, he brushed gently at the baby's curls, then took Catherine's hand in his. It was so small in his, so delicate. And he couldn't help comparing it to Diana's larger, stronger hands...hands that he knew from experience were as gentle and tender as Catherine's. He couldn't quite meet Catherine's eyes as he whispered, "Those months you were gone were so terrible for me...but they must have been even worse for you. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you...."

"It wasn't your fault, Vincent." Standing, she took the sleeping child and laid him in his crib, then came back to him. "The important thing is, you're here for me *now*. Let's not make the same mistakes this time."

Rising, Vincent hesitated for a long moment before taking her in his arms to hold her close. He was becoming aroused, just thinking of what she was implying. "Are you certain, Catherine...that you want me...that you can accept...."

Catherine drew in a deep breath, then sighed heavily. She stepped back and peered up at him with a wicked look on her face. "Oh, shut UP," she told him, smiling to show she was teasing. She pointed toward the crib, then reached up to tangle her fingers in his mane. "Don't you think we should be beyond all that?"

Vincent could feel the love and acceptance that radiated toward him from her through their renewed bond...an acceptance he'd never felt from her before, and he smiled. Things had, indeed, changed between them. "Yes," he agreed solemnly. "We should be. Perhaps we are."

In the flickering candlelight and with the soft singing of the pipes in the background, Vincent began undressing her, slowly sliding the sleek black dress off her shoulders, reaching behind her to unzip it and allow it to slip to the floor. Her body was more full and rich than he'd imagined...fuller, he knew, than it had been previously. Again, briefly, the vision of Diana's sleek, lithe beauty flashed into his mind, and he tucked the memory carefully, lovingly away. He knew that without having known Diana's love, he would still be unsure and hesitant with Catherine. He brushed the back of his hand across her cheek, rejoicing in the soft smile in her eyes and the continued encouragement from the bond. "Catherine," he breathed as his hand trailed lower to brush over the full swell of her breast, then clasped her hips as she reached to begin unlacing his vest.

Catherine took her time with unlacing his vest and unbuttoning his shirt, and Vincent's pulse was racing, his breathing ragged as her fingers slid through the hair on his chest. It was becoming more and more difficult for him to control himself: with Diana it seemed there had been no question of control...he merely was...he simply followed his instincts and loved her. But with Catherine, he knew it must be different. Despite the new acceptance he felt through the bond, the two women were simply...not the same...and he was unsure how to respond. Then, he could almost hear Diana's voice reminding him, *While you were making love to me, she was with a vampire...there's not much you could do that could possibly frighten her at this point.*

He was almost grateful to Snow.

Abandoning his inhibitions, he swept Catherine up and placed her on his bed, and when he removed his jeans, he relaxed as she raised her eyebrows and reached for him.

...

As the sun slipped behind the multi-layered horizon of the city, Snow woke, and for the briefest moment couldn't place where he was. He felt an instinctive panic building—a residual of five centuries of paranoia—then he remembered where he was and the panic subsided. When he sat up, he couldn't see Cat in her makeshift bed on the floor, so he could only assume the serum had worked. He was glad for her, yet felt an emptiness that he barely recognized as sorrow. Loneliness he understood, but sorrow at losing someone was something he hadn't experienced in some four centuries.

It was very quiet in the loft apartment, even to Snow's acute senses, so he assumed he was alone...that Cat had gone with Vincent, and Diana was out. *Just as well*, he told himself, though he was disappointed. *I don't think I could say goodbye to Cat very gracefully. It's best this way.* He stretched and climbed out of the tub, stopped at the sink to peer disconsolately into the mirror. *Sometimes I wish vampires **couldn't** see themselves in mirrors.* He ran the water and scrubbed at his face, ran damp fingers through his hair. *You look like shit, Snow. Good thing vampires age so slowly...if those lines get much deeper, they'll be gullies.* He sighed as he turned away. He knew he needed to go feed...knew he was procrastinating about leaving Diana's loft. Once he left, he'd have to put the past few weeks behind him...forget Cat...forget the fragile bonds of trust he'd established with Diana and Vincent. He hadn't trusted anyone in a very long time...and he certainly wasn't ready to put aside his memories of Cat.

He padded silently into the living area, stopping short when he saw Diana asleep on the couch. *She looks exhausted*, Snow thought as he approached to stand over her. Diana's long, red hair streamed over her shoulder and one pale, lightly freckled arm hung over the edge of the couch, her fingers curled softly as they rested on the worn rug. *Exhausted and defenseless.*

The blood-hunger was growing stronger, and Snow knew he should leave: Diana presented far too easy a target for a hungry vampire. With a last, regretful glance at the lovely woman on the couch, Snow turned and made his way up to the roof door.

...

Diana spent several days forcing herself through the motions of tracking the so-called "vampire killer." Snow's trail was a lot less obvious than the double one he and Catherine had left...he tended to dispose of his kills more thoroughly, so fewer were found. Diana couldn't help wondering what happened to Gabriel's "meals." She sat in front of her computer, listlessly poking at the keys: she couldn't concentrate. Her thoughts kept drifting, even though she tried to focus.

Finally, furious with herself, she gave up and paced the apartment. *I can't do this anymore. I'm lying to Joe, to Greg, to myself.... This whole thing is a farce. I'm not a detective, I'm a liar and a clown. Snow and Gabriel are out there killing people, and I'm letting it happen. What's happening to me? I can't even think rationally anymore...all I can think of is Vincent down there with Catherine...and I've got to put that behind me...quit feeling sorry for myself.*

Throwing herself onto the couch, she pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. "Arrrrgggh," she groaned. It was hopeless. What could she do? Tell Joe that the killers really were vampires...and one of them was the same monster who killed Catherine Chandler...and who was supposedly dead? *Yeah, sure. Funny Farm, here I come.* "So what do I do?" she asked herself. "Perspective, Bennett. Perspective."

Untangling her legs and padding over to the corkboard, she forced herself to study the police photos of the victims, forced herself to pack away Vincent and Catherine, her own pain, and her grudging respect for Snow. These were the victims she should be identifying with. Frowning at the photos, at the map with the red pins indicating where the bodies were found, focusing intently upon her new mission,

she finally began to feel almost normal.

Returning to her computer, Diana began typing.

Snow hasn't been ranging as far as he had previously. In the past few days, he's concentrated his feeding nearer to here. Why? Is he waiting for Catherine to come back here? Again, why? To get a glimpse of her, or to assure himself that she's well and happy? Perhaps both. Or perhaps he is still concerned that Gabriel will make some kind of move against Vincent and Catherine...an attempt to reclaim Jacob.

Who is the biggest threat...who kills the most? Snow or Gabriel? Impossible to say. Who is likely to be the hardest to kill? Who is the most vicious? Gabriel, without a doubt. The answer? Enlist Snow's aid to get rid of Gabriel, then deal with Snow.

Diana sat back and stared at the screen. It felt right.

...

The message came over the pipes as Vincent slept, his arm draped lovingly around Catherine. His subconscious automatically recognized the "intruder alert" and he woke immediately. His first reaction was to leap out of bed to go after the intruder, but he remembered just in time that he wasn't sleeping alone. Carefully, very gently, he extricated himself from the tangled sheets and quilts and slipped out of bed without waking his bedmate. Despite the still ringing pipes, Vincent couldn't resist lighting a candle and taking his time dressing: it was simply too delicious a feeling having Catherine there, peacefully asleep in his bed, her tousled hair and glowing skin reflecting their lovemaking.

It was the sound of the pipes that eventually woke her. She rolled over, luxuriously stretching... her hand reaching for him and not finding him. Her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled sweetly, innocent curiosity evident on her face. "What is it?"

"Intruder," he replied with a soft head-shake. "I'm certain it's nothing. It's rarely anything to be concerned with."

"Oh." She yawned. "What time is it?"

Vincent leaned over, burying her in the tent of his hair, and kissed her as she giggled and tried to wrap her arms around his neck. "It's very late," he told her with a chuckle. "Go back to sleep."

She released him and buried her face in her pillow, peering out at him mischievously. "Spoilsport." He laughed, feeling like a boy again. "I'll be back soon."

Traveling quickly, Vincent hurried to investigate the intruder. It didn't take him long to reach the sentry site, and he stopped to ask Cullen about the stranger.

The lean, taciturn carpenter didn't have a lot to offer. "He didn't seem dangerous. Looked lost, and scared. Wasn't armed as far as I could see. Can't imagine what brings him down here...specially this time of night."

Vincent considered. The man had penetrated much too far down to be easily diverted back to the surface. But if he presented no threat, it would be unconscionable to kill him. "Come with me, Cullen. Speak to the man."

"And tell him *what*, Vincent? 'Oh, pardon me, sir, but you just happen to be wandering in my backyard....miles under the damn city?'"

Vincent laughed at Cullen's wry observation. "Something like that." He slapped his friend on the back, nearly knocking him over.

"Hey...watch it!" Cullen grumbled. "I'm not sure it's safe to be around you when you're this happy! You're entirely too benevolent to go after intruders."

Sobering a bit, knowing Cullen was right, they traveled silently. When Vincent became aware of

someone up ahead, he indicated for Cullen to go ahead, and slipped into a side tunnel and opened a peephole.

The man looked startled...frightened...when Cullen hailed him, then after a few moments, seemed relieved. "Thank God!" the man said. "The rumors were correct! There really *are* people down here." Cullen backed off a foot or so as the man came toward him, arms outstretched in greeting. When he saw Cullen back away, the man stopped. "I'm sorry!" he said, "I'm just so glad to see someone actually down here! I'd heard there was a place down here...a safe place...with good people who would give me a place to stay...but I got lost."

