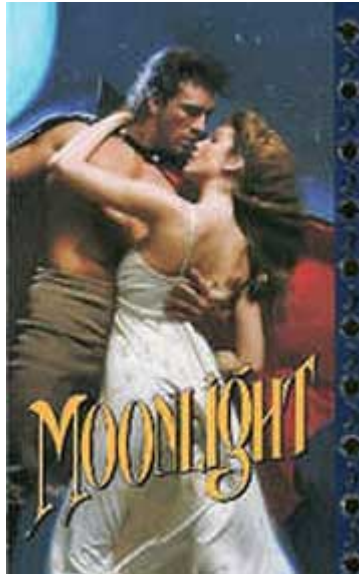
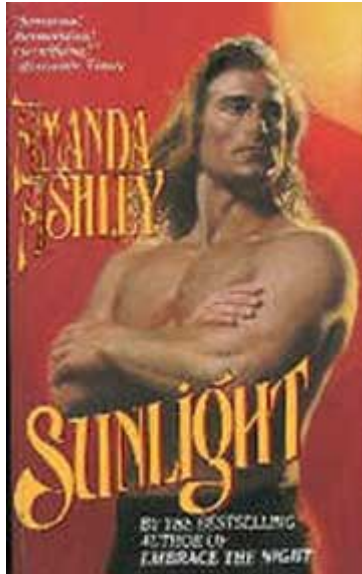




SUNLIGHT

MOONLIGHT

By

Amanda Ashley

REVIEWERS RAVE ABOUT AMANDA ASHLEY:

DEEPER THAN THE NIGHT

"The very versatile Amanda Ashley does a wonderful job... a fast-paced and fun-filled read!"

—Romantic Times

EMBRACE THE NIGHT

"Sensuous! Mesmerizing! Electrifying! A must read for all vampire romance fans!"

—Romantic Times

"An absolutely wonderful story!"

—*The Talisman*

Other *Love Spell* books by Madeline Baker writing as Amanda Ashley:

DEEPER THAN THE NIGHT

EMBRACE THE NIGHT

SUNLIGHT

MOONLIGHT

LOVE SPELL

NEW YORK CITY

LOVE SPELL®

January 1997

Published by

Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc.

276Fifth Avenue

New York, NY 10001

Copyright © 1997 by Madeline Baker

Printed in the United States of America .

SUNLIGHT

To DENA HAWKINS

Who shares my fascination for
Ghosts, werewolves, phantoms, and
One particular masked man!

Chapter One

Lainey stared at the old mansion, which sat alone at the end of an unpaved road. There had been rumors about the Grayson place for as long as she could remember. Some said it was haunted by the ghost of its last owner; some jokingly speculated that it was inhabited by a vampire. The townspeople might disagree about who or what lurked inside, Lainey mused, but they all agreed there was something definitely spooky about the place.

The house had been vacant for at least ten years, and it showed. The paint was peeling off the eaves, some of the tiles on the roof were missing, several windows were cracked or broken. Trees and shrubs grew in jungle-like profusion.

It was obvious no one lived in the house, and yet, lately, passersby had reported seeing a pale blue light flickering in the third-floor window. Police had been sent to investigate, but reportedly had found nothing suspicious.

It was a mystery, and Lainey loved a mystery. Reading them or writing them, it didn't matter. She'd take a good mystery over a love story any day of the week. Of course, if the mystery also contained a scorching romance, so much the better!

She also had a fondness for vampires, werewolves, and witches, which seemed at odds with her deep and abiding fear of the dark.

She also had a penchant for exploring old houses, but that, she decided, would have to wait for another day.

Taking her camera out of its case, Lainey snapped a couple of pictures from varying angles. The mansion, which was said to be over a hundred years old, was the perfect backdrop for the murder mystery she was currently writing. From its gabled roof and small round windows to its enormous front door and shadowed veranda, it reeked of mystery and danger. She could easily imagine any number of foul deeds being committed within its dark interior. No doubt there were dozens of secret doors and passageways cut into the walls and closets, she mused, and if there weren't, well, it didn't matter. She

would just write a few in.

She zipped up her jacket as she glanced at the lowering sky. One more picture, and then she'd go.

She was focusing on the round turret at the north side of the house when she saw a flash of movement in the third-story window.

Startled, she lowered the camera and stared at the window, and then she laughed uneasily. There was no one there. She was just letting her overactive imagination get the best of her. Sternly, she reminded herself that the house had been vacant for years.

Nevertheless, she decided she had taken enough pictures for one day. Slinging the camera strap over her shoulder, she started walking down the driveway to the road where she had left her car, walking faster and faster until she was running.

Running as if she were being pursued by demons.

Once she was inside the car, with the windows rolled up and the doors locked, she felt like a child running from shadows. But sometimes her wild imagination overcame her good sense.

Shoving the key in the ignition, she gave it a twist.

Nothing.

Grimacing, she tried again, and again, but the car, always temperamental, refused to start.

Defeated, she rested her head against the back of the seat and closed her eyes. Perhaps she'd flooded the engine. The word *flood* had no more than crossed her mind when the heavens opened, unleashing a deluge that would have given Noah cause for alarm.

"Oh, great," Lainey muttered. "Now what am I gonna do?"

She sat there for twenty minutes before she tried to start the car again. Nothing happened. Maybe it was the battery. Jim, over at the garage, had told her she needed a new one.

She sat there for another ten minutes, shivering inside her thin nylon jacket. A jagged bolt of lightning lit up the sky, followed by a crash of thunder that was so close, she almost jumped out of her skin.

Into her mind came visions of night stalkers and serial killers, all of them just looking for a lone female stranded on a deserted road.

She glanced up at the house, thinking she'd probably be safer, and warmer, inside four walls.

Staring at the mansion, she felt her gaze drawn to the upper floor, felt a sudden, inexplicable urge to explore the house, to ferret out its secrets.

Before she quite realized what she was doing, she was out of the car and running up the driveway.

Breathless, she took the stairs two at a time, then stood shivering on the front porch. For a moment, she chewed on her lower lip, debating the wisdom of going inside, but another drumbeat of thunder decided for her. The door was locked, but one of the panes of glass was broken, making it easy to reach inside

and unlock the door. The thought that she was committing a crime fluttered in the back of her mind. Breaking and entering. But she wasn't breaking, she rationalized, since the glass was already broken, just entering.

Thoughts of drug dealers and other disreputable characters filled her mind as she opened the door. She could hear the blood pounding in her ears as she crossed the threshold.

Closing the door behind her, Lainey stood in the entryway, listening. The sound of her footsteps echoed loudly as she crossed the black-and-white tiled floor to the parlor.

Knowing it was useless, she flicked the light switch inside the arched doorway. Nothing. In the rapidly waning daylight, she could see a high-backed sofa and a couple of chairs crouched before a massive stone fireplace. Sheets that had once been white, but were now threadbare with age and thick with dust, covered the furniture. To her fanciful mind, the furniture looked like beasts of prey ready to pounce on unwary strangers.

Standing with her arms folded over her chest, she stared at the fireplace, wishing she had the means to start a fire. She felt a warm breeze caress her cheek, and the next thing she knew, there was a fire crackling in the raised hearth.

Lainey blinked at the flames, certain she was imagining things.

But there was nothing make-believe about the heat radiating from the fireplace. She stood there for a long moment, wondering if the shivers running up and down her spine were caused by the fire's seemingly magical appearance, or her growing apprehension. For a moment, she considered going back outside to sit in the car, but the warmth of the fire was irresistible.

Slipping out of her wet jacket, she spread it over the back of a chair to dry, then stood in front of the fire, toasting first her front and then her back.

The warmth of the fire made her drowsy. Removing the sheet from one of the chairs, she shook off the dust, then sat down, the sheet spread across her lap, and stared at the dancing flames.

How odd, she thought. Here she was, sitting in the dark in front of a fire that had started as if by magic, and she wasn't the least bit afraid.

Listening to the sound of the rain as it splashed against the windows, she had the strangest feeling that she wasn't alone, that there was an unseen entity hovering nearby, watching her every move through curious, unblinking eyes. But even that didn't shatter the peculiar sense of well-being that was slowly engulfing her, wrapping her in a cocoon of contentment.

Perhaps the place *was* haunted, she mused. But it didn't feel haunted. Enchanted, then. That would explain her sudden lethargy. But even the thought of falling under some mystical spell lacked the power to frighten her as she drew the sheet up to her chin and closed her eyes.

Chapter Two

Lainey came awake with a start. For a moment, she couldn't remember where she was, and then she sighed. She was inside the Grayson mansion. She sat there for a moment, listening to the sound of the rain as she glanced around the room.

In daylight, she could see that the parlor had once been elegant. The draperies at the window, now faded and frayed, were of dark red velvet. The floor was of solid oak, dulled by years of dust and neglect. The chair she was sitting on was upholstered in a dark red, green, and gold print, as was the other chair and the high-backed sofa. She guessed the walls had once been a creamy white, but time had dulled the color. An enormous lacy cobweb hung from one corner of the vaulted ceiling.

Rising, she pulled on her jacket, surprised that the fire was still burning. Perhaps it was a gas log, she mused as she tossed the sheet over the chair. But surely, if there was no electricity, there was no gas. And even if the gas was on, it still didn't explain who, or what, had lit the fire the night before.

She combed her fingers through her hair, wished fleetingly for a toothbrush and a glass of orange juice, and then began to explore the rest of the house.

The kitchen was huge, with a walk-in pantry and numerous cupboards. A large window overlooked the backyard.

She paused at the back door, which was slightly ajar, frowning when she saw a carton of orange juice on the top step. Pushing the door open a little further, she picked up the container. The date stamped on the carton was current.

She hesitated only a moment, then opened the container and took a drink. It was fresh and tangy, as if it had just been squeezed.

Maybe someone did live here, she thought. But that was impossible. All the surfaces in the house were covered with a thick layer of dust, the cupboards were empty, there were no appliances of any kind.

Turning away from the door, she saw a stack of newspapers, and she thumbed through them while she drank the juice, scanning the headlines. The oldest newspaper was dated three weeks before.

FIREBALL SEEN STREAKING ACROSS L.A. SKY, the headline read, ALARMED CITIZENS, FEARING UFO INVASION, BOMBARD POLICE STATION WITH CALLS.

For the next week, the lead story had been about the meteor. No one had seen it land, but all sorts of government agencies, including the Air Force, were said to be scouring the area, hoping to find a piece of it.

After a week, the meteor story had been relegated to the back pages until an enterprising reporter interviewed a couple of scientists, who had speculated that the meteor might not have been a meteor at all, but a spaceship. Mention of flying saucers put the unidentified flying object back on the front page.

Flying saucers, indeed, Lainey thought as she put the carton on the sink and left the kitchen. Did scientists really expect to find little green men roaming the streets? She had never believed in flying saucers, had always assumed that if there really were other people on other planets, they would be just like the people of earth. She had never believed all those wild tales of people being abducted by aliens, either.

She wandered through three bedrooms, a large den, and a solarium that was crowded with plants and

rosebushes, all remarkably green and healthy considering that no one had lived in the house for ten years.

Leaving the solarium, she climbed the stairs to the second story. There were four bedrooms there, and four bathrooms. The master bedroom was bigger than her whole house. The drapes were blue-gray, the wallpaper a faded blue, white, and gray stripe. There was a corner fireplace, a walk-in closet. Sliding glass doors opened onto a balcony.

It must have been an elegant house at one time, Lainey thought again, and wondered what had happened to the previous owner, and why no one else had ever bought the place. It had such promise, such possibilities. She had a healthy royalty check coming in a couple of months, she thought. Maybe, if the place was for sale and they weren't asking too much for it, she'd see about buying it in spite of the rumors that it was haunted.

Haunted. She grimaced. Maybe that accounted for the mysterious fire last night, and the orange juice this morning.

Leaving the master bedroom, she saw a narrow set of stairs at the far end of the hallway.

Curious, she climbed the stairs to the next landing. There was only one door in sight, and when she tried to open it, she found that it was locked. Since there was no keyhole, it had to be locked from the inside.

That was odd. If no one lived here, how could the door be locked from the inside? It was just stuck, she decided. No doubt the rain had caused the wood to swell.

She put her shoulder to the door and pushed, but nothing happened. It was definitely locked.

A shiver ran down Lainey's spine as her vivid imagination immediately jumped into overdrive.

There was a vampire behind the door.

A serial killer.

Freddy, waiting to rip her apart. Jason, hiding behind his mask.

Cujo.

Heart pounding wildly, Lainey ran down both flights of stairs. Breathing heavily, she stood in front of the fireplace in the living room, shivering in spite of the fire's warmth.

There's nothing to be afraid of.

The voice, faint but definitely masculine, should have scared her out of a year's growth. Confused because she wasn't the least bit frightened, she glanced over her shoulder to see who had spoken, but there was no one there.

Turning around, she examined every corner of the parlor, but there was no one to be seen.

Maybe she was going insane. Maybe spending the night in the Grayson mansion had sent her around the bend. And maybe she was just suffering some sort of delusion brought on by hunger, she thought with a grin. Grabbing the sheet she'd used the night before, she draped it over her head and left the house, sprinting down the driveway toward her car.

Unlocking the door, she slid behind the wheel, uttered a silent prayer, and shoved the key into the ignition.

"Thanks, Lord," she murmured as the engine roared to life.

She was pulling away from the curb when she heard the voice again.

Don't go.

She hesitated a moment. There was something compelling about that voice, an aching loneliness that touched her heart.

Maybe she really was going mad, she thought, and with a shake of her head, she put the car in gear and headed for home.

Chapter Three

Lainey sat in front of her computer, staring at the blank blue screen. Try as she might, she couldn't concentrate on the book she was supposed to be writing—a book that was due in just three months.

"Think plot," she muttered.

But all she could think about was the Grayson mansion, and the mysterious voice that had spoken to her.

Who had that sexy male voice belonged to?

How had that fire started in the fireplace?

Who had left a carton of orange juice on the back porch of a house that hadn't been lived in for ten years? Who had been reading the newspapers?

Why had she felt so at peace there?

Why did she want to go back?

Oh, Lord, maybe she was losing her mind. Maybe there hadn't been any fire. Maybe she'd imagined the orange juice. And the voice? Had she imagined that, too?

She glanced through the photographs of the house that she'd had developed earlier that day, and then frowned as she stared at a close-up of the third story. Was that someone standing at the window?

Rummaging around in her desk, she found a magnifying glass and studied the photo. Was that a person, or merely a shadow?

She stared at the slightly hazy form, noticing that a faint blue aura seemed to surround the figure.

It had to be a shadow, she thought, or a glitch in the film.

Switching off her computer, she sat there for several minutes. It was a mystery, and she loved a mystery. Her mind made up, she grabbed her purse, her jacket, and her camera. Plucking her keys off the top of

the TV, she left the house.

Twenty minutes later, she was standing at the end of the long winding driveway that led to the Grayson mansion.

He squinted against the late afternoon sunlight as he watched her walk toward the house. He had sensed her presence long before he looked out the window.

He studied her as she drew nearer. He thought her quite the prettiest creature he had ever seen, with her long black hair, soft brown eyes, and smooth tawny skin. She wore a pair of tight black pants, a bulky pink sweater, and a pair of short white hoots. He liked the way she moved, as fluid as water.

Why had she come back?

He checked to make sure the door to the room he'd chosen for himself could not be opened, and then he listened to her footsteps as she moved through the house. So strongly could he sense her presence that he could almost see her as she moved slowly from room to room. She stopped in front of the fireplace for several moments before going into the kitchen.

The sound of her footsteps drew nearer, and then he heard her approach the third-floor room.

Lainey stared at the door for a moment, then turned the knob. Nothing happened. She shook the knob, then pushed on the door.

"Are you all right in there?" she called, jiggling the knob again.

He cocked his head to one side as he visualized her standing on the other side of the portal. What manner of creature was she? Didn't she realize how puny her human form was, how easily it could be destroyed? He could crush her with one hand, vaporize her with a single glance.

"I know you're in there," Lainey called. "I saw you in the window yesterday. I heard your voice." She tapped her foot, exasperation warring with concern because he refused to answer. "Are you sick? Do you need a doctor?"

He shook his head, amused by her boldness, dismayed by her apparent lack of fear, and even more appalled to learn that she had been able to discern his thoughts the day before.

Go away.

As before, Lainey glanced around, seeking the source of the voice. As before, there was no one there.

Lainey frowned. She'd heard that voice in her mind three times now. The first time it had assured her there was nothing to be afraid of. The second time it had begged her not to go. And now it was telling her to go away. It didn't make sense. And neither did the fact that she wasn't the least bit afraid. As before, she'd felt a curious sense of peace when she entered the house.

"Are you all right?" she called again. "Is someone keeping you here against your will?"

Not someone, he mused, but he *was* being kept there against his will.

Go away!

"Not until you tell me who you are and what you're doing here."

He shook his head, faintly amused by her stubbornness.

"This morning you asked me not to go. Why are you so anxious for me to leave now?"

You could be in danger.

Lainey swallowed. "From you?"

No.

Lainey took a deep breath, intrigued by his voice. She should go. She knew it. Standing there arguing with an unseen man had to be the height of stupidity. And yet, she knew somehow that whoever was behind that door wouldn't hurt her.

"I just want to help."

He held his breath, waiting for her to go away, wanting her to stay.

He heard the doorknob rattle, felt her curiosity, her concern.

"I'm not leaving until you open this door."

She meant it, he thought ruefully, and focusing on the door, he released the force that had kept it closed.

His eyes narrowed as daylight crept into the room.

"Hello?" He heard the faint tremor of disquiet underneath the excitement in her voice as she took a step forward and peered into the room. "Is anyone here?"

He hesitated a moment, knowing he should frighten her away, yet he was strangely drawn to her warmth.

Fearing he was making a terrible mistake, he probed her mind, took on a shape she would find pleasing, and stepped out from behind the door. "What are you doing here?"

Lainey whirled around, her handbag clutched to her breast, as she stared at the most outrageously handsome man she had ever seen. Fabio, she thought breathlessly. He looks just like Fabio.

She blinked up at him. "What did you say?"

"I asked you what you are doing here."

It was the voice, that same tantalizingly deep velvet voice she'd heard in her mind.

Flustered, she answered his question with one of her own. "What are *you* doing here? This place is supposed to be vacant."

He stared at her through fathomless silver-blue eyes. "I needed a place to stay."

"And you decided to stay here?" Lainey shook her head. "What are you, a clairvoyant or something?"

He frowned. "Clairvoyant?"

"You know, someone who hunts poltergeists and things."

"Poltergeists?"

"Never mind. You're not from around here, are you?"

A faint smile touched his lips. "No."

"I didn't think so. You have a strange accent. Where are you from?"

"A great distance."

She drew back as he took a step forward, but he didn't approach her. Instead, he closed the door.

"The sunlight is very bright," he said. "It hurts my eyes."

A shiver of fear tiptoed down Lainey's spine. Good grief, maybe the place really was haunted by a vampire!

"It is only temporary," he assured her. "It will pass in a day or two."

She backed across the floor, thinking she ought to stay as far away from him as possible. She kept telling herself she should be afraid of him, but she wasn't.

"How are you called?"

"Lainey," she answered, unable to draw her gaze from his. "Lainey St. John. How... how are you called?"

"I don't know how to say it in your language."

"Then say it in yours."

"Zermicazyne."

"What?"

"Zer-mica-zyne."

"That's a mouthful. Would you mind if I just called you Micah?"

"Micah," he repeated. "I like that. Thank you."

She felt a sudden glow, as if she'd just given him a gift beyond price. "You're welcome. How long have

you been in America?"

"How long?" he repeated. "Three... ah... three weeks."

"I see. You didn't tell me where you're from."

"Xanthia."

"Never heard of it."

"It's a small plan... a small place very far from here."

She couldn't keep from staring at him. He wore his long, dark-blond hair parted in the middle. His eyes were an unusual shade of silver tinged with pale blue; his mouth was wide, sensual, and totally masculine. He had a body that looked as though it had been carved by an Italian sculptor. His skin was pale and seemed to glow and yet even as she watched, the glow disappeared.

The word *vampire* whispered through her mind again. Pale skin that seemed to glow. Unearthly colored eyes that were sensitive to the light. Long blond hair. Maybe it wasn't Fabio she should compare him to at all, but the Vampire Lestat.

"Well, I guess I'd better go," she said in a rush. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Lainey St. John."

The loneliness in his voice was unmistakable and she paused, her hand on the doorknob. She couldn't just go off and leave him there alone. She grinned wryly. Even if he was a vampire, surely she'd be safe. After all, it was daylight. Weren't vampires supposed to be helpless when the sun was up?

"I could stay a while, if you like."

"Would you?"

"You... you won't bite me or anything, will you?"

"Bite you?" he asked, confused. "Why would I bite you?"

"Never mind." She glanced around the room. There was no furniture of any kind, not a chair, nothing. "Why don't we go downstairs?"

"If you wish."

"I don't suppose you have anything to eat?" Lainey asked as she walked down the narrow flight of stairs that led to the second floor.

"No."

"Maybe we could go out?"

"No."

"Oh, the light. I forgot. Well, never mind. I'm too fat, anyway."

"Not fat," he said from behind her, and the way he said it made her blush to the roots of her hair.

When they reached the main floor, Lainey dropped her purse on the floor, then sat down in the chair nearest the hearth.

Micah took the other one. His movements were quiet and inherently graceful, she thought. When he walked, he made hardly any sound at all.

She couldn't help staring at him. The white T-shirt he wore fit like a second skin, clearly outlining his broad shoulders and chest. His faded black jeans were also skintight, revealing long legs corded with muscle.

"How long will you be here?" she asked.

"Until someone comes for me."

"Someone?"

"A friend. From home."

"Oh. Is he picking you up here?"

Micah shrugged. "Here, or somewhere else. The place does not matter."

"Did you start the fire last night?"

He hesitated a moment before replying, "The fire? Oh, the fire. Yes."

Lainey frowned. Sometimes she had the feeling he didn't really understand what she was saying, yet he made the correct answers. It was strange. *He* was strange. And yet, she felt inexplicably drawn to him.

"Did you leave the orange juice on the porch, too?"

Again that pause before he answered. "Yes."

Lainey glanced at the window. "It's almost dark," she remarked. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to go out and get something to eat?" Her stomach picked that moment to growl meaningfully. "I only had a banana for breakfast," she said, smiling self-consciously, "and I didn't get any lunch."

"You're hungry?"

Lainey nodded. "Come on, let's go out. My treat."

"Treat?"

She was more convinced than ever that English was his second language. "I'll buy," she said. Rising, Lainey held out her hand. "Come on."

He stared at her hand for stretched seconds, and then he placed his hand in hers. His skin was cool, yet

warmth flooded her palm and washed up her arm, spreading through her like liquid sunshine.

Stunned, she gazed up at him and saw her own astonishment mirrored in the depths of his incredible silver-blue eyes.

"Your hand is so small," he said, his voice tinged with wonder. "Small and warm."

Lainey glanced at the sofa, which looked altogether too inviting. The house, which had once seemed large and dark and gloomy, now seemed suddenly small and intimate.

She smiled uncertainly. "I... we should go."

He looked out the window and when he saw that the sun had gone down, he nodded slowly. "If you wish."

"I think it would be a good idea."

Outside, she took a deep breath, wondering at the odd effect his touch had on her. Opening the car door, she slid behind the wheel, then waited for him to get in. Glancing out the window, she saw him standing beside the car, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Get in," she called. "It isn't locked."

"How?"

"How?" She stared at him, certain he must be kidding, but he looked dead serious. "They must have cars where you come from."

"Not like this."

Frowning, she leaned across the seat and opened the door. Somewhat cautiously, he settled himself on the seat.

"Hang on," she said, and pulled away from the curb. "Where would you like to eat?"

"Where?"

"Yeah, where? Do you want to go to a restaurant, or just grab a burger at McDonald's?"

"A burger will be fine."

"Don't tell me. They don't have hamburgers where you come from, either."

"I don't think so."

"I don't mean to offend you, but that must be some small country you're from."

"Yes," he agreed with a wry smile.

They drove the rest of the way in silence. Lainey glanced at Micah out of the corner of her eye, noticing that he was studying the dashboard carefully.

"We're here," Lainey said, pulling into the McDonald's parking lot.

After finding a parking place, she switched off the engine and slid out of the car, figuring she'd have to open Micah's door for him. But when she reached the passenger side, he was already out of the car and waiting for her. A quick study, Lainey thought, smiling up at him.

"Come on," she said, "they've got pretty good food here."

"Yes, food."

Inside, Lainey took a place in line, trying to decide between an Arch Deluxe, fries, and a chocolate shake, or a filet of fish and a chocolate shake.

She glanced at Micah as they moved up in the line. "What are you gonna have?"

"Have?"

"To eat."

"Yes, eat." He hesitated a moment. "What are you going to... have?"

"An Arch Deluxe, I think, and a chocolate shake."

He stared at her blankly for a moment, then said, "I will have the same."

Lainey told the counter girl what they wanted, covertly studying Micah as she waited for their order to come up. He was obviously a foreigner, but she couldn't place his accent. Sometimes she thought it sounded Italian, and sometimes French, and yet it didn't really sound like either one.

"So," she said, "where's your country located?"

"It's very far from here."

"Yeah, that's what you said. Is it in Europe?"

"Europe? No."

"South America?"

"It's north of here. Very far north."

"NearCanada?"

Micah glanced away. "Yes. NearCanada."

"Funny, I've never heard of it. Well, maybe not so funny, the way countries are changing their names these days. What did you say it was called?"

"Xanthia."

Their order arrived then and after paying for it, Lainey led the way to a table near the back window. She couldn't help noticing that every woman in the place turned to stare at Micah, but then, who could blame them? He was far and away the most handsome man she had ever seen.

She peeled the paper from a straw, poked it through the hole in the plastic top of the paper cup, and took a long drink. It was thick and rich and chocolaty, just the way she liked it.

Micah watched her a moment; then, very carefully, he removed the paper from his straw and poked it into his cup.

Lainey almost laughed out loud as he took a drink, his eyes mirroring surprise, and then pleasure.

"Don't tell me," she said. "They don't have chocolate shakes where you come from, either."

"They have nothing this good," he said solemnly, and took another long swallow. His shake was gone in nothing flat. "Do you think I could have another?"

"I think it could be arranged," Lainey replied. Grinning, she went to the counter and ordered another shake.

When she returned to their table, he watched her pick up her hamburger and take a bite. Micah picked up his burger, sniffed it, then turned it over. It was meat of some kind, he decided. A vegetarian since birth, he had never eaten meat. Curious, he took a small bite, chewing it carefully before swallowing. A variety of tastes filled his mouth: tangy, sweet, sharp, mild.

"Good," he said, taking another bite. "Very good."

"You are the strangest man," Lainey murmured.

"You have no idea how strange," Micah replied, and then he smiled, a broad smile that hit Lainey square in the heart and almost took her breath away.

"Would you like to go for a walk?" Lainey asked as they left the restaurant.

"Yes, if you wish."

She was tempted to take his hand, but thought better of it. After all, she didn't really know anything about him except his name, and the fact that he was drop-dead gorgeous. The women on the street were no more immune to him than were the women in McDonald's. Every woman they passed stopped to take a second look, but then, it was all she could do to keep from staring at him, to keep from running her fingertips over the muscles in his arms, to keep from pressing her hands to the broad expanse of his chest...

She gave herself a mental shake, furious and embarrassed by the path her thoughts were taking. She'd seen handsome men before—in the movies, on the beach, at the market—but none had ever affected her quite like this.

Lost in thought, she started across the street.

"Lainey!"

She heard him shout her name, felt his hand close over her arm and jerk her back onto the sidewalk just as a low red sports car careened around the corner.

Breathless and frightened by her near miss, Lainey collapsed against Micah, finding comfort in his strength, in the nearness of another human being.

For a moment, Micah stood looking down at her, wondering what he could do to comfort her and then, moving cautiously, he wrapped his arms around her and held her close.

She was shivering now, her body trembling convulsively as the full realization of what had almost happened sank in. If Micah's reflexes had been a fraction of a minute slower, she'd be dead.

"You saved my life," she murmured, and burst into tears.

Micah's arms tightened around her as she cried. Emotions he had never known he possessed stirred within him at the sight of her tears; feelings he had suppressed long ago struggled to make themselves known.

He held her until her body stopped trembling, until her tears subsided, and even then he was reluctant to let her go. She felt so good in his arms. Her body was soft and round and it molded itself to his form in a most pleasant way. Holding her close, he was conscious of her warmth. He bent toward her and a faint, vaguely familiar scent rose from her hair.

Lainey sniffed one last time, then drew away a little so she could see Micah's face.

"I seem to have drenched you with my tears," she said, dabbing ineffectually at his shirt front.

"It doesn't matter."

Lainey glanced around, suddenly embarrassed to be standing on a street corner, bawling in a stranger's arms. "Maybe we should go."

He agreed reluctantly, wishing he could hold her in his arms forever. Just holding her made him feel good all over, made him wish for things he didn't fully understand.

He felt as if he'd lost a vital part of himself when he let her go.

It was a feeling he pondered long after she'd dropped him off at the house and driven away.

Chapter Four

"He's so different, Mom. I don't know how to explain it. I mean, I know he's from a foreign country, but sometimes it seems like he's from another planet."

"I think that imagination of yours must be working overtime again," Dolores St. John said indulgently.

"That's not it," Lainey insisted, shifting the receiver to her other ear. "Mom, he said he'd never been in a Volkswagen before."

"Well, I'm sure there must be some countries that aren't as motorized as we are."

"Maybe..."

"Are you going to see him again?"

"Yes. Tonight."

"Do you think that's wise? I mean, you really don't know anything about him. And he lives all alone in that old house that isn't even his."

"I know, I know. But there's something about him, Mom. Sometimes he seems so lost. I don't know. I just know I have to see him again."

"You will be careful, won't you?" Dolores asked, even though she knew she was wasting her time. Lainey was Lainey. "How's your book coming?"

"Slow."

Dolores made a low sound of sympathy. "By the way, have you heard any more about that meteor?"

"No."

"Funny, they can't find any trace of it."

"Probably burned up in the atmosphere," Lainey replied. "It was scary, though. I saw it flash across the sky, and it was just like one, of those old science fiction movies." Lainey shivered. "It was bound to happen, the way the government keeps sending rockets into space. Sooner or later, one of them was bound to come back down."

"I guess so. Well, have a good time with your young man. And be careful."

"I'll be careful," Lainey replied. "I love you, Mom. Talk to you tomorrow."

Lainey stared at the phone after she had hung up. Her mother was right. She should be careful.

She told herself that as she took a long, hot bubble bath.

As she carefully applied her lipstick and mascara.

As she pulled on a pair of slinky black pants and a turquoise sweater.

As she spritzed herself with perfume.

Feeling like a teenager going out on her first date, she grabbed her purse and her keys and practically ran out of the house.

She was going to see him again.

He was waiting for her at the front door. All day, he'd been counting the minutes until he would see her again. He had tried to repair the intergalactic transmitter from his spacecraft so he could communicate

with his sister ship, but he hadn't been able to concentrate on the task at hand.

He had tried to remember everything he had ever learned about the United States, its people, their habits and language, their universal gestures; he had tried to keep himself busy by reading the local newspapers and magazines in hopes of absorbing the most commonly used words and terms of her language, but to no avail.

All he could think of was the way she had felt in his arms, the warmth of her skin, the silky texture of her hair. Never in all his years had he experienced anything like holding Lainey St. John in his arms.

And now she was here, looking more beautiful than he remembered. Her brown eyes were glowing; her skin was radiant and warm. The clothes she wore accented every feminine curve, and his body reacted instantly.

Micah had learned to govern his primal urges years ago, but his hard-won self-control shattered each time he saw her. An unfamiliar heat exploded in his groin and radiated to every part of his body.

He wanted her. Wanted her with every fiber of his being, every beat of his heart.

He took a step backward so she could enter the house. For a moment, he stood in the shadows of the entry hall, taking slow, deep breaths, until he was again in control of his wayward thoughts and emotions, and then he followed her into the parlor.

"What shall we do tonight?" Lainey asked, turning around to face him. Her heart quickened at his nearness. He made her feel beautiful, desirable, and very, very female.

"Do?"

"You know, go bowling, take in a movie, go for a walk down by the beach."

Micah hesitated, baffled by her suggestions, and then he shook his head. "Perhaps you should decide."

"Have you eaten?"

"Eaten? No."

"Well, if it's okay with you, I'd like to go to dinner, and then a show."

"Whatever you wish," Micah replied, and knew he would do anything she asked just to be with her.

Lainey smiled up at him. He was wearing a pair of snug black jeans and a blue cable-knit sweater. She took a deep breath, thinking he should be on the cover of GQ. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

He followed her out of the house, admiring the graceful way she moved, the sway of feminine hips.