Vincent frowned, wondering about the rumors, and where the man had heard them.

"So why'd you need someplace to stay?" Cullen asked suspiciously.

The man looked embarrassed. "I...well...I'm a gambler. I got myself into a real fix, and lost more than I had. Now I got some folks after me who want to do more than repossess my car, if you know what I mean. I'm not saying I was right, y'know...but I don't deserve what they got in mind, either. I just want to lay low for a few days. I signed over my car and my house to 'em, that didn't satisfy 'em...but it's all I got.

Vincent relaxed some. The man seemed safe enough. He didn't trust him completely, but he could be watched. Let Cullen take him to Father. Let the council decide.

...

Catherine was visiting in the nursery, playing with her son when she first saw the newcomer. The man, who they just called "Gage," was standing in the threshold of the nursery watching the children play, and to Catherine, he seemed ominous...threatening. There was something about him that she immediately mistrusted. He seemed somehow...familiar. Clutching Jacob to her, she glared up at him. "Did you need something?"

The man smiled...a smile that was meant to be friendly, she was sure, but it bothered her...just as the odd pains she was beginning to have bothered her. "No...no," he assured her. "I was just...watching the children. They're such a joy, aren't they?"

Jacob was starting to squirm in her arms, but Catherine held him more tightly. "Yes. They are."

The man knelt in front of her and held out a hand—as though to touch Jacob—and Catherine automatically drew him away, turning the boy the other direction and patting him...encouraging him to toddle off to play. The man didn't seem to notice her deliberate rudeness, but rose and smiled as he turned away. "I suppose I'd better go. I promised William I'd help him in the kitchen."

As the man left, Catherine tried to get up from her kneeling position, but gasped as another shaft of pain sliced through her, keeping her from rising. *It's nothing*, she told herself. *I'm just out of shape, is all.* The pain subsided, leaving her momentarily weak. As she knelt on the floor of the nursery watching her son playing with the other babies, she decided she could accept any sort of pain in exchange for the gifts she'd been given: Vincent and their son. She forgot about the newcomer, and enjoyed her son.

...

Diana spent more and more time walking the streets at night, trying to spot Snow. After several days, she gave up that avenue of the search. She knew she was going to have to be more methodical. She attended the task force meeting, but could barely keep her eyes open as she lurked silently in the back of the room. The only thing that kept her awake were Joe Maxwell's furious glances in her direction. The body count was going up and Joe's patience with her was plummeting in direct proportion. *I'm tryin' Joe...I'm tryin'*, she thought in his direction. *If I can just find Snow, maybe I can plan something.* She wished she could just tell Joe that at least half the bodies were Gabriel's. She *knew* where *he* was...she just couldn't get to him. But she doubted if she could convince Joe that the Michael Gates who now owned Gabriel's mansion was the same Gabriel she'd shot dead with a heart shot.

Jimmy Faber smirked at her from across the room, knowing full well that neither her watch commander nor the D.A. were happy with her.

When Joe dismissed them, Diana tried to sneak out without having to face him, but no such luck: he shouldered Jimmy out of his way to get over to her. "Bennett...if you think you can spare the time," he growled, voice laced with irony, "I'd like a report."

Her guilty knowledge making her feel a bit like a spitted chicken, Diana avoided his eyes and said quietly, "Joe, when I *have* something to report, I will...I promise."

"Why do I always get the feeling you know more than you let anyone know, Bennett?"

"I dunno." She shrugged uneasily. "It's just the way I work, Joe. Sorry."

Joe just shook his head, and gave a frustrated grunt as he turned away to answer someone's question. Diana took the opportunity to slip away before Joe had a chance to renew his questioning.

...

Vincent was teaching when Mary appeared at the chamber threshold. She positively radiated concern. Vincent immediately dismissed the class and went to her. "What is it, Mary?"

"Vincent...I don't..." Mary looked flustered. "The baby...Jacob...he's missing."

Immediate, heart-stopping panic rose. "What do you mean? How can he be missing? He can't even walk yet!"

"I know. Vincent...please...I'm so sorry! I think it was that new man...Gage. He..."

"Gage!" Furious at his lack of insight, Vincent growled, and Mary cringed. He hastened to reassure her. "I'm not angry with *you*, Mary. I'm angry with myself! Gage must be working for Gabriel. Tell Pascal to alert the sentries to watch for him." Patting the trembling woman's shoulder, Vincent then dashed past her and headed toward the section of tunnels they'd found Gage in.

As Vincent traveled, various messages on the pipes guided his way. The man was seen going toward the serpentine, then west from there. It wasn't very long before Vincent caught up with him near the Abyss.

Jacob was crying...reaching toward him, and Vincent's fury rose. With a snarl, he moved toward Gage. The man was backing away toward the Abyss, and Vincent stopped his advance. "Give me my son," he said, as gently as his rage would allow. There was still the undertone of a growl to his words, and the man paled. Gage held the baby out over the Abyss, and Vincent's heart lurched.

"Come any closer, and I'll drop him," Gage told him in a voice that shook with fear.

"If you drop him, you'll die."

"If I give him back to you, I'll die," Gage said, his shakes becoming more obvious.

"If you give him back to me, I'll let you live to tell Gabriel you failed."

Gage fell to his knees, still clutching the wailing child to him, and Vincent crept closer. When he was only a few feet away, Gage looked up at him with the eyes of a terrified, trapped animal...and set the child carefully on the ground in front of him. Vincent snatched up his son and backed away...honoring his promise not to kill the man. Gage stood...took one long look at Vincent...and leapt into the Abyss.

...

Catherine was more furious than she ever remembered being...furious with herself for not seeing at once what Gage had planned...furious at Vincent for not "feeling" that something was wrong...and more determined than ever before that Gabriel shouldn't get by with his continual torment of innocent people. "I *knew* there was something about him," she told Vincent as she paced the chamber, having to stop, finally, because of the pain in her side.

Vincent merely stood at the threshold watching her, a slight frown on his face. Finally, he spoke. "I, too, should have known, Catherine. But I didn't. Perhaps I was merely too happy. Too content...to see anything else. Normally, I am more involved in the council when allowing newcomers Below...but

this time....”

Eyes closed against the pain and with her effort to block that pain from Vincent, Catherine nodded. “Don’t blame yourself, Vincent. It’s Gabriel who’s at fault.” The pain eased off, and she held her arms out for him...encouraging him to come to her. “We won’t ever be safe until he’s destroyed. Jacob won’t be safe. And I won’t have that.”

“Nor I, Catherine.” Taking her in his arms, he made her forget her fear and anger for a time.

...

Vincent sat across the room from Catherine, watching her sleep. He was concerned about her. The first few days after they came Below, she was full of energy and bubbling with excitement, but the last day or so, she’d become quiet, and was always tired. He’d questioned her, asking if there was anything wrong, and she denied any problems. At first, he’d thought it was a reaction to Gabriel’s man trying to kidnap Jacob, but he gradually realized it was more than that. She managed to mask her feelings well: that disturbed him as much as any of the other symptoms, because she obviously had something to hide. While she slept, she couldn’t mask her feelings, and the impression that came across to him was that she, too, was concerned...and that she was in pain.

Catherine moaned softly in her sleep and shifted restlessly. Finally, Vincent made a decision. He would take his concerns to Father. Catherine was not only worried, she was in pain, and if she wouldn’t talk to him, he would have Father examine her.

He found Father at his desk in the study, still examining the results of his and Peter’s research on the vampirism virus. “Father, may I speak with you?”

The older man looked up from his papers and removed his glasses. “This virus is amazing....” he paused as he glanced up into his son’s face. “What is it, Vincent? You seem upset.”

“It’s Catherine, Father....”

Father frowned and started to rise. “Catherine? What is it? Is she ill?”

Vincent shook his head. “I don’t know, but I believe she may be. She’s been...very quiet...withdrawn, the last day or so.”

“She’s had a lot happen to her in the past week, Vincent,” Father told him. “Perhaps it’s merely catching up with her.”

“I don’t think so, Father. I ask her what’s wrong, and she evades my questions. She masks her emotions from me. But when she sleeps, I can sense her concern...and...she is in pain.”

“Would you like for me to examine her?”

Vincent nodded, gratefully. “Yes. Please.”

“I think perhaps it would be best if Peter also saw her. It wouldn’t hurt for us to run some tests on her in any case. After all, this is hardly a routine matter for any of us.”

...

Snow saw Diana leave her apartment and he followed her closely. The detective was obviously hunting. She was vividly alert and aware of her surroundings, and she stopped periodically and questioned people, gesturing fluently with her hands. Snow, himself, was alert to everything around him...and around Diana, keeping an eye out for Gabriel. He smiled grimly as he noticed she was stopping near each of the places where he’d last killed, despite the fact that he’d been careful to dispose of the bodies. The lady was good, he’d give her that. He followed her most of the night, and didn’t really begin getting concerned until it became obvious she was getting closer and closer to the place he’d been sleeping. He frowned as he watched her poking around the alley of the old tenement building where he slept. Moving closer, he watched her carefully through the dirty window of another building. He didn’t want to kill her—it was amazing how much that thought disturbed him—but he would if he had to.

As he watched, Diana seemed to tense—looking for all the world like a wild animal who’d suddenly

become aware of danger. She peered in his direction, and he was certain she knew he was there, though he knew no human could see well enough from that distance to make out much of anything with it night and with the building itself dark. Diana stood completely still for several long moments, then walked directly toward him, stopping only yards away. He knew she could see him, then...his white hair, if nothing else, and he started toward the door. Diana waited, without moving. He couldn't decide if she was brave or stupid.

The two hunters faced one another silently in the darkness.

"What do you want, Diana?"

"Your help to get rid of Gabriel."

He chuckled and shook his head. "Been there, done that. Getting rid of Gabe is easier said than done. Not sure it's worth the heartburn."

She crossed her arms. "I've been there, too...and I want to try again. I think that if we combine forces, we might just have a chance."

Snow avoided her eyes. "I thought you had sense, guess I was wrong. You don't know Gabe like I do."

"And I don't want to," she retorted. "I just want to do the world a favor and get rid of him permanently."

He finally forced himself to meet her eyes. "You're not gonna give up on this, are you?"

She gave him a rather ironic smile. "Nope."

"Even if I tell you you'll end up dead or a vampire, like me?"

She shook her head. "Can't do it, Snow. I can't live with myself knowin' he's out there."

Snow eyed her warily. He hated being forced into a corner, but he knew from the determination in her eyes that if he let her go at this alone, she was done for. He also knew that if they succeeded in destroying Gabriel, he'd be next on her hit list. Somehow, that didn't much bother him...not like it might've a few weeks ago. With a long, sad sigh, he shrugged, then told her, "What the hell. Got nothin' better to do."

...

"No, Vincent!" Catherine snapped in frustration. "I don't need to see Peter. I'm just tired, that's all."

"Catherine...it's more than that...."

Looking up into Vincent's eyes was awkward...it was intimidating, despite his gentle, caring tone. It was difficult to lie to him, but she didn't want him to worry. With effort, she pushed the frustration...and pain... aside and smiled. "Vincent, please...don't worry. I'm sure I'm fine."

"You're in pain, Catherine...I can feel it...why won't share this with me?"

She sighed and moved into his embrace, burying her face in the soft leather...leaning for a moment into his strength. "All right. Yes. I'm in a little pain. I admit it." She pulled away and met his eyes. "Vincent...this body has been through a lot. The fact that I'm alive at all is a miracle that I'm so grateful for...surely I can overlook a few aches and pains. Maybe it's just the dampness down here."

Gently, firmly, Vincent guided her to the bed and made her sit, then he knelt at her feet, earnestly entreating, "Catherine, please. Humor me. If there's nothing wrong, then no harm has been done...but if there *is* something wrong...."

With an uneasy feeling...like the lurch of missing a step...Catherine reluctantly gave in. She just didn't have the energy to keep on pretending she felt fine. "Oh, all right," she muttered belligerently. "You win. I'll go see Peter if it'll make you feel better. But you'll see...it's nothing."

Vincent glanced up at Father, who had been waiting for her answer. Catherine was grateful that Father had stayed out of the discussion, but she still felt she'd been maneuvered into a corner. *Why can't they just...leave me alone? There can't be anything wrong...there just can't be.* But deep down, that coiled knot of fear was beginning to unravel...and spread.

...

Vincent paced restlessly on Diana's rooftop, unsure if he should make his presence known or not. *I should have come to see her before this*, he chided himself. *I've wanted to...I've missed her...but will she believe that? Or will it look as though I only come to her for comfort?* Frustrated, he clenched his fists, unsure of what to do. The vampire, Snow, was with Diana, but Vincent didn't have much time: Catherine had gone with Father and Peter to Peter's office for them to run some tests. *I only want to talk to her. She always helps me put things in perspective.* Groaning in genuine misery, Vincent muttered: "Why doesn't he *leave*? Why is he here at all?"

Finally, unable to wait any longer, Vincent went to Diana's clerestory windows and tapped. Immediately, Diana's head snapped up and her eyes met his. And she smiled. A glorious, delighted smile that made Vincent determined not to spoil her joy at seeing him.

He barely made it back to the door before Diana threw herself through it and into his arms. "Vincent! I'm so *glad* to see you!"

Vincent hugged her to him, absorbing her delight, cherishing her love. Then released her when he felt her sudden embarrassment. She stepped back, surveyed the rooftop and asked quietly, "I'm sorry...I shouldn't...is...is Catherine here?"

So honorable, his Diana. Always wanting to do the right thing. Not wanting to hurt anyone. He smiled at her. "No. Catherine's...not here. I'm alone. I...just wanted to see you," he lied...only a small lie...and not a lie at all, really.

Her face alight, she took his arm and pulled him toward the door. "Come on down. Snow's here...."

"I know...." Vincent was uncomfortable with the vampire's presence. "Diana... perhaps I'd best go. Snow is *not* my favorite person."

Diana stepped away from him again and flushed. "Um...yeah. I know. He's not mine, either, but he's helping me."

Puzzled, Vincent hesitated, then asked, "Helping you? How?"

Her expression sobered. "Helping me figure out how to destroy Gabriel."

The very thought of Diana going after such a creature terrified him. "Diana! You must not...." Words failed him as he realized he had no right to make restrictions on Diana's life...no right to even make any requests of her.

As his voice trailed away, Diana placed her hand very lightly on his arm and told him quietly, "I have to, Vincent. He's killing people...a *lot* of people."

"So is Snow," he reminded her grimly.

"One problem at a time," she stated. "Right now, Snow is the lesser of two evils."

At a loss of how to answer her, Vincent merely stroked her face—her hair—with the back of his fingers. He wanted to tell her to be careful, that he couldn't bear to lose her, he wanted to confide in her his fears for both her safety and Catherine's health...but he couldn't. "If I can help...." he finally managed.

She nodded, but said nothing. He watched his fingers as they threaded through the wisps of her hair, closed his eyes, bit back the words he wanted so badly to say...*I love you*...and finally told her, "Be well, Diana."

"You, too...." she murmured. Then as he turned to leave, "When will I see you again?"

Heart aching, remembering another parting with similar words, he said truthfully, "I don't know." He felt torn in half...desperately wanting to stay with Diana...and needing equally badly to be with Catherine.

...

While Diana was visiting with Vincent, Snow reviewed the notes and drawings he and Diana had put together. He frowned at the grim picture they presented. The last time he'd penetrated Gabriel's

defenses, it had apparently spurred him to greater efforts at security: he wasn't certain that even with the skill he'd gained over the past five centuries he could get past the incredible wall of defense Gabriel had built—not by himself—and Gabriel had carefully kept himself within those defenses since Catherine went Below. *How can we destroy him if we can't even get to him?* Snow heard Diana on the stairs and glanced up. Her expression warned him not to even *ask* what Vincent had come for...or how Cat was. With a sigh, he pretended he didn't notice how upset she was and spread the hand-drawn map out on the floor in front of him. "I don't see how we're going to get to him unless we can draw him out," he told her.

Diana joined Snow, who was sitting cross-legged on the floor. She was staring intently at the map, but Snow didn't think she was seeing the map at all. "Diana," he said quietly. "Is everything all right?" He was almost afraid to ask, but *something* was wrong...and if it involved Cat, he wanted to know.

Without looking up, Diana just replied in a monotone, "Yeah, sure." She poked a finger at the map, at a place within the house. "When I went in before, I crawled through a pipe that entered the basement somewhere around here. I doubt Gabriel ever knew that was how I got in."

Diverted from his concern over Cat, Snow asked, "Is the pipe large enough for a man?"

There was a long, pregnant silence, then Diana answered him. "Vincent fit. Barely."

"You'll have to show me where the entrance is. Tonight."

Diana roused a little from her introspection, though her tone was still flat. "It's too late tonight. I'll take you tomorrow night."

"There's still time...it's a long way to dawn," Snow protested, wanting to get this done before his nerve gave out.

"I *said* not tonight! What's the damn hurry? He's already been around for a thousand years. What's one more night?" Diana rose abruptly, spinning away from him and stalking away.

Snow frowned as he watched her stiff backed walk, her long russet braid swinging back and forth, then he slowly rolled the drawing and slipped a rubber band around it. Snow whistled softly. *What the hell did Vincent say to her?* He decided that he'd best do a disappearing act for the rest of the night and approach her again tomorrow night.

...

Vincent looked up expectantly as Peter descended the iron steps into Father's study. He could tell the news wasn't good by the misery radiating off his old friend. Gazing past Peter, he could see Catherine on Father's arm, and there wasn't an ounce of good news to be had in any of the three. "What is it?" he croaked as he rose to help Catherine, who was making her way carefully down the stairs toward him.

She reached up with one small hand and stroked his cheek. "I'll let Peter and Father tell you."

With one arm protectively around Catherine, he looked from one man to the other, desperately searching for some glimmer of hope, but Father merely turned his eyes away. Peter cleared his throat before beginning. "Um...Vincent...I'm afraid...."

"The news isn't good," Vincent finished quietly, though panic flared within him.

Peter also dropped his eyes as he mumbled, "She's dying...and there's not a damned thing we can do about it."

Horried, Vincent could only stammer, "How? Why?"

Catherine, looking very weary, began softly, "The...serum...."

Finally, Peter took a deep breath, laid a gentle hand on Catherine's shoulder, which she gave an encouraging pat. "The serum works, all right, Vincent. It attacks the vampirism virus. But the virus is what kept Catherine alive, rejuvenated her even after an autopsy. We did x-rays, sonograms... which showed us more than we needed to know." Peter ran his hand through his hair, drew a shaky breath and continued. "None of her internal organs are where they should be, Vincent. They're oddly connected with some strange connective tissue. The virus made everything work—while it was healthy—

but now, everything is deteriorating. Slowly coming apart.”