Opening the door, he slid into the car, feeling cramped, as always, in such a small space. He watched carefully as she put the key in the ignition and started the engine.

After a moment's indecision, Lainey decided to go to dinner at Luigi's, which was one of her favorite

restaurants. She couldn't help but notice that every woman in the place turned to stare at Micah as they made their way to their table. She glanced over her shoulder at Micah, but he seemed completely unaware of the attention he was getting.

Lainey ordered spaghetti with marinara sauce, and when Micah couldn't make up his mind, she ordered the same for him, and then, as an afterthought, ordered a bottle of dry red wine.

Micah glanced around the restaurant, surprised to see men and women sitting together, eating together. A young man and woman sat side by side, openly holding hands. An elderly couple sat at a nearby table. They didn't talk much, but they smiled at each other while they ate.

He couldn't help staring at the man and woman in the next booth. The woman held a curly-haired baby on her lap, bouncing it up and down, laughing and cooing to it while the man looked on, smiling proudly, happily.

"So, what kind of work do you do?" Lainey asked.

Micah was so mesmerized by the sight of the woman with the child that it took a moment for him to realize Lainey had spoken. He quickly probed her mind to see what she'd asked him before replying, "I'm a navigator."

"Like on an airplane?"

"Yes."

Lainey frowned. "Let me get this straight. Your country has planes but no cars?"

"I didn't say we had no cars, only that they were different from yours."

"Oh." She studied him covertly while the waitress poured the wine. The light blue sweater he wore emphasized the blue of his eyes and complemented his long blond hair. He was so beautiful, sometimes just looking at him took her breath away.

She felt her face grow hot when she realized she was staring at him, and that he was very much aware of it.

Picking up her glass, she took a drink, hoping he would attribute the blush in her cheeks to the wine.

Micah grinned. He had little experience with females, but he recognized admiration when he saw it. The rosy color in Lainey's cheeks heightened under his knowing gaze.

Taking pity on her, he picked up his glass and took a sip. It had a pleasant taste, reminding him of some of the fruit he'd eaten here on earth.

"Why are you staying at the old Grayson place?" Lainey asked, hoping to hide her embarrassment at being caught staring. "I mean, I think you'd be more comfortable in a hotel."

"The house suits my purposes."

"Oh? And what might those be?"

"I wanted a place where I could be alone," Micah replied, but that was only part of the truth.

"Don't tell me you're a hermit."

"A hermit?"

"A recluse. Someone who doesn't like to be around people."

Micah frowned. He'd never thought of himself in those terms, but he supposed he was a loner. He spent very little time around people, preferring the quiet of space and the solitude of his ship to crowded compounds and noisy gatherings.

"By that definition, I suppose I am a hermit," he admitted with a wry smile.

"Maybe I should go and leave you alone then?"

"No," he said quickly. "Don't go."

"I was only kidding." Lainey shook her head when she saw he didn't understand. "Making a joke. Never mind. I didn't mean it."

"I'm glad."

Just two simple words, yet they went straight to her heart and lodged there.

"What kind of work do you do?" Micah asked, assuming that, like all the females he knew, Lainey was also employed.

"I write mystery novels."

"Books?"

Lainey nodded. "Maybe you've read one."

"I don't think so, but I would like to, very much."

"I'll bring one next time... I mean..." She felt her cheeks grow hot. She didn't want him to think she was taking anything for granted. "If we see each other again..."

"When," he said, his gaze intent upon her face. "When we see each other again."

"Have you heard from your friend?"

"Not yet."

"I'm glad. I mean, I'm sure you're anxious to get back home, but..." She took a deep breath. "I'll miss you."

"Will you?" He leaned forward, wanting to tell her how much she had come to mean to him, but the waitress arrived with their dinner then, and the moment was gone.

Lainey talked about the book she was working on while they ate, and he learned that the reason she'd gone to the house in the first place was to take photographs. She was very enthusiastic about what she did, and he thought it charming that she cared so much, that it gave her such pleasure. How long had it been since he'd taken any real pleasure in his work, in anything?

After dinner, they went to a movie. It was a unique experience, to sit inside a darkened building and watch a story unfold before his eyes. It was primitive, yet entertaining, and for a few moments, he lost himself in the story of a man and a woman overcoming tremendous odds to make a life together.

When the lights came on again, he noticed tears in Lainey's eyes.

"Why do you weep?" he asked curiously.

"Because it was so sad. And so happy."

"But it was not real."

"I know, but I just can't help it. When I go to the movies, I lose myself in the story until it isn't happening to someone else, it's happening to me. Good books affect me that way, too."

"You have a very sensitive soul, Lainey St. John."

"Thank you."

He was quiet on the ride home. Time and again, she slid a glance in his direction, admiring the masculine beauty of his profile, the width of his shoulders.

When she parked the car in the driveway, she wondered if he would kiss her and tried to tell herself she wasn't disappointed when he got out of the car.

"Do you want to come inside?" he asked.

It wasn't a good idea, Lainey thought. It was late. She was feeling blue, and vulnerable. And he was much too attractive. "Maybe for a little while."

She followed him up the steps and into the house. In minutes, he had a fire going in the hearth. Warming her hands, Lainey thought how odd it was to be in a house without gas and electricity. Of course, since the house was supposed to be vacant, he couldn't very well have the utilities turned on. Still, she wondered what he did for food, how he bathed and washed his clothes. Walking to town seemed out of the question, considering the distance.

She felt an odd shiver of anticipation when he came to stand beside her. From the corner of her eye, she studied his profile. It was sharp and strong, totally masculine, with no trace of softness. It was, she thought, quite the most compelling face she had ever seen.

He was studying her, too, and it made her decidedly uncomfortable. After all, what did she really know about this man? For the first time, it occurred to her that he might be hiding from someone, maybe the police. Why else would he be holed up in this old house? Oh, Lord, her mother always said she was too trusting. Just because Micah was tall and handsome didn't mean he wasn't capable of murder and mayhem.

Suddenly, her imagination running rampant, she visualized him raping her, strangling her, burying her body in the backyard.

She made a big production of looking at her watch. "It's later than I thought. Maybe I should go."

Sensing her sudden apprehension, he backed away from her, hoping the distance between them would ease her mind. "I will not hurt you, Lainey St. John."

"What?"

"I will not hurt you."

Lainey stared into his silver-blue eyes, eyes that reflected a deep sadness, and wondered how he'd known what she was thinking.

"I..." She forced a smile. "I know, but it's late, and I..."

She was going to leave, and he would be alone again. He held out his hand, palm up, in entreaty. "Stay. Please."

As quickly as they'd appeared, her doubts and fears seemed to vanish. "What is it?" she asked, concerned by the odd expression on his face. "What's wrong?"

"I want..." He shoved his hands into his pants pockets and she saw them tighten into fists.

"What do you want?"

"I want very much to hold you."

"You do?"

"I don't wish to offend you, but..."

Lainey's heart skipped a beat as she gazed up at him. The light from the fire played over his face. Never, she thought, never in all her life had she seen such longing, such melancholy, reflected in a man's eyes. "All right."

"You're sure you won't mind?"

"I won't mind," Lainey assured him. Indeed, she had been wishing he would touch her all night.

Feeling as though he were walking through the quicksands of Orizzon, Micah crossed the short distance between them, then gently enfolded Lainey in his arms.

The minute he touched her, Lainey experienced the same sense of peace, of belonging, that had suffused her when she first entered the Grayson house. With a sigh, she pressed her cheek against his chest and closed her eyes.

He held her close for a moment, and when he would have released her, she wrapped her arms around him. "Don't go."

"I don't want to... to..."

"To what?"

He muttered something in a foreign language, something Lainey thought sounded very much like a curse.

"You don't want to what?" she asked again.

Micah swore under his breath. It was frustrating sometimes, not knowing exactly what word he was looking for. "I don't want you to think the wrong thing."

Lainey smiled up at him. "Are you afraid I'll think you're trying to take advantage of me?"

"I... guess so."

"Oh, Micah, you're so naive. I've been wanting you to hold me all night."

He looked surprised. "Have you?"

Lainey nodded. "I know it's crazy, but I..." She felt a wave of heat wash into her cheeks. "I'm very attracted to you."

His mouth turned up at the corners as the meaning of her words became clear. "I am... attracted to you, too."

Attracted was putting it mildly, he mused. Never before had he held a woman in his arms, or felt the hot stirring of passion as strongly as he did now. But then, there were many emotions he had never truly felt until he came here, to this place. This woman.

He wondered again if his people were still looking for him, or if they had given him up for dead. He had never been truly happy at home and yet, it had been home, as different from this place as sunlight from moonlight.

Answering some deep primal urge, he lowered his head and brushed his lips across her hair. Such wondrous hair. Long and soft and curly. And dark. So dark. So different from his own. So different from that of any woman he had ever known.

He drew her closer, molding her body to his, marveling at the riot of sensations her nearness aroused within him. His breathing grew erratic; his groin fell full and heavy. He was besieged with a violent urge to mate, a desire so strong that it frightened him, just as it would surely frighten her if she became aware of it.

Closing his eyes, Micah commanded his body to relax, commanded his mind to think of something else, something other than the smooth, soft flesh and feminine contours pressing so seductively against him.

Abruptly, he lowered his arms to his sides and took a step backward.

Lainey glanced up at him, felt her heart skip a beat when she saw the raw hunger that blazed in the depths of his silver-blue eyes.

"You should go now," Micah said tersely.

"Yes," Lainey replied, "I think you're right."

She didn't take time to say good-bye, simply grabbed her handbag and headed for the door. Her hand was on the latch when his voice reached out to her.

"Will you come back?"

Just say no. Wasn't that what addicts were taught to say?

Ignore the faint hint of pleading in his tone, the barely suppressed need.

Just say no. Before he becomes a habit you can't break.

"Tomorrow night." She didn't turn around, afraid that if she looked at him again, she would throw herself into his arms. "I'll bring some candles."

Her words filled him with a deep and all-encompassing sense of relief.

He hadn't frightened her away. He would see her again.

Chapter Five

Micah stared at the transmitter, wondering how he'd ever fix it. Without the radio, he had no way of contacting his sister ship, no way of letting them know he was still alive. How much longer would Pergith wait, hoping to hear from him? He looked out the window. Perhaps they'd already given up.

Picking up the transmitter, he ran the tip of his finger over the distress signal mechanism. It could be activated only once, and was meant to be used only in cases of dire emergency. Should he activate it now? To do so would bring any spacecraft in the sector to his rescue, yet such a rendezvous could be dangerous, for him and for them, unless it took place in a location where there was little chance of discovery.

Brow furrowed in a thoughtful frown, Micah turned the small black box over in his hand. He'd barely had time to grab his flight kit and the transmitter and eject from his craft before the ship crashed and exploded. Badly shaken, he hadn't had the strength to disintegrate what little had been left, so he'd camouflaged the wreckage of his ship as best he could, and sought a place to hide.

Even before he entered the house at the top of the hill, he had sensed that it had been vacant for a long time. Near exhaustion and badly hurt, he'd managed to drag himself up the stairs. Taking refuge in the welcome dark of the topmost floor, he had treated his wounds, using the emergency medical supplies in his flight pack.

Micah placed the transmitter on the table and sat back in his chair, but it wasn't communication with home that filled his mind now. It was the woman, Lainey. From the moment he first saw her, there had been a strong bond between them, a telepathic link he had never experienced with anyone else. She could hear his thoughts if he projected them her way; he could read her mind with very little effort. It was impossible, but true. Frightening but fascinating. What a rare creature she was, open and outgoing, trusting.

"Lainey..." He spoke her name aloud, liking the sound of it.

He couldn't wait to see her again, to hear her voice, savor her nearness, feel the touch of her hand. Ah, but she was so warm, so soft, like nothing he had ever known.

He glanced out the window. The position of the sun told him she would be there soon.

Soon.

Lainey's fingers flew over the keyboard. It was such a great feeling, when the ideas flowed like water, when the words came almost faster than she could type them. And yet, even as the story took shape before her eyes, a part of her mind was always on Micah. He was a strange man, so different from anyone else she had ever known. Strong and tender. Virile yet oddly innocent. She wondered how many women he had loved, how many hearts he had broken—if he would kiss her, just once.

She glanced at the clock on her desk. It was almost five, almost time to quit for the day.

Her heartbeat accelerated and butterflies of anticipation danced in her stomach. Soon she would see him again.

Soon.

Micah's head snapped up. She was near. He could feel her presence drawing ever closer.

Rising, he covered the transmitter with a scrap of cloth he had found in the basement, quickly assumed the shape she expected, and hurried down the stairs to meet her.

Moments later, she entered the house, bringing the warm scent of sunshine and flowers with her.

She greeted him with a smile and a breathy hello, and the look of happiness in her eyes filled him with a rush of pleasure so acute that it was almost painful.

Lainey gazed at Micah. She knew she was grinning like an idiot, but she was so happy to see him again, she couldn't seem to stop.

Micah felt an odd catch in his heart as he followed her into the parlor. How beautiful she was! She wore a blouse of some gauzy white material that was the perfect foil for her tawny skin and ink-black hair. A dark red skirt swirled around her ankles as she walked, emphasizing the feminine sway of her hips.

"What have you got there?" he asked, gesturing at the brown paper sack in her arms.

"Oh, not much. Candles, matches, some bread and cheese. A bottle of wine. Some fruit, and a couple of candy bars." She looked up at him, her expression sheepish. "One of my books."

Micah smiled. "Will you read it to me?"

"If you like," Lainey agreed, although reading one's own words aloud, to someone else, was often traumatic, like standing naked on a street corner, letting everyone see you, flaws, freckles, and all.

He followed her into the kitchen and stood in the doorway, his gaze caressing her as she moved about the room. She pulled two white china plates out of her bag, arranged layers of bread, sliced ham, and cheese on the plates, added sliced apples and oranges. Reaching into her bag again, she took out a bottle, two glasses, two cloth napkins, and a flowered tablecloth.

"Shall we eat in front of the fire?" she asked.

"If you wish."

"Grab the plates, will you?"

Nodding, he picked up the dishes, taking a moment to sniff the unfamiliar food before following her into the other room.

Spreading the tablecloth on the floor in front of the hearth, Lainey sat down and filled their glasses with wine.

Micah sat down across from her, setting the china on the floor between them.

"What shall we drink to?" Lainey asked, handing one of the goblets to Micah.

"Exploring," Micah replied, his voice sounding unusually husky.

"Exploring?" Lainey repeated. "That's an odd toast, but if that's what you want..." She touched her glass to his. "Here's to exploring."

He watched her take a drink, and then he took a sip. The wine was tart and sweet at the same time, different from the wine they'd had at the restaurant. But he wasn't thinking of wine as his gaze met hers. He was pondering the effect her nearness had on him, bemused by the heat that permeated his being whenever she was near.

"What do you want to explore?" Lainey asked, and knew the answer before the words left her lips.

"You," he replied, his tone hushed, and suddenly he knew without question what he wanted. "I want to explore every curve, every valley, every peak. I want to touch you, and taste you, until I know every inch of your body as I know my own."

Lainey stared at him, the glass in her hand forgotten. It was suddenly hard to breathe and she wondered what had happened to the air in the room. No other man had ever looked at her like that, with eyes filled with such hunger, such yearning. No other man had ever said anything quite so romantic, or made her feel so desired. So desirable.

"Micah, I..." She felt a blush creep up her neck into her cheeks. "I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing. Only let me touch you again, for a moment."

Heart pounding, Lainey put her wine glass aside. Mesmerized by the heat of his silvery gaze, she let Micah draw her into his arms, felt every nerve ending come suddenly, acutely, alive as his hand stroked her hair, her back.

"You're so soft," he murmured. "You smell so good. Feel so good."

Lainey made a small contented sound low in her throat as his hand caressed the curve of her cheek.

"Kiss me," she whispered.

He looked down at her, confused. "Kiss you?"

Lainey nodded. "You know, a kiss. Like this."

Her eyelids fluttered down as her hand slipped around his neck, drawing him closer.

And then he felt her lips on his, and his whole being was suffused with heat and light. It burned into every cell, exploding through his groin, arousing him to hungers he had never fully understood until that moment.

"Lainey!" He gasped her name, bewildered by the torrent of emotions flooding through him. Images danced inside his head—images he had seen years ago in an ancient scroll, images of couples engaged in a practice long forbidden and forgotten.

"It's all right," Lainey murmured, threading her fingers through his hair.

"No!" He drew back, his brow sheened with perspiration, his breathing ragged. "We mustn't."

"Mustn't what? Kiss? There's no harm in a kiss."

He stared at her mouth, knowing deep in his heart that one kiss would not be enough, that a hundred, nay a thousand, would be far too few.

She smiled up at him, her beautiful brown eyes as luminous as the stars of Xanthia, her lips pink and inviting, and he surrendered to the invitation in her eyes, unable to resist the temptation to kiss her again.

A kiss, he thought, what an amazing thing it was.

He had never kissed a woman before. It shook him to the very core of his being, freeing his tightly reined emotions, until he wanted nothing more than to plunder her body as he plundered her mouth.

The thought that his self-control, that the discipline he had worked so long and hard to master, could be so easily destroyed, was devastating, and he drew back, thinking that Lainey's power over him was far more dangerous than all the armies on the face of the earth.

Lainey gazed up at him, confused by his abrupt withdrawal. "What's the matter?" she teased, resorting to humor to cover her sudden uncertainty. "Are you afraid I'll seduce you?"

"No." His voice was thick. "I'm afraid of what I'll do to you."

It wasn't a harmless flirtation anymore. He wanted her in the most primal, elemental sense of the word. And she wanted him. Wanted him as she had never wanted another man.

"Micah..."

His gaze slid away from hers. He wanted her with a soul-deep ache that was frightening in its intensity,

and even more alarming because he had never before known he was capable of such need, such raw, primitive hunger. To feel it now, for an earth woman, was more than he could endure.

"I think you should go."

He was right, and she knew it, but at that moment Lainey didn't care about right or wrong. She wanted to stay, to bask in the warmth of his arms, to lose herself in the sweet seduction of his kisses.

"Please, Lainey, go home and don't come back." Micah forced the words past his lips.

He watched her stand up, her cheeks flushed, her eyes shiny with unshed tears. He didn't have to probe her mind to know he had hurt her deeply, but it was for the best—for her, at least.

He clenched his hands at his sides to keep from reaching out for her, compressed his lips to hold back the words that would beg her to stay.

She looked down at him for several seconds, then turned on her heel and hurried out of the room, out of the house.

He stared after her for a long time. In his mind's eye, he could see her running down the driveway, fumbling inside her handbag, jamming the key into the ignition of her little blue car. The motor sputtered to life, the car pulled into the street, and then she was gone, leaving him sitting there in the darkness, empty and alone, as he had always been alone.

It was time to leave here, he thought dully. He should have activated the distress signal long ago, but he had been reluctant to leave this planet.

Late at night, he had often assumed a human shape and wandered up and down the dark streets, intrigued and fascinated by the subtle differences, the numerous similarities, between Xanthia and Earth.

He should go home, but now that he had found Lainey, going home was the last thing he wanted. He hadn't meant to hurt her, didn't want to hurt her, and yet sending her away had been for her own good. He could not tell her the truth. He could not let himself succumb to the shameful primal urge that was tormenting him even now, sending the hot blood rushing through his body, making him long for a way of life that had been proscribed eons before he was born.

Heavy-hearted, he walked up the stairs to the third-floor room.

She was gone, and his soul was as cold and empty as his heart.

Chapter Six

"Lainey. Lainey?"

With a shake of her head, Lainey pulled herself out of her reverie and looked across the table at her mother. "What?"

"Do you want dessert now, or later?"

"Later, Mom."

Dolores St. John shook her head ruefully. "You hardly ate a thing, sweetie. Are you all right?"

"Fine."

"Leave her alone, Dee. It's bound to be man trouble. I haven't seen her look this depressed since she split up with Drew."

"Dad!"

Ralph St. John lifted one dark brown brow. "Am I wrong? Tell me I'm wrong."

Lainey couldn't help smiling as she shook her head. She'd never been able to fool her dad, not for a minute. Not when she was a little girl, not now.

Dolores stared at the two of them, then stood up and began clearing the table. "No, you go on and talk to your dad," she admonished when Lainey started to help. "In the state you're in, you'll probably wash the leftovers and put the dirty dishes in the fridge."

With a grateful smile, Lainey followed her father into the front room and curled up in a corner of the blue print sofa.

Ralph sat down in his easy chair, removed his shoes, and put his feet up on the coffee table. "Ah, that feels good," he remarked. "So, what is it, honey—what's troubling you?"

"Just what you said."

Ralph nodded sagely. "Man trouble. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"There's really nothing to tell. I went out to the old Grayson place..."

"The Grayson place! Lainey, are you out of your mind?"

Right then, she decided to skip the part about spending the night at the mansion. "Dad, I just went out to take some pictures, you know, for inspiration. Anyway, when I had the film developed, I saw something in one of the upper windows and..."

"And you just had to go have a look for yourself."

"Right. Anyway, there was this man there and..." Lainey made a vague gesture with her hand. "I don't know how to explain it, but he made me feel..." She shrugged. "It was the funniest thing. Even though I didn't know anything about him, I felt safe, kind of peaceful."

Ralph St. John frowned. "Safe? Peaceful? What is this guy, some kind of guru?"

"No. He's a navigator."

St. John grunted softly. "Your mom said he's a foreigner of some kind."

Lainey nodded. "He's got a marvelous accent, although it's very slight."

"And I suppose he's tall, dark, and handsome, too."

"Tall, blond, and handsome."

"So, when are we gonna meet him?"

"That's the trouble, Dad. He doesn't want to see me anymore."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I went to see him last night and everything seemed fine. Later, we..." She couldn't stop the blush she felt heating her cheeks. "We were making out a little and suddenly he told me to go."

Ralph St. John frowned. "Maybe he's gay."

"Dad."

Her father shrugged. "It was just a thought. Maybe he's afraid of getting AIDS. Maybe he just wasn't in the mood."

"Dad," Lainey said with a grimace, "the men I've met are always in the mood."

"So, maybe this guy's different. Maybe he's got some morals, if they exist anymore."

"Dad, I wasn't trying to seduce him. We were just kissing. And he liked it, I know he did."

She felt the tears well in her eyes and blinked them away, determined not to cry. She had already shed enough tears for a man she had only known for a couple of days.

"I wish I could give you some advice," her father said, "but I guess all you can do is wait for him to call. Or call him."

Lainey shook her head. "He doesn't have a phone. And I wouldn't call him if I did." Rising, she kissed her father on the cheek. "Thanks for listening, Dad."

"Any time," he remarked, reaching for his paper. "How's the new book coming along?"

"Slow," Lainey said, resuming her place on the sofa.

"It'll pick up. It always does."

Lainey smiled at her father, but he already had his nose buried in the sports page. Nothing had been settled, but, as always, just talking to her dad made her feel better.

"I think I'm ready for dessert now," she remarked, and went into the kitchen to help her mother dry the dishes.

She'd get over Micah, just as she'd gotten over Drew. It would hurt for a while, but she'd bury herself in her book until the worst of the hurt was gone. One thing about being a writer, she thought, she was always in control.

And she could have as many happy endings as she wanted, at least on paper.

Chapter Seven

He missed her. Missed her more every day. It was a new emotion for him, one he definitely didn't like. Never in all his life had he let himself get emotionally involved with another being. He was a navigator, the best one in the fleet, and he'd never had time for anything else. He had sworn his allegiance to the fleet, had taken a blood oath that he would give his life to protect the welfare and interests of Xanthia.

Crossing the floor to the window, he stared up at the night sky. How different life was at home. Males and females rarely intermingled for any length of time except to mate. Children were raised in a controlled environment by people who had been carefully selected for that assignment.

Home. For the first time he realized that, while he missed flying, missed the thrill of exploring the unknown, he didn't actually miss Xanthia. Beautiful as it was, peaceful as it was, as much as he loved it, he had no desire to go back.

And Lainey was the reason. She was as warm as the earth's sun, and as far away as the stars that lit the night sky. Much as he might wish to stay here, with her, it was not an option. His life's course had been set years ago. When he returned home, he would join with Adana, the female who had been chosen for him, ensuring the continuation of his line, ensuring that all he was, all he knew, would be passed to the next generation. There would be no fire between them as there had been between himself and Lainey. Breeding was not done for pleasure. Once his chosen mate had conceived, it was unlikely that he would ever see her again.

He had never questioned the way his people lived until now. Until Lainey. He wondered, for one brief moment, what it would be like to stay here, in her world, to be her mate for life, to watch whatever children he might father grow up. It was an idea totally foreign to everything he knew and yet he yearned to embrace her way of life almost as much as he yearned to embrace Lainey herself.

A frustrated sigh whispered past his lips. It was a waste of time even to consider such a thing. Even if he couldn't repair the transmitter, there was a good chance Pergith or one of the others would locate him sooner or later. They would search for him until they found him, or until they were certain he had died in the crash.

Sending Lainey away had been the right thing, the expedient thing, to do.

But, oh, how he missed her.

Lainey stared out the window, gazing up at the stars, wondering what Micah was doing, wondering why he had sent her away. She wasn't an expert in sexual games by any means, but she knew when a man desired her, and Micah had wanted her. She was certain of that. His words, his touch, had spoken of a want that went deeper than the needs of the flesh.

She closed her eyes as a new thought occurred to her. All along, she'd had the feeling he was hiding from something. Maybe that something was a wife, children, a mountain of debts.

She groaned softly. Painful as the thought was, it made more sense than anything else. A man alone. Needing company. And along comes Lainey, naive, gullible Lainey, all too willing to believe a few pretty words uttered by an attractive man...

She slammed her fist on the window sill. It didn't make sense. If he was the kind of heel she was painting him to be, he wouldn't have stopped at a few kisses, he wouldn't have sent her away.

It just didn't make sense. Nothing made sense.

Eyes still closed, she pressed her forehead against the window pane, wishing she could see him just one more time.

Lainey.

It was his voice, husky and edged with pain. She whirled around, expecting to see him standing behind her, but there was no one there.

I need you.

"Micah..." Overcome with an unaccountable sense of alarm, she grabbed her coat, handbag, and keys and ran out of the house.

Breathless, she backed the car out of the garage and drove toward the mansion, totally oblivious to everything but the necessity of finding Micah.

She saw the lights even before she turned down the road. Slowing the car a good distance away from the house, she pulled over and killed the engine. The Grayson place was ablaze with lights. No doubt the police had ordered the electric company to turn on the power.

She saw a trio of black-and-white police cruisers, at least a dozen cars bearing an insignia she didn't recognize, and a couple of unmarked cars. Police officers and men in dark suits and overcoats prowled the enormous front yard. Flood lights, located on all four sides of the house, turned the night to day. Up on the hill behind the house, flashlight beams cut across the darkness, sweeping the shrubbery, the shadows under the trees.

She saw dogs.

And guns.

And men in Air Force blue.

She didn't realize she had a death grip on the steering wheel until her hands began to ache. What on earth was going on?

Lainey... hurry...

Hurry, Lainey thought, dazed. Hurry where?

My voice... follow the sound... of my voice...

Without stopping to think, without taking time to wonder about the strangeness of it, Lainey slid out of the car and followed the sound of Micah's voice.

She turned away from the mansion as she made her way down the sharp incline located on the south

side of the house. Slipping and sliding, she descended the hill, then turned right and followed a drainage ditch until she came to a storm drain.

Bending over, she looked inside. "Micah?"

"In here."

Lainey breathed a sigh of relief when she heard his voice. The inside of the storm drain was damp and dark. She'd gone about six feet when she saw him sitting with his back against the side of the cold cement.

"Micah? Are you all right?"

With a faint nod, he stood up, swaying unsteadily. "Can you get me out of here?"

"I can try." She held out her hand. "Come on."

She couldn't see his face clearly, but she felt him hesitate. He stooped to pick up something, which he tucked inside his shirt, and then his fingers were closing over hers.

Lainey went first, peering into the darkness. "I think we're in the clear," she whispered. "Let's go."

He followed her out of the storm drain and up the hill. Once, she heard him gasp as he stumbled, and then they were at the top of the incline. Her car was only a few yards away.

It was then that she saw the dark stain that blossomed across his shirt front and spread down the left side of his trousers.

"You're hurt!" she exclaimed. "What happened?"

"No time... to explain," he said, his voice reedy and uneven.

Lainey stared at him for a moment. He'd been shot, she thought, appalled. She wondered briefly why the police were after him. Wondered if he was, indeed, a mass murderer.

And then she looked into his eyes, those guileless silver-blue eyes, and all her doubts and fears disintegrated.

A quick glance up the road showed that the police were widening their search. She could see their flashlight beams sweeping the darkness as several officers approached the edge of the driveway. In the distance, she could hear dogs barking, as though they'd picked up a fresh scent.

Wordlessly, she helped Micah into the car, then slid behind the wheel. She turned the key in the ignition, then put the car in reverse.

Only when they were well out of sight of the mansion did she turn on the headlights.

She glanced at Micah several times as she drove home. His eyes were closed, his complexion was beyond pale, his breathing was rapid and shallow. For the first time, it occurred to her that he might die.

He was barely conscious when they reached her house. She drove into the garage, shut off the

headlights, and switched off the ignition. After getting out of the car, she closed the garage door, then turned on the light.

Opening the car door, she shook Micah's arm. "Micah? Mi-cah!"

His eyelids fluttered open and he stared up at her, his gaze unfocused.

"You've got to walk. I can't carry you."

He nodded that he understood, and Lainey stepped away from the car so he could get out.

There was no way to explain what she saw. Afterwards, she would wonder if she had imagined it. While she watched, he closed his eyes and she knew, without knowing how she knew, that he was drawing on help from some deep inner well. Impossible as it seemed, she could almost see the vitality flowing through him, strengthening him from within.

In less than a minute, Micah opened his eyes. Effortlessly, he climbed out of the car and followed Lainey inside, down the narrow hallway into the guest room located in the back of the house.

He stood in the middle of the floor, his gaze sweeping the room in a swift glance, noting the single window, the narrow bed, the chest of drawers. And then he reached inside his shirt, pulled out a black box, and handed it to her.

"Take care of this for me," he said, forcing each word. "If anything happens to me, you must destroy it."

And then, as if the last drop of his energy had been expended, he fell face-down across the bed.

Lainey stared at the box for a moment, then placed it on top of the dresser and turned her attention to Micah. It took all her strength to turn him over, to remove the blood-soaked shirt, his shoes and socks, the blood-stained trousers. He wasn't wearing anything under his trousers or shirt.

As she pressed a cloth over the ugly wound in his side, her mind registered a quick impression of a perfect male body before she covered him with a sheet, then ran into the kitchen. She filled a teapot with water and put it on the stove to heat, found a pair of scissors, some gauze, a roll of tape, a bottle of disinfectant.

While the water heated, she ran back to the bedroom to place a hand on his forehead. It was warm. Too warm. The sheet that covered him was already stained with blood. Lainey frowned... Brown blood?

She closed her eyes and shook her head, but when she looked again, the blood was still brown.

The whistle of the teapot drew her back into the kitchen. Finding a tray, she piled everything onto it and went back into the bedroom.

Drawing the sheet away from the wound, she stared at the odd-colored blood that oozed from the bullet hole and then, taking a deep breath, she eased Micah onto his side, feeling a swift surge of relief when she saw that the bullet had gone through.

Moving quickly, trying not to gag at the sight of so much blood, she washed the wound, soaked it with disinfectant, placed cold compresses over both holes, and wrapped a thick layer of gauze around his

middle to hold everything in place.

She was perspiring heavily by the time she was through. She hated the sight of blood! She knew lots of little girls dreamed of being doctors or nurses when they grew up, but she never had. Just the thought of a needle was enough to make her nauseated.

Lainey stared at the bloody shirt on the floor, at the rag she'd used to clean the wounds. Brown blood. Try as she might, she could find no logical explanation for it, but she didn't have time to worry about it now.

Returning to the kitchen, she made herself a cup of strong coffee, then brewed a cup of weak herb tea, which she generously laced with brandy, for Micah.

He roused enough to drink it, and then he fell back on the pillow.

Sitting in the rocking chair beside the bed, Lainey sipped her coffee. Who was Micah? Why were the police hunting for him? And why had the Air Force been there?

If he was wanted by the law, she could be arrested for harboring a fugitive.

She rested her head against the back of the rocker and closed her eyes. Bits and pieces of the last few days drifted down the corridors of her mind—hearing Micah's voice the first night she had spent in the Grayson house—the fire that started by itself—the carton of orange juice that had appeared as if by magic at the back door of the mansion—the figure with the blue aura that had appeared in one of her photographs. Maybe they were all incidents that could be explained logically. And maybe not.