It was Catherine who kept him on his feet as his knees turned to water. Her strength flowed into him, steadied him. Her love wrapped around him and buffered him as the wave of despair hit him, washed over him. She can't be dying!

“It's all right, Vincent,” Catherine murmured as she curled into his lap.

“At least we had some time together...and I got to know our son. That's a lot more than we had before. I can't be anything but grateful for that.”

“How much longer?” he whispered as he looked up...and noticed that Father and Peter had left the chamber.

“Peter says it could be a day...a week...” Catherine told him. “There's really no way of telling. I just wish there was some way to take Gabriel with me. I think I could almost die happy then.”

Her words brought Diana and Snow and their bizarre partnership to his mind. “Perhaps there *is* a way,” he told her.

...

Gabriel sat in the dark watching the flickering television screens that lined the wall. Silent images of death; passionate, graceful dances passed before him. Tapes of Snow and Vincent in the act of killing. Playing and replaying, the tapes told their story as he studied his enemies' methods and admired their skill. Aroused, Gabriel sipped slowly at the thick liquid in his goblet, then ran his tongue over his lip, curled it around his fang. It had been too long...too long since he'd allowed himself to feel the passion of death. The passion that clouded the mind. Destroyed reason. Undermined control.

With leopard-like speed and the nobility of the lion he resembled, Vincent in motion was wondrous...breathtaking. In stark contrast, Snow's studied, calculated movements, his stealth, was tantalizing.

Gabriel clicked the button on his controller and the images vanished. The room went dark. He drained the last of his meal and stared into the darkness, envisioning himself sinking his fangs first into Snow's throat...then Vincent's. Or either one. He could think of no better way to end a century-long fast. The child could wait, now that he knew the serum worked. Now was the time for paying old debts.

Very old debts, he thought with grim satisfaction. *You always kill the one you love.*

...

The following evening, Diana sat sullenly in front of her desk poking viciously at the computer keys. She was still in a lousy mood and wasn't looking forward to Snow showing up with the sunset. She glanced up at the clerestory windows where the waning light indicated that time was fast approaching. With a huge, frustrated sigh, she shoved the chair back and rose to pace the living room. *What's wrong?* she asked herself for the hundredth time since seeing Vincent. *What's wrong, and why won't he talk to me?* It upset her that he was hiding behind his walls, more tightly closed than she'd seen him since Jacob's Naming. *I thought he trusted me. Thought we could still be friends, at least. I'm losing him and there's nothing I can do about it.* Turning back to her office, she stood before her bulletin board, where she'd tacked up the rough-drawn map of Gabriel's estate. *Concentrate on the hunt, Bennett*, she told herself. *Catch the bad guy, get back to work. Vincent's a big boy and can take care of himself. And you? You've been dumped before. You'll live. "Yeah, sure."*

The phone rang, and her machine picked up. “Von Helsing here. I'm out sharpening my stake to go vampire hunting, so I can't chit-chat right now. Leave a message and I'll get back with you if you're lucky.”

She grinned happily as she heard Joe's violent curse just before he slammed the receiver down. Suddenly, she felt one hundred percent better.

“Love your greeting, Bennett. Real classy.” Snow said from behind her.

Diana almost jumped out of her skin. She wasn't used to having anyone sneak up on her

like that. "Jeeeee Louise, Snow!" she held her hand over her heart. "Don't you ever knock, or ring doorbells or anything?"

Snow smiled wryly and flopped down on the couch, throwing one leg casually over the back. "Not when I think I might not be welcome. What'd be the use then?"

"Can't argue with that, I suppose," she admitted. "Sorry 'bout last night."

He shrugged. "So will you show me the entrance tonight? I'd like to get this disaster over with, if you don't mind."

Before Diana could answer, another voice drifted down from the top of the stairs. "It may not be the disaster you're anticipating."

She turned to see Vincent—and Catherine—coming slowly down the stairs from the roof. She didn't even bother wondering how the hell he'd gotten her up there. She was just so glad to see him she felt like she was going to cry.

"So," Snow asked without even twitching a muscle, "...you got some brilliant idea of how to kill a thousand-year-old vampire with a well-armed modern army and every scientific gadget imaginable? H'lo, Cat," he added in a gentler tone.

Diana's attention shifted from Vincent to Catherine, and she blinked in surprise. Cathy didn't look well at all, though she smiled sweetly at Snow as she greeted him. But when she turned her eyes to look at Diana, Diana could see the pain written there. This was one sick lady, and she knew, suddenly, what was wrong with Vincent and why he hadn't been able to talk to her. She could feel his despair as strongly as she could Cathy's pain, and she found she couldn't look him in the eyes.

"It's okay, Diana," Cathy told her.

Snow uncoiled from the couch in one lithe, furious motion. "It's *not* okay, Cat! *Damn* Gabriell!" He stalked past Diana to Cathy, stopping just short of taking her in his arms...probably remembering Vincent. His hands clenched at his sides.

Diana had finally managed to meet Vincent's eyes. "I'm so sorry."

He moved his head in an almost imperceptible nod, accepting her sympathy, her love.

But Snow was ranting at Vincent. "So you're just gonna let her die? Just like that?"

Vincent faced Snow down with a calmness that astounded Diana. "What would you have me do, Snow? Have you make her a vampire again? Assuming that would even work, against the stronger virus that she carries, now. She doesn't want that. She wants...peace. And she wants...her death...to mean something. To leave us knowing that Gabriel can't ever threaten anyone again."

"So how's she supposed to do that?" Snow shot back. "How are any of us?" He gestured toward Diana. "I was just humoring her. We can't kill him. I've tried."

But Diana knew. Snow just wasn't thinking clearly. Cathy had brought them the answer. "The serum, Snow. It's what's killing her...and it'll do the same thing to Gabriel."

...

Once Snow realized what Diana was saying—let it digest into his fevered, grieving brain—he realized she was right. Diana had a gift for *knowing* things...knowing people. Yes, she was right. Gabriel himself may have inadvertently given them the weapon to pull him down. *If* they could just get to him. If they could get beyond the walls that kept them from trusting one another. He didn't know who it would be hardest for, Vincent, Diana, or himself. Cat trusted them all...even Diana, whom she had reason to resent.

The four of them stood silent as statues for a long minute, and in that time, Snow assessed them: mismatched souls that they were, they'd been drawn together in this mad quest despite themselves. Eventually, Snow found the peace within himself to speak. "Through the centuries, men who believed in powers greater than themselves have believed in Fate and in the worth of personal sacrifice. Until now...I haven't believed much in either. But I'm beginning to." He could feel Vincent's eyes burning into him, as though the beast-man could see through him like a window into another place. He met that solemn gaze and tried not to flinch. He held out his hand—the age-old gesture of friendship and peace.

"Perhaps there should be more between us than blood and death...and our own belief in our guilt...that is, if we want Gabriel dead."

Vincent hesitated so long Snow was ready to believe he'd only made a fool of himself, but then a furred, taloned hand came up to clasp his in a firm grip. The touch of soft skin covering their hands made Snow look away from Vincent. Catherine had placed her hand atop theirs, and a moment later, Diana's had joined it.

Snow's heart was full for the first time in five centuries, and he remembered what it was like to be truly alive with passion and resolve.

...

As the coffee perked and the tea kettle began to screech, Cathy walked into the kitchen in time to hear Diana ask herself seriously, "What am I gonna offer Snow?"

"Nothing, Diana," Cathy murmured gently as she came up behind Diana and reached past her for a teacup and saucer. "I think we've already given him more than he can handle."

Cathy leaned against the counter as she prepared the tea for Vincent. She felt like the counter was all that was holding her up. It took all her strength to look better than she felt for Vincent, and to keep him from feeling the depth of her weariness. Diana looked back over her shoulder and over the counter at the two men in the other room: they were intent on their conversation. Diana pulled out a chair for her and guided her onto it, asking with concern, "Are you gonna make it?"

She drew a deep breath and ignored the pain it caused her. "I'll make it long enough to kill that bastard. I'll make it if I have to crawl. And if for some reason I don't, Diana, I expect *you* to crawl *for* me. He sent someone to kidnap Jacob. He sent someone into our *home*...we're not safe as long as he's alive."

Diana's mouth twitched in a half-smile. "Well...last time I killed him it was with your gun and in your name."

Cathy smiled back. "That's it. Keep your sense of humor. One person as serious as Vincent is enough."

Both women looked toward the other room, where Vincent gestured toward the map on the wall as he discussed the plans with Snow. Both men were extraordinary...one tall, solid and golden, the other tall, whip-thin and pale. Neither of them true men as men go...but either of them were also more man than either woman had ever known before.

"Maybe," Diana admitted, then looked down at her. "He seems more...centered...than I'd expect. Under the circumstances, I mean. But I don't think it's hit him yet—the fact that he's really losing you again."

Cathy sighed, and her eyes misted over with tears she'd been holding far too long. "I know, and that worries me. Vincent's very good at pretending everything's okay...especially about things he can't deal with emotionally. Diana...do me a favor, will you?"

"If I can," she promised.

"You brought him through it last time...your love did." Cathy wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. "Please...stay with him. Help him. Don't leave him."

"I won't. I couldn't if I tried."

"Good."

...

Vincent was acutely aware of how Catherine felt, despite her efforts to shield him. But he'd grown accustomed to pain and loss in the past year or so. He'd begun to learn acceptance. He'd accepted her death once, he knew he could do it again, unhappy as it would make him. His pain was more for Catherine. She'd been through so much and borne it so bravely: it made him furious that she should have her life and her possibilities stolen from her yet again. He thought of what he'd once told

Elliot...that if there was any way he could exchange his life for hers, he would...and that hadn't changed. Unfortunately, he still didn't have that choice.