Sitting up in the chair, Lainey stared at Micah. His breathing was shallow, so shallow that she placed her hand over his chest to make certain he was still alive.

She couldn't seem to keep from touching him—his brow, which was much too hot; a lock of his hair, damp with sweat. She let her fingertips caress his cheek, his jaw. Odd, she thought, there was no telltale shadow of a beard.

He muttered something in his sleep, something she couldn't understand, and then he whispered her name.

"I'm here, Micah."

His eyelids fluttered open. His eyes were dark, glazed with pain and fever. "Thirsty... so thirsty."

"Here." Lifting his head, she held her cup to his mouth. He drank greedily, drinking the last of the coffee that had gone cold.

"Got... to... get... away."

"Later."

"Now."

"You've got a fever, Micah. You've got to rest."

He shook his head. "Must... go. Home."

"Soon." She lowered his head to the pillow, then wiped his face with a cool cloth. "Rest now."

He shook his head, then tried to sit up, groaning as the movement pulled on the wound in his side. "Danger... here."

"You're safe. No one knows where you are." She pressed a hand to his shoulder, encouraging him to lie back down. "Please, Micah, you've got to stay quiet."

He stilled at her touch and she started to sit back in the rocker when she noticed the stain spreading over the bedding.

He was bleeding again.

It was after midnight by the time she got the bleeding stopped, the bandages replaced, and the sheets changed. The fever raging through him frightened her even more than the blood and its peculiar color.

Filling a bowl with cold water, she wiped his face, his neck, the broad expanse of his chest, down his flat belly, stopping at the strategic point where the sheet protected his modesty and thwarted her curiosity.

Near dawn, his fever went down and a little color returned to his cheeks. Hardly able to keep her eyes open, Lainey curled up in the rocking chair, drew a furry blanket up to her chin, and closed her eyes. That quickly, she was asleep.

Asleep and dreaming.

She was walking with Micah, holding his hand. Everywhere they went, people stared at them, pointing, frowning. Puzzled, she glanced around, noticing for the first time that the sky was yellow, the grass was blue-green, and the sun was pale pink. She noticed the people then. They were all about the same height, they all had hair of varying shades of blond and eyes of varying shades of blue. Trying to stifle the hysteria she felt rising within her, she lifted her head to look at Micah...

The sound of her own scream jerked her from sleep.

"Lainey, are you all right?"

"Fine." She stared at Micah, but he was only a dark shape against the flowered percale sheets. Frowning, she tried to remember her dream, but it was gone.

"Go back to sleep, Lainey." Micah's voice, low and soothing, reached out to her through the darkness.

She nodded. Sleep, yes.

There's nothing to be afraid of.

His voice, speaking in her mind, soothed her as it had once before, lulling her back to sleep.

There were no more dreams.

Chapter Eight

Micah seemed better the following morning. Lainey plugged in the coffee maker, then switched on the morning news. She'd expected the goings-on at the mansion to be the top local story. Oddly enough, no mention of it was made on the radio, or in the morning paper.

After a quick shower, she pulled on a pair of sweats and sneakers, checked to make sure Micah was still asleep, then drove up to the Grayson place.

It seemed exceptionally quiet after the noise and confusion of the night before. She parked her car about a quarter of a mile away, then jogged up the road, slowing as she neared the driveway. An unmarked police car was barely visible in the shadows alongside the mansion. Glancing at the house, she caught a flicker of movement at one of the upstairs windows. She had a sudden, silly urge to wave.

Micah was still asleep when she got home. She threw a load of wash in the machine, including Micah's blood-stained clothes, which had been soaking in cold water, then sat down in front of her computer.

But she couldn't concentrate on her story. There were too many unanswered questions rattling around in her head, too many real-life mysteries that needed solving to worry about the fictional mystery she was trying to write.

Too restless to sit still, she looked in on Micah. He was still asleep. A good sign, she thought. Her mother always said sleep was nature's best cure for just about anything.

She was about to leave the room when her gaze landed on the black box. Picking it up, she carried it into the kitchen. After pouring herself a cup of coffee, she went into the living room to study the black box. It was an odd contraption, about four inches square. It wasn't made of wood, or plastic, or of any other material she was familiar with. She turned it over in her hands, but try as she might, she couldn't figure out how to open it, if, indeed, it opened at all.

Another mystery, she thought, and dropping the box on top of the TV, along with her empty coffee cup, she went back to her computer, determined to get at least one page written before the day was over.

She went to check on Micah again at a little past noon. He was sitting up, his pale face sheened with perspiration.

"I'd ask how you're feeling, but there's no need," Lainey said, placing her hand on his fevered brow. "You look awful."

"I feel awful. Where are we?"

"My place. Don't you remember?"

He frowned, then shook his head. "No. I don't remember anything after I was wounded."

"What happened? Why are the police after you?"

Micah took a deep breath, pondered telling her the truth, and dismissed it. "I can't tell you," he replied slowly.

"Can't, or won't?"

"Can't, Lainey. Not now. But you must believe me when I tell you I haven't done anything wrong."

Under the circumstances, there was no reason to believe him. But she did. He was telling the truth. She knew it right down to the ground.

"Are you hungry?"

Micah nodded.

Lainey smiled. His having an appetite was a good sign. "I'll fix you something to eat. If you have to—ah, relieve yourself, the bathroom's in there." She paused at the bedroom door. "Do you need help?"

Micah shook his head, and Lainey left the room. He stared after her, unaccountably pleased that she was willing to trust him even though she knew very little about him.

He gazed out the window, wondering at the wisdom of remaining here. Last night, wounded and afraid, he had called out to her, desperation clouding his judgment, but it had all happened so fast. He had been asleep in front of the fireplace, dreaming of Lainey, when a noise from outside roused him. Before he had quite realized what was happening, men were swarming through the house, their lights blinding him.

He'd had no time to try to hide in the guise of an earthling, no time to get his flight pack, no time to do anything but grab the transmitter and make a run for it.

He'd heard a voice shout, "There he is!" and then there was only confusion, an explosion, blinding pain...

He shook the memory from his mind.

It took every ounce of his strength to get out of bed and walk to the bathroom. Inside, he closed and locked the door; then, head hanging, he let himself relax completely.

When he looked into the mirror a few minutes later, his own face stared back at him.

Lainey hummed softly as she prepared Micah's lunch. She hadn't had a man to fuss over since Drew. Hadn't realized how much she missed it until now. Their marriage had been a mistake from the very beginning. She had been looking for a home and family; he had been looking for another conquest.

She knew now that the only reason Drew had stayed around so long was because she had refused to sleep with him until after they were married, because she had been determined to be a virgin when she walked down the aisle. It was a promise she had made to herself when she was just a young girl, a vow that she had silently renewed each time she saw another of her friends dressed in a long white gown—girls who clothed themselves in the outward symbol of purity and innocence when everyone knew they had been sleeping with their boyfriends for months, or years. Silly as it seemed in this day and age, Lainey had wanted to be worthy of a white dress and all the trimmings.

Maybe, way deep down where she didn't look too often, she had always been secretly afraid that Drew would lose interest in her once the hunt was over. And that might have been one of the reasons their marriage failed, but the main reason had been because, in spite of all they had done, she had been unable to have children, and he had left her for a woman who could.

Lainey had filed for divorce the day after Drew's son was born. Filed for divorce and gone back to using her maiden name. And then she had buried herself in her writing. The emotional pain and heartache she had suffered during the breakup of her marriage gave her a new perspective to write from, a new depth of emotion, of empathy, of understanding.

Her career had soared. Her personal life had been in the pits. She had forced herself to date, always shying away when the relationship started to get too serious, too intimate, resigned to the fact that she would never marry again, never have the family she so longed for...

She heard Micah moving around in the bathroom, and found herself smiling. She was drawn to him in a way that she couldn't understand. It wasn't just his looks, though heaven knew she had never seen a more gorgeous hunk of masculinity in her whole life. Just looking at him made her feel good all over, but there was a vulnerability about him, a kind of innocence, that she found vastly appealing.

She turned off the stove, covered the plate to keep the food warm, and walked down the narrow hallway to the guest room.

The bed was empty and she glanced at the bathroom door, then frowned at the strange blue light glowing in the narrow crack between the bottom of the door and the bedroom rug.

"What the...?" She stared at the light, closed her eyes, then opened them again.

The peculiar glow was gone.

A moment later, the bathroom door swung open and Micah stepped into the bedroom, a blue-and-pink striped towel wrapped around his waist.

She couldn't help staring at his broad shoulders, the wide expanse of his chest, his long, well-muscled arms and legs. The blood-stained bandage was partly visible above the towel.

Micah stopped in mid-stride when he saw her standing there. Color stained his cheeks as he glanced down at the towel, at Lainey, and at the towel again.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I didn't know you were here..."

"It's all right." She turned her back to him. "Get into bed, Micah. I won't peek."

She heard the rustle of sheets as he crawled under the covers, her imagination running wild. She'd already had a brief glimpse of that magnificent body. It took very little imagination to fill in the rest.

Placing the tray on the bedside table, she examined the wound in his side. Despite her crude medical skill, he seemed to be healing remarkably quickly.

"I'll put a fresh bandage on that after you eat," she said, handing him the tray. "Can I bring you anything else?"

"No, this is fine."

"Well, okay, I'll be back in a little while."

"Stay."

"All right."

She sat down in the rocker, trying not to stare at him while he ate. Even sitting in the bed, he seemed to fill the small guest room with his presence. She glanced at his jaw, wondering why he never needed a shave.

She felt her cheeks blossom with color when he looked at her, his silver-blue eyes filled with warmth and affection.

"Thank you, Lainey," he said, his voice low and a little uneven. "You saved my life."

"I'm glad I was able to help."

"You did more than help. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come when you did."

She nodded, then frowned. "How is it that I can hear your voice in my mind?"

"Simple telepathy."

"Simple! I've never heard voices in my head before... well, I have, the voices of the characters in my books, but not like this. How do you do it?"

Micah shrugged, as if it were of little consequence. "There's a link between us. When I wish to communicate with you, I tie into that link."

"What link? I don't understand."

"I'm not sure I do, either. It's never happened to me before."

"Me, either," she muttered. "What's in that black box?"

She watched his face, saw the varying emotions that flickered in the depths of his eyes. He had never lied to her before, but she knew he was considering it now.

The doorbell rang before he answered. With a sigh of exasperation, she went to see who it was.

"Yes?" Lainey peered through the peephole. Two men, one tall and thin, one short and thin, both dressed in navy-blue suits and ties, stood on the porch; a police officer stood behind them, his brawny arms folded across his chest.

"Miss Lainey St. John?"

"Yes."

"We'd like to talk to you for a few minutes."

She glanced at the cop again. "What about?"

"We'd rather not discuss it out here, if you don't mind."

Lainey stared at the three men, wondering what to do, when she heard Micah's voice in the back of her mind. *Let them in* .

The police officer took a step forward. "I can get a search warrant, if necessary."

A search warrant! Lainey unlocked the door, unhooked the latch on the screen, and stood back, a shiver of alarm skating down her spine as the three men entered the front room. It didn't occur to her to invite them to sit down.

"What's this all about?"

"I'm Frank Bergen, from SETI," the tall man said. "This is my partner, Edward Falk. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

SETI! She tried to recall what the letters stood for. SETI. She repeated the initials in her mind. Didn't they stand for Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence?

Lainey frowned. Weren't they the people who had been looking for Jeff Bridges in *Starman* , some organization hoping to find proof that there was life in outer space? What were they doing here?

Frank Bergen's gaze swept the room. "Do you live here alone?"

"Yes."

"Are you alone now?"

"Y...yes."

Bergen looked skeptical. "Have you ever been to the Grayson mansion up on Northcliff Road ?"

So that was what this was all about, she thought. They had found her fingerprints at the mansion. "Is that why you're here? You've come to arrest me for breaking and entering?"

Bergen grimaced. "When was the last time you were up there?"

"A couple of days ago. I'm writing a mystery, and I thought the mansion would be a good setting. I've been up there a couple of times. To take pictures." She was babbling and couldn't seem to stop. "My car broke down and I spent the night there. I didn't take anything. Except pictures. Would you like to see them?"

Frank Bergen grunted softly and made a note in a little black book pulled from his inside coat pocket.

"What is this all about?"

"A couple of joggers said they saw lights on in the house. We're just checking it out."

Lainey glanced at the police officer. "Why would that interest SETI?"

Edward Falk stepped forward. "Is this yours?"

Lainey glanced at the paperback book in his hand. It was the mystery novel she had taken up to the

house to read to Micah.

"I wrote it, if that's what you mean."

"We found it at the mansion."

"So? Lots of people read my books."

"So we're a little short on leads, that's all," Bergen explained. "We figure some transient probably left it behind."

"Mind if we look around?" Falk asked.

She glanced at the police officer, wondering if his talk of a search warrant was just a bluff, but he didn't look as though he was bluffing.

Lainey shrugged, more confused than ever by SETT's interest in the old Grayson place. What were they looking for, and why did they think she had anything to do with it, whatever it was?

"Help yourself," she said, hoping that, if she acted as if she had nothing to hide, they'd go away.

They didn't. The shorter of the two suits stayed in the front room with her while the policeman followed the other suit into the kitchen.

Lainey could hear them moving from room to room, felt her nerves stretch to the breaking point as they neared the guest room. Her fingernails dug into her palms as she waited for... what? A shout of discovery? A gunshot?

She glanced around the room, and then her gaze fell on the black box on top of the television. Casually, she crossed the room and picked up the box and the cup she'd left there earlier.

"Would you care for a cup of coffee?" she asked, rattling the cup as she glanced over her shoulder.

Falk shook his head and Lainey walked into the kitchen, careful to keep the box hidden from his view. She slipped it under a dish towel and poured herself a cup of coffee. When she turned around, she saw Falk standing in the doorway.

"Sure you won't have a cup?" she asked.

"No, thanks."

He stepped aside to allow her to return to the living room. She was relieved when he followed her.

A few minutes later, Bergen and the police officer entered the room.

Frank Bergen glanced at his partner and shook his head. "There's no one here."

"Want me to dust the place for prints?" the police officer asked.

Frank Bergen regarded Lainey for a long moment, then shook his head. "I don't think so." He shoved his notebook into his coat pocket with an air of finality. "Let's go, Ed. Sorry to have troubled you, Miss St.

John."

"What is it, exactly, that you're looking for?"

"A fugitive. Thanks for your time."

Lainey nodded. She watched them drive away, then closed and locked the door. If Micah wasn't here, where was he?

Chapter Nine

"Lainey?"

She whirled around at the sound of his voice. "Micah!"

He stood in the doorway, wrapped in one of her flowered sheets, and a bandage. "Have they gone?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have involved you in this."

"It's all right," she said with a shrug, although a thousand questions crowded her mind. "They said you were a fugitive."

"I'm not."

"Why didn't they find you? Where did you go?"

"I went out the window."

"You might not be safe here," Lainey said. "They might come back."

"Then I'll go out the window again. Unless you wish me to leave."

"No." She didn't want him to leave. Not now. Not ever.

"Lainey..."

Her gaze met his and something warm and tangible arced between them, a need that sizzled like chain lightning, an awareness that pulsed in time to the beat of her heart, making her forget everything but the look in his eye and the sudden, fluttery feeling in her stomach.

"Micah?"

She whispered his name, afraid to cross the invisible barrier between them, knowing that once she stepped into his arms, she'd never be able to turn back. She would be his then, body and soul, and she had vowed never to let another man wield that kind of power over her again. It was too traumatic when it was over, too painful to look back and think of what might have been.

Resolutely, she took a step backward and crossed her arms over her breasts in a decidedly defensive gesture.

Micah looked at Lainey, at her rigid stance, at the wary expression on her face. Only a few feet of carpeted floor separated them, yet he felt as if a chasm had opened between them.

Overwhelmed by a sharp sense of loss, he took a step toward her. "Lainey, let me hold you."

"I don't think it's a good idea."

"Please." The look in his eyes spoke more eloquently than words. "Just for a moment."

She went to him because she couldn't resist the pleading in his gaze, the need in his voice.

She went because he was hurting and far from home.

She went because she wanted to.

Lainey rested her head on his chest, felt his arm circle her waist. As before, she was flooded with a sense of peace, of coming home after a long absence.

Micah held her for a long while, saying nothing, doing nothing more than holding her close while he lightly stroked her hair. She made him feel strong, invincible, and yet strangely vulnerable, continually arousing emotions he had never experienced, making him question the habits of a lifetime.

"You can tell me," Lainey said quietly. "Whatever it is you're running from, you can tell me."

"I wish I could."

She heard the regret in his voice, the need to share his troubles with someone who would listen and understand. "Don't you trust me?"

"With my life, *cominza* ."

"Cominza?"

"It means my lovely one."

Lainey tilted her head back so she could see his face. "You trust me with your life, but not your secrets?"

"It's for your own good," Micah said. And mine.

"Okay, okay, I give up."

"Lainey, if you only knew... if I only had the words to tell you..."

"Tell me what?"

"How you make me feel. When I hold you like this, I feel as though anything is possible, anything at all."

"There's nothing wrong with those words." Deeply touched, she resorted to humor as she frequently did when she was genuinely moved or embarrassed.

"Lainey..."

"I'm sorry."

"No. I've never felt anything like this before. It scares me a little."

He wasn't like Drew at all, she thought. Drew had always been self-confident, assured, secure in his charm, in his ability to say just the right thing. A real macho jerk.

Lainey let her gaze meld with Micah's. He might be hiding all kinds of secrets about his life, his past, but there was nothing secretive about the look in his eyes, those amazing silver-blue eyes that revealed a vulnerability and a yearning that went straight to her heart.

"I'm a little scared myself," Lainey admitted. "But it's a wonderful kind of fright."

"Yes," Micah agreed. "Wonderful."

She was so beautiful. Her dark brown eyes were guileless; her skin was smooth and clear. Her hair curled around her face like a soft black cloud. And her lips... those full pink lips that beckoned and tempted...

Slowly, unable to stop himself, he lowered his head and covered her mouth with his. Her lips were warm and soft and pliant. He kissed her, gently, tentatively, and then he kissed her again. A moment could have passed. An eternity could have passed.

Her lips parted and his tongue touched hers. Tiny flames of fire ignited in his groin, heating the blood that flowed through his veins. Driven by a need more powerful than any he'd ever known, he let his arms tighten around her, drawing her up against him so there could be no doubt of what he felt, what he wanted.

Lainey surrendered to the hunger he aroused in her. Her head fell back and she shivered with pleasure as his lips burned a path along her neck before returning to her mouth. His tongue danced with hers, his hands caressed her back, her belly, the curve of her breast. She felt a tremor of anticipation when she felt the unmistakable evidence of his desire.

"Micah," she murmured breathlessly, "you aren't going to send me away again, are you?"

He looked confused. "Send you away?"

"Last time we kissed like this, you sent me away, remember?"

"I remember." He smiled down at her. "I was afraid of hurting you."

"And now?" She stood on tiptoe and pressed butterfly kisses to his cheek.

"I'm still afraid of hurting you," he admitted in a voice like rough velvet, "but I don't ever want to let you go."

"And I don't want you to."

For a timeless moment, they gazed into each other's eyes. And then, drawn by a power he was helpless

to resist, he covered her mouth with his while the sheet fell, unnoticed, to the floor.

It seemed to be a kiss without beginning, without end. Slowly, their arms locked around each other, they sank to the floor.

Lainey caressed his bare back, loving the touch of his heated flesh beneath her fingertips. She was breathless when he drew away and she tilted her head back, giving him access to her throat. For a moment, he only stared at her, and then he lowered his head and flicked his tongue over her wildly beating pulse.

"Lainey, I want..."

"What?" she murmured, her tone low and seductive. "What do you want?"

"I'm not sure." He buried his face in the curve of her neck, breathing in the musky scent of her skin, the flowery scent of her hair. "I've never..."

"Never?"

He shook his head, afraid of appearing a fool. "I don't know what you expect, how to please you."

"Well, you're doing a first-rate job so far," Lainey murmured. She pulled away a little so she could see his face. "Just do whatever you want."

"I want to touch you and kiss you, memorize every lovely curve. I want to draw you into myself and never let you go." Hesitantly, his hand cupped her breast, then splayed over her heart. "I want your heart to beat with mine."

"Oh, Micah..."

His hungry gaze trapped hers as he started to undress her, waiting for her permission even though she'd already told him to do whatever he wished.

She nodded slightly, her eyes watching him as he undressed her, loving the way his breath caught in his throat as his gaze moved over her, warming her from the inside out. He caressed her as if she were made of spun glass, as if she might shatter if he held her too hard.

It was like being worshiped, she thought, like being adored. His hands and lips were ever so gentle as they explored her, learning what made her sigh with pleasure, what made her gasp with longing. She held him and coaxed him until he was quivering with need, and when they came together it was like two stars colliding.

They lay spent in each other's arms for a long while, her head pillowed in the hollow of his shoulder, his arm curved possessively around her waist. It felt so right, Lainey thought. Making love to Drew had never been like this. And yet she couldn't help feeling a little guilty. She had refused to let Drew touch her until they were legally and lawfully married, and yet she had melted in Micah's arms after knowing him for only a matter of days.

Micah, keenly attuned to her moods, sensed her doubts. "You're sorry we joined," he said, trying to keep the hurt out of his voice. "Why?"

"I'm not sorry." Nervously, she licked her lower lip. "It's just that this is all happening so fast. I don't want you to think that... what I'm trying to say is that I don't sleep around, Micah. I never have."

"Sleep around?" Turning on his side, he propped his head on one hand and stared down at her, his brow furrowed

"I don't have casual sex."

"You call this casual?"

"No. I guess I'm not making myself clear. What I mean is that I don't just sleep with every guy I meet. I haven't been with a man since my divorce and..."

"Divorce?"

Lainey nodded. "I divorced my first husband a little over two years ago."

"I don't understand divorce."

"I was married, and now I'm not."

"Married." The word stabbed him to the heart. It was an earth term that meant to join, to unite. To mate.

She had been with another man. Jealousy was an emotion he had not heretofore experienced, but he recognized it immediately. "Do you have offspring?"

"No." There was a world of sadness in that one single word. "I'm only telling you this because I don't want you to think badly of me."

"And do you think badly of me because of what we have done?"

"No. I just don't want you to think I'm promiscuous."

Micah grunted softly, unable to think of anything other than the fact that she had been with another man, that he was not the first to hold her, to touch her, to receive the gift of her love.

He tried to think logically, to convince himself that there was no reason for him to be jealous that she had been with another man, no basis for the swift unreasoning anger that swept through him when he imagined her in another man's arms, but the feelings remained, along with the fact that she had been married and divorced.

His people did not mate for life; hence there was no such thing as divorce. They came together to procreate, then went their separate ways. If a male felt the need for sexual release outside of the mating ritual, there were planets where those cravings could be satisfied. But what he wanted from Lainey was more than the sexual gratification they had shared. His need for her was an ache he had never known before, a soul-deep hunger that was deeper and more meaningful than a few moments of physical relief. He wanted to know her heart and her mind, to share in her every thought, her every hope, her every aspiration.

More than that, he wanted to share his thoughts and dreams with her, tell her everything... And that he could never do.

The full impact of what he had done hit him then. He had joined with a woman not of his world. Joined with a woman who could never be his.

It took every shred of self-control he possessed to let her go. He slid away, putting a little space between them, immediately aware of a sense of emptiness, as if a vital piece of himself had been lost.

"This should not have happened," he said. "Forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive. I wanted you, too."

Micah nodded, only half listening to her words. He had mated with Lainey. There might be a child, a child he would never see because he could not stay here.

He sat up then, cradling his head in his hands.

"Micah?" Hurt and confused, Lainey placed her hand on his shoulder. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"My side..." he said, unwilling to burden her with the truth. "It hurts."

Of course it hurt, she thought. What had she been thinking? She glanced at the bandage wrapped around his middle, alarmed to see a dark stain spreading on the gauze. "Lie down. You're bleeding again."

He sank onto the floor and she dragged a furry blanket off the sofa and covered him.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable on the couch?"

"I'm fine."

"Can I get you anything?"

"No." Pain lanced through him. She had already given him more than he had ever dreamed of.

"Let me get you something cold to drink," Lainey insisted. "You've lost a lot of blood. You need to drink lots of fluids."

He accepted her offer because it was easier than arguing.

Lainey wrapped herself in the sheet Micah had discarded earlier, then hurried into the kitchen. Seven-Up or Coke, she wondered, and grabbing a can of each out of the fridge, she filled a couple of glasses with ice, added the soda, and returned to the living room.

"Which one?" she asked, holding up both glasses.

Micah pointed at the 7Up and she handed him the glass. Thinking it was water, he raised himself on one elbow and took a long swallow. The unexpected effervescence took him by surprise and he began to cough.

Kneeling on the floor beside him, Lainey pounded Micah on the back. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "Fine," he gasped. "What is that?"

"Seven-Up." She frowned at his perplexed expression. "A soft drink? Carbonated soda pop?"

Micah grunted, then took another, more cautious drink. It was good, cold and refreshing, like the mineral water on Quinton Rells.

"So," Lainey asked softly, "where do we go from here?"

"Go?"

She laughed softly. "What are we going to do about us, about what we feel for each other?"

Micah stared into his glass, watching the tiny bubbles. What were they going to do? What would she say if he told her the truth about who he was, where he'd come from? Would she still look at him like that, her beautiful brown eyes soft with affection? Would she still want him to hold her, kiss her? Or would she turn away in revulsion?

"Micah?"

"I don't know."

"You're not married, are you?"

"No."

"Is there someone waiting for you at home?"

He thought briefly of Adana, then shook his head. "But sooner or later I must go back."

"Why? Why can't you stay here?"

"I don't belong here."

"Maybe I could go with you?"

"No, that's not possible."

"Oh." She looked away, but not before he saw the hope fade from her eyes.

"Lainey..."

"You should get some rest," Lainey said. Rising, she pulled on her clothes and stepped into her sandals. "I'm going for a walk."

He started to reach for her, then thought better of it. He didn't want to hurt her, to make her think that what they had shared had been—what had she called it, casual sex?—but maybe it was better this way. They had no future together. Once he repaired the intergalactic transmitter, he would be able to send a message relaying his situation and whereabouts and someone from home would come to pick him up and he would never see Lainey St. John again.

The mere idea hurt worse than the nagging pain in his side.

Chapter Ten

When would she ever learn? Every time she thought she'd found Prince Charming, he turned out to be a frog!

She wouldn't cry. She refused to cry. After all, she hardly knew the man. Heck, she didn't even know his last name. Didn't know if his parents were living, if he had brothers and sisters, or how old he was.

She kicked the corner of a picket fence. How long could it take to get over a man she had only known for a few days?

A lifetime, she thought, remembering how tenderly he had made love to her. It would take a lifetime to forget a man like Micah.

Suddenly cold, she wrapped her arms around herself and then, with a sigh, she turned around and went home.

Micah met her at the door. "Lainey..."

She swept past him, relieved to see he had pulled on his laundered jeans and T-shirt in her absence.

"Lainey, forgive me. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't."

He didn't say anything, only gazed down at her through those amazing silver-blue eyes that seemed able to probe the furthest reaches of her soul.

"Okay, so you hurt me. I'll get over it."

"Will you?"

She lifted her chin defiantly. "Of course I will."

"But I will never get over you, Lainey St. John," he replied softly, sadly. "No matter how long I live, no matter where I go, your goodness will always be a part of me."

His words, filled with sincere feeling and regret, melted the wall of ice around her heart.

"Micah, please don't go. Not yet."

"Lainey, come and sit down."

I don't want to hear this, she thought as she crossed the room and sat down on the sofa. *Whatever it is, I don't want to hear it.*

Micah paced the floor for a moment, one hand pressed against his wounded side. And then, against his better judgment, he knelt in front of her, determined to tell her the truth before he left.

"Lainey, there's something I have to tell you."

"No." She shook her head, knowing that whatever he said was going to alter her life forever.

"Please, just listen. I'm not who you think I am, *what* you think I am."

"*You are* married!" she exclaimed. "I knew it!"

"No." He started to reach for her hand, then thought better of it. "Lainey, those men weren't looking for me because I'm some kind of fugitive from your law. They're looking for me because I'm not from your world."

"Right. Next thing I know, you'll be telling me you can't stay because your flying saucer is ready to blast off to explore a galaxy far, far away."

"Lainey, it's the truth. Xanthia isn't a country. It's a planet located at the edge of the Milky Way. My spaceship crashed in the woods behind that old house where we met."

Exasperated, she shook her head. "If this is your way of letting me down easy, I don't find it very amusing."

"Lainey, look at me. Who do I look like?"

"What?"

"Who do I look like?"

"Except for your eyes, you look a lot like my favorite romance cover hunk. So what?"

"Do you know why?"

Lainey frowned. "Heredity, I would imagine."

"No. I look like this man because I knew he wouldn't frighten you."

"I don't understand."

"When you came into the upper room in the mansion, I probed your mind for a male image that you found pleasing, one that you found attractive."

"No..." It was too outrageous, too incredible. She didn't believe in aliens or flying saucers any more than she believed in Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. "It can't be true."

"I can prove it."

She didn't ask how. She knew how. Images of space monsters flashed through her mind—the bizarre beings in the cantina scene from *Star Wars*, the gill-man in *The Creature From the Black Lagoon*, the hideous reptilian creature in *Alien*, the hulking monster from *The Thing*. Oh, Lord, what kind of hideous beast had she made love to?

"Lainey?"

She shook her head, ashamed of her cowardice. "I don't want to know."

A rueful smile touched his lips. "I'm considered quite handsome by those who know me."

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," she retorted. "If you feel the need to go on with this farce, just show me your spaceship and I'll believe you."

"I doubt if it's a good idea to go back there just now."

Lainey nodded. He was right, of course. No doubt the police and the people from SETI were still searching the area.

SETI... outer space... images of the blue glow she'd seen in the bathroom and the odd color of Micah's blood rose up in her mind. Merciful heavens, what if he was telling her the truth? But that was impossible. There were no such things as flying saucers. There had to be another explanation. A logical explanation.

Micah leaned forward. "Where's the black box I gave you?"

"In the kitchen."

"Get it."

Muttering under her breath, Lainey did as he asked. Returning to the living room, she handed it to him.

"All right," she said, resuming her place on the sofa, "I'll bite. What is that thing?"

"It's an intergalactic transmitter. A radio."

She looked skeptical. "It doesn't look like any radio I've ever seen."

His gaze held hers. "Exactly."

He tapped what sounded like some sort of code onto the top of the box with his fingertip and the lid popped open. Lainey leaned forward. There was a keypad labeled with foreign symbols of some kind, and several small, square chips that looked like the innards of her computer.

Micah frowned. "I'd hoped to have it working by now."

"Hard to find spare parts this far from home, I guess," Lainey muttered sarcastically.

Micah nodded absently, his attention momentarily focused on the transmitter. Thus far, he hadn't activated the distress signal. Slight as it was, there was always a chance that a tracking station here on earth might pick up the signal, and he had no wish to alert the earthlings to his presence, or risk putting Pergith and his craft in danger. If he could only get the transmitter working, he could advise Pergith of his whereabouts and arrange a rendezvous. There was always a chance someone on earth might pick up his transmission, but with luck, he would be on his way back home before any of earth's tracking devices could pinpoint his location.

"So," Lainey asked, "what are you going to do?"

Micah shrugged. "I might be able to salvage what I need from the wreckage of my ship."

"I thought you said you couldn't go there."

"Not now. But your people are bound to give up sooner or later."

"Maybe."

Micah closed the box and slid it under the sofa. "I don't want to leave you," he murmured fervently. "But I can't stay. And I can't take you with me."

Suddenly, it was all too much. She needed to be alone, to think, to try and make sense out of something that was totally incomprehensible.

Abruptly, she stood up. "I think I need another walk," she said, and rushed out of the room before he could stop her.

It was warm outside. The sky was clear and blue; the sun was shining. The people she passed on the street looked ordinary.

Outer space. He said he was from outer space. Why would he concoct such an outlandish story if it wasn't true? Unless he was just crazy. But he didn't act crazy.

Maybe she was. She thought of the strange blue aura around the figure in the photograph, then shook her head. Probably just a glitch in the developing. And the brown blood? Try as she might, she couldn't explain that away, or blame it on a roll of faulty film.

Increasing her stride, she headed for the library.

She was surprised by the number of books that had been written about UFO sightings. She picked several at random, found an unoccupied table, and started to read.

Facts and figures jumped out at her. Since World War II, tens of thousands of reports of UFOs had been gathered by the Air Force and other government and civilian investigative organizations around the world.

Reports came from ordinary people in small towns, from astronauts like Borman and McDivitt, to police officers like Lonnie Zamora who claimed to have seen a UFO in Socorro, New Mexico, in 1964.

Ninety percent of all sightings were proven to be misidentifications of airplanes or stars or other natural or artificial objects, but the other ten percent couldn't be rationally explained away.

Sightings had been reported as far back as 1896.

In 1975, a man in New York claimed to have seen ten or eleven aliens emerge from a spaceship. He said they were only three-and-a-half to four feet tall and clad in identical hooded, one-piece, light-colored garments. He went on to say they had dug around in the ground, poured some earth in their bags, and returned to the spaceship.

Another man who claimed to have been abducted described the room he had been examined in as a big, circular, flattened-out oval. He said there was no sound in the room, and the table they examined him on

seemed to grow out of the floor.

There were numerous descriptions of what aliens looked like; some people had described them as tall and skeleton-thin, with enormous heads and sunken eyes; others claimed the creatures were only three or four feet tall, shapeless, with no necks.

Another described the alien he had seen as being "kinda flat" with broad shoulders, a thin neck, and arms much longer than a human's, with long, bony fingers. Three fingers. And a large thumb. The head was described as egg-shaped, with sharp cheeks, a small mouth that didn't open, eyes like a cat's, very tiny ears, and no hair.

Still another description, perhaps the most frightening of all, characterized the alien as having leathery, amphibian-type skin that was greenish-yellow and wrinkly.

One of the books contained drawings depicting beings with thin bodies and large heads. The creatures had no hair, no visible ears, large, almond-shaped eyes, and thin lips.

Lainey stared at the drawings of the supposed space aliens. Was that how Micah really looked? Was he some nightmarish creature with a huge hairless head and a skeletal body? The thought made her shudder.

So many conflicting descriptions, Lainey mused. Maybe there were alien beings from dozens of planets zooming in and out of earth's atmosphere, doing their little tests, taking samples of dirt from the earth, blood from the people...

For a moment, she cradled her head in her hands and closed her eyes. It was too awful, too bizarre, to be true.

After a few moments' rest, Lainey turned to the back of the book. There were organizations you could call if you thought you'd seen a UFO—the Center for UFO Studies in Chicago, Illinois; the Mutual UFO Network in Seguin, Texas; and the National Investigations Committee on UFOs in California.

There were thousands of people who claimed to have been abducted by aliens and taken aboard flying saucers. Some said they had been examined, poked and prodded with needles; some said samples of their blood and skin had been taken. There were photos of scars supposedly left by these barbaric examinations.

The last book mentioned that there were four kinds of encounters with aliens. The first kind was the sighting of a saucer; the second kind involved visual evidence or impressions made by a spacecraft, like burned areas or irradiated soil, grass, or trees; the third kind, the kind Spielberg had made his movie about, were those in which the person involved actually observed or confronted an alien. The fourth kind were encounters where people claimed to have been abducted.

Lainey sat back in her chair. *Well, what do you know*, she thought, dazed, *I've been having my very own close encounter of the third kind. Very close*, she amended, remembering that they had made love only a few hours before.

From out of nowhere came the memory of the episode of *Soap* where Burt's wife, Mary, gave birth to an alien baby. For the first time in her life, Lainey was glad she couldn't have children.

She stared, unseeing, at the books spread across the table. She would have dismissed it all as nonsense except for one thing: almost all those who had encountered aliens mentioned that the space creatures

communicated telepathically, the way Micah had communicated with her.

Head spinning from all she'd read, Lainey returned the books to the shelves and left the library.

She was surprised to find that it was dark outside.

She stood on the steps for a moment, her fear of the dark suddenly making itself known as she gazed up and down the deserted street. She wished Micah was there beside her, and then laughed. A lot of help he'd be if a UFO decided to carry her away.

Shaking off her fears, she started walking home.

Micah wandered through Lainey's house. Behavioral scientists on Xanthia had been studying earthlings for centuries, marking their progress, the advance of their civilization. He wished now that he had spent more time learning about Lainey's world, but in his wildest dreams, he had never imagined that he would find himself stranded on Earth.

It took him only moments to figure out how to turn on the television, the stereo, the microwave. All were primitive by his standards, primitive but fascinating.

He thumbed through her books—romances and mysteries, the plays of Shakespeare, the poetry of William Blake, histories of the Old West, books on other cultures and peoples, on Eastern philosophy, maps and dictionaries, a thesaurus, a book on computers.

He stopped to smell the flowers that bloomed in the colorful clay pots on her windowsill, touched the leaves of the green plants that were scattered throughout the house. He tasted her toothpaste, ran his hand over the pale pink nightgown that hung on the back of her bedroom door.

Closing his eyes, he sprayed her perfume on the back of his hand and inhaled deeply. The scent, so much a part of her, only increased his longing for her.

He was conscious of time passing as he moved through her house on a journey of discovery. She liked flowers and plants.

There were a variety of odd-looking stuffed creatures on the foot of her bed. She collected unicorns. Pink appeared to be her favorite color. He thumbed through her collection of compact discs. The names of the artists were unfamiliar, of course, and he picked one at random.

"Yanni." He read the name aloud as he slipped the disc into the player and turned it on.

He liked the music immediately. It was beautiful, haunting, filled with passion, reminding him of a popular musician on Xanthia.

Going into the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator. The food on earth was vastly different from that of Xanthia, different but not unpleasant. He liked milk and cheese, apples, potato chips, Milky Way candy bars, chocolate chip cookies.

The water on earth tasted far different from that at home; the air was thicker, harder for him to breathe, and it reacted oddly against his skin, causing a faint blue glow.

He looked out the window, checking the time. She'd been gone for two hours by Earth's reckoning. He wondered fleetingly if she had left for good, and then dismissed the idea. This was her home, after all.

He never should have told her who he was, he thought, but he hadn't been able to bear the thought of hurting her, of letting her think that she wasn't important to him, that he didn't care.

Standing there, staring out the window, it occurred to him that she might have betrayed his whereabouts to the men who were searching for him. The thought gave him pause, and then he dismissed it. He would never believe that. Never.

He went into the living room again and sat down. Bored, he picked up a newspaper and began to read, wondering when the people of earth would learn to stop killing each other and turn their time and energy to more productive endeavors, wondering if they'd put an end to the pollution that was killing their planet and fouling their oceans before it killed them.

Where was Lainey?

He threw the newspaper on the floor and went to the window. It was dark out now, dark and cold. Closing his eyes, he let his mind search for her.

She was on her way home.

Walking rapidly.

Shivering against the wind.

She was hungry. And tired. And confused.

Micah let out a sigh of relief. She was coming home. He peered into the darkness, wondering if he should leave before she arrived, wondering if she had stayed away so long in the hope that he would be gone by the time she returned.

And perhaps that would be best. It might be easier to just go, to exit her life before his presence disrupted her existence any more than it already had.

But even as he considered leaving, he knew he couldn't go without seeing her just one more time.

Danger!

The warning jolted through him like an electrical charge.

Lainey was in danger.

Chapter Eleven

The footsteps sounded closer, more ominous. Lainey picked up her pace a little, resisting the urge to look over her shoulder. She knew who was following her. She'd passed the two punks about half a block back. One of them had made a crude remark as she went by, and then they'd fallen into step behind her, their words growing more lewd, more suggestive.

She glanced around, looking for help, but there was no one else to be seen. The stores she passed were all closed, and now she was approaching a vacant lot.

Fear made her stomach queasy and coated her palms with sweat.

What to do, what to do? She knew instinctively that she couldn't outrun them even as she knew that running would only whet their appetite for the kill.

Oh, Lord, she was so afraid! Every lurid tale of rape and murder she'd ever read about in the papers rose up to haunt her, making an abduction by an alien seem almost tame in comparison.

I'm coming, Lainey.

His voice cut through her fear as cleanly as a knife through butter.

Hurry, please hurry! The silent plea screamed inside her mind.

And then he was there, rounding the corner ahead of her.

"Micah!" She sobbed his name, tears of relief welling in her eyes as he pulled her up against him, sheltering her against the indomitable wall of his chest.

The two young toughs who had been following her came to an abrupt halt.

Lainey's breath caught in her throat when she got a good look at them. They both wore the distinctive colors of a local gang. One of them, a kid of about sixteen clad in baggy pants and a loose-fitting black shirt, held a gun in his hand. Held it as if he'd been born with it. The other boy, who was perhaps a year or two younger, casually tossed a switchblade from one hand to the other.

"Hey, she's ours, man," the kid with the gun said.

"No," Micah replied, his voice loud and clear. "She is mine."

"If you won't give her to us, we'll just have to take her."

Micah shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Ugly and stupid," the kid with the knife said. "That's a bad combination."

Micah took a step forward, putting himself between Lainey and the two punks.

"Micah..."

"Don't worry, Lainey."

The kid with the gun laughed. It was a dry, humorless sound, like leaves skittering over a grave. "Hear that, Griff, he told her not to worry."

"Told ya he was stupid," Griff replied.

"Go home," Micah said, his voice calm. "I don't want to hurt you."

The boy with the knife snorted disdainfully. "*You're gonna hurt us* ? Man, you really are stupid."

Lainey glanced around, hoping to see a police car, as the guy with the knife took a step forward. As usual, there was never a cop around when you needed one.

And then she glanced at Micah, and time seemed to stand still. Voices and images seemed to blur. She watched in horror as the kid with the gun lifted the weapon as if to fire, and then, as if struck by an invisible blow, he stumbled backward. The gun turned red, then white, and he let out a high-pitched shriek as the glowing metal burned the skin off the palm of his hand.

The other punk uttered a vile obscenity, then began backing away when he realized Micah's attention was now focused on him.

"Hey, I didn't mean nothing, man," he said. He risked a glance at his companion, who was writhing on the ground cradling his injured hand against his chest. "I didn't mean nothing," he said again, and dropping the switchblade, he turned and ran.

Lainey stared at the boy on the sidewalk, then at the gun, which glowed and pulsed like a white-hot flame.

Micah held out his hand. "Let's go, Lainey."

She nodded, too stunned to speak, as she took his hand. The fingers that curled around her own trembling ones were warm and strong.

They were several blocks away before she found her voice. "What happened back there? How did you do that?"

Micah shrugged. "Just a little trick I know."

"Some trick," Lainey muttered. "How did you know I was in trouble?"

"I felt it." He squeezed her hand. "Where did you go?"

"To the library."

He lifted one brow. "The library? Do you always go there to hide?"

"No, I... I did some research on UFOs."

"I see," he said, keeping his voice and face impassive. "And did your research convince you that I'm telling the truth?"

"No, it only confused me more."

They were home now. Opening the front door, Lainey went into the living room. Everything looked the same as when she'd left, and yet she knew that nothing would ever be the same again.

Hands clasped together, she turned to face Micah. "So, are you really a little green man, or a monster?"

"Neither."

"Show me, then, now, before I lose my nerve."

Micah took a deep breath, and then let himself appear in his natural form.

Lainey stared at him for a long moment. He was nothing like what she had imagined and everything she could have hoped for. He was tall and broad and beautifully formed, perfection upon perfection. His skin, what she could see of it, was golden brown, smooth, devoid of hair. A shimmering blue aura surrounded him, pulsing softly. His eyes were large, the same arresting silver-blue color as before, slightly tilted at the outside corners. *Catlike*, she thought, remembering one of the descriptions she had read. That part, at least, had been true. His nose was long and straight, his lips full. Long blond hair, almost silver in color, fell well past his shoulders. He held up one hand and she saw that there was an extra bit of webbing between his thumb and forefinger.

If possible, he was even more appealing than before.

"You don't look much different," Lainey remarked, "except for that blue glow."

"A little different," he said, and sweeping his hair back on one side, he let her see his ear. It was small and flat and lay close to his head.

Just like in one of the books, she thought, but everything else was different.

"So?" Micah said, letting his hair fall back in place, "are you going to run screaming into the night?"

"I guess not, although that blue glow is a little disconcerting."

"It's caused by the high level of oxygen in Earth's atmosphere."

He was watching her, his gaze warm and steady on her face. She felt the heat rise in her cheeks, felt her stomach begin to flutter wildly.

"So," she said, toying with the hem of her shirt, "can you do any other weird things besides read my mind and melt gun metal?"

"Like what?"

She crossed her arms over her breasts. "You don't have X-ray vision, or anything, do you?"

"X-ray vision?"

"You know, like Superman... never mind, I guess you don't know." She shook her head. "I don't know what to make of all this."

She sat down on the sofa, studying Micah from the corner of her eye. Maybe she was dreaming.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Leave?"

"I have the feeling that my being here is making you uncomfortable."

"No. Yes, well, maybe a little. I guess I just haven't absorbed it all yet."

"Lainey..."

"Why did you come here? To Earth, I mean?"

"My ship malfunctioned and crashed."

"Have you been here before?"

"No."

"Have any of your... your people?"

Micah sat down on the other end of the sofa, wondering how to answer her, wondering if he dared tell her the truth, or if she would be happier with a lie.

"Have they?"

She was watching him carefully, waiting for his answer, and he knew he couldn't lie to her.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Scientific curiosity about a race that's different from our own, yet amazingly similar."

"Have they ever abducted anyone?"

Micah hesitated a moment, and then nodded.

Lainey felt the blood drain from her face as she recalled the horrible incidents she had read about in the library, stories of people being taken aboard UFOs to be poked and prodded like laboratory animals. The books she had read described aliens cutting people open, examining their internal organs, taking samples of blood and tissue. She remembered the awful scars pictured in one of the books.

"Lainey, it's not like that!" He started to reach for her, but she drew away, her face a mask of horror and revulsion.

"Lainey, you must believe me. We've never harmed anyone, never done any of those things that are troubling you. All my people have ever done is talk to those they have taken, ask questions, nothing more."

It was the truth, whether she believed it or not. His people meant hers no harm. He didn't know if there were beings from other worlds visiting the earth, but no one who had been examined by Xanthians had ever been harmed, nor were they ever allowed to remember the experience. They were not hypnotized to forget the incident; it was completely erased from the mind so that not even hypnosis could recall it.

Xanthia had strict regulations forbidding his people to intermingle with humans for any but scientific

purposes. Earthlings were making longer forays into space, probing deeper and deeper.

It was Xanthia's wish to remain unknown and undiscovered. Unlike humans, Xanthians abhorred violence and warfare. They did not seek to colonize other planets or impose their will upon other civilizations. They did not pollute the land. Their air was clear and untainted; their oceans were uncontaminated by filth and refuse.

"Lainey, won't you please believe me?"

She didn't answer, merely continued to stare at him as if he were indeed the monster she had expected him to be.

Her silence, and the fear she was trying to hide, made him ache deep down inside.

"Have I ever lied to you?" he asked quietly. "Have I hurt you in any way?"

"I don't know what to believe."

"Believe that I care for you, that I would never do anything to hurt you."

Lainey closed her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose. She had a horrible headache all of a sudden.

"Lainey..."

She opened her eyes, startled to find him sitting close beside her. She hadn't heard him move, hadn't felt the sofa shift beneath his weight when he moved. "How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"You know what."

"It's a gift, like reading your mind."

"You can't turn invisible, too, can you?"

"No."

She eyed him warily as he lifted one hand toward her.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Lainey." His voice was low and quiet, his luminous eyes filled with a silent plea. "Won't you please trust me?"

She couldn't help tensing as he reached toward her. Slowly, gently, he pressed his fingertips against her forehead. In seconds, her headache was gone.

"You're full of tricks, aren't you?" she murmured, unable to keep a faint note of accusation out of her voice.

"It's not a trick. I have the ability to project heat and energy."

"Oh." She felt bereft when he took his fingertips from her brow. "What's it like where you come from?"

"It's a pretty place, very peaceful. There are no wars. Our cities and our oceans are clean and beautiful. There is very little misconduct, as the penalties are severe and punishment is carried out immediately."

Unlike the United States, she thought, where criminals who had been sentenced to death lived in comfort on death row.

"Does your planet look like Earth?"

"In a way. We have trees and flowers and grass, though they're different in color and form from yours. Our sky is more pink than blue."

"And do you have movies and TV?"

"Yes, but on a more advanced scale than yours."

"And books? Do your people read for pleasure?"

Micah nodded. "But no one on Xanthia writes as well as you do. Why don't you rest now?"

Lainey nodded. She did feel tired. Tired and confused.

Before she could stand up, Micah swept her into his arms and carried her down the hall to her bedroom. Pulling down the covers of the bed, he placed her, very gently, on the mattress, removed her shoes, then drew the blankets up to her chin.

"Go to sleep, Lainey. I'll leave tomorrow morning if that's what you want."

She nodded, unable to speak past the lump in her throat. She didn't want him to go, but did she want him to stay?

She watched him leave the room. A faint blue glow remained behind for a moment and then, it too, was gone.

She was in a large oval room being pursued by a little green man with four arms and two heads. He held a scalpel in one hand and a gigantic syringe in another. She ran and ran, but there was no way out, and everywhere she looked, she saw stainless steel operating tables fitted with thick leather restraints. There were people on the tables, people who screamed soundless screams as shiny silver scalpels cut into their flesh. She ran and ran, but always he was behind her, laughing maniacally.

She was dreaming. She knew she was dreaming, knew it wasn't real, and yet she couldn't outrun the horror, the fear of what would happen if he caught her.

She had to wake up!

She screamed then, screamed and screamed, until her silent shrieks became reality and the sound of her panicked cries jerked her awake.

She sat up, drenched in sweat.

A moment later, Micah burst into the room. "Lainey!" He switched on the overhead light. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, squinting against the sudden brightness. "You're not blue anymore."

He shrugged. "I thought you would be more comfortable if I looked like your cover model again."

"Oh." She sensed that it pained him because she was more at ease with an illusion than with who and what he really was, but then, hadn't she always been more at ease in fantasy than reality? It was why she loved writing so much, why she was so good at it.

"Are you all right?" Micah asked quietly.

"Yes. I had a nightmare." She began to shiver. "It was awful."

"What was it about?"

"Monsters from outer space," she answered, avoiding his gaze.

"And was I in it?"

"No."

He stared down at her, feeling as if his whole life, once as meticulously ordered as the universe, was spinning out of control.

Lainey gazed up at Micah, wishing he would hold her, comfort her, yet too hurt and confused to ask.

Knowing he was invading her privacy, yet needing to know what she was thinking, what she was feeling, Micah let his mind probe hers.

Anger. Confusion. Hurt. Fear. A need. To be held. To be loved...

Love. It was an unfamiliar concept, difficult to understand. His people cared for each other. There was honor and respect for friends, reverence for the elderly, veneration for those in positions of authority. But love...

Was it love that he felt for Lainey St. John? Love that made him ache for her, love that made him want to see her smile again, that made him want to spend every waking moment at her side?

He ran a hand through his hair. How could he love her? They were worlds apart. Literally worlds apart.

Lainey...

Because he couldn't look at her and not touch her, Micah sat down on the edge of the bed, and after a moment's hesitation, he drew her into his arms and cradled her against his chest.

She fit into his embrace as if she had been created for him and for him alone.

She made a small, whimpering sound as she snuggled against him, and Micah knew that he was lost. If

she asked him to go, he would go.

And if she asked him to stay, he would stay.

Micah rested his chin on the top of her head and closed his eyes. If Pergith should find him and he refused to go home, he would be considered a traitor, an enemy of Xanthia. They could not risk his being caught and examined and perhaps persuaded, under duress or drugs, to divulge information about Xanthia and its people.

He released a long, slow sigh of resignation. No explorer from Xanthia had ever remained on Earth this long. He had learned much of Earth and its people and technology, information that might prove useful to his planet, information that he was honor-bound to report to his superiors. But, even more damning, he knew too much of the inner workings of Xanthia for them to risk letting him stay.

Chapter Twelve

Lainey woke slowly, suffused with a sense of warmth and peace. Micah lay beside her, one arm draped protectively around her waist, the other cradling her head.

Content, she let her gaze move over him. What was there about this man that filled her with such peace, and what would she do when he was gone? She had known him such a short time, and yet he filled the empty places within her heart and soul in a way no else ever had.

Last night, she had fallen asleep in his arms. She had awakened several times, always fearing that he would be gone, but each time he had stroked her hair, urging her to go back to sleep, assuring her that everything would be all right.

In the middle of the night, cocooned in a cloak of darkness, she had let herself believe; but now, in the bright light of day, reality crowded in on her and she sat up, suddenly restless.

"What troubles you, Lainey?"

"I thought you were asleep."

"No."

"Have you been awake all night?"

Micah nodded. Eyes still closed, he asked the question that had kept sleep at bay. "Have you made up your mind?"

"About what?"

"My staying here. I told you I would leave this morning if you wished me to go."

"Look at me, Micah."

Slowly, he opened his eyes and met her gaze. He could have probed her mind for her decision, but if it was bad news, he didn't want to know it a moment sooner than necessary.

"I don't want you to go."

Relief, sweeter than Xanathian winter wine, washed through him. "Are you certain?"

Lainey nodded. "Maybe they'll never find you."

"Maybe."

She gazed into his eyes, willing him to read her mind, to know how desperately she needed to feel his arms around her.

"Lainey, what would you have me do?"

"Why don't you just read my mind, Micah?"

He shook his head, knowing he wouldn't venture into her thoughts again unless he thought she was in danger.

"No. If I am to stay, then your thoughts must be your own," he said, feeling guilty for stealing into her mind the night before. "I don't want you to feel as though you can have no secrets."

"I want you to stay, Micah. For as long as you can."

"Would you mind if I held you in my arms?"

Lainey laughed softly. "You held me all night. Why would I mind now?"

"Last night, you were asleep."

"I'm not asleep now."

Gently, he drew her into his embrace, marveling at the way her slim body molded itself to his. He had sought solitude for most of his adult life, preferring his own company to the company of others. Only now, holding Lainey in his arms, did he realize how lonely his existence had been.

"You can do more than hold me," Lainey said shyly. "If you want to."

Knowing how fragile her feelings were, how hard it had been for her to ask for his love, Micah chose his next words carefully, hoping she would understand that he had only her welfare in mind. Absently, his hand stroked her cheek.

"I want nothing more than to join with you, Lainey," he said, his knuckles lightly grazing her cheek, "but I have nothing with me to prevent conception, and..."

He felt her withdraw from him ever so slightly. "You don't have to make excuses, Micah."

"Lainey, you must know how much I want you."

"You don't need to worry, then," she said. "I can't have children."

The sadness and regret in her voice tore at his heart. "I'm sorry, Lainey."

She shrugged, as if it didn't matter, but it mattered very much. She had always wanted children, lots of children. She had gone to every doctor in town, even driven into the city to see a specialist, but they had all said the same thing—she was barren.

Murmuring her name, Micah stroked her hair, her back, hoping she would find comfort in his touch. He did not understand her longing for children. On Xanthia, he would have planted his seed in Adana, and then never seen her again. Out of curiosity, he might have gone to see his child when it was born, but he would never be a part of the child's upbringing, though he might observe the child as often as he wished, if he wished.

Lainey snuggled against him, a single tear trickling down her cheek. It was so unfair. Women all over the world had babies every day. Women who didn't want them. Women who abused them, left them in trash cans, tried to abort them. It just wasn't fair.

She closed her eyes, letting the warmth of Micah's touch wash over her. His nearness, the feel of his hand in her hair, seemed to draw the pain from her heart. If she couldn't have a child to love, she would love Micah for as long as she could.

She drew back a little, cupping his face in her hands. His eyes were filled with such tenderness, it made her heart ache and stirred a need deep within her, a need only he could satisfy.

"Micah." She whispered his name as she drew him closer.

Warmth and contentment suffused her as his mouth closed over hers. His hands adored her, making her feel beautiful, desired.

Their lovemaking was unlike anything she had ever known, a joining not only of their flesh, but of hearts and souls and minds. She sensed his need for her, his affection, his desire to please her, to shield her from pain and harm.

He murmured to her, love words spoken in her language and his, his voice thick with passion.

And then, as his seed spilled into her, filling her with warmth and pleasure beyond words, she felt as if she'd been reborn.

Lainey sat up, and then groaned as she heard her mother call her name. Of all times for her parents to make an unannounced visit, she thought. She glanced at Micah, sleeping beside her.

"Lainey?" Her mother's voice, coming nearer.

"I'll be right there!" she hollered.

Jumping out of bed, she grabbed her robe and hurried out of the room before her mother came looking for her.

"Hi, Mom," Lainey said, steering her mother toward the kitchen. "What are you doing here so early?"

"Did you forget you invited us to breakfast this morning?" her father asked cheerfully.

"Breakfast?" Lainey blinked at her father. So much had happened in the last few days, she *had* forgotten.

"Get dressed," her mother said. "I'll put the coffee on while you shower."

With a nod, Lainey left the parlor, wondering how she was going to explain Micah's presence to her parents. It didn't matter that she was a grown woman, that she'd been married and divorced. She was their only child, and she'd always be their "little girl."

Micah was awake when she returned to the bedroom. He looked at her askance when she entered the room.

"My folks are here," Lainey explained.

"Does their presence create a problem?" he asked, noting the look of dismay in her eyes.

"No, not really, it's just that..."

"What?"

"You," she said. "How do I explain your being here so early in the morning?"

He stared at her, not understanding.

Lainey let out a sigh of exasperation. "I don't know how things are done where you come from, but my parents aren't very open-minded when it comes to... to..."

She felt her cheeks grow hot as she gestured at the bed. "They don't believe in sex outside of marriage. And I didn't either," she mumbled sheepishly, "until I met you."

"Ah," Micah said, understanding at last. "What do you want me to do?"

"Get dressed."

Filled with trepidation, she went into the bathroom and stepped into the shower.

"You're a big girl," she murmured as she lathered her arms and legs, "a big girl, *abig* girl. You're entitled to live your own life."

She was still muttering to herself when she walked into the kitchen twenty minutes later.

"So," she asked brightly, "what would you like for breakfast?"

It was then that the shower went on again.

Ralph St. John looked at his daughter, a question in his eyes.

"I have a houseguest," Lainey said, refusing to meet her father's eyes. "So, what will it be? Waffles? Eggs? French toast?"

"Ham and eggs and wheat toast for me," Ralph said.

Dolores St. John tied an apron around her waist. "Who's your guest, dear?"

"Just a friend," Lainey said, stalling. Opening the refrigerator, she withdrew the ingredients for breakfast. "Mom, would you slice the ham, please?"

She knew the minute Micah entered the room. Her father, who had been complaining about the president's new health-care plan, stopped in mid-sentence. Her mother, who had been setting the table, dropped a handful of silverware on the floor.

Lainey felt her cheeks grow hot as her parents looked to her for an explanation. It was obvious they had assumed her friend was female.

Who is this man? their eyes seemed to say, *and why is he coming out of your bedroom at this hour of the morning?*

Lainey took a deep, calming breath, then pasted a smile on her face. "Mom, Dad, this is Micah. Micah, these are my parents, Ralph and Dolores St. John."

The silence was deafening.

Her father recovered first. Rising, he extended his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Mr..."

"Just Micah."

The two men shook hands.

"Sit down, Micah," Lainey said. "Breakfast is almost ready."

Dolores was still staring at Micah, who had bent down to retrieve the silverware she'd dropped.

"Mom?"

"What?"

"Maybe you'd better sit down, too."

"Yes, I think so," Dolores muttered.

Micah sat down at the head of the table, impassively enduring the scrutiny of Lainey's parents. Dolores St. John was a plump, pretty woman with short, curly black hair, a beautiful complexion, and vibrant blue eyes. Ralph St. John was tall, tan, and muscular, with dark brown hair and brown eyes.

Lainey quickly dished up breakfast, then sat down across from Micah.

"Dad, will you say grace?"

Ralph grunted assent, then lowered his head, his deep voice asking the Lord's blessing on the food and the hands that had prepared it.

"Thanks, Dad. Mom, will you pass the orange juice, please?"

"So," Dolores said, coming right to the point, "how long have you two known each other?"

"Not long," Lainey said. She glanced at her father and saw the knowing gleam in his eye. So, his gaze said, *this is the man you thought you'd never see again* .

The telltale flush in her cheeks was all the answer her father needed.

"Lainey tells me you're a pilot," Ralph commented. "What airline do you fly for?"

"He's not a commercial pilot, Dad," Lainey said quickly.

Ralph grunted. "Air Force?"

"Yes," Micah replied.

"Been flying long?"

"About fifteen years."

Ralph nodded. "I take it you're a career man, then?"

"Yes."

"Dad's a mechanic for Southwest Airlines," Lainey said, winking at her father. "Mom's been trying to get him to retire for years, but he just can't leave the planes alone."

Ralph looked at Micah and shrugged. "You know how it is. There's something about being around those big jets."

"Flying gets in a man's blood," Micah agreed.

"Are you here on vacation?" Dolores asked.

Micah grinned. "In a way."

"How long will you be here?"

"I'm not sure. I'm on an extended leave."

Lainey felt herself relax as Micah deftly parried her parents' questions. It was obvious that her mother thought Lainey had made the catch of a lifetime. Her father, too, seemed pleased, but then, he had a high regard for men in the armed services.

"That was good, pumpkin," Ralph said. Pushing his chair away from the table, he patted his stomach, then looked at Micah and winked. "She was always a heck of a cook. Even as a little girl, she loved to pretend she was cooking, always making mud pies."

"Thanks, Dad," Lainey said dryly. "Would you like some more coffee?"

"I've never turned down a cup of coffee in my life," he said with a grin. "No reason to start now."

"You men go on into the living room," Dolores said. "I'll help Lainey clean up in here."

Lainey groaned inwardly, dreading the third degree she knew was coming.

"Just leave the dishes, Mom." Lainey took off her apron, picked up the coffee pot and four cups, and followed her father into the front room.

The next hour passed pleasantly enough. Micah fielded her parents' questions with ease, apparently unperturbed by her mother's sometimes tactless attempt to delve into his past. Nevertheless, she was glad when her father said it was time to go.

She closed the door with a sigh, then rested against it. "Well, I'm glad that's over," she muttered.

"I like them," Micah said.

"Me, too, but..." She made a gesture of exasperation. "I know my mother was just dying to get me alone so she could ask me what's going on between us."

"You mean this?" Micah asked, pressing a kiss to her brow.

Lainey nodded, feeling her senses stir at his nearness.

He rested his forehead against hers, his hands circling her waist. "They care for you a great deal."

"Of course. Didn't your mother and father love you?"

"I never knew them."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

He shook his head at the sympathy he read in her eyes. "On my planet, children are not raised by their parents."

Lainey looked at him in horror. "They're not?"

"No. The young are raised in dormitories until they're old enough to look after themselves."

They moved to the sofa and sat down while Lainey digested that bit of information. "That's awful!"

"It wasn't awful, Lainey," he said, but even as he defended the ways of his people, he was aware of a sense of loss, of having missed the love that Lainey's parents obviously felt for her.

"Ours is a very ordered and regimented society," he went on, repeating words he'd heard a hundred times before and wondering, for the first time, at the reasoning behind them. "Children are tested at a young age. Those judged above average are tested again later. It was decided that I would be a navigator, and I was raised with that goal in mind."

"Did you want to be a navigator?"

"Always."

"But... but what if you wanted to be something else?"

"I was given a choice. No one is forced to do something he dislikes, but the tests are very discerning. Most of my people are assigned to areas where they excel."

"But you never knew your parents." Lainey couldn't imagine such a society. She thought of the trips her family had taken to Yosemite and the Grand Canyon, of the happy, noisy Christmases shared with her parents and aunts and uncles and cousins. The baseball games she'd gone to with her dad. The shopping sprees with her mother. Remembering, she was struck anew by the longing to have a child of her own.

"Did you ever try to find out who your parents were?"

"I knew who they were," Micah said. "My father was also a navigator. My mother was a brilliant scientist. I saw them occasionally, but I never really knew them." He took her hand in his, his thumb making concentric circles on the back. "There is no such thing as marriage on my planet, Lainey. My mother and father were chosen as mates based on their intelligence and physical attributes."

It just got worse and worse. Lainey shook her head, unable to comprehend such a world, or such an existence. And then she frowned. "Has someone been chosen for you?"

"Yes. Her name is Adana."

"I guess she's very smart and beautiful."

"Very."

"Oh."

"Lainey..."

"I guess you're anxious to go back to her."

Micah's gaze met hers. "You know better than that."

She did, but she couldn't stifle the fierce jealousy that burned in her heart when she thought of Micah with another woman. A beautiful woman. An intelligent woman. A woman who was capable of bearing his child.

"Lainey."

She heard the question in his voice, saw the sudden heat of passion flare in the depths of his silver-blue eyes as his palm cupped her cheek.

At her nod, he stood up, then lifted her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom.

Reverently, he lowered her to the bed, then stretched out beside her. "You're so beautiful."

He caressed her cheek with the back of his hand, marveling at the softness of her skin, the pale golden color, so unlike his own. She would never be able to blend in with his people. Her black hair and fair skin would elicit stares wherever she went. His people would think of her as an oddity, but he thought her the loveliest creature he had ever seen.