He watched Snow as the vampire pointed out key places on his hand-drawn map of the grounds of Gabriel's estate. It was difficult to concentrate, and he glanced toward the kitchen, catching a glimpse of Catherine's bright hair.

"Vincent," Snow snapped, "you have to pay attention if we're going to get anywhere with this. I know how you feel...about losing her...but...."

Releasing a low growl of rage and frustration, he turned on Snow, "Don't!" He caught himself before lashing out as he saw the pain in the vampire's eyes. He'd never forgive Snow for Sam's and Stephen's deaths, but nonetheless...Snow loved her, too...and that was a connection between them that Vincent couldn't deny. Drawing a shaky breath, he said quietly, "All I want to do is take her Below with me and spend every moment with her, and I cannot...."

"No. And I can't indulge myself either. She wants to see Gabriel dead. Finished. And if we don't hurry, we'll fail her."

"We can't." Vincent insisted. "I can't fail her again."

"You said there's still some of the serum in Diana's refrigerator?"

Another quick glance toward the kitchen revealed a glimpse of Diana, bending over Catherine... the two women smiling at one another. "Yes. Our problem is how to get it into *Gabriel*. That done, our job will be finished." One thing concerned him, though, and he voiced it to Snow. "Catherine is dying partly because the virus had to...repair...the damage done to her body during the autopsy, and now the serum is destroying what the virus repaired. Has Gabriel ever had any damage severe enough to cause him problems in that way?"

Snow grinned and Vincent shuddered involuntarily...a grinning vampire was a *most* unpleasant sight. "You mean like being beheaded, stakes shoved in his heart, little unpleasanties like that?"

"Yes. Exactly like that."

"In a thousand years, thousands of battles, I think old Gabe has enough damage to his innards to cause him considerable difficulty. Don't worry. It'll work. But Diana has *got* to get me into the mansion *tonight*, or we're likely to lose Cat before she has a chance to know whether we succeed or fail."

"Why just you?" Vincent was uneasy at the thought of only Snow going on this mission. "How will we know if you succeeded or not? No. There has to be a backup."

"Who?" Snow asked with an evil chuckle. "You? Oh, he'd just *love* to get his hands on *you* again."

"I'd like to get my hands on *him*, just *once*," Vincent snarled.

"He'd have you for breakfast. Literally."

"I don't care *how* powerful he is," Vincent insisted. "If we surprise him, he can't take both of us."

Snow's frown lines deepened. "Taking Gabriel, by surprise or otherwise, is likely to be a lot harder than you know." He gave a frustrated sigh. "All right, but Cat and Diana stay here."

"Agreed."

Again, the two men clasped hands. "You know, of course," Snow told him with an oddly cheerful tone, "it's likely one of us isn't going to make it out of there. The serum will work, but not instantly...no more than it has with Cat. And Gabe's gonna be mad as hell."

"I know." They grinned fiercely at each other.

...

"Just look at 'em," Diana muttered, feeling fondly indignant. "We'd better get back in there, or they'll have the whole Rambo mission planned and leave us out."

"Like hell they will." Cathy groaned as she started to her feet, and Diana helped her up. Cathy's face was pasty-pale and she trembled as she stood. "Cath...I don't...."

Cathy pinned her with a sharp edged look. "Don't even think it, Diana! I'm going!"

"It'll be dangerous, Cathy. It's not just Gabriel we have to worry about, it's all the hired guns he

has, as well.”

“So what’s he going to do, kill me?” she spat belligerently. “He’s already damned well *done* that!”

That was logic Diana couldn’t fight. And she had to admit, no one had more right to hate Gabriel than Cathy did.

Standing up straight, Cathy picked up Vincent’s tea—which by now was just about the right temperature, Diana figured—and walked, seemingly effortlessly into the other room. “Damn,” Diana muttered with admiration.

Before joining the rest of them, Diana detoured to her bedroom to dig out her gun...and her Dad’s. She loaded hers and shoved it into its holster, then strapped the shoulder holster on. She took a long minute to examine her Dad’s gun: it hadn’t been fired in years, though she kept it cleaned. As she pulled on a vest to cover the shoulder holster, she thought, *I don’t guess Dad’d mind if I put it back into action. Especially for a good cause.* She loaded her Dad’s .38 and headed toward the living room. If Cathy was going in with them after Gabriel, she was damned well going in armed.

...

Gabriel checked the security monitors, personally checking with each guard. Everything was quiet, but he was uneasy. Polk still hadn’t returned, nor had he gotten word back...therefore, Gabriel could only surmise that he’d been discovered and “disposed of.” Nor had any of his men seen anything of Snow lately, though most assuredly he’d been out to feed.

After checking with his head of security, Gabriel returned to his art room...and to the statue of Snow. Lovingly, he ran his hands over the smooth marble, over the bunched muscles of the shoulders and arms up to the deep creases in the stone face. *Snow*, he thought with a feeling of loss, *I should have killed you centuries ago, when you still loved me...before you betrayed me.*

Pacing around the statue, Gabriel tried to quiet his nerves. It wasn’t fear he was feeling...never that. Anticipation, perhaps. A growing hunger that he hadn’t felt in at least two centuries.

...

Vincent was frustrated with both Catherine and Diana. Neither he, nor Snow, wanted the women to go with them after Gabriel, but it didn’t look as though they had much choice. “If you leave without us, we’d just follow you, anyway,” Diana told him, and he knew they would.

He stared at the two women—both of whom he loved beyond life—and sighed in frustration. “Very well. I know when I’m outvoted, but please...stay close to us. I have a feeling that where Gabriel is concerned, the only safety is in numbers.”

Diana had filled four syringes with the serum so each of them could have one. As she handed them out, she told them, “This is your most important weapon. It won’t keep Gabriel from killing *us*, but if we get it into him, if he kills us or not, he’s finished.”

Vincent glanced at Snow, then back to the women. “It may be true that our primary purpose is to rid the world of Gabriel, but I’d still like for us to come out of it alive. Don’t forget that.” He aimed this last comment at Catherine, as he knew she felt her death would be no loss—and she naturally tended to wade into situations with no thought to caution anyway. “When one feels they have nothing to lose, they can become reckless.”

Obviously stung by his comment, Catherine replied heatedly: “I wouldn’t do anything to endanger you. You know that.”

Momentary images of scores of rescues flashed into his mind, but he held his tongue. What was done, was done. But it was one thing for Catherine to put *him* in danger. He’d allowed it...perhaps even encouraged it. But it was another thing entirely to allow Catherine to add to the danger Diana might be in. He glanced at Diana, meeting her eyes, and saw understanding there. He nodded. “Just so everyone understands. This is *not* a suicide mission. For *anyone*. If anyone feels the need to jump off cliffs, we have a perfectly adequate abyss down Below. Anyone who goes in, goes in with the intention

of coming back out.” Again, he stared pointedly at Catherine. “Is that clear?”

Catherine glared at him. “Crystal.”

...

Diana hung back with Snow as they headed toward the entrance of the pipe that would take them to Gabriel’s mansion.

“You seem to be taking Catherine’s impending death pretty well,” Diana ventured.

Snow shrugged. “There’s no point in making things harder for her...or for him.” His eyes slid away from hers. “Anyway, dying’s what people do best.”

“Snow...” she began, wishing there was something she could say to make a difference.

Snow shook his head and nodded toward the pipe. “Look, Diana...do me a favor, will you?”

“If I can,” she said with an odd, uncomfortable feeling of déjà-vu. It seemed like she was making a lot of promises tonight.

“You make sure that Vincent and Catherine...and you...all get out. Leave Gabe to me.”

“As Vincent said, this isn’t a suicide mission, Snow.”

He gave her an odd, distant look, and quoted softly, “Out-worn heart, in a time out-worn....”

Snow turned and headed for the entrance, and Diana followed, muttering curses under her breath. *Damn, damn, damn*, she thought furiously as she followed the vampire into the dark pipe. *In our happy little group we’ve got a dying woman driven by a desire for revenge and a suicidal vampire with a hard-on. Vincent, I think we’re in deep shit.*

...

As they neared the end of the pipe, Vincent knelt to wait for the rest of them to catch up. Catherine was closest, and when she reached him, she managed to hug him, despite the close confines. “Sorry to snap at you. You were right to remind me,” she told him.

Kissing her softly, Vincent brushed at her bangs, which were perpetually in her eyes. “I want to have you with me as long as possible, Catherine. Is that too much to ask?”

“Um. No, I guess not,” she admitted. Then, with a mischievous smile, she added, “And I think you’d like to have Diana in one piece after I’m gone, too!”

Shocked in spite of himself, Vincent could only stare. He couldn’t believe she was joking about this. But she simply kissed him, and added, “I want her in one piece, too. I want you to have that chance at happiness...the chance we lost by waiting too long.” She took his chin in her hand and stared hard into his eyes. “Promise me you won’t be so damned shy with *her*. Promise.”

That promise was easy to make. He was no longer the same man he’d been. “I promise.”

“She’ll take good care of you...and Jacob.”

Vincent was embarrassed by the direction Catherine was taking. Granted, he loved both women, and they both knew it...but *discussing* the fact with her was making him acutely uncomfortable. “Catherine....”

She reached out and patted his chest and smiled. “Oh, all right. I won’t embarrass you any more, but I really wanted you to know...that I approve.”