He tangled one hand in the silk of her hair. "Had I never met you, I would have gotten Adana with child and never spared her another thought. Until now, I never questioned the ways of my people, never had any desire to share my life with a woman." His fingertips traced her lower lip. "Such a thing is unheard of where I come from. But now..."

He swallowed hard, wishing he had the words to express the feelings in his heart, but words of love, like the concept of marriage, were foreign to him.

"Lainey, Lainey..." He murmured her name as he slowly undressed her.

No one had ever looked at her the way Micah did. He made her feel as if she were the most precious thing in his life, as if, by letting him hold her and caress her, she was giving him a gift beyond price.

"Lainey?"

The hesitation in his voice filled her with apprehension. "What?"

"Would you mind if... if..."

"Micah, you're scaring me."

"I want to make love to you in my own skin, so to speak."

"Oh," she said, her breath expelling in relief. "Is that all?"

"It's all right then?"

"Yes." She smiled her assurance, though she harbored a small doubt, wondering if Xanthian male anatomy would be different from that of males from Earth.

Micah closed his eyes and she felt him relax beside her, saw the gradual changes take place as his hair grew lighter, his skin darker. Watching him, she couldn't help wondering if all the men of Xanthia were as ruggedly handsome of face and form as Micah.

He stood for a moment, quickly stripping off his clothes, and Lainey breathed a small sigh of relief. He had all the right equipment in the usual place.

"Still sure?" he asked.

There was a hint of amusement in his voice, but she saw the wariness lurking in the depths of his silver-blue eyes as her gaze skimmed over him from head to heel. With a shy smile, she held out her arms.

Micah went to her eagerly, his arms wrapping around her, content, for the moment, just to hold her close.

Lainey's hands wandered over his back and broad shoulders, loving the solid muscular heat of him, the low murmur of pleasure that rumbled in his throat when she brushed her lips across his chest. The blue glow that emanated from his skin shadowed hers as well. Idly, she noticed that the glow seemed brighter when he was aroused.

He let her tease and torment him until he was on fire for her, until he trembled with the need to possess her, to be a part of her, body and soul, and then he turned the tables on her, bringing her to the brink until she sobbed his name, her fingernails raking the length of his back as she arched against him in silent invitation.

Micah took her then, slowly and deliberately, until they were joined flesh to flesh, their hearts beating as one, and as his life filled her, he knew he had finally found what he'd been searching for.

Chapter Thirteen

Lainey's mother phoned the next morning. It was an awkward conversation. Lainey was angry with herself for feeling guilty about Micah, and angry with her mother for making her feel that way. To her credit, Dolores didn't ask if Micah was living there, perhaps because she didn't want to know the answer. Lainey was on the verge of tears when she hung up.

"Is something wrong?" Micah asked.

"Not really. I guess my mother's disappointed in me."

Micah lifted one brow in question. "Disappointed?"

Lainey shrugged. "She doesn't approve of your being here."

Micah clenched his hands into tight fists as a fierce ache welled in his chest. "Do you want me to go?"

"No! No."

"Are you sure, Lainey? I don't want to cause trouble between you and your parents."

"I'm sure."

The next few days passed uneventfully. Micah slid effortlessly into Lainey's life, making it richer and more rewarding by his mere presence alone.

She would have preferred to spend every moment in his arms, but she had a contract to fulfill and so she forced herself to spend each morning at the computer. Writing had been her only joy in life since her divorce, but now Micah was there, and there were times when it was practically impossible for her to concentrate on her novel because she was so busy daydreaming about Micah, so eager to be in his arms again.

Sometimes it was embarrassing, but she couldn't keep her hands off him. He had asked her if she would mind if he remained in his natural form, explaining that it took a considerable amount of concentrated energy to maintain the shape of an earthling, and she had assured him that she didn't mind at all. The slight differences in his anatomy didn't repel her in the least; she had quickly grown accustomed to the faint blue glow that emanated from his skin. Like a teenager with her first big crush, her every thought was for Micah. She looked at him, and she wanted to touch him. She touched him, and a touch wasn't enough. She filled her eyes with the sight of him, loving the way he walked, the way he carried himself. He moved with catlike grace, agile, unconsciously sensual.

Gradually, they fell into a routine. After a leisurely breakfast, Lainey went into her office and wrote until

noon. She took an hour off for lunch, went back to work until five, and then spent the rest of the evening with Micah.

Micah spent his days learning everything he could about Lainey's civilization. He read the newspaper every day, perused numerous books and magazines, watched countless hours of TV. He remembered everything he read, everything he saw, everything he heard.

Sometimes, in the evening, they went out. Lainey took Micah shopping, buying him a couple pairs of Levis, some T-shirts, a couple of sport shirts, shoes and socks. She tried to buy him some underwear, but he adamantly refused to wear it.

Weekends were the best. They spent a day at the L.A. Zoo, with Micah comparing Earth's animals to those of Xanthia. They spent two days touring the Museum of Natural History. Micah was fascinated by the skeletons of Tyrannosaurus Rex and Triceratops, by the great whales, the woolly mammoths, the three-toed sloths and saber-toothed tigers.

They went to a baseball game and pigged out on popcorn and Junior Mints. They went to the movies often.

She taught him to play tennis, took him bowling, taught him how to dance.

Micah found it pointless but amusing to volley a tennis ball.

Bowling was more to his liking, and after a few lines, he bowled a perfect game.

"You've done this before," Lainey had accused him, but Micah had just grinned at her and explained that he had merely applied a Xanthian scientific principle to put the ball where he wanted it to go.

But it was dancing Micah loved best of all because it gave him an excuse to hold Lainey in his arms, to feel her body pressed close to his, to breathe in the flowery scent that was hers alone. No matter how many times he held her, kissed her he still found it difficult to believe that she desired him, that she enjoyed his company. Her easy laughter never failed to delight him. She was such a rare creature, filled with a love for life that had somehow been lost on Xanthia.

Lainey couldn't help noticing that, no matter where they went, women turned to stare at Micah. In the form he assumed, his resemblance to her favorite cover hunk was uncanny, and she often overheard women whispering, wondering if he was who they thought he was.

The days seemed to fly by. Lainey had always liked to cook, but now cooking became an adventure. Micah didn't care for meat—Xanthians, she learned, were vegetarians. He loved spaghetti. He loved grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup. He developed a taste for coffee heavily laced with cream and sugar. He loved anything chocolate; his favorite breakfast was a big bowl of Cocoa Puffs and a cup of hot chocolate smothered in whipped cream.

"You'll soon be as fat as a pig," Lainey had muttered one morning, but he had only laughed and said Xanthians never got fat.

They spent a couple of evenings with her parents because Dolores and Ralph had expressed a desire to get to know Micah better. At first, Lainey had been uncomfortable, knowing that her parents disapproved of her having a live-in companion.

One evening, when Micah had been busy in another part of the house, Lainey had asked her parents to please try and understand.

"I never meant for this to happen," she explained. "But I love him so much, and he's so good to me."

Ralph and Dolores had exchanged sheepish glances.

"We're sorry, Lainey," Dolores had said sincerely. "We didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable. I keep forgetting that times have changed."

"Just be careful," Ralph had said, giving Lainey an affectionate squeeze. "We love you, and we can't help worrying."

"We just want you to be happy," Dolores added.

"I know," Lainey had said, loving them the more for caring, for understanding.

The strain had eased between Lainey and her parents after that, and she and Micah had spent several pleasant evenings with her folks, either at home watching TV, or going out to dinner and a movie.

After two weeks, it seemed as though Micah had always been a part of her life; after three weeks, she wondered how she'd ever lived without him; after a month, Lainey knew she was hopelessly in love.

With a flourish, Lainey typed "The End" on the last page of her manuscript. At last, it was finished!

She sat back in her chair, grinning broadly. She'd written furiously for the last month, anxious to finish her book so she could spend all her time with Micah, and now it was done.

And it was good.

She backed up her work on a floppy disk, turned off the computer and went into the kitchen. Tomorrow, she would send a copy of the manuscript to her editor.

Tonight, it was time to celebrate.

She was reaching for the bottle of champagne she'd bought for just this occasion when she felt Micah's arms steal around her waist.

"You are done early today," he murmured, his breath warm against the side of her neck. "Is something wrong?"

"No." She leaned back against him, everything else forgotten as his hands teased their way up to cup her breasts. She stared at his fingers, so long and brown, at the thin layer of webbing between his thumb and forefinger, at the faint blue glow of his skin, and thought he had the most beautiful hands she had ever seen. "The book's done. It's time to celebrate, just the two of us."

"Lainey..." He bent forward and pressed his cheek to hers. How had he ever thought his life complete before now? He had spent years traveling through space, seeking, searching for some-thing to add color and light to his life and he had found it in the heart of the woman enfolded in his arms.

He whispered her name, his body coming to life, swelling, surging with desire, with the need to hold her, to be a part of her. To make her a part of him. He would never forget the first time they made love, never forget the sense of wonder, the feeling of humility, that had washed over him when Lainey had allowed him to hold her, to touch her, to learn what it meant to be a part of another being. There were no words in his language to describe what he felt when they made love, no words to express the depth of emotion that filled his soul. No words to tell her how grateful he was for the precious gifts she had given him—the gifts of her love, her trust.

He buried his face in her hair, inhaling the flowery, feminine scent. If he were deaf and blind, he thought, he would be able to find Lainey by her scent alone.

She turned in his arms, her mouth seeking his. Heat suffused him as she pressed against him. Her breasts were warm against his chest, her hands eager as they roamed across his back, slid over his buttocks, caressed his thighs. His breath quickened and he groaned low in his throat as her tongue teased his lips.

"Micah..."

He looked down at her, his body trembling with desire, and still he waited, waited for her silent nod that said it was all right for him to take her. She often kidded him about that, but even though they had made love every night for the past three weeks, and often during the day, he still waited for her to tell him it was all right.

"Why do I have to give you my permission every time?" she had asked him one night. "You must know I want you as much as you want me."

And he did know. He had learned to recognize the smoky look in her eyes that meant she wanted him, but her loving was too precious, too great a gift, to ever take for granted.

A faint smile curved Lainey's lips as she gazed up at him, and then she nodded.

It was the signal he had been waiting for. With a muffled cry of exultation, he swung her into his arms and carried her to the bed they shared.

They undressed each other, exchanging kisses that grew more and more ardent as each piece of clothing fell away. Lainey's heart swelled with love as they fell back on the pillows, locked in each other's arms.

"You were going to celebrate," Micah murmured as his hands caressed her.

"I am," Lainey replied, a soft smile curving her lips. "This is just what I had in mind."

"Are you sure?" His tongue laved her neck, swirled inside her ear.

She could hardly speak for the tremors of excitement that rippled through her. "Quite sure."

"Lainey..."

"Hmmm?" Her hands measured the width of his shoulders, then feathered across his chest.

He lifted himself on his elbows so he could see her face. Her eyes were dark with passion, her lips slightly parted.

"Lainey, I think I love you."

"Micah!"

"Is it all right?"

"Oh, Micah." She wrapped her arms around him, tears stinging her eyes. "I love you, too."

"You do?" He looked so surprised, she had to laugh.

"I do," she said. "Come, let me show you how much..."

Later, he held her in his arms while she slept, unable to believe that such a delightful creature could love him, amazed at how possessive he felt toward her now that he had declared his love and received hers in return.

Lying there, he knew he would never go home again. It seemed a small price to pay for the privilege of loving Lainey St. John. She had whispered her love for him before she fell asleep, had begged him to stay with her. It was what he wanted more than anything, to stay there with Lainey, to be a part of her life. It would not be easy. He would never be able to be himself anywhere except in the privacy of Lainey's house. He would never again see his home or travel the vast reaches of space, and yet he couldn't be sorry.

Tomorrow, he would destroy the transmitter and what was left of his spacecraft, thereby making it virtually impossible for anyone from Xanthia to trace his whereabouts should they still be searching for him.

With a sigh, he drew her closer, feeling as though he were holding the wealth of the universe within the circle of his arms.

Lainey shook her head emphatically. "No way, Jose."

Micah frowned. No way, Jose? It was an odd phrase, but there was no time to inquire as to its relevancy now.

"I'm going," he said firmly. "Alone."

Lainey shook her head again. "I'm not letting you go up there without me, and that's all there is to it."

Micah sighed. At times, she could be a most stubborn, exasperating creature. "Very well, Lainey, you can go with me. But you must promise to wait for me in your car."

"All right."

Ten minutes later they were on their way. Lainey glanced up at the sky as she drove toward the Grayson place. It was the dark of the moon and the night was as black as ten feet down.

"Are you sure you'll be able to find it?" she asked dubiously.

Micah nodded. "I'll find it."

Lainey parked the car about a quarter of a mile away from the mansion. Switching off the ignition and the lights, she turned toward Micah.

"How long will you be gone?"

"No more than an hour."

"You'll be careful?"

Micah nodded. He gazed at her a moment, then leaned across the seat and kissed her quickly. "Remember your promise," he admonished.

"I remember. Hurry."

Heart pounding, she watched Micah get out of the car. He took a few steps, then paused to glance over his shoulder, his gaze meeting hers.

Lainey had the sudden, disconcerting feeling that he was imprinting her image on his mind in case he never saw her again.

With a start, she leaned across the seat to roll down the window, intending to call him back, but by the time she got the window down, he had disappeared into the brush along the side of the road.

Micah moved stealthily through the darkness, pausing occasionally to check his bearings against the stars. His ship had crashed in a shallow hollow between two hills behind the mansion. The night seemed unnaturally silent, as if all the nocturnal creatures were holding their breath.

It took twenty minutes to reach the place where he had buried what was left of his spacecraft, and another ten minutes to uncover it.

Assuming his own form, he concentrated on the ship's remains, focusing his thoughts and his energy on obliterating the twisted wreckage that had once been the fastest ship in the Xanthian fleet.

He felt the heat, the inherent power, rise up within him, his body quivering as he sought to maintain the high level of energy required to reduce the pile of rubble to ashes. He knew a moment of regret as he destroyed all that was left of the sleek craft that had been his home in space for the last six years.

Projecting the amount of force needed to disintegrate the ship's debris drained his strength, and for a moment he stood there with his head bowed, his whole body trembling with fatigue.

He was walking toward the hill that led to the road where Lainey was waiting when he heard a faint rustling in the darkness off to his left. Pausing, he cocked his head to one side, listening, but all was still once more.

With a shake of his head, he started walking again. He hadn't gone far when a brilliant light illuminated the area. For a moment, he thought Pergith had found him, and then he heard a voice shout, "Take him!"

Micah spun on his heel, a soft oath escaping his lips as a sharp pain exploded in his chest.

With a grunt, he reeled backward, then sank to his knees as an overpowering numbness swept through him.

Breathing heavily, he stared up at the three men who surrounded him, and then he pitched headlong into a void as black and silent as the far reaches of space.

He'd been gone more than an hour. Fidgeting nervously, Lainey stared out the window, wondering for the tenth time in as many minutes what was keeping him.

Too jittery to sit in the car any longer, she got out and started walking up the road toward the mansion.

She heard the faint sound of voices as she neared the entrance to the Grayson place. Male voices. Excited voices.

Hiding behind a tall juniper, she peered down the driveway. A black van was parked alongside the house. The sweep of a flashlight made her dart backward. The voices were louder now. Two men dressed in black jumpsuits materialized from behind the house. A third followed.

He was carrying Micah over his shoulder.

One of the men opened the back door of the van and the other two dumped Micah's body inside, then jumped in and closed the doors; the third man climbed into the cab and started the engine.

Mind racing, Lainey ran back to her car, slid behind the wheel, and ducked down. A short time later, she heard the black van go by.

Feeling as though she were living one of her own mystery novels, she switched on the ignition and went in pursuit of the van, careful to stay well behind them.

They had Micah. The thought pounded in her brain, even as she wondered who "they" were, what they wanted him for, what they intended to do to him.

There had been no emblems or insignia of any kind on the van to signify if the men who had taken Micah belonged to a government organization. Were they from the Air Force? The Central Intelligence Agency? SETI? How had they known Micah survived the crash? That he would show up at the Grayson place tonight?

She scolded herself for letting him return to the mansion, for not realizing that some fanatical scientist with nothing better to do might still be in the area, waiting around in hopes that the alien, if he had indeed survived, might return to what was left of his ship.

She blamed Micah, too. Surely he had realized how dangerous it would be to return to his ship?

Micah. He could read her mind. She could read his. She concentrated on his face, willing him to hear her, needing his assurance that he was unhurt.

Please, she thought. *Please hear me. Please answer me .*

But there was only silence and an increasing sense of dread, an overwhelming fear that they had killed him and were taking his body to some secret laboratory to dissect and study.

Her imagination, always vivid and overly active, quickly went into overdrive, and she visualized a team of doctors and scientists standing around Micah's remains, examining the webbing on his hands, coldly removing his internal organs, measuring the size of his brain, testing his blood.

No! The denial screamed inside her head. He could not be dead.

Please, please, don't let him be dead. Quiet tears trickled down her cheeks as the unspoken prayer repeated itself in her mind.

She was so lost in thought, so steeped in despair, that she almost ran into the back of the van as it made a slow turn into a narrow driveway.

Coming to herself, she leaned on the horn as if she were an angry motorist, flipped the bird to the driver of the van, then sped on by. Careening around the next corner, she went about half a block, parked the car and killed the engine, then sat huddled in the seat, shivering.

"Please," she whispered, "I'll be so good, just don't let him be dead."

Chapter Fourteen

Muffled voices.

Darkness.

Pain.

Micah lay perfectly still, listening to the sounds around him, not wanting his captors to know he had regained consciousness. His whole body felt heavy; he was so groggy, he could scarcely think.

Awareness came to him in fragments. There was a needle in his left arm.

Cold metal straps encircled his wrists and ankles, shackling him to an equally cold metal table.

He was naked.

There was some sort of covering over his face.

Stark fear congealed in the pit of his stomach and a violent tremor wracked his body as he surmised that he was in a laboratory of some sort.

Gradually, the muffled voices grew more distinct, and he deduced that there were three men in the room, quietly discussing him as if he were a creature without understanding or feelings. Bits and pieces of their conversation filtered into his mind.

"Remarkably well-formed..."

"Not injured like the other one..."

"... should be able to keep this one alive..."

He felt the sharp prick of a needle as someone drew blood from his right arm, and then rough hands began to measure the width of his chest, his neck, the length of his arms and legs. One man called out the measurements, presumably so one of the other men could write them down. Fingers probed the webbing between his thumb and forefinger.

Someone removed the covering from his face, and Micah blinked against the bright glare of the overhead light.

A tall man with dark red hair peered down at Micah, his pale blue eyes magnified by the thick glasses he wore.

"I'm gonna take his vitals," Red Hair said. "Mac, jot this down. Blood pressure, eighty over forty. Pulse, thirty-five. Respiration, twelve."

Micah gagged as Red Hair forced his mouth open and placed a glass tube under his tongue.

A short time later, Red Hair removed the tube. He studied the numbers a moment, then grunted softly.

"Temp's ninety-six." Red Hair glanced at the other man. "Got all that?"

"Eighty over forty. Thirty-five. Twelve. Ninety-six. Got it."

Next, Red Hair pulled on a pair of rubber gloves and proceeded to examine Micah's ears, his eyes, his nose, stopping now and then to make copious notes in a thick black book.

Micah grimaced as the red-haired man forced his mouth open so he could examine his teeth, his tongue.

"Easy on the blood, Mac," Red Hair admonished. "You took too much last time and the creature died."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll be careful," Mac muttered.

Micah grunted softly as the man called Mac carelessly jabbed a needle into his right arm.

"We'll need a couple of hair samples, too," Red Hair said. "Gene, you wanna take care of that?"

"Right," the man called Gene replied. "We'll need urine, too."

"Damn!" Mac exclaimed as the syringe filled with fluid. "That brown blood throws me every time."

"Always thought Martian blood was supposed to be green," Gene said, grinning as he poked Micah in the side. "That's where you're from, isn't it, fella? Mars?"

"Do you suppose brown is its natural color?" Red Hair asked.

Mac shook his head. "Maybe, maybe not. Might be a chemical reaction to our atmosphere."

"The other one had brown blood, too," Red Hair remarked. "That idiot, Herb, never did find out what caused it, or what made the alien's skin glow, either."

"I'll find out," Mac said confidently, and callously jabbed another needle into the vein in Micah's right arm.

For a moment, Gene and Red Hair moved away from the table, their heads bent over a large book, and Micah felt a twinge of hope. Maybe they were through with him.

But they weren't. Micah's entire body went rigid when Red Hair began an extensive examination of his genitals.

Micah stared at the man, focusing his mind, his energy, on destroying the man, but nothing happened. It took him several minutes to realize that whatever drug they were using to keep him sedated had rendered him powerless; it also made coherent thought difficult, but it didn't interfere with his ability to hear, to see, to feel.

He felt suddenly nauseated as he realized he was helpless, that these men could do whatever they wished to him and there was nothing—nothing—he could do to stop them.

Micah glanced at the syringe slowly filling with his blood. *Not like the other one... keep this one alive*. What other one? he wondered dully.

He turned his head to the side to avoid the bright light that was making his head ache, felt his stomach churn at what he saw.

There was a long wooden shelf on the far wall, and on the shelf were numerous jars containing various Xanthian internal organs. A brain floated in a large bottle of clear liquid, webbed hands could be seen in a second jar. A Xanthian skeleton stood in the corner. Its empty eye sockets seemed to be looking at him with pity.

Micah knew of three Xanthian pilots who had disappeared while flying through earth's atmosphere. Was this skeleton one of those men, men he had worked with, laughed with?

For the next hour, the three men poked and prodded, measuring every inch of Micah's body. It was humiliating in the extreme, feeling their hands on him, listening while they made crude jests about the webbing on his hands, the size of his ears, the blue glow that shimmered around him, darker and more obvious now that he was in an agitated state.

They took pictures of him from every conceivable angle, taking close-ups of his hands, his ears, his eyes, making jokes about his ability to procreate as they snapped photos of his genitals.

"Too bad he destroyed the spaceship before we got there," Gene remarked as Red Hair took yet another picture. "That would have been a real coup."

"Next time," Red Hair said. "Next time we'll be better prepared."

"Yeah, next time," Gene muttered. "Your ass will be grass if SETI finds out about this. You know what Bergen said about going off on your own. And he'll burn us right along with you."

Red Hair shrugged as he picked up a scalpel and forceps. "We'll worry about that if and when it happens. Swab his chest with alcohol. I want to take a skin sample."

"Right."

Micah strained against his bonds as Red Hair lifted a section of skin with the forceps, then cut off a small slice, which he dropped into a glass vial. Gene quickly swabbed the area with alcohol, then slapped a bandage in place.

"We'll need a tissue sample, too."

"Maybe we should anesthetize him," Mac suggested.

Red Hair dismissed the idea with a shake of his head. "It'll only take a minute. Besides, it'll give us a chance to see how he reacts to pain."

Micah stared at the three men in horror. Lainey had accused his people of callously experimenting on humans, but his people had never done anything like this. Xanthians had an innate reverence for life forms of all kinds. They abhorred brutality and bloodshed.

He couldn't take his gaze from the knife in Red Hair's hand, couldn't control the violent tremors that wracked his body as he waited for the earthling to cut into his flesh.

Nausea rose in Micah's throat as Red Hair took a pair of surgical scissors and made a shallow incision in the muscle of his right arm. He drew a harsh breath between his clenched teeth as pain seared through him. Hands clenched, his body rigid, he choked back a scream as Red Hair removed a small piece of tissue.

He was sweating profusely now, his hands clenched into tight fists, his body throbbing with pain, his muscles taut with a deep-seated primal fear of the unknown.

There was a sharp, stinging sensation as Gene poured disinfectant over the cut, then wrapped it with a bandage. Micah stared at the strip of white cloth, which was quickly turning brown with blood.

But they weren't through with him yet. They took a sample of his sweat, then pared his fingernails.

"Well, that does it for me," Red Hair said. "You two have everything you need?"

"For now," Gene said.

"I might need some more blood later."

Red Hair nodded. "Let's call it a night, then. Gene, why don't you and Mac go get us some dinner while I finish up here?"

"Right. Come on," Gene said. "We'll take my car."

Red Hair walked around the table, stopping occasionally to take another picture, or write something in his big black notebook.

"Damn," Red Hair murmured, "you're gonna make us famous. And richer than hell." He poked Micah in the chest with a stubby fingertip. "Who are you? Where are you from?"

Micah stared up at him. He could feel the drug coursing through him, rendering him powerless, making it difficult to think.

"You can talk. I know you can," Red Hair said. "Of course, there's always the possibility that you don't speak English, but somehow I think you do." He changed the bloody bandage on Micah's arm, then pulled off his gloves and tossed them in a wastebasket. "Well, we've got lots of time." He laughed as he jerked a spatulate thumb at the skeleton in the corner. "He was stubborn, too."

Red Hair checked the IV bag at the head of the table, then nodded. The solution dripped steadily into Micah's arm.

Red Hair patted the plastic bag. "You won't be giving us any trouble," he said conversationally. "Mac invented this concoction. Keeps guys like you as helpless as newborn babes, but still allows us to see how you react to different stimuli." He chuckled softly. "Yeah, we know all about those death-ray eyes of yours. We've been studying your kind for years. Kind of funny, when you think about it. People on earth running around worrying about being abducted and studied by aliens when we've been studying you guys for years."

Red Hair walked slowly around the table, his gaze narrowed.

Micah clenched his jaw, hating the way the man looked at him, studying him as though he were no more than a bug under a microscope.

"The similarities between your people and ours are amazing, but it's the differences that intrigue me," Red Hair murmured softly, and then he looked at Micah and grinned. "Better get some rest, space man. You're gonna need it."

And with that cryptic warning, Red Hair switched off the overhead light, went into the adjoining room, and shut the door.

Left alone at last, Micah closed his eyes, wishing he could banish the pain that throbbed in his chest, his arm. If only he could think clearly! If only he wasn't so weak, so dizzy.

Rousing himself, he tugged at the bindings on his hands and feet, but he was too weak to do more than pull at them a few times, too dazed to think clearly, too heavily drugged to be able to concentrate on anything for more than a few seconds.

He shivered as the room grew colder. Closing his eyes, he surrendered to the darkness that hovered around him. His last conscious thought was that he'd never see Lainey again...

Lainey's apprehension grew with the passing of each hour. Three times, she'd walked past the old building where they'd taken Micah. Once, she had crept up to a window, hoping to get a glimpse of Micah, but the windows had been blacked out from the inside. Now, sitting in the car, her gaze riveted on the building, she wondered what to do next.

She thought of calling the police, but somehow that didn't seem like a smart move. What could she say? Three men have kidnapped my boyfriend, who just happens to be from another planet? They'd either laugh, or lock her up in a rubber room. And even if they believed her, Micah probably wouldn't be any better off in the hands of the police, who would, no doubt, turn him over to the Air Force or the CIA or whoever it was who handled alien invaders.

Damn, she thought, this was like something out of that TV show, *The X-Files*. She just wished Agents Mulder and Scully were there with her. They'd know what to do. She wished she did.

Closing her eyes, she tried to contact Micah, but she encountered only a vague sense of emptiness. Did that mean he was dead? There was no way to tell what they were doing to him in there.

She remembered the headlines she'd read in some of the more sensational tabloids in the last year:

GOVERNMENT COVERUPS DISCLOSED.

SPACESHIP KEPT UNDER WRAPS IN SECRET DESERT

LABORATORY.

AUTOPSY REVEALS STRANGE ALIEN PHYSIOLOGY.

She shivered as she imagined Micah being examined by a battery of doctors, subjected to a variety of inhumane tests. But surely, if these men were connected to the government, or SETI, they would have taken Micah somewhere besides what seemed to be an abandoned building. If these men were on the up and up, there would be men in uniform, some kind of security.

With a sigh of exasperation, she snuggled deeper into her coat, her gaze fixed on the building.

Twenty minutes later, she saw two men get in a car and drive away.

It was now or never.

Resolutely, she opened the trunk, took out the tire iron, and made her way toward the building, hoping, praying, that there had only been three men inside.

He was drifting in a black fog, hovering on the brink of unconsciousness, when he heard Lainey's voice calling his name.

Ah, Lainey, he thought groggily. *If only you were really here*.

He winced as someone removed the needle from his arm.

"Micah! Micah, please, wake up!"

"Lainey?" Slowly, he opened his eyes to see a blurred shape hovering over him.

"Micah! We've got to get you out of here." She was unfastening the metal cuffs that bound his hands and feet as she spoke. "Can you sit up?"

"Don't... know."

"I'll help you," Lainey said, slipping her arm under his shoulders. "Come on, we've got to go."

Micah sat up, then slid his legs over the side of the table. The room tilted crazily, and he stumbled against Lainey, who grabbed him and held on tight.

"Are you okay?" she asked, staggering under his weight.

"No. They..." He rested his head on her shoulder and closed his eyes. "Needle... drugged me..."

"Well, hang on, we've got to get out of here before the other two come back."

And before the red-haired man in the other room regained consciousness. She wasn't normally given to violence, and hitting the man over the head with a tire iron while his back was turned hadn't been easy. At the time, she'd worried about hitting him too hard; now, seeing what they had done to Micah, she wished she had hit the man harder.

It was all she could do to get Micah out of the building. He was so weak, he had to stop several times on the short walk to her car. Once, he dropped to his knees and began to retch violently.

Helpless, Lainey could only stand there, watching, her gaze darting constantly toward the street, always afraid the other two men would return, or that someone would pass by and call the police. That was all she needed, she thought wryly, wondering how she'd explain a naked man who was obviously under the influence of drugs.

She was a bundle of nerves by the time she managed to get Micah safely inside the car. Removing her coat, she draped it over his shivering form, threw the car in drive, and got the hell out of there.

Micah was unconscious when they reached home. Parking the car in the garage, she hurried into the house, threw several changes of clothes for the two of them into a bag, grabbed her toothbrush, a couple of pillows, her laptop computer, some sheets and blankets. She checked her first-aid kit to be sure it was fully supplied, then ran back out to the car.

Micah was as she had left him, his head propped against the door, his eyes closed. His naturally dark skin seemed pale, the blue aura darker than usual.

"Lainey?"

"I'm here."

"Transmitter... must get... transmitter."

With a sigh of exasperation, she ran back into the house, fished the little black box out from under the sofa, and hurried back to the car.

She was praying earnestly as she started the engine and pulled out of the driveway, praying for help, praying that Micah would be all right, wondering where they would be safe.

She drove slowly down the darkened streets, the same prayer repeating itself in her heart. *Help me, please help me. Please don't let him die. I don't know what to do. I don't know where to go.*

And then it came to her, as loud and clear as if a voice had spoken to her mind.

The mountains. Take him to the cabin in Chadds Creek.

Of course, she thought. Grandma St. John's cabin. It had been vacant for over five years, ever since Grandpa died. Her folks were always talking about going up there and restoring the place, but they'd never done it.

Murmuring a fervent prayer of thanks, she pulled onto the freeway and headed north, toward the small mountain community of Chadds Creek.

It was almost dawn when Lainey parked the car in the ramshackle garage behind the cabin. She had made one stop on the way up the mountain, stopping at a market to buy enough canned and dry food to last for at least a month.

"Micah?" She shook his shoulder gently. "Micah?"

Slowly, his eyelids fluttered open. "Lainey?" A faint smile touched his lips. "Thought... I had... dreamed you."

"No, I'm here." She brushed her fingers across his cheek, noticing that his skin felt hot and dry.

"Transmitter...?"

"I've got it. Come on, I want to get you into bed."

"Don't think... I'd be... much good... right now."

In spite of the seriousness of their situation, she burst out laughing. "Micah! You made a joke."

"Not... joking..."

"Come on, you big lug, let's get you inside."

Five years made for a lot of dust and cobwebs, Lainey thought as she swept the kitchen floor. Earlier, she had found a rat's nest, several small piles of bones, and assorted animal droppings. All were gone now, picked up and scrubbed away.

Micah was sleeping, tucked between clean sheets and the blankets from her bed at home. She had changed the bandage on his arm, realizing, as she did so, that they had deliberately cut into him, taking little bits and pieces to study, she guessed. The thought made her sick to her stomach. Thank God she'd gotten him out of there before they did any real damage, she thought, and then wondered if she had. He had a low fever, but didn't seem to be in any pain in spite of the raw place on his chest and the shallow incision on his arm. He was still dizzy, groggy, a little disoriented. He said he had been drugged. What if the drug had permanent adverse effects on him?

She shook her head, refusing to think about the worst until it happened. For now, all that mattered was that Micah was there.

It took twelve hours for the drug they had given him to wear off.