The soft scuffle of footsteps approaching reminded him that they were not alone. When Snow and Diana reached them, Vincent told them quietly, “The pipe leads into the basement. It’s doubtful there will be a guard there, but I know from experience that Gabriel has the entire house monitored with cameras, so it won’t be long before he knows we’re there. There *will* be resistance.”

Snow looked thoughtful. “I think I should go in first, with Vincent taking up the rear. I’ve made it past his cameras before and have a pretty good idea of what the layout is.”

There were no dissenting opinions, so Snow squeezed past and continued on to disappear around the bend. Diana met Vincent’s eyes and gave him a smile, then followed Snow.

Catherine kissed him again, then pulled her gun and followed Diana.

Vincent followed them all into enemy territory.

...

Diana scanned the basement, keeping her gun at ready, as Snow made a methodical check for sensors or cameras. When Catherine and Vincent emerged, Snow was just finishing his check. "The basement is clear," he announced. "Apparently he saw no need to put surveillance down here."

Walking over to the area once occupied by a cage, Vincent glanced up to the ceiling, and Diana knew he was remembering his time there. "At one time, he had surveillance here."

"Yeah..." Diana said grimly. "Looks like he learned how futile *that* little endeavor was, at least."

Catherine approached Vincent and asked, "What was here, Vincent?"

He looked away.

"A cage, Catherine," Diana told her. "An electrified cage. And monitor cameras."

Catherine whirled, and asked with a half-snarl, "A *cage*? Gabriel *caged* him?"

"Temporarily."

"Look," Snow snapped, interrupting the conversation. "If we're going to do this, we'd better damn well *do* it!"

"Snow's right," Vincent said as he headed up the stairs toward the door.

Diana caught Snow's glance, nodded, and followed Vincent, knowing Snow would bring up the rear. Obviously, Vincent wasn't in a mood to be reasonable, so Snow simply changed plans. Diana followed Vincent closely as he moved into the main part of the house. Catherine and Snow made it in just as a guard entered the room. Snow suddenly produced a gun and fired, downing the guard before he could lift his weapon. Diana just stared as Snow tucked the gun away under his vest--silencer and all. He shrugged. "I like toys. What can I say?" He pointed up to the ceiling to a small camera that tracked their movements. "No sense in being quiet, and we'd best hurry."

Then, the sound of running feet told them they were too late to avoid the guards, and Snow and Vincent positioned themselves on either side of the door as Diana pulled Catherine with her behind the couch. Sounds of machine gun, screams of fear and pain split the air, and Vincent's roar reverberated through the room and seemed to go on and on...then it was silent. Tentatively, Diana and Catherine poked their heads up over the back of the couch. The room was bathed in blood, the coppery scent filled Diana's lungs, but Vincent and Snow stood, bloody but unscathed. Vincent was breathing hard--not from exertion, but from the adrenaline rush, Diana knew. Snow trotted across the room to the next one and motioned for them to follow, but Vincent just stood staring, eyes glazed. Diana and Catherine both went to him.

"It's okay, Vincent," Catherine crooned softly. "C'mon. Snow's waiting."

Vincent inclined his head, his eyes registering Catherine. He swung his gaze toward Diana. "No more," he said roughly.

"He can't take this anymore, Cathy," Diana murmured. She stroked Vincent's mane. "No. No more," she assured him. Turning to Catherine, she told her, "Go on. We'll catch up. He'll be okay." Catherine obviously didn't want to go, so Diana hissed, "Go, dammit, Cathy! Snow's alone. He needs backup. He'll be okay...just give him a minute."

Catherine gave Diana a long, measuring look, then smiled as she turned away.

A minute or so passed before Vincent steadied, and his eyes cleared. "You okay?" Diana asked softly.

"Yes." He looked up. "Where are they?"

"Gone on ahead. If we hurry, we can catch up."

Vincent became upset, then. "You shouldn't have let them go ahead, Diana!" He started immediately toward the door, and Diana followed...just glad that he was himself again.

...

It was too quiet, and it shouldn't be. Snow tried to remember how many guards Gabriel used to have guarding the mansion and surrounding area. He kept scanning for surveillance cameras and immediately destroyed them. He was acutely aware of Cat standing close behind him. He stopped to reload, and heard a sound behind him. Spinning, gun at ready, he relaxed when he saw it was only Vincent and Diana. "Where the hell were you?" he asked, without waiting for an answer. "Let's go. We're running out of time."

Moving out, Snow started up the winding staircase. He knew Gabriel liked having his "control room" on the upper levels, and he knew that would be where he'd be...where he could escape by helicopter if need be. As he entered the room at the top of the stairs, he was grabbed and thrown across the room. Tumbling head over heels, he rolled, then came to his feet. Gabriel stood against the far wall, his arm wrapped around Cat's neck. Vincent was snarling, but obviously was held at bay by his concern for Cat.

"Well, well, Snow," Gabriel crooned. "So here we are again. Thank you for coming to me."

"Let her go," Vincent growled.

"Easy, Vincent," Snow managed as he maneuvered closer. He met Cat's eyes once and realized she was totally calm...and was, with one hand, working the syringe case out of her pocket. He knew he had to keep Gabe distracted. By the time he reached Vincent, he knew the beast-man had determined what Cat was doing as well. Diana had her gun out and was circling behind them to get on the other side of the room.

"Stop right there, Ms. Bennett," Gabe told her, and Diana stopped.

Cat had the syringe out of the case and almost positioned in her palm.

Vincent snarled again, drawing Gabriel's attention, and at that moment, Cat plunged the needle of the syringe into Gabriel's thigh, and at the same time depressed the plunger.

Gabriel exploded into furious action, throwing Cat effortlessly into the air and across the room, then launching himself at Snow. As Gabriel slammed into him, Snow automatically and reflexively blocked the vampire's vicious fangs from his throat. He yelled at the others, "Get out of here! I can only hold him so long!"

But true to form, Vincent didn't listen, and Gabriel was dragged off him. A shot rang out, and Gabriel slumped. And everything was quiet. Diana put her gun away and she and Vincent went to help Cat, who was struggling to her feet.

Snow kept an eye on Gabriel as he checked with the others to make certain Cat wasn't hurt badly. He saw Gabe stir. "Now! Get her out of here *now*!"

"What about you?" Vincent asked, as he picked Cat up.

"Don't worry about me. Just get out of here. In the end, this is between me and Gabe...as it always was." He watched them as they disappeared through the door, then went to Gabe, kneeling beside him.

Gabe's eyes opened. The virus was still doing its job. "It's over, Gabe."

With a grimace of pain, Gabriel rose, and Snow stood with him. "It's not over, Snow. You wouldn't be here if it were over."

An immense sadness swept over him. "You're dead, Gabe. Not today, but soon."

Gabriel smiled grimly. "Why? Because the serum will make me human? There's a simple solution to that." His hand caught Snow's neck and drew him close. Snow felt the fangs sink deep, the blood flowing between them. He closed his eyes and let it happen. When the thirst became too much for him, he responded instinctively, sinking his own fangs in Gabriel's throat. The give and take of blood—of life—brought the usual almost sexual delight...made even more intense by the power of Gabriel's age.

They sank to their knees, both reaching that immense edge of pain and delight, and all was silence within.

...

They reached the tunnels just before dawn. Catherine wanted to go Below to see Jacob, and as she lay in their bed, with their son sitting beside her, Vincent felt such helplessness, and such sorrow he almost couldn't bear it. She was truly dying...she'd been just holding on so she could see Gabriel finished. Catherine ran a hand over the baby's soft hair and smiled up at Vincent. "Somehow, it doesn't feel as bad to be dying as I thought it would."

"Catherine...." Vincent began, his throat tight with tears.

"No...really," she told him. "This time, I know my baby's all right, and I know you'll be okay. And Gabriel's finished." A spasm of pain stopped her momentarily, then she motioned to Diana, who was hanging back by the threshold. "Remember what we talked about," Catherine whispered to Diana. "What you promised."

"Cathy, I wish...."

"No, you don't," Catherine said, forcing her words. "For once, Diana...be selfish. Take something for yourself. And if you see Snow again, tell him...thanks." She kissed the baby and asked Diana to take him for her.

Diana picked Jacob up and left Vincent and Catherine alone. He lay beside her on the bed, holding her close. "I'm here."

She closed her eyes and smiled. "Good. I love you, Vincent. Just hold me."

"Always," he murmured through his tears.

Catherine took a deep breath, another...and then no more.

...

Snow rolled away from Gabriel. He was lethargic, sleepy. Dawn was near, and although they were safe from the light within the huge mansion, Snow knew he couldn't escape the urge to sleep. *It doesn't matter, anyway. It's over*, he thought with immense relief. The serum should do its work...quite possibly for both of them. As an afterthought, and just to be sure, Snow pulled out his own syringe and injected Gabriel again. That done, he fell into a contented sleep, not caring in the least what his waking might bring.

Dreams flickered through his mind as he slept: flashes of his long life...all the way back to the night when Gabriel turned him into the creature he now was. Gabriel had offered him immortality, with life being an eternal hunt. In his dream state, Snow had to admit to himself that Gabriel had kept his word. The uncomfortable realizations continued as he dreamed, and he realized that Gabriel hadn't taken him from his wife...it had been his own choice. It hadn't been Gabriel's fault that Snow had become more human through the centuries...not less. A fact that drove a wedge between them. Then he saw Cat... smiling at him, holding a hand out for him. His heart hurt. So much to regret. Such a waste of five centuries.