Micah slept most of that time. Lainey sat beside his bed, afraid to leave him alone for more than a few minutes at a time in case he woke up and needed something. She touched him frequently, assuring herself that he was really there. His color was good. His fever was gone; the faint blue glow that had emanated from his skin seemed almost nonexistent and that worried her because she didn't know if it was a good sign or not.

Once, he cried out as though he were in pain and she took his hand in hers and held it tightly. He quieted instantly at her touch, and then he murmured her name.

She wept then, tears of gratitude because he was alive, tears of despair because she was afraid of what the future held.

"Lainey?"

Her head jerked up at the sound of his voice. "Micah! You're awake."

He nodded groggily. "Where are we?"

"At my grandmother's cabin in the mountains. We'll be safe here. No one knows about this place except my folks, and even they don't know we're here."

Lainey chewed on the inside of her lip, knowing how worried her parents would be when they didn't hear from her. In a day or two, she would have to drive down to Chadds Creek and call home.

Micah glanced around the room. It was small and square, with blue walls and checked curtains at the windows. "How did we get here?"

Lainey tilted her head to one side. "You don't remember?"

"No."

"It doesn't matter. We're here, and we're safe."

"The transmitter!" Micah exclaimed. "I've got to go back..."

She laid a hand on his shoulder. "Calm down, Micah. I've got it with me."

He relaxed visibly, and she wondered what was so important about a broken radio.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Weak."

"Maybe you should eat something?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Well, I'm going to fix you some tea and toast just the same."

She brought him a tray a few minutes later and he obediently ate the dry toast and drank the tea, only to have it all come up again.

Lainey quickly cleaned up the mess, then changed the sheets.

"I'm sorry," Micah said. He refused to meet her gaze, embarrassed by his weakness, and by the fact that she had seen it.

"No," Lainey said, "I'm sorry. You said you weren't hungry. I should have listened. I just wish I knew what to do to make you feel better."

"Your being here makes me feel better," he murmured. "Come, sit beside me."

He didn't have to ask her twice. She sat down beside him, and he pillowed his head in her lap and closed his eyes.

"Micah? Your blue glow is almost gone."

"Is it?" He opened his eyes and studied his arm, surprised to see that the glow was, indeed, very faint.

"What does it mean?"

"I'm not sure." He closed his eyes again and burrowed deeper into Lainey's lap. "It might be a reaction to the drug they gave me," he murmured after a while, "or maybe it's fading because I'm becoming accustomed to the earth's atmosphere."

Lainey felt a little thrill of hope. If the blue glow disappeared altogether, he'd look pretty much like any other man except for the webbing on his hands and the size of his ears. But those things could be explained away as a birth defect, she thought, or maybe surgically corrected.

Gently, she stroked his brow, his hair. How had she grown to love him so dearly in such a short time? It was almost as if they had been destined to be together, as if Fate, realizing Her mistake in having them born on separate planets, had sought to rectify that error by bringing Micah to Earth. It sounded bizarre, even to Lainey's wild imagination, and yet the pieces all fell into place so neatly—her going out to the old Grayson place, her car refusing to start, the storm that had compelled her to take shelter inside the mansion.

She gazed at Micah, studying his profile, loving the strong, masculine planes and angles of his face, the sensual shape of his lips, the line of his jaw. His brows were thick without being bushy, his nose was long and straight, his cheekbones high and well defined. He was, she thought, nothing short of perfect.

"Lainey..."

"I'm here."

"Maybe you should leave. You're in danger as long as you stay with me."

"I'm not going anywhere, mister, so just put that idea right out of your mind."

His eyelids fluttered open and he gazed up at her, his silver-blue eyes bright with amusement. "Are all Earth women as stubborn as you?"

"Not all."

Lifting one hand, Micah cupped her cheek. "Looks like I owe you my life once again," he murmured.

"You don't owe me anything."

"I don't mind." His fingertips trailed down her cheek, and then he let his hand fall, as if he didn't have the strength to hold it up any longer. "Whatever happens. Lainey, I'm glad I met you."

"Nothing's going to happen."

He smiled at her for a long moment, wishing he was as sure of that as she was, and then his eyelids fluttered down and he was asleep.

He woke to find Lainey lying beside him, her head pillowed on his shoulder. How beautiful she was, this brave Earth woman. She had put her own life at risk to save his, not once, but twice.

Lying there, careful not to move lest he awaken her, he took stock of how he was feeling. His mind was clear, and except for a slight ache in his right arm, he felt strong. Turning his head to the side, he focused his energy on a glass of water sitting on the small table beside the bed. In a matter of seconds, the water started to boil and he glanced away, satisfied that his power had returned.

He would have to leave her soon, he thought sadly. The three men who had captured him would be searching for him. Scientists, whether human or Xanthian, were all the same, eager to explore the unknown, to poke and prod and examine every new specimen they encountered, whether that specimen was humanoid, animal, or mineral. As much as he loved Lainey, he could not stay here and put her life at risk. She thought they were safe, but he didn't share her optimism. Tomorrow, or the next day for sure, he would activate the distress signal, alerting Pergith to his whereabouts. Surely another day or two with Lainey wasn't too much to ask.

Lainey stirred beside him, her head burrowing deeper into his shoulder as she snuggled up against him, driving everything else from his mind but the supple curves of the woman beside him. The scent of her hair and skin wrapped around him, evoking memories of the many nights they had made love. The first time they had been intimate had been an experience unlike anything he had ever imagined. At the time, he had been certain nothing in his life would ever be more satisfying and yet, each time he had made love to her had been better than the last.

And he wanted her now. Desperately. Needed to feel her closeness, needed her sweetness to banish the feeling that he was utterly alone in a strange land.

In his mind, he whispered her name.

"I want you, too," replied a sleepy voice.

"Lainey, I didn't mean to wake you."

She smiled up at him, her brown eyes glowing with amusement. "Didn't you?"

"Maybe I did."

She stroked his cheek with her forefinger, then drew it lightly over his lower lip.

"I don't have to ask what's on your mind," she said, grinning broadly. "Your thoughts are coming through loud and clear."

"Is it all right?"

She couldn't help laughing. They'd made love countless times in the last few weeks, and he still felt the need to ask her permission. It was sweet, somehow, that he never took her for granted.

"Of course it's all right." Turning on her side, she began to drop light kisses on his cheeks, his nose, the curve of his jaw, his eyelids.

He made a soft sound of pleasure as her mouth settled over his, her tongue lightly stroking his lower lip.

Now that he had her permission, Micah made love to her ever so sweetly, his hands light and gentle as he adored her, his voice thick with desire as he whispered that he loved her, that she was the center of his universe, the sun in his sky.

His hands were like magic, softly caressing, filling her with wonder, carrying her to the heights and depths of ecstasy, and yet it was the words of endearment he spoke to her that brought her the most pleasure. He had never been in love before, and Lainey felt truly blessed to be able to share the newness of it, the wonder of it, with him.

Later, lying in the circle of Micah's arms, she tried to remember the words of an old Michael Bolton song, something about a man who told his girl he loved her but he lied, because it was more than love he felt inside. How true that was where Micah was concerned, she thought.

She had told Drew she loved him; at the time, she would have sworn it was true, but she knew now that comparing what she had felt for Drew to what she felt for Micah was like comparing the pale silver light of the moon to the blinding brilliance of the sun.

There was no comparison at all.

Chapter Fifteen

She awoke to find Micah gazing down at her, his silver-blue eyes filled with sadness.

"What is it?" Lainey asked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Micah forced himself to smile. "Why?"

Lainey shook her head. Maybe she was just imagining things. "Are you hungry?"

Heat simmered in the depths of his eyes as his gaze moved over her, slowly, suggestively. "Very."

"Men," Lainey muttered in mock disgust. "Don't you ever think of anything else?"

Micah took her hand in his, his thumb making lazy circles on her palm. "I never thought of it at all until I

met you."

She was melting, she thought, dissolving from the inside out.

"Lainey..." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed each knuckle, then turned her hand over and kissed the pulse point on her wrist. How was he ever going to leave her? How could he go back home, back to the loneliness of his old way of life, now that he had known Lainey St. John? How could he leave her, now that he knew what it was like to love, to be loved, to be a part of someone else's life?

He drew her into his arms, crushing her close. How could he even think of a life without her? His former life seemed empty and without meaning as he recalled the years he had spent in space, exploring other worlds, gathering samples of dirt, of plant and animal life. There had been times when he had gone for months without seeing another living soul. Until now, he'd always been happy with his lifestyle, content to be alone, satisfied with his work. Only now did he realize he'd been lying to himself, that his life had been empty, that he'd been content to be alone because he himself had been empty.

"Micah?"

"Hmm?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Micah, don't lie to me. I may not be able to read your thoughts right now, but I can sense that something's bothering you."

His arms tightened around her, as if he would never let go.

"Please, Micah, you're scaring me."

"I love you, Lainey. You believe that, don't you?"

"Yes."

"It's because I love you that I've got to go."

A cold hand squeezed the warmth from her heart. "Go where?"

"Back home."

"No!"

"Lainey, don't you understand? As long as I'm here, you'll be in danger."

"I don't care."

"I care."

"But no one knows where we are. Please, don't go."

He stroked her hair gently. He could feel the wetness of her tears on his chest, feel her shoulders shake with the force of her silent weeping.

"Lainey, I don't want to hurt you."

"Then don't go!" She leaned back so she could see his face. "I was so alone until you came. My life was so empty. There were days when I never left the house, when I buried myself in my writing because what was happening in my story was so much more exciting than reality."

"Lainey..." He drew her into his arms again, his face buried in her hair. "I know, *cominza*," he murmured. "I know."

"If you know, then how can you even think of leaving?"

"Because I love you. Those men who had me, they won't stop looking. I wasn't the first Xanthian they'd captured, Lainey. There was a Xanthian skeleton in their laboratory. They're conducting the kind of experiments you once accused my people of doing."

And that was another reason he had to go back, he thought bleakly. He had to warn his people that the people of Earth knew of their existence.

"Is there nothing I can say to make you stay?"

"I must go." He put his forefinger under her chin and tilted her head up. "But I'll come back if I can, Lainey. I promise."

"Do you have to contact your people right away?"

Micah shook his head. He had planned to stay another day or two. He knew now that it would take at least that long just to say good-bye.

Later that afternoon they went for a walk. Hand in hand, they climbed a narrow, winding path that led through a forest of tall trees, their footsteps muffled by a thick bed of pine needles.

It was beautiful, Micah thought. The sky was a clear, bright blue, so different from the sky at home. Colorful birds flitted from tree to tree, filling the air with their cheerful melodies. Lainey pointed out chipmunks and squirrels, told him the names of the different kinds of birds. They paused to watch a deer grazing on a patch of grass in a shady glen.

They'd been walking about an hour when they came to a small mountain meadow fragrant with clover and wildflowers.

"Pretty, isn't it?" Lainey asked.

"Yes. Almost as pretty as you."

"Oh, Micah..." Blinking back a tear, she wrapped her arms around him and pressed her cheek against his chest. She'd known him such a short time, and yet she couldn't imagine what her life would be like without him.

"Don't think of it now," he urged.

With a nod, she sniffed back her tears. "There's a small lake over there. Do you know how to swim?"

"Like a fish."

The water was cold, but Lainey hardly noticed. Wrapped in Micah's arms, feeling his wet skin against her own, she was conscious of nothing else. She ran her hands over his shoulders and down his arms, reveling in the latent power she felt there. He kissed her cheeks, her neck, the curve of her breast, and heat suffused her, making her forget the cold water, making her forget everything but Micah.

She let her gaze move over his face, memorizing each feature, let her fingertips trail across his chest. She smiled as she felt the hard evidence of his desire press against her belly, and then his hands were doing their own exploring, filling her with a bittersweet pain.

She had never made love in the water before. It was a unique experience, slick flesh sliding against slick flesh, their bodies buoyant in the water. It was primal, the ancient, eternal mating of male and female, life renewing itself. Almost, it was like being reborn.

Spent, they stretched out on the grass, her head pillowed on his shoulder, and let the sun bake them dry.

"The sunlight doesn't seem to bother you anymore," Lainey remarked.

"I think I must be getting acclimated to Earth's environment," Micah replied.

He lifted his arm and studied it a moment. The faint blue glow that had shadowed his skin had disappeared. Except for his ears, and the webbing on his hands, he looked much like any other human male.

He picked up Lainey's hand and pressed his own against it, palm to palm, noting how similar they were, and how different.

Lainey folded her fingers over his. "You're the best thing that ever happened to me," she whispered.

She placed his hand on her belly and covered it with her own, wishing she could bear a child, wishing she could feel Micah's seed growing within her womb.

"I wish I could stay." He kissed her gently. "I want to stay."

"I know." She turned onto her side, her head propped on one hand while she traced figure eights on the broad expanse of his chest.

His skin was firm beneath her fingertips, warm from the kiss of the sun. For a moment, she thought of destroying the transmitter, of smashing it into a million tiny pieces so he'd never be able to contact his people, never be able to leave her, but even as she thought of it, she knew she would never do such a thing.

Couldn't do it. He was an honorable man. *And a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do*. She didn't know where she'd heard that phrase, but she suddenly realized it was true. And on the heels of that bit of wisdom came the memory of a line she'd heard in the movie *Parenthood*. Women have choices, Steve Martin's character had said to his wife, men have responsibilities.

At the time, the seemingly chauvinistic remark had made her want to throw up. Now she wanted to cry.

Giving herself a mental shake, Lainey forced the thought that Micah was leaving out of her mind, determined to enjoy whatever time they had left.

"You're very handsome, you know," she remarked, draping her arm across his waist. "Are all the men on Xanthia as good-looking as you are?"

Micah shrugged, inwardly pleased that she found him attractive. "To quote one of your people, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Our people are no different than yours. Some are more appealing than others. Some are tall, some short, some are thin, some are not."

He lifted a lock of her hair and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger. "But none of us has hair so black as yours, or skin so fair." His fingertip grazed her cheek. "No one has eyes so dark and lovely, or lips so soft."

His lips trailed feather-light kisses over her eyes and nose and mouth. "I will never forget you, Lainey St. John, nor will I ever join with another woman."

His words touched her heart and imprinted themselves on her soul.

"No, Micah..." Lainey placed her hand over his mouth to stifle the protest she saw in his eyes. "I want you to join with Adana," she said, and meant it, though it killed her to say the words. "I want you to be a father, to give Adana the child you can't give me."

He took her hand from his mouth. "No!" He looked at her in horror. "How can you even suggest such a thing?"

"Because I can't give you a child, and I don't want you to miss out on the opportunity to be a father. You said you could see your child if you wanted to. Maybe you can change things where you come from, make your people realize what they're missing by cutting themselves off from their children. And if not, you'll still have a child, someone who'll be a part of you."

"Lainey..." He turned on his side so they were face to face.

Unable to find the words to express what he was feeling, he folded her into his arms and held her close, knowing he would never forget her, that he would never forget this day.

It was near dusk when they made their way back to the cabin. Micah sat in the kitchen, watching while Lainey prepared dinner, and again found himself wondering how he could bring himself to leave her. It had been so easy to fall in love with her, so easy to adapt to her way of life. In spite of all the violence of her world, the pollution, the poverty, there was an excitement that was missing on Xanthia.

He watched her peel a potato and realized he had never seen a woman prepare a meal until he came here. On Xanthia, he had always eaten in restaurants, where the cooking and the serving were done by androids.

Sitting there, watching Lainey cook for him, appealed to some deep primal emotion he didn't quite understand. She hummed softly as she stood at the stove, and the sound of her voice wound around his heart, binding him to her in ways he didn't fully comprehend.

She smiled at him as she set the table, a bittersweet smile that made it difficult to swallow. He wished suddenly that the transmitter had been destroyed in the crash so that he would truly be stranded here, so that he'd have no choice but to stay, to spend his life here, with Lainey.

Dinner was a quiet meal. Lainey ate automatically, hardly aware of what she was eating. Micah was leaving. That single thought overshadowed everything else.

When they were finished, Micah helped her clear the table, then wiped the dishes while she washed.

When the last pot had been scrubbed, she stood at the sink, watching the water go down the drain. She could hear Micah moving around behind her, the clink of silverware as he put it in the drawer. It was such an ordinary thing, doing the dishes together, something any married couple might do. Such an ordinary thing that it brought tears to her eyes.

Micah stood behind her, noting the slump of her shoulders. Without conscious thought, he probed her mind. She was crying silent tears, her heart filled with sadness and despair.

Whispering her name, he slipped his arms around her waist, drawing her back against him. Holding her close, he bent his head and pressed his lips to her hair.

"Don't weep, Lainey," he murmured. "Please don't weep."

"I can't help it."

He took a deep breath. There was always a chance his people wouldn't make any more journeys to Earth. Three of the last five spacecraft that had been sent there hadn't returned. His ship would make four. Perhaps the rulers of Xanthia would realize it was no longer safe to venture into Earth's atmosphere. He'd been here many weeks now. Surely Pergith would have given up any hope of finding him alive and gone home...

He was making excuses, grabbing at any plausible reason that would absolve him of guilt, that would make it all right for him to stay. He knew it, but he couldn't seem to stop.

And he couldn't leave her. Maybe she was right. Maybe no one would find them here.

Micah let his breath out in a long sigh of defeat. Right or wrong, he couldn't leave Lainey, not now. He would stay as long as it seemed safe, as long as his being there didn't put her life in danger.

"Lainey?"

She sniffed. "What?"

"If I stay, will you stop weeping?"

"Stay?" She spun around in his arms, her luminous brown eyes searching his. "Do you mean it?"

Micah nodded. "I'll stay as long as it seems safe."

"Oh, Micah!" Standing on tiptoe, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. And kissed him. And kissed him again.

And at that moment, he knew he had made the right decision.

Chapter Sixteen

"So," Lainey said, "what do you want to do today?"

Micah glanced up, his gaze meeting hers across the table. "Whatever you wish."

"We could pack a picnic lunch and go fishing at the lake. Have you ever been fishing?"

"No."

"Then we'll go. If you want to."

"Ah, Lainey, don't you know I'd go anywhere with you?"

"Oh, Micah." He'd done it again, she thought, caught her completely off guard with a few simple words that went straight to her heart.

She gazed into his eyes, those incredible silver-blue eyes, and knew there would never, ever be another man in her life. Even if Micah decided to go back home, she knew she would never love again, not like this.

No words were needed between them. She rose to her feet at the same time he did, snuggled against him as he swung her up into his arms and carried her back to the bed they had vacated only a short time before.

He quickly peeled off her robe and nightgown, shucked his jeans, and then they were in each other's arms, pledging their love, their fidelity, their devotion, with each shared kiss.

Lainey sat on the grassy bank beside Micah, wondering when she'd ever felt so happy, so content. It had taken only moments to show him how to bait a hook and cast his line into the water. She wasn't the least bit surprised when he caught the first fish, a beautiful fat rainbow trout.

He had looked at the wriggling fish with interest, removed the hook from its mouth, and tossed it back into the lake.

"Hey!" Lainey had exclaimed. "That was supposed to be dinner."

But Micah had only shrugged. "It was too pretty to eat," he'd said by way of explanation.

He had caught three fish since then, and had thrown every one back.

And because it seemed like too nice a day to kill anything, even something as tasty as a trout, Lainey had tossed back the fish she caught, too.

It was late afternoon when they returned to the cabin. Lainey stood in the kitchen, perusing the contents of the old refrigerator.

She glanced over her shoulder at Micah, who was lounging in the doorway, one ankle crossed over the other, his arms folded over his chest.

"Well," she said, one hand resting on her hip, "since we don't seem to have any fish for dinner, how would you feel about bacon and eggs?"

"Anything you want to fix is fine with me, you know that."

"Micah, you've got to stop acting like you're a guest in my house. If you'd rather have something else, say so."

"Lainey..."

She gazed up at him, feeling angry and confused without knowing why. He was so tall, so devastatingly handsome, and yet that wasn't what drew her to him. He was strong yet gentle, wise yet innocent. He'd come into her life and turned it upside down in the space of a few short weeks. How would she fill the empty spot in her heart when he was gone? And he would go; sooner or later, he would have to go back and she'd be left with nothing but memories and a broken heart.

"Lainey, what's wrong?"

"I want you to be happy here," she replied curtly. "I want you to feel like you belong. You don't have to agree with everything I say, or do everything I want to do."

Micah stared at her, confused by her irrational behavior. "Lainey, you're angry with me and I don't understand why."

"I'm not angry."

He lifted one brow inquisitively. "Aren't you?"

"No." She brushed a tear from her cheek. "I'm not angry, Micah. I'm just so afraid..." She took a deep breath, willing herself not to cry, not to beg. "I'm just so afraid of losing you."

Not knowing what to say, Micah crossed the floor and wrapped his arms around her. He couldn't promise her forever, not when there was a chance that Red Hair might find him, not when Pergith might still be out there searching for him. If Pergith found him, he'd have to go back.

Gently, he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. He couldn't promise her forever; he could only offer her one day at a time, and hope that it was enough.

"I'm sorry," Lainey said, her voice muffled against his chest. "I don't know what got into me. Too much sun, maybe."

"Too much of me, maybe?"

"No! I guess I'm just afraid that what we have won't last." Lainey placed her hand over his heart. "When I married Drew, I thought it would be forever, that we'd have children and live happily ever after..." She shrugged. "But it didn't last. He wanted a son, and when I couldn't give him one, he found someone who could."

The tears were coming faster now and she couldn't stop them. She'd thought she'd gotten over the hurt long ago, but now it spilled out in a torrent and she found herself saying things she hadn't even realized

she'd been keeping bottled up until now.

"He said I was only half a woman, that I was just a pretty package that was empty inside. And he was right! Oh, why don't you just leave me alone?"

She twisted out of his arms and gazed up at him, her face streaked with tears. "Why don't you just go home and join with Adana ! She'll probably give you a hundred sons!"

"Lainey, stop it! I love you. Just you. I don't need a son, don't you understand that? It's you I want. You I need. Just you." Gently, he drew her back into his embrace. "Only you." He kissed her cheek. "Always and forever, only you."

She shook her head, afraid to believe.

"Lainey, please believe me. I love you. I've never loved anyone else, and I never will."

She looked up at him, wanting to believe, needing desperately to believe, and yet so afraid.

Micah gazed deep into her eyes, feeling her love, her fear of being hurt again, and prayed that she could get past her old hurts, her old fears, and accept the love in his heart.

Tenderly, he cupped her tear-stained face in his palms, his thumbs wiping away the last drops of moisture.

"If I tell you I don't want eggs for dinner," he said, very seriously, "will you believe I love you?"

She couldn't help it. She laughed. "Oh, Micah, can you forgive me for being such a fool?"

"There's nothing to forgive. I love you. I'll always love you. Believe that if you believe nothing else."

"Oh, Micah." She stared up at him, basking in the warmth of his gaze. He was nothing like Drew. Drew had been shallow, selfish, arrogant, everything Micah was not.

Micah took her hands in his, uncertain how to say what he wanted to say.

"Lainey, I... would you... could I be your husband?"

"Husband? You mean get married? You want to marry me?"

"Yes. I want to belong to you. I want you to belong to me."

He'd done it again, she thought, completely floored her. What could she say but yes?

"When?" he asked.

"I don't know." Lainey chewed on the inside of her lower lip. They'd have to go some place that didn't require blood tests, she thought. Las Vegas , maybe, or Tijuana .

They discussed it over dinner, deciding they would go to Vegas when it seemed safe.

"Let's go into Chadds Creek tomorrow morning and call my parents," Lainey suggested. "I need to call

them anyway to let them know where I am, and we can tell them about our engagement. Maybe do some shopping and then go to lunch. What do you think?"

"I think I'd like that," Micah said, and then he frowned. "Maybe we should go today. I don't want your mother and father to worry about you."

Lainey smiled at Micah, touched by his concern for her parents.

"Tomorrow will be soon enough," she assured him. "Besides, it'll be dark soon, and I've never liked driving these mountain roads after sunset."

Rising, she started to clear the table, and then she felt Micah's arm curl around her waist. He drew her up against him, his face cradled in the valley between her breasts.

"Since I am not a guest," he murmured, his breath penetrating the fabric of her blouse to warm the skin beneath, "and since you said I should tell you what I want..." He drew her down into his lap, his tongue laying the curve of her ear... "I want to make love to you, now. I want to taste of your sweetness, feel your heart beating next to mine, listen to the music of your soul..."

Spellbound, Lainey took Micah by the hand and led him into the bedroom.

Breathless with yearning, her pulses racing with desire, she gave herself into his keeping and let her soul sing to his all through the night.

Chapter Seventeen

Chadds Creek was an old mining town. In the early 1800s, gold had been discovered along the banks of the river, but it had been a small strike of little consequence and the town had slowly died out. In the mid 1960s, George Malcolm McHenry—a man who had lots of money and even more spare time—decided to build himself a winter home near the old town, complete with a ski lift. When McHenry died, his son, George, Jr., turned the house into a ski lodge and Chadds Creek became an exclusive playground for the very rich and the very famous.

With the increase in tourists, the town's original buildings had been restored to give people a taste of the past, while new businesses—mostly fashionable boutiques—had sprung up like mushrooms near the ski lodge. Lainey preferred the old part of town.

Leaving the car behind Nell's Ice Cream Parlor, Micah and Lainey walked down the narrow alley that led to the main street. Now, during the summer, the ski lifts and a lot of the boutiques were closed, but the old section of town drew enough tourists to keep the place alive throughout the year. She saw several cars with out-of-state license plates as they crossed the dusty street and walked down the wooden sidewalk to a pay phone located on the corner.

Micah had shed his own form and taken on his alter ego when they left the cabin and now, walking down the street, women old and young alike turned to stare at him. She could only imagine the long, lingering looks he'd get in his natural form, which she thought was every bit as sexy and gorgeous as this one.

Lainey laughed when a girl of about ten pointed at Micah and loudly exclaimed, "Mom, that man looks just like Fabio!"

Micah leaned one shoulder against the door of the old-fashioned phone booth while Lainey placed her call. He grinned at the pained expression on Lainey's face as she explained to her mother that everything was all right, that Micah was with her, that she wasn't sure when they would be back, that she was sorry she had left home without telling anyone.

"Mom! Mom, would you please just listen for a minute? I've got something to tell you." Lainey glanced at Micah and smiled. "Mom, guess what? Micah asked me to marry him. No, I'm not kidding... Well, we haven't set a date yet... we'll probably go to Vegas..." She looked at Micah and rolled her eyes. "I've already had one big church wedding, Mom, I don't need another one... yes, we'll talk more about it when I get home. Give my love to Dad. Bye."

Lainey hung up the phone, then shook her head. "Well, I'm glad that's over. Let's go get something to eat."

Hand in hand, they walked down the street to Kattle Katy's Kitchen. It was a building unlike anything Micah had ever seen. The furniture was rough-hewn; the tables were covered with red-and-white checked cloths. There were animal heads mounted on one wall and posters with desperate-looking men on another. The woman behind the counter wore a blue gingham dress and a frilly white apron.

Micah stared at the animal heads while Lainey ordered a couple of cheeseburgers with the works, a double order of ranch fries, and two chocolate shakes. He had developed quite a taste for meat since coming to Earth.

"You're awfully quiet," Lainey observed as they took a seat at a booth near a window. "Is something wrong?"

"A big church wedding," Micah said. "What is that?"

Lainey made a vague gesture with her hand. "A wedding is when people get married. Sometimes you invite a lot of friends and family and have a big party. That's a big wedding. And sometimes people go away and get married quietly. That's what we'll do."

"You don't want a big church wedding again?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I already went that route with Drew and it didn't work out. I guess maybe I'm a little superstitious."

"Superstitious?"

"Afraid that if I go through all that again with you, something might go wrong."

Micah nodded. "What is Vegas?"

"It's a place where you can get married without any blood tests."

Micah frowned, remembering Red Hair and Mac and fat syringes filled with blood.

"Most places require blood tests before you can get married to be sure you don't have any diseases, but

in your case, I don't think that's a good idea."

Understanding dawned in Micah's eyes. Of course, he could not let anyone test his blood. The color alone would cause any number of questions that could not be answered.

"But, Lainey, will you be happy going to this Vegas place to be married?"

Lainey smiled. "I'll love it," she said, folding her hand over his. "And I love you."

He started to reply, but the waitress chose that moment to bring their order. She stared at Micah for a moment, her eyes wide. "You aren't... I mean, are you... ?"

"No," Lainey replied. "He isn't."

"Well, a girl can hope," the waitress retorted, and walked away, her skirts swishing.

"Would you like to go sightseeing after we eat?" Lainey asked. "There's a blacksmith shop, an old newspaper office, an assay office..." She frowned, trying to remember what other buildings remained. "Oh, a jail, of course, and a brothel..."

"Brothel?"

Lainey shrugged. "You know, a house of ill repute? Whore house? Prostitutes?" She shook her head when she saw he still didn't understand. "A place where men could pay to have sex."

"Ah," Micah said.

"Do they have such places on Xanthia?"

"No, but there are planets where such things are common."

"Really?"

"The urge to mate is strong throughout all the known galaxies," he remarked with an exaggerated leer. "My own urge has grown steadily stronger since I met you."

Lainey felt herself blush from the soles of her feet to the roots of her hair as the waitress chose that moment to stop by and see if they needed anything else.

"We're fine," Lainey stammered. "Just bring the check, please."

"You're very pretty when your cheeks turn pink," Micah said as they left the restaurant.

"I'm glad you think so, since I seem to blush frequently since I met you."

They spent the next two hours touring the town, looking at old butter churns, and flat irons that weighed a ton, and huge black kettles. They saw old fire engines and pot-bellied stoves, cast-iron wash tubs and outdoor pumps, high-button shoes and whalebone corsets.

"I wish I'd brought my camera," Lainey said as they walked through the old jail. "I can't believe I left it home. I take it everywhere."

Micah grimaced as he peered into one of the iron-barred cells. It took very little to imagine what it must have been like to be locked up in such a dreary place. All too clearly, he recalled being imprisoned on Einar Three, and, more recently, being strapped to a cold metal table, his freedom gone, his life in the hands of his enemies.

Leaving the jail, Lainey dragged Micah into Wilson's Western Emporium and insisted he try on a cowboy hat. Most men looked great in cowboy hats, and Micah was no exception. Lainey insisted on buying him one, choosing a black Stetson with a rolled brim.

"No, Lainey," Micah said, removing the hat. "You've done enough for me already."

"What do you mean?"

"You buy my food. You bought me clothes. I live in your house. It is enough."

"But you need a souvenir," she argued. "Besides, it looks great on you."

"No."

Lainey grimaced. Apparently male pride wasn't a trait unique to Earth men. "I want you to have it, Micah. Please? It isn't polite to refuse a gift."

"But I cannot buy you anything," Micah said quietly.

"You pick something out, and I'll buy it."

"It is not the same."

"Well, then, I'll lend you some money until you get a job, and then you can pay me back."

Micah considered that for a moment, and then he nodded. He disliked taking money from Lainey, but he wanted to give her something—wanted her to have something tangible to remember him by in case he had to leave her.

While Lainey tried on boots, he wandered through the store, browsing through shelves of mugs and glassware embossed with the name of the town, T-shirts, scarfs and belts. He paused at a counter featuring an array of jewelry and watches before deciding on a heart-shaped bracelet made of turquoise and silver.

He paid for the bracelet, then stood near the door, waiting for Lainey while she purchased a pair of white cowboy boots.

Outside, he handed her the small sack, his gaze intent upon her face as she opened it.

"Oh, Micah, it's beautiful. I love it." Standing on tiptoe, she kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

Micah touched the brim of his hat with his forefinger, and then kissed Lainey on the cheek. "Thank you."

On the way back to the car, Lainey speculated on what it must have been like to have been a woman back in the old days, before microwave ovens, refrigerators, washers and dryers, no-wax floors, and

polyester had come along and taken the drudgery out of being a housewife.

With a grin that was slightly smug, Micah informed her that on Xanthia microwaves and all the other things she thought of as modern conveniences were as old-fashioned as washboards and butter churns.

"Well, we'll catch up," she replied confidently. "Maybe you can introduce some of the wonders of Xanthia to our backward culture while you're here."

"Maybe," he said doubtfully.

"Why not?" Lainey asked, growing excited by the idea. "The women of Earth would probably make you a saint if you invented that thing you told me about that does all the cooking. Think of the hours in the kitchen it would save at Thanksgiving and Christmas. A complete dinner at the push of a button. Why, you could make a fortune. You know, a lot of money."

Lainey frowned as she unlocked the car door and slid behind the wheel. "I don't suppose they have money on Xanthia, do they?"

Removing his hat, Micah got into the car. "No." He looked at Lainey thoughtfully as he put his Stetson on the back seat, then shut the door. "Would you like to have a fortune?"