Snow woke, feeling feverish and uncomfortable. Gabriel thrashed beside him, and when Snow put his hand on him, Gabe's skin was hot, even to his own feverish skin. *The serum*, he thought with satisfaction as he fell back onto the cool surface of the marble floor. *It's almost over.*

...

Diana bounced Jacob on her hip as she listened to Vincent giving Catherine's eulogy—watched him scatter her ashes over the surface of the underground river. The entire community was in tears, but she couldn't allow herself to cry, because if she did, Jacob would start. As it was, the child was restless and unhappy as he absorbed all the misery around him. She kept a tight rein on her own emotions, trying to feed the baby some positive emotions to balance the others. As the rest of the

tunnel dwellers filed out of the chamber, Diana could see a few of them casting unfriendly glances her way, and it hurt. A lot. It was almost as though some of them were blaming *her* for Catherine's death. *It's not fair*, she thought. *She was already dead when I fell in love with him. Or so we thought.* Jacob started whimpering, and Diana bounced him some more and turned her mind away from self-pity. She could see Father consoling Vincent. *I want to console him, but I can't.*

Eventually, Vincent turned away from the river and came to her, taking Jacob from her. "Thank you, for keeping him for me, Diana." His face was lined with grief, and he seemed older.

Jacob patted at his father's face with small hands, his innocent baby face wrinkled in a worried frown. Diana held her arms out for him. "Let me keep him for you a bit longer, Vincent," she pleaded. "You're upsetting him. He needs to be away from you...away from everybody down here." She watched Vincent for his response. She didn't know what else to do to help. Nothing else was appropriate, and she had to do *something*.

Vincent kissed his son, then with a nod, handed him back to her. "Perhaps you're right."

"I can take him up with me to the loft for a few days, and when you're handling things a little better..."

Vincent looked away. "Diana...I feel...as though it'll never be over. That...I'll just keep losing her again, and again..."

Feeling helpless and miserable, Diana juggled the fretting child. "I know." She lifted a trembling hand to touch his face. "But it *will* be over. It will. Just...have faith. She *is* really at peace, now." He lifted those fathomless eyes to hers...filled with years of pain and endless love, and she smiled at him, even though her heart was hurting almost as badly as his was. "And when you've ridden it through... come to me. Remember I'll be there for you. Jacob will be there."

"I'll remember. Thank you, Diana...for being there." He stood with his head bowed for a long moment. "We must find out what happened to them, Diana."

"We will, Vincent. We will."

...

Snow tossed in fevered delirium. On one level, he was aware of what was happening to him, but his consciousness faded in and out as the fever raged. *I hunt alone, alone... alone....* In his dreams, Cat came to him over and over again...and alternately, Gabriel taunted him for his weakness, or praised him, beckoning to him to share eternity. Both reminded him of the terrible wonder of love...the after images of death.

He woke with his mouth dry, his throat parched, and with a massive thirst. He ran his tongue over dry, cracked lips. Weakly, he turned his head to see where Gabe was...reached a hand out to feel still-heated skin. Gabriel was still fevered, whereas Snow's fever had broken. Snow forced himself to his feet and made his way to a bathroom, where he was able to slake his thirst. *How long?* he thought, wondering how long it'd been. One night? More? There was no way to tell.

There was a groan from the other room, and Snow looked around for something to take Gabe some water in. There was nothing. He staggered back to Gabriel's side and helped him up, helped him into the bathroom to the water, then allowed himself to slide down to sit on the floor, his back braced by the wall.

After Gabriel drank his fill, he too, slid down to sit facing Snow. They stared at each other for long moments, then Gabriel shook his head and asked, "Why?"

"It was time, and past time, Gabe. Too many years. Too many kills."

Gabriel's already gaunt face seemed even more skeletal. He leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. "What do you know of time, Snow?" He lifted his head, eyes blazing. "All you know of time is what I've shown you. You've fought beside me on battlefields...hunted with me. You've loved me and hated me for five centuries...but *I've* survived for a thousand years. And I'll be here a thousand more."

Snow managed a smile and a deep chuckle. "I don't think so. Not this time, Gabe." He struggled

to his feet and walked past Gabriel out the door. "Not this time." With his legs steadying the longer he was up, Snow made his way down the stairs, where the stink of death and decay told him it had been at least two days since he and Vincent had killed the guards. If there had been any others, they'd left after seeing what had happened to their cohorts.

And for the first time in five centuries, he walked out into the daylight, felt the sun on his face, and smiled.

...

Diana spent two days tending Jacob and keeping a tight rein on her emotions to avoid upsetting him. The child's still-developing empathy made him easily susceptible to other people's emotions, and he had no control over what came in. Even with Diana being so careful, Jacob was cranky and irritable. Down on her hands and knees, and almost nose-to-nose with the toddler, all Diana could think of was how much her back hurt. "Ow!" Diana exclaimed as Jacob whacked her on the nose with his teddy bear. "Damn!" She sat back on her heels and glared at him. "I know you miss your daddy, kid, but don't chase off the hired help, huh?"

The phone rang, and Diana scrambled to her feet to go answer. "Bennett here."

It was Joe, of course, asking if she'd "noticed" that there hadn't been any more of the vampire murders for the past few days.

"Yeah, I noticed. No, I don't have a clue as to why. Maybe the killer changed hunting grounds." She dropped the phone to go grab Jacob as he headed for the lamp cord. She could hear Joe cursing as she picked the receiver back up. "Sorry. I'm babysitting, Joe. Had to go avert a disaster." She sighed as she watched Jacob head right back to the lamp. "Look, Joe, I *am* working. I've....damn! Just a minute."

Dashing back over to the lamp, she unplugged it and moved it to the kitchen, then went back to the phone, still keeping one eye on a disappointed Jacob. "I'm *sorry*. Where was I? Oh, yeah. I've been tracking the kills, and narrowed it down to one area. There *isn't* anything else to give you, yet. I want the killings to stop as badly as you do, believe me."

As she hung up the phone, she breathed a sigh of relief that at least the killings *were* over. Joe might never know that she'd caught the bad guy, but at least *she* knew. "Now if I just knew what happened with Snow and Gabriel..." she muttered.

The buzzer from downstairs startled Jacob and he began crying. Picking him up and soothing him, she pressed the intercom button. "Yeah?"

"Top of the mornin' to you, Irish," came the masculine voice from downstairs.

"*Snow*? Well, speak of the devil! I was just wondering what happened to you! C'mon up!" It didn't occur to her until after she released the elevator for him that it was broad daylight.

As Snow stepped into her apartment, Diana could tell he'd made the changeover to human—mostly because he still looked a bit unwell. "So..." she began hesitantly, "you did it, huh? Gabriel's dead?"

He shrugged and knelt beside Jacob, who had toddled up to him and was holding onto his pantleg. Snow picked him up and held him for a few minutes before speaking. "He's a good looking boy." Glancing over at Diana, he said quietly, "He's safe, now. That'll please Cat."

Diana couldn't meet his eyes. "Cathy's dead, Snow. Vincent had her cremated, and they had a service night before last."

Without a word, Snow smoothed the baby's hair with one hand, then passed him to Diana. "Well, hell. I'd hoped...well...you know. Thought maybe she'd have more time. I'd've liked to have seen her again."

"She died content, Snow...knowing Gabriel was finished." She paused, considering for a moment that Snow hadn't actually *said* Gabriel was dead. "He *is* dead, isn't he?"

Snow smiled thinly. "Not yet. As of right now, he doesn't even know he's dying. Just thinks he's not a vampire anymore...figures that's bad enough. I decided I'd let him find out on his own."

Diana frowned as a thought occurred to her. "What's gonna happen when somebody finally goes in that place, Snow? It looks like a slaughterhouse...and hell...there's bound to be prints everywhere." The thought of the police—of Joe or Greg—finding that place with bodies everywhere, slashed like Vincent's other victims, and finding her prints there as well...rather chilled her.

"Don't worry," Snow assured her. "I'll take care of everything. Not much to keep me out here, now that Cat's gone. And if I go back, I can make sure Gabe doesn't manage to cause any trouble in the time he's got left."

Diana didn't doubt that Snow would manage to "take care" of things. "Is there... anything...I can do for you?" Diana asked, feeling helpless once more. It seemed like she was unable to help anyone, but she felt compelled to ask.

He thought a moment, then said quietly, "Tell Vincent...I'm sorry. For everything. I can't bring Stephen or the old man back again, and there was nothing I could do for Cat." Snow glanced over at the window, and shrugged. "All I can do is make sure Gabe stays out of trouble...but for now, I'm going out for a while to enjoy the sunshine...and maybe try a hamburger."

"Will we see you again?" Diana asked, with a sense of loss that surprised her.

He reached up and touched her for the first time...a gentle tracing of his fingertips over her cheek. "Who knows, Diana? If I've learned one thing, it's that life has a way of surprising us." Before he left, he glanced back and told her, "I'll send you a sign to let you know everything's done."

...

Vincent lay in his bed, staring up at the ceiling. He'd spent most of the past two days alone in his chamber. One by one, his friends and family had come by to offer condolences and try to help him through this, and one by one, they'd stopped coming because they were puzzled by his attitude.

He sighed, remembering the past few weeks. Such beauty and love they'd shared...he and Catherine. This, though—the feeling he had now—it wasn't grief, exactly. He knew grief. Grief was when the world stopped meaning anything, when everything was dark and there was no hope left. That...that was grief. This wasn't grief. A tear trickled from the corner of his eye and he let it slide down the side of his face into his pillow. *Tristesse*, he thought, remembering the word. That's what the French called the feeling of sadness one sometimes had after making love...the sense of loss at becoming once more separate beings. First, the "small death," or "la petite morte" of the climax, and then the loss. Yes. *Tristesse*. That was the feeling. That, and a sense of peace.