"I don't know." She pulled onto the highway, her brow furrowed in thought.

She'd never really wanted to be rich. Her father had always provided her and her mother with a comfortable living, and when she got out on her own, she discovered she could make a decent living as an author. Still, it might be nice to drive a low-slung sports car and shop in Beverly Hills.

"Is money important to you?" Micah asked.

"Not really. I guess I'd rather be happy and healthy." She glanced at Micah. "And in love with you."

Heat sizzled through her as Micah placed his hand on her thigh and gave it a squeeze.

Suddenly eager to be home where they could be alone, she pressed down on the accelerator, thinking she'd be happy to wash clothes in an old-fashioned washtub as long as they were Micah's clothes.

Chapter Eighteen

Micah bolted upright, all his senses alert as he gazed around the darkened room. Something was wrong.

He glanced at Lainey, sleeping soundly beside him, then slid out of bed and padded quietly to the window and drew the curtains aside. A full moon hung low in the sky, bathing the grounds in a pale yellow light.

Head cocked to one side, he listened to the stillness, his gaze sweeping the moon-dappled yard. And then he saw it—a dark silhouette darting from tree to tree, gradually making its way closer to the front of the cabin.

Cursing softly, Micah went back to the bed, placed one hand over Lainey's mouth, then gently shook her shoulder.

She woke with a startled cry, the sound muffled by his hand.

"They've found us," Micah whispered. "Get dressed."

Lainey stared up at him, his words dissolving the cobwebs of sleep from her mind. Moving quickly, she got out of bed and pulled on a pair of jeans, a heavy sweater, and sneakers.

She glanced over her shoulder to see Micah pulling a black sweatshirt over his head. Like her, he was also wearing jeans and sneakers.

"I'm ready," she whispered, hoping he didn't hear the nervous quiver in her voice.

Micah nodded. Grabbing the transmitter from the dresser drawer, he shoved it under his sweatshirt; then, as quietly as possible, he opened the bedroom window, helped Lainey climb over the sill, and followed her outside.

Turning, he closed the window, then grabbed Lainey's hand and ran toward the tree-studded hill that rose behind the cabin.

They had just reached the tree line when a man shouted, "Over here!"

"*Tjete!*" Micah swore under his breath as he recognized Mac's voice. "Run, Lainey!" he said, pushing her in front of him.

Without stopping to look back, Micah ran after her, scrambling up the side of the hill.

"Cut 'em off, Gene!" Mac hollered. "I've got you covered!"

There was the sound of footsteps crashing through dry underbrush, and then a dark shape rose up out of the blackness of the night.

"Stop!" Gene commanded. "I don't want to shoot."

Fearful for Lainey's life, Micah grabbed her by the arm and pushed her behind him.

There was the roar of a gunshot, a slash of white-hot pain as the bullet buried itself in the muscle of Micah's left arm.

Pain and anger warred within him, kindling the primal instinct to survive, to protect one's mate. Without conscious thought, Micah focused his gaze on the man called Gene, felt the energy swell and coalesce from deep within him.

The man screamed, a terrible high-pitched shriek of agony. Slowly, as if all his bones were dissolving, he toppled forward and rolled down the hill.

Micah whirled around, reaching for Lainey, when a second shot reverberated through the night.

Time seemed to have slowed, crystalizing every sound, every movement. He stared at Lainey in disbelief as she stumbled backward, her hand flying to her chest before she crumpled to the ground. Even in the darkness, he could see the dark crimson stain soaking her sweater.

With a feral cry, he turned on Mac, who was creeping up behind him. For a moment that seemed to stretch as long as infinity, they stared at each other.

A vile oath enipted from Mac's lips as he raised the gun, his finger curling around the trigger.

Rage unlike anything he had ever known suffused Micah. He felt the power boiling up inside him, burning out of control.

Time seemed to stop as Mac fired the gun.

Micah felt the searing heat of the bullet, a sharp stab of pain as the slug buried itself high in his right shoulder.

The sound of the gunshot echoed and re-echoed in the stillness of the night. A plume of blue-gray smoke eddied from the barrel of the revolver, slowly rising toward the sky.

Fury as cold as the outer reaches of space rose up within Micah, overshadowing everything else. He felt the deadly power flow out of him, hotter than the fuel that propelled his ship, more devastating than the firestorms of Orizzon.

A long, agonized cry of pain and fear blotted out all other sound as Mac's skin blistered and turned black until nothing remained but a pile of charred ashes.

Shock had rendered Micah's wounds momentarily numb. Knowing it wouldn't last, he shoved the transmitter into his pants pocket, then yanked off his sweatshirt. He tore off one of the sleeves, made a thick pad, and placed it over the gaping wound in Lainey's chest.

Tearing the rest of his sweatshirt into strips, he wrapped them tightly around her chest to hold the makeshift bandage in place, and then he gathered Lainey into his arms and carried her up the mountain.

As the shock wore off, so did the numbness in his arm and shoulder. Each step jarred the bleeding wounds, sending shafts of bright white pain lancing through him, and still he kept going, doggedly putting one foot in front of the other.

He was covered with perspiration when, at long last, he reached the top of the mountain.

Gently, he placed Lainey on the ground. He gazed at her for a moment, and then he pulled the transmitter from his pocket and activated the distress signal.

With luck, Pergith would still be in the area.

Sitting down, Micah drew Lainey into his arms and held her close, trying to warm her with the heat of his own body. He'd always been lucky, he thought as he rocked her gently back and forth. Always. He'd come through numerous disasters unscathed, had singlehandedly battled his way off a cannibalistic planet, had rescued three children from a burning building on Quinton Rells, had survived the crash of his ship.

He stroked Lainey's hair, praying that his luck hadn't run out.

He could feel her temperature rising even though her body was trembling as though cold.

"Lainey? Lainey, can you hear me?"

Her eyelids fluttered open. Her beautiful brown eyes were glazed with pain.

"Micah?"

"I'm here."

"I can't see you."

His arms tightened around her. "I'm here, *cominza*."

"I'm dying, aren't I?"

"No!"

She tried to lift her hand so she could touch him, but she didn't have the strength. A single tear rolled down her cheek.

"We'll never... get married... now."

"We will, Lainey, I promise."

"Love... you..."

"Lainey!" He shook her slightly as her eyelids fluttered down. "Lainey! Don't leave me." Ah, Great God, don't let her die, please don't let her die.

He sat there through the night, holding her body close to his, heedless of the cold, of the damp ground, of the monotonous throbbing of his wounds. He thought of nothing but Lainey, of what she had come to mean to him, of how much he had grown to love her in such a short time. He could not lose her now.

Time and again, he glanced skyward, willing Pergith's ship to appear. Xanthia possessed remarkable medical technology, but even their doctors couldn't restore life once it was gone.

He placed his hand on her brow, feeling the heat radiating from her skin, the chills that wracked her body. She'd lost so much blood. How much could a human lose and still live?

The minutes passed slowly, each one like an eternity, and then, in the darkest hour before the dawn, he heard the faint whir of a ship.

Looking up, he saw Pergith's spacecraft break through the clouds to hover directly overhead. The bottom hatch opened; a moment later, a transporter beam carried Micah and Lainey up into the ship.

"Zermicazyne!" Pergith entered the transporter room, his arms outstretched in welcome, until he saw Micah's burden. "*Tjete*," he swore softly, "who have you got there?"

"Her name is Lainey St. John, and she's badly hurt."

"It is against regulations to bring an earthling on board an exploratory vessel," Pergith said. "I could lose my commission."

"Your commission be damned," Micah said curtly, and before Pergith could argue or ask any more questions, Micah swept past him, carrying Lainey down to the hospital deck.

A doctor and two medic assistants, both dressed in light gray jumpsuits, looked up as Micah burst into the room and placed Lainey on one of the examining tables.

"She's dying," he said, choking on the words. "Do something."

"You do not look so good yourself," Pergith remarked, entering the room behind Micah. "Maybe you should climb up on the other table?"

"Lainey first," Micah insisted.

"We will take care of her," the doctor said, pulling on a pair of sterile gloves. His gaze swept over Micah, noting the dried blood on his left arm and right shoulder. "Do not worry, commander. Rathe, take Commander Zermicazyme into the other room and look after his injuries."

"I am all right," Micah said, not wanting to leave Lainey's side.

"I am the commander of this ship," Pergith said firmly, "and you will do as Doctor Corda has ordered." Clasp ing his hands behind his back, Pergith fixed his gaze on the doctor's face. "I want him to have a complete examination."

"Pergith!"

"Head to foot," Pergith said. He glanced back at Micah. "I will be in my quarters when you are through, Commander."

Micah glared at his old friend, but there was nothing to do but obey. He wasn't on Earth now. Technically, he was on Xanthian soil, and Pergith was in command.

He glanced over his shoulder as he followed the medic out of the room. Lainey's face was as pale as the thin white cloth that had been placed over her. Her hair, as black as the crystals of Maddorriah, only emphasized her lack of color. But it was the dark crimson stain on her chest that held his gaze. She had been badly hurt, and it was all his fault.

Following the medic into the next room, Micah striped off his clothing and stretched out on the exam table, feeling its built-in warmth relax him until he was hardly conscious of the dull ache in his arm and shoulder.

He closed his eyes as the medic quickly and expertly washed the wounds with warm water laced with a soothing antiseptic, sprayed his arm and shoulder with a pungent disinfectant, and neatly stitched the wounds. When that was done, the medic applied the lazerpad which would accelerate healing and eliminate scarring.

With the injuries taken care of, the medic subjected Micah to an in-depth physical examination, pronouncing him in remarkably good health in spite of the blood he had lost.

"I will make my report to Commander Pergith," the medic said. "You should report here for a recheck when the stitches disappear."

Micah nodded as he hopped off the table, his only thought to see how Lainey was.

"You will find a clean uniform in the closet," the medic said as he took his leave.

Minutes later, dressed in a regulation Fleet uniform, Micah returned to the main operating room. Fear coiled around his heart as he entered the compartment, which was ominously silent. Lainey rested on a long white table, covered by a dark green, temperature-controlled blanket. The doctor stood beside the table, his face grave as he listened to her heartbeat. He glanced up as Micah entered the room.

"How is she?"

"Not good," the doctor replied. "There has been considerable blood lost. The wound itself is not fatal, but..." The doctor shook his head. "Her prospects for survival are not favorable at this time."

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"She needs blood. Human blood, but of course, we have none on board."

"Take mine."

The doctor shook his head. "No."

"Why not?"

"We have never mixed our blood with this species."

"Just do it."

"Very well, but I will not be responsible for the consequences to the earthling—or to you, Commander."

Micah nodded impatiently. "Just get on with it."

"This is most irregular," the doctor muttered, but he quickly performed the necessary preliminaries, and in a matter of minutes, Micah's blood was mingling with Lainey's.

He stared at the narrow tube that carried the blood from his veins to hers. On Earth, his blood had appeared to be brown, but now it was again a dark, dark red.

Please, just let her live. The silent prayer repeated itself in his mind over and over again as he watched the life-giving force trickle into Lainey's veins. But would it be life-giving, he wondered, or would his own blood poison her system, robbing her of the last breath of life?

He was light-headed when the procedure was finished, but he refused to leave her again.

The doctor cleared his throat. "I believe Commander Pergith expects you in his quarters."

"He can wait."

The doctor and the medic exchanged disapproving glances. To disobey one's superior on board ship was akin to mutiny.

Exasperated and obviously confused by Micah's devotion to an Earth woman, or perhaps to any woman, the doctor brought Micah a chair, insisting that he sit down before he fell down.

With a sigh, Micah did as he was told. For the first time in his life, he didn't care about obeying orders, didn't care about the rules and regulations that had always governed his life. He wasn't leaving Lainey's side until... he swallowed the lump in his throat... until he knew she was better or dead.

Time passed unnoticed as he sat beside her, her hand, so cold and limp, clutched in his, his gaze locked on her face. Gradually, the color returned to her cheeks, her hand grew warm, and then, with a sigh, she opened her eyes.

"Lainey?"

She turned toward the sound of his voice. And then a faint smile touched her lips.

"Micah," she murmured drowsily, "I had the strangest dream..." She frowned, her words tapering off as she took in her surroundings. "Where are we?"

His hand squeezed hers. "We're on board a spacecraft."

"A flying saucer?"

Micah nodded. "Pergith came for me."

"But..." She lifted a hand to her chest, felt the slight bulge of a bandage beneath the sheet. "I was shot." She stared at him, alarmed. "You were shot. I don't understand..."

"Everything is all right, Lainey." He stood up and kissed her cheek. "Rest now."

She grabbed his forearm. "Where are you going?"

"I must see Pergith."

"Don't leave me."

"You'll be all right," he said reassuringly. "I won't be gone long."

"Promise?"

"I promise. Try to get some sleep."

She nodded, but of course sleep was out of the question. She was on a spaceship! The table beneath her was warm, pulsing as though it were alive. The walls and ceiling were a clear, soft white. She peered over the edge of the table; the floor was green and glowed faintly.

There were a number of strange-looking objects on a low shelf.

She felt a moment of apprehension as a man clad in a pale green shirt and pants walked into view. He was tall and slender, with short, wavy, yellow-gold hair and hazel eyes fringed with pale lashes. His ears were very small, smaller even than Micah's. There was webbing on his hands.

"How are you feeling?" he asked in a well-modulated voice.

"Fine, thank you." She couldn't help staring. Or grinning, when she saw that the doctor was staring, too.

"I am Doctor Corda," he said. "Forgive me for staring, but you are the first earthling I have observed up close. I had been told our people were very similar, but this is the first chance I have had to see for myself."

"Am I going to be all right?"

"I believe so." He brushed the hair from her brow, frowning thoughtfully as he bent down to look at her left ear more closely. "Do you mind?" he asked politely, and then he lifted her hands, first one, then another, turning them over carefully. "Interesting," he murmured. "Most interesting."

He smiled apologetically. "Forgive me. You need to rest. Zermicazyne will no doubt return shortly."

With a brief nod, the doctor left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Lainey stared after him, wondering if she was home in bed dreaming the wildest dream of her life.

"If this is a dream, Lainey St. John," she muttered with a shake of her head, "you've outdone yourself this time."

Suddenly overcome with weariness, she closed her eyes and tumbled down, down, into darkness.

"Have you lost your sanity?" Pergith demanded. "Bringing an earthling on board my ship?"

"I could not let her die."

"Her fate is not your concern. You should have contacted us immediately after your ship crashed. What have you been doing down there for so long?"

Micah stared up at his friend. He had grown up with Pergith. They had been raised in the same nursery home. Gone to the same school. Trained together. But now Pergith was like a stranger. Had he always been so rigid, so disciplined, so devoted to obeying every nuance of the law?

Micah gave himself a mental shake. Pergith hadn't changed. He had.

"My transmitter was not working. I could not contact you, and I did not signal you because there were earthlings who knew a ship had crashed in the area. These people know of us, Pergith. They have captured some of us, studied us."

"How do you know this?"

"I know," Micah replied wearily. Feeling as though he hadn't slept for years, he stood up, swaying slightly. "I am going to go check on Lainey, and then I am going to get something to eat and go to bed."

"I will have Stacha bring you a tray."

"Thank you."

"Rest well, my friend."

Micah nodded, then left the commander's quarters.

He went immediately to check on Lainey. She was sleeping soundly, one hand tucked beneath her cheek, her lashes making dark crescents against her skin.

Suddenly overcome by weariness, Micah sank down in the chair beside the examining table and closed his eyes.

Lainey was going to be all right, and that was all that mattered.

Chapter Nineteen

Pergith stared at his friend, unable to believe what he was hearing. Zermicazyne had fallen in love with an earthling, and if that wasn't bad enough, he wanted to return to Earth and live with the woman.

"Live with her?" Pergith queried. "Cohabitate? In the same dwelling? Together?"

"Yes."

"You cannot be serious. Do you mean to sacrifice your career and leave Xanthia forever for this female, this Earth woman?" Pergith shook his head. "Think what you would be giving up. Earth is a primitive planet. What would you do there?"

"I have made up my mind, Pergith. When you take Lainey back to Earth, I am going with her."

"I think not."

Micah stood up. Bracing his hands on the commander's desk, he leaned forward. "I am going with her. You may be the commander of this vessel, but you are not in command of my life."

"You cannot walk away from the Fleet, or from your responsibilities," Pergith said, his voice suddenly cold. "You have an obligation. To our people. To Adana. To yourself. If you cannot think rationally enough to realize that what you're doing is wrong, then I shall take whatever steps I deem necessary for your own good."

Micah's eyes narrowed ominously. "That sounds dangerously like a threat."

"It is, in fact, a promise," Pergith retorted. "Being on Earth so long has warped your thinking. Even your manner of speech is altered."

Without taking his gaze off Micah, Pergith switched on the intercom on his desk. "Security, report to the commander's cabin."

Micah stared at Pergith in disbelief. "Are you having me arrested?"

"Of course not. I simply intend to have you confined until the Earth woman has been returned to her own planet."

"No! Damn you, Pergith, you cannot do this!"

"I can." Pergith glanced past Micah as the door to his cabin swung open. Pergith signaled for Jerva, the chief security officer, to enter. Achaia waited in the companionway, his weapon at the ready.

"Jerva, I want Commander Zermicazyne confined to his quarters until the Earth woman is returned to the planet."

"Yes, Commander." Jerva approached Micah, his hand on the stunner at his side. "Will you come peacefully, Commander?"

"Pergith, I beg you, do not do this."

"You will thank me when it is over."

"Don't count on it."

Pergith saw the rage glittering in Zermicazyne's eyes as he glanced at Jerva, and then at Achaia. The commander took a deep breath, fearing he was about to destroy a lifelong friendship, yet certain that he was only doing what needed to be done.

"You had best put him in restraints until you reach his quarters," Pergith suggested. He looked at Micah and shook his head. "I am sorry, my friend."

A muscle twitched in Micah's jaw as Jerva fastened the restraints around his wrists. They were a remarkable piece of work; lightweight yet virtually unbreakable, they were infused with a substance that reacted to violent emotion and movement. Should a prisoner become hysterical, try to escape, or become violent, the sudden accelerated change in heart rate and body temperature immediately caused the restraints to inject a drug into the bloodstream that rendered the prisoner unconscious within seconds.

Micah stared at the restraints, and then at Pergith. "Let me go to her and explain what is happening."

Seeing the refusal in Pergith's eyes, Micah took a deep breath, hating his old friend for making him beg. "Please, Pergith, at least let me tell her good-bye."

Pergith glanced down at the medical report on his desk, wondering how much Zermicazyne knew, and then he shook his head.

"I think not."

Micah took a step forward, his hands curled into tight fists. "Damn you, why are you doing this?"

"I think perhaps being so long on Earth has warped your thinking," Pergith replied. "We will return the woman to Earth when it is dark, and then set course for Xanthia. You will feel better about everything once you are home again."

Micah glared at Pergith. For one brief, irrational moment, he thought of unleashing his power, of destroying his friend and anyone else who dared stand in his way. He could incinerate Pergith and perhaps the other two before the restraints rendered him unconscious...

He swore softly, appalled that the thought had even crossed his mind. With a last accusing glance at Pergith, he followed Jerva out of the room.

Lainey paced the floor of her quarters, wondering where Micah was. She had no idea of how much time had passed since she'd seen him last, but she was sure it had been at least twelve hours. Where was he?

Tired of pacing, she sat down on the edge of the narrow bed and gazed at her surroundings. The room was small and round, with a domed ceiling, white walls, and a white floor. The chair beside the bed felt as if it was made of plastic, yet she knew it wasn't plastic at all. She stared at the ceiling curiously. There were no lights visible, yet the room was as bright as day unless she sat on the bed, at which time the light grew dim; when she lay down, the light went out altogether.

There was a low table on the far side of the bed, made of the same substance as the chair. A tall blue vase holding a trio of bright red flowers of a kind Lainey had never seen before stood on the table. It was the only splash of color in the room.

Where was Micah? She tapped her fingertips on the tabletop, the quiet of the room and the strain of not knowing what was going on making her more nervous by the minute. The last thing she remembered was falling asleep in some sort of examining room. When she'd awakened, she'd been here, in bed.

An alien dressed in some sort of dark-green uniform had brought her something to eat an hour or so ago. A short time later, he had returned with her clothes, neatly washed, mended, and folded, in his arms.

When she'd asked him of Micah's whereabouts, he'd merely smiled and shrugged.

Dressing quickly, she had tried the door, only to find it locked. Muttering a very unladylike oath, she began to pace again, her imagination running wild.

Micah was dead.

She was being taken to an alien planet to be studied like a bug under a microscope.

She was going to be sold as a love slave to some horrible slimy creature from another world. She shuddered as visions of the loathsome Jabba from *Star Wars* filled her mind.

She whirled around as the door to her room opened, Micah's name on her lips. But it wasn't Micah.

Pergith stared at the woman for a moment. She was undoubtedly quite attractive, but Zermicazyne had known beautiful women before. What was there about this earthling that made his best friend willing to sacrifice his career and his home just to be with her?

Lainey put her hands behind her back and clasped them tightly together. "Where's Micah?"

"Micah?" Pergith lifted one brow in amusement. "Is that what you call him?"

"Yes. Where is he? Is he all right?"

"He is well."

"Would you... can I see him?"

"I am afraid that is quite impossible. You will be transporting soon."

"Transporting?"

"We will transport you down to the planet. To Earth." Pergith folded his arms across his chest. "I made... Micah, did you call him?... a promise that I would not erase your memory of this time. In return, I will require your promise that you will tell no one of what has transpired here, or described what you have seen."

Erase her memory? Fear coiled in the depths of her soul. She remembered Micah telling her that after his people interviewed someone from earth, the entire incident was erased from their minds. "I promise."

"Nevertheless, I would advise you to forget this incident entirely. Get on with your life."

"Can't I please tell him good-bye?"

"No." Pergith stared at the woman, at the moisture welling in her eyes. He had never seen a woman weep. It was most disconcerting. "It is for your own good," he said gently. "And for his."

"Is it?"

"Yes. Zermicazyne has resigned himself to returning home. It is where he belongs. He has a duty to his people. If he sees you again, it will only make parting more difficult for him. And for you."

"But... but I..."

Pergith drew himself up to his full height, steeling himself against the sorrow in her eyes, the overwhelming sadness of her tears.

And then, sounding loudly in his mind, he heard Zermicazyne's voice. *Pergith, in the name of our friendship, please let me see her one last time. Please, I'm begging you, let me tell her goodbye .*

I gave you my answer before, my friend, Pergith responded. *It has not changed* . "I am sorry," he said gruffly. He spoke to Lainey, but his apology was for Zermicazyne, as well. "Jerva will take you down as soon as it gets dark."

Lainey stared at the door after he was gone. That was it, she thought. She would never see Micah again.

She felt suddenly numb, the hurt too deep for tears. She had met a man she never should have met, fallen in love with him, and now it was over. Or was it?

Micah? She focused her thoughts and sent them to him. *Micah, can you hear me ?*

Lainey! Are you all right?

I'm fine. They're sending me back to Earth.

I know. I love you, Lainey.

And I love you. I'll never forget you. Never.

Perhaps it would be best if you did.

The heaviness in his voice, the note of despair, tore at her heart. *Never ! she vowed. I'll love you until the day I die .*

Lainey, Lainey, so many things I want to tell you. . .

I know. Promise you won't forget me.

She heard the soft sound of bittersweet laughter, and then his voice, low and soft. *I will not forget you , cominza.*

Micah. . . A sound at the door broke her concentration. Whirling around, she saw an alien standing in the doorway.

"It is time," he said.

She tried to concentrate, tried to reestablish her bond with Micah so she could hear his voice one last time, but the alien was urging her out the door, down a narrow companionway. Her heart felt like lead as she followed him to a small oval room. *Micah, I love you . . .*

She stood where the Xanthian told her, felt a sudden sense of disorientation, of being hurled through space, and then, miraculously, she was standing on the hill behind the cabin at Chadds Creek.

A faint whirring sound drew her attention and she glanced up in time to see a slender silver craft hovering overhead, and then it was gone, and Micah with it.

The tears came then. Buckets of tears. Oceans of tears. Sitting down, Lainey crossed her arms on her bent knees and wept until she had no tears left.

Micah glared at Pergith and then slowly raised his shackled hands. "Are you going to make me wear these until we get home?"

Pergith shrugged. "Do you think it will be necessary?"

Micah shook his head, the anger draining out of him. Lainey was gone and Pergith had set a course for Xanthia. It was over.

"I will have Jerva remove the restraints immediately," Pergith said quietly.

Micah nodded, his face impassive.

Pergith spread his hands in a gesture of appeal. "I am truly sorry about the restraints."

"So am I."

Pergith swore under his breath, irritated by his friend's sullen attitude. Zermicazyne had been a good

friend; he would be a formidable enemy.

"I will send Jerva to you," Pergith said, and left the room, fearing he had lost his best friend.

Micah sat on the edge of his bunk, staring at the floor. He was going home, but he felt as if he was being sent into exile, away from everything he loved.

Lainey... He felt a tightness in his chest, a thickness in his throat. Lainey. He remembered the first time he saw her. She had been wearing black pants and a pink sweater, and he had thought her quite the prettiest creature he had ever seen.

He closed his eyes and her image rose in his mind, so vividly that he could almost smell the fragrance of her hair, see the love shining in her eyes, hear the sound of her voice.

With an effort, he banished her image from his mind. She was no longer a part of his life, he thought bleakly, but she would always be a part of his heart.

He stood up as the door to his quarters swung open and Jerva entered the room. Wordlessly, Micah held out his hands and Jerva removed the restraints.

"Commander Pergith requests that you dine with him," Jerva said, tucking the restraints into his jacket.

"No."

"As you wish, Commander. Shall I have something sent in?"

"No."

Jerva stared at him for a moment, then left the room, quietly closing the door behind him.

With a sigh, Micah stretched out on his bunk and closed his eyes. She was gone, and his life would never be the same again.

Chapter Twenty

"Lainey! Thank God! Where have you been?" Dolores St. John wrapped her arms around her daughter and hugged her tight. "We've been so worried."

"I'm fine, Mom."

"Get her inside, Dee," Ralph St. John said, hovering over the two of them. "I'll get some coffee."

"Come in and sit down, dear," Dolores said. She shepherded Lainey into the living room, settled her on the sofa, and covered her with a blanket.

"Here, sweetie," Ralph said, handing Lainey a cup of coffee laced with brandy. "Drink this."

Obediently, Lainey took a sip, coughed, and drained the cup.

"Lainey, can you tell us about it now?"

She nodded, then burst into tears. "Here, now," her father said, gathering her into his arms as if she were still his little girl. "Go ahead, sweetie, cry it all out."

And she did, releasing all her unhappiness, all her heartache in a flood of tears that scorched her eyes and did almost nothing to ease the pain in her heart. And all the while her father held her and rocked her.

When her tears finally subsided, she slid off his lap onto the sofa. "Sorry, Dad," she said, sniffing. "I didn't mean to drown you."

"Don't be silly." Ralph thrust his handkerchief at her. "I'm waterproof. You ought to know that by now."

Lainey smiled in spite of herself, then blew her nose and dabbed at her eyes.

For the next half hour, she related what had happened up at the cabin and on the spaceship. Fresh tears welled in her eyes when she reached the end of her story.

"And now he's gone," she said mournfully, "and I'll never see him again."

"What happened to the bodies?" Ralph asked.

"The bodies?" Lainey shuddered, remembering the charred remains. "I don't know."

Delores and Ralph exchanged glances, then Ralph cleared his throat. "We weren't going to say anything, Lainey, but maybe you should know. A man came here the same night you and Micah were attacked. He held us at gunpoint for twenty-four hours."

"Gunpoint! Who was he?"

Ralph shook his head. "I don't know. He wore a ski mask, but I'd guess he had something to do with the two men who followed you to the cabin. I think he came here to wait in case you got away and came home. I don't know. He got real fidgety when you didn't show up. He kept looking at the phone, as if he was expecting a call. He even picked up the receiver a couple of times, like he was checking to make sure the phone was working." Ralph took a deep breath and let it out in a heavy sigh. "All I'm saying is, maybe it's a good thing Micah's gone."

Lainey shook her head. "No..."

"Lainey, if everything you've said is true, think of what would have happened to Micah if the wrong people found out he was here," Dolores remarked quietly. "The press would have had a field day. Scientists would have been poking and probing at him for the rest of his life."

Lainey thought about the three men who had captured Micah, about the tests they'd performed, and knew that would be nothing compared to what would happen if SETI or some other organization had gotten hold of Micah. Her mother was right and she knew it, but it didn't lessen the pain.

Lainey frowned. The men who had followed them to the cabin had to be the same men who had captured Micah. But how had they known where her parents lived? The realization that her parents might have been hurt or killed hit her for the first time. She stared at her father and saw the knowledge in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Lainey," Ralph said. "I know how much you cared for him, but I can't be sorry he's gone. I'd

rather have you grieving than see anything happen to you or your mother."

Lainey placed her hand on her father's and gave it a squeeze. "I know, Dad. Thanks for listening and for believing me."

Rising, she hugged her father, then her mother. "I think I'll go to bed."

"Good night, sweetie," Dolores said. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Good night, Mom. Dad."

Heavy-hearted, Lainey climbed the stairs to her room, pulled off her sneakers, jeans, and sweater, and crawled into bed, praying that Micah would travel in safety, thanking God that her parents hadn't been harmed.

She tried to focus on putting her life back together, tried to think of a plot for her next mystery, which was due at the end of the year, but to no avail.

Micah was gone from her life, and nothing else mattered.

"Well," Delores said after Lainey had gone to bed, "what do you make of that? Spaceships, indeed!"

"Lainey's always had a vivid imagination," Ralph said, chuckling. "Remember that time she thought her closet was haunted? Still..." He rubbed a hand along his jaw. "There's something strange going on here, Dee. I don't believe for a minute that Micah's from outer space, but people *are* looking for him. Maybe he's involved in some sort of mob activity or something. Whatever's going on, I think we'd better cancel that trip to Palm Springs and stick close to home, just in case."

He sat in the car across the street from the St. John house, an unlit cigar clamped between his teeth. Gene and Mac had disappeared. He assumed they were dead, killed by the alien. But it was the fact that the girl had come home alone that concerned him. What did it mean?

Turning the key in the ignition, he pulled away from the curb. The girl had come home alone. Did that mean the alien had escaped and headed home, or was he merely lying low?

Frowning, he turned down the alley that ran behind his house.

The alien was gone, at least for now, but there was always a chance he'd come back for the girl.

And Red LeMans would be waiting for him.

Dressed in his official Fleet uniform, Micah stood in front of his superiors, his face impassive as the Minister of Flight enumerated the charges that had been filed against him.

It was quite a lengthy list. Most of the charges were of little consequence, but his failure to follow

standard procedures after the crash, coupled with his admission that he had intentionally put off signaling his sister ship, were charges to be reckoned with. And the fact that he had not only let an earthling see him, but had lived with her and told her about Xanthian ways, only made things worse. And yet it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. He had answered their questions honestly, not caring what anyone thought, not caring that he was likely ruining what had been an outstanding career. He had told them everything except the most important thing.

Pergith had been called to testify. Micah had felt the commander's sympathetic gaze as Pergith related all that had happened on his ship from the time Micah and the woman had come on board until the time the woman had been returned to Earth.

Told in a straightforward manner, fact upon fact, Micah's behavior sounded irrational, unacceptable. He wasn't surprised when he was stripped of his flight status and rank for the duration of a solar year. He was also denied the right to leave Xanthia during that period.

Pergith was waiting for him in the hallway when Micah left the Minister of Flight's chambers. Micah would have passed him by, but Pergith grabbed him by the arm.

"I am sorry, Zermicazyne," he said. "I never thought the penalty would be so severe."

"Didn't you?" Micah stared at his old friend, and Pergith released his hold on Micah's arm.

"I wish you would join me for a late meal," Pergith said.

"No."

"We have been friends for many years," Pergith remarked quietly. "What I did, I did because I thought it was best for you. And for the Earth woman."

"Her name is Lainey," Micah said softly. "Lainey St. John."

He stared past Pergith, his heart aching with the knowledge that he would never see her again. He took a deep breath and expelled it in a long, slow sigh. "Farewell, Pergith."

"You will not forgive me for this?"

"No."

Pergith inclined his head in a formal gesture. "Very well. I will not trouble you again."

Micah watched Pergith walk away. He stood there for a long moment, feeling more alone than he could ever remember, and then he left the building.

Adanawas waiting for him outside. He had forgotten how lovely she was. Her hair, so blond it was almost white, fell to her waist in a mass of soft waves. Her eyes were as blue as earth's sky, her skin a smooth golden brown.

"Zermicazyne," she said, slipping her arm through his in an uncharacteristic display of affection. "I have missed you."