Vincent rose and thought of Catherine...and of Diana. And of how blessed he'd been in his lifetime. Nothing he could do could give Catherine her life back—he knew that. But he also knew, now, that Catherine wanted him to go on...to live fully, and to open his arms and his heart to love. To Diana. Thus, any guilt he might have felt in the situation did not exist.

There was only one thing left to mar his peace, and that was his uncertainty of what had happened after they had left Snow with Gabriel. It was time to find out. Inertia never solved anything.

He grabbed his cloak and threw it over his shoulders as he headed down the tunnels. Each time someone met him with a surprised look and asked where he was going, he merely told them, "Above." He didn't feel like conversation...he felt the need for action.

It was early evening, just becoming full dark when he reached the threshold, and he took a deep breath of the park air. True, it was laced with auto exhaust and pollution, but it was far fresher than the air Below. He looked up and could see bright stars and the moon, still making their eternal rounds. *The world turns, and life goes on.* The thought was both uplifting and a bit sad. It made him feel very small and unimportant in the universe. Yet, at the same time he was aware that mankind made their own kind of immortality. *Catherine*, he thought, *you are gone, but not forgotten. You live in me...in Jacob. And in all the lives you touched. And I promise that Gabriel will be finished. He will never hurt anyone again.*

His original plan had been to go back to the mansion, but he decided to go see Diana first. Diana had a way of finding things out, and it was possible she already knew whether Gabriel was dead or alive. So, he turned toward Tribeca.

...

Diana sat in front of her computer, trying to type out a report of some kind to turn in to her superiors. Taking a sip of coffee, she glanced over at the pallet on the floor, where Jacob slept peacefully. *He looks so angelic when he's asleep*, she thought with a smile. As much as she loved the little tyke, she sure hoped his daddy would feel up to taking him home, soon. *I don't know how long I can keep up with him.*

She heard a familiar tapping sound that brought her heart into her throat. Quickly, but quietly, so as not to wake the sleeping child, Diana made her way up to the roof door, where she knew Vincent would be waiting.

He stood there, his massive form merely a dark shape against the glow of the city lights. His expression was hidden in the shadows, but her senses, conditioned to him, felt it all. He wore an aura of peace that surrounded and filled her. Sorrow was there...but also acceptance, and the vastness of his love—both for Catherine and for her.

"Diana," he whispered, opening his arms for her. Wordless, for no words were necessary, she went to him and wrapped her arms around him as he enclosed her in his. She rested her head on his shoulder, brushed a soft kiss just under his ear. Felt him smile, and luxuriated in the velvet warmth of his presence.

The long, quiet, moments passed unheeded. Moments filled with feather touches of soft-fur against silken skin. Moments of remembering one another. Then, they were apart, separate beings once more. Apart, but no longer alone.

"I missed you," she told him.

She could see the white flash of his teeth as he smiled. "Yes."

Chuckling at his understatement, she took his hand. "Come on downstairs. Jacob's asleep. I'll make some tea...."

Instead of coming along with her, he pulled her back toward him. His tone serious, he said quietly, "Not now, Diana. Have you heard anything?"

"Anything?" She was confused only for a fraction of an instant, then she knew what he was asking. "About Gabriel?" He nodded, and she took his hand again. "Come on down. Have the tea, and I'll tell you what I know. Jacob might wake."

He hesitated, then followed her downstairs. As she made the tea, he knelt beside his son and watched him sleep...and Diana watched them both. The television flickered soundlessly behind him from when Jacob had been watching cartoons. She poured two cups and headed back to join him, but as she rounded the bar, the picture on the tv caught her attention. "Vincent!" she hissed in a loud whisper. "Look!" Putting the cups down, she trotted over and grabbed the tv controller and turned the sound up enough to hear.

On the screen a raging fire flickered, fire trucks and police cars stood helplessly in the foreground as Gabriel's huge mansion burned. The newscaster's voice narrated:

"...suspects arson, but the fire department has pulled all men out. The fire is completely out of control. It is unknown at this point if there is anyone alive left inside..."

Vincent came to her and put his arm around her, and together they watched the fire eat its way through the mansion. As soon as the scene switched to another subject, Diana turned the sound off again and turned to Vincent. "Snow came today. In the daylight. He told me that he'd take care of things...make certain Gabriel died. And he told me he'd send me a sign."

"And you believe this is the sign?"

"Yes," she said with certainty.

He drew a deep, relieved breath...then asked gently: "And Snow? What of him?"

"I don't know," Diana answered, feeling a bit sad. "I don't know why, but somehow, I don't think

we'll see him again."

"Then...it's finished."

Diana wound her fingers in his mane and drew him to her. Her thumbs traced the upward sweep of his brows as she kissed him fiercely and felt him respond, pulling her hips in closer to him and hardening against her. When she came up for air, she said, "Catherine is at rest, Gabriel's finished. But we are just beginning."

...

The following morning, Diana was jarred awake by the telephone. The bed beside her was empty: Vincent had left before dawn, but remembering the night before made her smile. Jacob had slept through the night, leaving them free to explore their *possibilities*. Picking up the receiver she said sleepily, "H'lo. Bennett here."

It was Joe, of course. Wanting her to come to the site of the fire. *I should've known he'd call.* "Um. Yeah...saw it on the news. Sure." She padded over to peer around the corner at the empty pallet where Jacob had slept. Of course Vincent had taken his son with him. "Be down there as soon as I can get dressed," she told Joe.

Diana took a quick shower and dressed, pulled her hair back into a pony tail and caught a cab. All the way, she wondered exactly what Joe had found in the ruins the fire had left...the thought made her nervous. The cab pulled up in front of the gate, and Diana paid him. Flashing her shield at the young cop guarding the gate, she walked down the long driveway to get to what remained of Gabriel's mansion.

As she neared, she could see the arson squad and forensics working, but at first glance, missed Joe. When she saw him, she approached slowly...though she wasn't too worried any longer that he'd found anything incriminating: Snow had done too thorough a job. There wasn't much left.

When she got closer, she gasped. Joe was standing beside a life-sized black marble statue of Snow...in the act of killing. The marble was cracked and covered with filth from the fire, but it was clearly the work of a master.

Hearing her approach, Joe turned. "What'cha think, Bennett? Pretty unusual, huh?"

Unable to take her eyes off the statue, Diana didn't answer, but merely walked around the statue, examining the detail. *Exquisite*. Finally, lifting her eyes to Joe's she asked, "This why you wanted me out here?"

He shrugged. "Thought you'd be interested, considering whose house this was before. And considering that this statue is obviously of a vampire. Pretty weird, don't you think?"

She swiveled her head, taking in the extent of the damage. Not much was left standing. Just the statue. She nodded. "Yeah, Joe...I have to agree, it's definitely weird." She watched the investigative team for a few moments as they went about their work. "So what else did they find?"

"Not a lot. Some bones...not much left of 'em. But from the skulls, looks like maybe eight or nine bodies over there..." he pointed vaguely in the direction where Diana knew the guards' bodies had been, "and what appears to be one more body here, near the statue."

One? Diana thought. *Not two?* Joe directed her over to a pile of charred debris that...if you looked closely enough...you could tell it had been bones. She knelt beside the pile, scanning quickly, desperately wanting to dig through it to see if there was anything to indicate who it had been.

Someone called Joe, and he excused himself, and Diana used the opportunity to poke at the charred bones with a stick. Something shiny caught her eye, and she looked closer. A small puddle of metal—gold—lay beneath. She picked it up and studied it. *Gabriel's ring*.

She hesitated momentarily before surreptitiously pocketing it. There was nothing the police could learn from it, she decided. And it was proof that Gabriel was dead. But once more, she asked herself, *So if Gabriel is here...where is Snow?*

When Joe returned, she walked back to his car with him and he dropped her off at her apartment building. "So, what are you gonna do with the statue, Joe?"

"Called the museum. They're coming out to get it. Hell, there's no room in evidence for something like that."

"No. I suppose not." Joe opened the door for her and Diana got out. "Thanks for calling me, Joe. It was interesting."

Joe leaned against the car and smiled at her. It was an odd sort of smile...with just a touch of frown between the eyes. "Oddest damned case I've ever seen, Diana. It's gotta have something to do with Cathy. First, her body is stolen out of her grave, then we have this string of vampire murders...all of 'em stopping three days before Gabriel's mansion burns to the ground. And then we find a statue of a *vampire* in the ruins." He shook his head. "I just don't get it."

Sticking her hands in her pockets, Diana touched the remnants of Gabriel's ring...wondering how or even *if* Snow had somehow managed to survive. "Sometimes, Joe, there's no point in tryin' to understand. You just accept that it's over and go on. Sometimes...there's nothing else to do."

"Yeah," he muttered, then met her eyes. "Had Cathy's grave closed up. Nothin' else to be done about it, I guess."

Diana could tell he was hurting, feeling helpless that he'd failed Cathy once more, and she put a hand on his shoulder for a moment, patted, then drew back, telling him as she'd told Vincent: "She's gone, Joe. What was in that grave wasn't Cathy Chandler. She's at peace, now. Let her rest."

...

From too much love of living
From hope and fear set free
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods there be
That no life lives forever
That dead men rise up never
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.

Algernon Charles Swinburne