Micah nodded, wishing he could say he had missed her, too, and that it was good to be home. But it

would only be a lie, and so he remained silent.

"What happened in there?" Adana asked in gentle concern.

"I was stripped of my rank and my flight status and admonished not to leave Xanthia."

"I am sorry. I know how much flying means to you." She squeezed his arm. "But perhaps some good will come of it."

"What do you mean?"

A faint blush tinged her cheeks. "You were scheduled for an exploratory flight to Delton Seven when you returned from your last mission, but now that you've been... now that you will not be leaving, we can expedite the date of our joining."

Her softly spoken words hit him like an iron fist. He had given his word, his pledge, to join with Adana. Speechless, he stared into the depths of her eyes and wondered how he could possibly fulfill his commitment now.

He remembered Lainey's words, spoken in hurt and fear: *Go home and join with Adana. She'll probably give you a hundred sons*. He thought of the nights spent in Lainey's arms, the attraction that had flowed between them, the way his heart had swelled with love whenever she was near.

In Lainey's arms, he had learned the true meaning of love, of caring and sharing. How could he join with Adana, plant his seed within her womb, knowing their progeny would be raised by others? If he was to have offspring, he wanted them to be nurtured by Lainey. Lainey who so badly wanted a child and could never have one.

Lainey... The thought of never seeing her again slashed through his heart like a laser blast.

Adana was looking up at him, her expression worried. "Is something wrong, Zermicazyne? I'm sorry if I spoke out of turn. Perhaps now isn't the time to discuss intimate matters."

She was smiling at him, the look in her eyes asking for his forgiveness.

"I am sorry, Adana," he said. "I... I have a lot on my mind right now."

"Of course." She gave his arm an understanding squeeze. "We can talk about it later."

"Yes," he said in a strangled voice. "Later."

Micah watched Adana walk away. Joining wasn't quite as casual as he had made it sound when he spoke of it to Lainey. There were gifts to be exchanged, blessings to be obtained from the High Church, medical examinations to ensure that they were both in good health, mentally and physically.

Each requirement suddenly seemed like an obstacle that couldn't be overcome. The thought of buying Adana a gift reminded him of the bracelet he had bought for Lainey; obtaining a blessing from the church reminded him that he had asked Lainey to marry him—to be his woman, not just until a child was conceived, but forever.

Joining with Adana, which he had once viewed as no more than an obligation to be fulfilled and

forgotten, now filled him with dread. And yet, how could he refuse? It was expected of him, just as total allegiance to Xanthia was expected of him.

He walked out of the city, needing to be alone. A narrow path ran alongside the river that supplied the city with water.

Stripping off his uniform shirt and boots, Micah cleared his mind and began to run, losing himself in the sheer physical act of running.

His pace quickened as the miles went by. His legs ached, his side felt as if it were on fire; perspiration dripped from his body, and still he ran. But no matter how fast he ran, how far he went, he couldn't outrun Lainey's memory, couldn't run away from the fact that he'd been grounded for a solar year; couldn't run away from the knowledge that, sooner or later, he would have to fulfill his obligation and join with Adana.

He ran until his legs refused to obey, until the pain in his side forced him to stop. Dropping to the ground, he threw back his head and loosed all his pain and frustration in a long anguished cry.

He sat there for a long time, reviewing his past, his life on Xanthia, the numerous flight honors and commendations he had accumulated in the last fifteen years. He thought of how little he had to live for on Xanthia, and how much waited for him on Earth.

Sitting there, gazing at the city that glowed beneath a pale pink sky, he bade a silent farewell to his old life. If all went well, he would soon be with Lainey. If he failed...

A wry smile lifted a corner of his mouth. If he failed, all his problems would be over.

Permanently.

Lainey glanced over her shoulder, unable to shake the feeling that she was being watched, but there was no one there.

Another bizarre manifestation of being pregnant, no doubt. Pregnant! Numerous doctors had assured her that it was impossible, that she would never conceive, and yet here she was, five months pregnant, and the father was thousands, millions, of miles away, totally unaware that he was going to have a child.

When she had asked the doctor how such a thing was possible when she had been told time and again that she was barren, he had only shrugged and smiled, somewhat sheepishly. *We are not infallible*, he had replied. *Couples who have been told pregnancy is impossible often conceive once they stop trying so hard, or they adopt a child.*

Unlocking the door, she went into the kitchen and put the groceries away, then went into the living room and sank down on the sofa, her hands resting on the swell of her stomach.

Pregnant. She had never contemplated the discomforts of being pregnant when she had dreamed of having a baby; she had thought only of the joy of having a child.

That joy was hard to recall now. She had been nauseated the first three months. Her ankles were swollen. Her breasts were tender. She cried at the least provocation.

She managed to keep busy during the day, but at night she was haunted by memories of Micah, of dreams filled with bizarre landscapes, of nightmare images of deformed babies with blue skin and webbed hands and feet.

She was carrying an alien baby.

Her emotions were out of control, soaring to heights of great joy and plunging into the depths of despair. If not for the support of her parents, she was certain she'd have lost her mind. Her mother came by every day to make sure she was all right; her father called from work, and stopped by on his way home.

They brought her silly gifts to make her smile, and a crib for the baby. Her parents painted the spare bedroom a soft shade of yellow. Her father bought a baseball glove; her mother bought a doll. They drove her to the doctor, took her out to dinner, to the movies.

She loved them all the more for their patience and concern, but late at night, after her parents had gone home, she was alone with her fears, and with the ever-increasing certainty that someone was following her.

Chapter Twenty-One

He took nothing with him, no mementos of his past, nothing to remind him of what he was leaving behind.

Clad in a pair of black breeches, a long-sleeved black tunic, and black boots, Micah took a last look at the spacious rooms that had been his home for the last ten solar years. The walls throughout were a restful shade of blue reminiscent of earth's sky; the furniture was sparse and functional. A shelf that took up an entire wall held an assortment of souvenirs from distant planets, as well as the numerous awards and citations he had received for meritorious service in the Fleet.

Gazing at the main living space, he thought how sterile it was, how empty, when compared to Lainey's house, which was cluttered with unicorns made of glass and pewter and crystal, with colorful pots of dried flowers, paintings, books, framed photos of people she cared for.

With a last look around, Micah closed the door and made his way across the compound to his shuttlecraft.

A short time later, he landed on the far reaches of the space station and made his way to the landing bay. Standing in the shadows, he picked out the craft he wanted, a sleek two-man ship that was big enough, and carried fuel enough, for a flight to Earth. It was the fastest long-range fighter in the Fleet, equipped with all the latest technological marvels.

Stealing the fighter went against everything he believed in, everything he had been taught, yet it was the only way. With his flight rank and status canceled, the tower wouldn't give him clearance to leave Xanthia. And so he would steal a ship and sneak away, a crime far greater than any other of which he had been accused. But it couldn't be helped.

Taking a deep breath, Micah crossed the distance to the ship, climbed in, and did a quick pre-flight check of the controls. Everything was in order; the galley was stocked, the fuel tanks were full, all emergency equipment was in place.

He set the proper coordinates, then sat back and waited. He didn't have to wait long. An Orizzon transport was getting ready to take off.

Slowly, the big bay doors began to open. It was now or never.

Muttering a hurried prayer, Micah fired up the engine and roared out of the dock ahead of the transport, soaring into the darkness, his spacecraft, and his thoughts, racing toward earth.

If all went well, if the ship didn't malfunction, if the Minister of Flight didn't send anyone after him, he would be with Lainey in three Earth months.

Lainey sat in her car, staring at the old Grayson place. She didn't know what had possessed her to drive up to the mansion in the middle of the night, probably just another foolish whim brought on by being eight months pregnant, like her craving for dill pickles and watermelon.

Still, just being there made her feel closer to Micah... Micah, who was never out of her thoughts. Micah, who had probably gone back to his old life... joined with Adana ...

The thought of Micah with another woman was like a knife in her heart.

Micah... If only there was some way to tell him about the baby. If only... Her thoughts came to an abrupt end as a blinding white light streaked across the sky and disappeared behind the mansion.

In spite of her expanded girth, she was out of the car in minutes, running toward the back of the mansion. It was just a shooting star, she told herself, nothing more, but she ran until her sides ached, and then she walked, past the house, up the hill.

Breathless, she stared at the long, slender spaceship, felt her heart climb into her throat as the hatch opened and a man dressed in a gray spacesuit and helmet climbed out.

Her heart was beating so wildly, she was sure she'd faint, but she couldn't take her eyes from the man as he stripped off his helmet and flight suit and tossed them into the ship.

"Micah?" His name sounded in her mind. Unknowingly, she spoke it aloud as well.

Slowly, the man turned toward her.

Lainey?

She nodded, tears streaming down her face as he began to run toward her. Effortlessly, he ran up the hill, and then she was in his arms, sobbing incoherently.

"Lainey, Lainey." He held her close, one hand caressing her back, her shoulders, touching her hair, her face, assuring himself that she was there, really there.

"You came back," she murmured. "I don't believe it."

"Believe it."

She stared up at him, her hands framing his face. He was even more handsome than she remembered. The moonlight shimmered in his pale blond hair, tempting her touch. His eyes were the same silver-blue that had haunted her sleep. His skin radiated a familiar blue glow.

"You're here," she whispered. "Really here."

For endless moments, they held each other close, and then Micah stepped back, his gaze fixed on her distended abdomen.

"Lainey?"

She placed her hands protectively over her womb. "I'm pregnant."

"Pregnant?"

"With child."

Micah stared at her for a moment, his eyes narrowed. She was breeding. "You said you couldn't... I..."

He knew nothing of human reproduction. Looking at her, he had no idea how advanced her pregnancy might be.

He wanted to ask if the child was his, but couldn't form the words.

"I never thought I'd see you again," Lainey said slowly, and Micah felt a sharp pain in his heart. The child wasn't his. She had found someone else.

Lainey looked down at her hands, still clasped over her stomach. They had shared so much, why was it so hard to tell him the child was his?

"I never thought I'd be able to tell you about the baby," she said, still not meeting his gaze, "but I hoped you'd be happy."

"It's mine?"

Lainey nodded, wishing she had the nerve to look at him.

"Lainey!" With a triumphant cry, he lifted her off her feet and whirled her around.

Abruptly, he stopped twirling and drew her close, one hand resting on her belly. "Lainey, oh, Lainey."

"You're not angry?"

"Angry? Why would I be angry?"

"I don't know."

"When?" he asked eagerly. "When is the child to be born? Are you all right? Have you been examined by a physician?"

"Two weeks, more or less. I'm fine, and yes, I've seen a doctor." She looked into his eyes, drowning in

the love, the happiness, reflected there. And then she glanced at the ship, shimmering in the moonlight.
"How long can you stay?"

"As long as you want me."

"What... what do you mean?"

"I came to stay, if you still want me."

"You mean it?"

He nodded, his gaze intent upon her face. "I still want you to be my woman, my wife, unless you've changed your mind."

"I haven't. Oh, Micah!" She kissed him then, kissed him with all the love in her heart.

And he was kissing her back, banishing all the hurt, all the loneliness, of the long months of separation. He was there, to stay, and that was all that mattered.

Heart pounding with happiness, she watched as he walked back down the hill, withdrew a small remote from his pocket, and activated the molecular masking device that would render his spacecraft invisible.

He was beautiful in the moonlight, she thought. The pale light of the moon turned his hair to silver; the blue glow of his skin seemed to shimmer as he walked back up the hill toward her.

He stopped at the crest of the hill and buried the remote at the base of a tall tree.

"Will it be safe there?" Lainey asked.

"It should be. I don't want to take a chance on losing it, and if I need it in a hurry, it'll be here."

"I guess so," Lainey agreed dubiously.

"Why did you come here tonight?" Micah asked as they walked, hand in hand, to Lainey's car.

"I don't know. I was sitting at home, trying to plot my next book, when I seemed to hear your voice inside my head, and then I had the oddest feeling that I should drive to the mansion." She looked up at him and smiled. "Maybe, subconsciously, I knew you were coming."

Micah nodded. "I'm sure of it. You've been in my thoughts ever since I left Xanthia."

She squeezed his hand. "And now you're here." Happiness bubbled up inside her. "Blue glow and all."

Micah stared at his hand as he opened the car door. His skin was, indeed, glowing.

"You'll have to learn to drive," Lainey said as she slid her ample girth behind the wheel. And then she frowned. If Micah was going to be a permanent resident of Earth, he'd need a driver's license, a birth certificate, a Social Security number. How did one go about getting those things for someone from another planet?

She glanced at Micah, her heart swelling with such love and happiness, she thought she might die of it.

She'd worry about all those other mundane matters later. Right now, she wanted only to get home, to be alone with him in the privacy of her house, to touch him and taste him, to listen to his voice. She wanted to know everything that had happened since she'd seen him last.

Micah stood in the middle of the living room, Lainey's hand tightly clasped in his as he looked around. It was just as he remembered, filled with plants and books and crystal unicorns that shimmered in the light, all of it reflecting the warmth, the love, the beauty, that was Lainey.

"I missed this place," he said, smiling down at her, "almost as much as I missed you."

"Are you sure you'll be happy here?"

"Ah, Lainey, I've never been happy anywhere else." Swinging her into his arms, he sat down on the sofa, cradling her in his lap.

"What happened when you got to Xanthia?"

Micah grunted softly. "They stripped me of my rank and my flight status and told me, in subtle but certain terms, that I was not to leave Xanthia for a year."

"But... but you're here." She calculated quickly on her fingers. It had been eight months, Earth time, since she'd seen him last. "Did they change their minds?"

"No. I took a ship and left without telling anyone."

"Oh, Micah." She didn't know what the penalty for such a thing was on Xanthia, but she was certain it was serious. "Won't they come after you?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, but even if they do, there's no way for them to find me. No one knows where you live, although Pergith will know where he picked us up." He cupped her chin in his hand. "Don't worry about it, Lainey. Not now. Tell me what you've been doing. How are your parents? Are they pleased about the child?"

She wanted to know what he'd been doing, too, but she put her questions on hold and answered his, telling him how she'd found out she was pregnant only a few days after he left, how happy she'd been.

"But I was scared, too," she confessed. She took his hand, so big and brown and strong, and clasped it to her breast. "I'm still scared." What if the child was horribly deformed? What if it died? And even if it was strong and healthy, how would they explain that strange blue glow?

Of course she was scared, Micah thought sympathetically. She was carrying an alien child. To his knowledge, no Xanthian had ever joined with a human before. What sort of offspring would such a union produce?

"I saw a TV show once," Lainey said, "about an alien race that took over the earth. One of the girls had an alien baby..."

"And?"

"It was awful." She looked up at him, her eyes tormented. "And it died."

"When the doctor examined you, did he find anything abnormal?"

"No. At least, he didn't say so."

Lainey stared at Micah, seeing him again as if for the first time. Except for his ears and the webbing on his hands, he looked like any other man. Perhaps, genetically, they weren't so different, even though they came from different planets.

Micah covered her hand with his. "Did he find anything unusual in your blood?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"On the ship, you needed blood, and I gave you some of mine."

"You did? Then why didn't it show up on the tests?"

Micah shrugged. "There must be an explanation, but I don't know what it could be." He paused a moment, his eyes searching hers. "Do you want this child? My child?"

"Yes." She took a deep breath and forced a smile. "Even if it's blue all over and has two heads."

No matter what the future held, Micah knew he would never love her more than he did at that moment. "Then let's hope for the best, and worry about the worst when it happens."

"All right." She could face anything, she thought, now that he was there with her. "Don't you think it's time you kissed me?"

She didn't have to ask him twice. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her gently, tenderly, wishing he could tell her how he had missed her, how deeply he loved her, but he lacked the words in her language to express what he truly felt, and to tell her in his native tongue would be pointless. And so he filled his mind with love and hoped that she would understand.

Micah's kiss deepened, and Lainey was suffused with warmth—not the blazing heat of passion, but the sweet, gentle warmth of love, of affection, of caring. She felt his thoughts, the emotion that was too deep, too strong, for mere words, and knew she was loved in ways few women would ever know.

Micah drew a deep breath and let it out in a long, slow sigh fraught with desire. "I wish..." He cut the thought off in mid-sentence.

"Wish what?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"Micah."

"I want to hold you, love you. To join with you."

"I know. I want it, too, but..."

"It isn't safe."

"No." She gazed into his eyes, a wistful expression on her face. "I wish you'd gotten here a few weeks sooner."

"I can wait." He brushed her cheek with his knuckles. "For a few weeks, if I have to. Forever, if I must, so long as you're near me. So long as I can hold you, touch you. Be a part of your life."

"Oh, Micah." She smiled up at him through her tears. "I love you so much."

"And I love you, Lainey St. John, with all my heart and soul."

How could she doubt it? He'd forsaken his home, his friends, traveled millions of miles, just to be with her.

"It's late," Micah said. "You should get some sleep."

"Will you hold me all night long?"

"All night," he replied in a voice thick with emotion. "And every night for as long as I live."

Rising, he carried her down the hall to her bedroom. Lowering her onto the bed, he undressed her, worshipping her with his eyes. He placed his hands over her swollen belly, trying to imagine his child sleeping within her womb. And then the child, his child, moved.

Speechless, Micah gazed into Lainey's eyes, his expression one of awe, of reverence.

Lainey placed her hands over his. "It is wonderful, isn't it? So many nights, I lay here, feeling the baby move, wishing you were here to share it with me." She caressed his cheek. "And now you are here, and it's even better than I imagined."

With hands that trembled, she undressed him, reacquainting herself with the broad swell of his chest, her fingertips lingering on the width of his shoulders, his strong, flat belly. Looking at him, at the sheer masculine beauty of his face and form, she felt all her fears fade away. Surely, with Micah for a father, her child would be beautiful.

Filled with contentment, she drew Micah down beside her, curling into his big body as she had dreamed of doing for so long.

"You'll be here when I wake up?"

"Every morning for the rest of my life."

With a sigh, Lainey closed her eyes, carrying Micah's image into her dreams.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lainey called her parents the next morning to let them know Micah had returned from Xanthia. Thirty minutes later, Ralph and Dolores arrived at the house.

Earlier that morning, Micah had assumed the form Lainey's parents would be expecting. Now, sitting in

the kitchen across the table from Ralph and Dolores St. John, he knew they were trying not to stare, but he was acutely aware of their furtive glances as they looked for some tangible evidence that he was, indeed, from another world.

It was unsettling, to say the least, and after ten minutes or so, he'd had enough. "I guess Lainey told you where I'm from," he remarked quietly.

"She might have mentioned it," Dolores said. She picked up a napkin, folding and unfolding it in her lap.

"But you don't believe it?"

"Well, it did seem a little far-fetched, but she was upset. We knew she'd been in some kind of trouble, and she's always been given to rather bizarre flights of fancy... You don't look—I mean..."

"You're babbling, Dee," Ralph said.

Lainey crossed the kitchen to stand beside Micah, her hand resting on his shoulder. "Maybe you should let them see how you really look?"

"Oh, dear," Dolores murmured. The napkin fell unnoticed to the floor as she pressed a hand to her heart. "He's not green or anything, is he?"

"Blue, actually," Lainey said, grinning.

"Lainey, this is no time for levity. It's natural for your mother to be a little... upset."

"I'm not making a joke, Dad. Show her, Micah."

Feeling like some sort of aberration on public display, Micah took on his own form. He held up one hand so they could see the webbing between his thumb and forefinger, and then he pulled back his hair so they could see his ears. The inner tension he felt caused the blue glow that emanated from his skin to shimmer darker than usual. He tried to keep his face impassive as he endured the St. Johns' reactions.

Dolores stared at him, her face suddenly pale, her mouth agape, her deep blue eyes registering shock.

Ralph swore under his breath. It was a crude oath, one that, under normal circumstances, he never would have repeated in front of his wife and daughter.

And Lainey laughed. "I told you he was blue," she said. Bending down, she kissed Micah on the cheek. "I'm hungry. How about the rest of you?"

"Forget breakfast," Dolores muttered under her breath. "I could use a drink."

She folded her hands in her lap and offered Micah a tentative smile, obviously relieved that he didn't have two heads in addition to everything else. "Except for your hands and your ears, you don't look much different from most folks I know."

Ralph snorted. "He looks a damn sight better than a lot of people I know."

"Of course, your skin is an unusual color," Dolores said, trying not to stare at him. "And your eyes are a little strange, slanted the way they are. And that blue glow is a trifle disconcerting, but..."

Ralph laid his hand on his wife's shoulder. "Let it go, Dee."

"I think he's beautiful," Lainey interjected smoothly. "French toast okay for everybody?"

Lainey stood beside Micah, his arm draped around her shoulders, as they waved good-bye to her mom and dad. During her parents' visit, Lainey had pointedly refrained from mentioning the baby, but she knew her folks were having the same doubts she was, even if no one spoke them aloud.

Her parents had taken the news of the wedding in stride, but then, what was the point in objecting? Lainey was old enough to make her own decisions, and there was a baby on the way. Lainey had talked it over earlier with Micah, and before her parents left for home, she had suggested they all drive to Vegas the following weekend. "If that's what you want, sweeting," her father had said, giving her a hug.

"Well, that was a unique experience," Lainey declared as they went back into the house and closed the door.

"An experience," Micah muttered. "Is that what you call it?"

Lainey slipped her arms around his waist and gave him a squeeze. "I know it wasn't easy for you, but it had to be done sometime."

"I'm not sure it was a good idea, telling them about me."

"Why not?"

Micah sat down on the sofa and drew Lainey down beside him. "I just don't think it's wise to tell anyone where I'm from."

"I had to tell my folks," Lainey said. "I mean, I didn't think I'd ever see you again, and someone had to know, in case something went wrong while I was in labor."

Micah nodded. What she said made sense. "Have you told anyone else?"

"No. Who would believe me?"

"It's obvious your parents didn't."

Lainey grinned. "Well, I thought they believed me when I told them that night you left, but now that I think about it, I guess they were just humoring me."

She laughed as she remembered her parents' reaction to Micah's transformation. "Did you see the look on my Mom's face? I guess seeing really is believing, but don't worry, they won't tell anyone."

"I'm not worried."

Lainey bit down on her lip. "Micah, I've decided to have the baby at home."

He didn't have to ask why. Hospitals asked questions, took blood tests.

"I'm sorry, Lainey," he said quietly. "I've made a mess of your life, haven't I?"

"No!" She took his hand in hers and held it tight. "Don't even think that. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be having this baby at all." She looked up at him, her eyes bright with love and acceptance. "You gave me something no one else could, something I've wanted all my life. Something that was impossible, until I met you."

"Maybe we shouldn't get married until after the baby is born."

Lainey shook her head, knowing he was offering her a way out in case she changed her mind, in case the baby died and she decided life with an alien was more than she could bear.

"I don't want to wait, Micah. No matter what happens, I don't want this child, born of our love, to be a bastard."

Gently, he drew her into the circle of his arms and rested his chin on the top of her head. Would she still look at him with that same depth of love and devotion if the baby was born horribly deformed or dead? Or would she look at him with hatred and revulsion, recoiling from his touch? Would she then be sorry she had agreed to be his wife?

"I love you, Lainey," he murmured fervently. "Love you, love you."

And love her he would, he thought. No matter what happened in the future, he knew he would love Lainey St. John as long as he had life and breath in his body.

"You're awfully quiet," Ralph St. John mused as he slid into the flow of traffic on the freeway.

"I'm not quiet," Dolores replied. "I'm stunned."

"Yeah, it's a little hard to swallow all right, but, hell, you can't doubt the truth of your own eyes."

"He's *analien*, Ralph. From outer space. And he's going to marry our daughter. Our only child."

Ralph glanced at his wife, a wry grin on his face. "Honey, they've already done everything but say the words."

"I know, but..." Dolores toyed with the folds of her skirt. "Ralph, she's pregnant. I've never been in favor of abortion, you know that, but don't you think we should have discussed it with her? I mean, there's no telling what the baby will look like..."

"I know. I thought of it, too. But, Dee, she looks so damn happy, I just couldn't say anything to ruin it. Besides, she's too far along for an abortion, and even if she wanted one, she couldn't very well waltz into her doctor's office and tell him she's carrying an alien baby."

"Ralph, be serious. What if... what if it's dangerous for Lainey? What if..." She couldn't say the words aloud.

Ralph reached over and took her hand in his. "She'll be fine, hon, I'm sure of it. She's a strong, healthy

girl."

"I know, but... but we don't know what effect having this alien's child could have. What if it's..." She took a deep breath. "Fatal?"

"Don't even think that!"

"I can't help it, Ralph. I'm afraid."

"I know." He squeezed her hand. "I am, too. But you want to hear something funny? Of all the guys she's dated, he's the first one I've ever liked, and that includes that loser she married."

"You want to know something?" Dee asked, grinning at him. "I feel the same way. I just wish..."

They looked at each other and smiled. "... he wasn't blue," they said simultaneously.

"She's happy." Ralph said, pulling off the freeway, "really happy for the first time in her life."

"I know." Dee wiped a tear from her eye. "Imagine, an alien for a son-in-law, and I can't even tell the girls at the beauty parlor."

Micah couldn't sleep that night. Lying in bed, he stared into the darkness. He could feel Lainey curled up close beside him, her body warm and soft against his. Gently, he placed his hand on her belly and felt a little thrill of exhilaration as his child stirred beneath his hand.

A child. Before knowing Lainey, he had never given any thought to having offspring beyond the physical act of joining; would never have agreed to join with Adana on Xanthia if joining had not been required of all healthy males. But now...

A surge of love, of protectiveness such as he'd never known, swelled within his heart as he felt the child kick again. His child, a child born of his love for Lainey. A child he would be able to touch, to hold in his arms. He would watch it grow, watch it learn to walk, to talk. He would be there to soothe its hurts, quiet its fears, share in its laughter, its accomplishments.

He remembered sitting in the restaurant with Lainey, watching a woman bounce a baby on her lap while a man looked on, smiling with pride. A family. A wave of excitement swept through Micah as he realized that he was about to have a family of his own, and that it would encompass not only Lainey and the baby, but Lainey's parents, as well.

Beside him, he felt Lainey stir. He knew the moment she came awake.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No. The baby's kicking a lot, that's all. It woke me up."

Micah drew her into his arms, massaging her back with one hand. "I love you, Lainey," he murmured. "I don't think I realized how much until now."

"I love you, too."

"I know." His throat felt thick; tears burned his eyes. "I know."

In all his life, no one had ever loved him. He'd had friends on Xanthia, people who had admired him, friends who had respected him, but no one had ever loved him.

Lainey brushed her hand across Micah's cheek. She drew back, startled at the dampness she felt there. "Are you crying?"

He squirmed uncomfortably, then nodded, afraid to speak for fear he would completely lose control.

"It's all right," Lainey whispered. "I won't think less of you if you cry."

"I will."

"Why?"

"It isn't... men don't..."

Lainey shook her head. Men! They seemed to be the same no matter what their planet of origin. "Cry if you feel the need," she urged softly. "You'll feel better for it, I promise."

Heaven knew he had enough to cry about, Lainey thought as she wrapped her arms around him. He'd left his home, left everything he knew, to be with her. She tried to imagine what it would be like to leave her home and her job and settle on an alien planet where she could only be herself in Micah's company, where she would have to spend the rest of her life in disguise so no one would know who she really was. It was beyond comprehension, and yet Micah was doing it, for her.

She was comforting him now, her hands stroking his back, caressing his cheek. Her kindness, her sweetness, was his undoing. Silent sobs rose in his throat; silent tears coursed down his cheeks, and he was helpless to stop them.

He wept because, even though he didn't want to, he could never go home again.

He wept because his heart was so full of love for Lainey and their unborn child that it was almost painful.

He wept because he was happy for the first time in his life, because Lainey loved him unconditionally.

He wept because he knew that happiness, like life itself, was fragile and easily destroyed.

"Lainey..." He clutched her to him, ashamed of his tears, and yet he did feel better for having shed them. "Forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive." Lifting a corner of the sheet, she wiped the last of the tears from his face, then kissed him lightly on both cheeks. "Better?"

Micah sat up, drawing Lainey up beside him. "Better."

"You know what?"

Micah smiled down at her. "You're hungry."

Lainey nodded.

"I'll go get you something."

"No, I'll go." She patted her stomach. "I have to go to the pregnant ladies' room anyway." Sliding out of bed, she pulled on a robe and left the room.

A noise outside drew Micah's attention and he shook his head. It sounded like the neighbor's cat was in the trash again. A few minutes later, he heard what sounded like a pan falling to the floor. He thought of going into the kitchen and offering to help, but he needed a few moments alone to regain his composure.

Propping another pillow behind his head, he stared up at the ceiling. He had cried in Lainey's arms. Cried like a frightened child, yet she didn't seem to think less of him for it. In all his years on Xanthia, he had never seen a grown man cry. Never seen a woman cry, unless she was in extreme physical pain.

With a sigh, he dragged a hand across his jaw. He had a lot to learn about life on Earth, he thought with a wry grin, but he wouldn't be alone. Because of Lainey, he would never be alone again.

Lainey... where was she?

Throwing the covers aside, he got out of bed and went into the kitchen. The lights were on, steam was rising from the tea kettle, there were eggs scrambled in a bowl on the sink. He picked a frying pan up from the floor. "Lainey?"

Frowning, he went into the bathroom, but she wasn't there, either.

Alarmed now, he walked through the house, checking the guest room, her office, switching on the lights as he went. She was nowhere to be found. Lastly, he checked the garage, but her car was still there.

Returning to the kitchen, he glanced around the room again, looking for a clue of some kind. It was then he noticed that the back door was slightly ajar, and that the lock had been forced open.

The noise he had heard outside earlier suddenly took on ominous overtones.

Swearing a pithy curse word he had heard on television, he ran back into the bedroom. Dressing quickly, he went outside, his gaze sweeping up and down the sidewalk, his mind screaming Lainey's name. Silence was his only answer.

Red Hair. With grim certainty, he knew that Red Hair had abducted Lainey.

Quivering with rage, he stared down the dark street, remembering a cold metal table and thick iron straps. Lainey!

Micah's hands curled into tight fists as he tried to remember where Red Hair had taken him. But he had been unconscious on the ride to the laboratory, and barely coherent when Lainey had rescued him. He had no clear idea of how near, or how far away, the laboratory might be or where it was located, only a cold certainty that Lainey was there, and that her life was in danger.

Ralph St. John flipped on the porch light, then stared through the peephole.

"Micah!" he exclaimed, opening the door. "What are you doing here at this hour of the morning? Is something wrong? Where's Lainey?"

"She's gone."

"Gone!" Ralph stepped back so Micah could enter the house. "Gone where? What happened, did you two have a lovers' quarrel?"

"No." Micah dragged a hand through his hair. "She's been taken."

"What is it?" Dolores called from the bedroom.

"Nothing, Dee ," Ralph said. "Go back to sleep. Sit down, Micah, I'll get some coffee."

Micah followed Ralph into the kitchen, too agitated to sit still. "I know who has her," he said. "It's the same man who captured me."

Ralph swore under his breath as he filled two cups with instant coffee, added hot water, and handed one to Micah. "Do you know where he's taken her?"

"No. I mean yes, but I don't know where it is, how to get there."

"What's going on?" Dolores stood in the kitchen doorway, wrapped in a fluffy pink robe. "Where's Lainey? Is it the baby?"

"Sit down, Dee ," Ralph said. "Something's happened."

"We've got to call the police," Dolores said after Micah explained what had happened.

"And tell them what?"

"That Lainey's missing, of course."

"You have to wait twenty-four hours to file a missing person's report," Ralph replied. "Micah, do you remember anything about the place they took you?"

"No." He stared into the dark liquid in his cup for a long moment. "The building was old. Dark wood. It was at the end of a long, narrow driveway."

"Were there houses on the street?"

Micah frowned, then shook his head. "I don't remember." He stared at Lainey's father through eyes dark with anguish. "I don't remember."

"We'll find her." Ralph St. John laid his hand on Micah's arm, thinking he had never seen such anguish in a man's eyes in all his life. If he'd had any doubts about the depths of Micah's love for Lainey, they were gone now.

"Ralph, what are we going to do?"

"There's nothing to be done tonight, Dee. Why don't you make up the bed in the spare room for Micah? Tomorrow we'll go to the police."

Micah shook his head. "I'm going back to Lainey's house."

"You're welcome here," Dolores said. "Please stay."

"No. I want to be there, in case..."

"That might be a good idea," Ralph agreed. "Someone should be there in case she comes home. Or in case they call..." He wrapped his arm around Dolores. "Maybe she's fine and we're worrying for nothing."

Micah and Dolores exchanged glances, then looked at Ralph.

"I was just trying to look on the bright side," Ralph said. He looked at Micah. "You'll call us if you hear anything?"

Chapter Twenty-Three

She woke to darkness. There was an incredibly vile taste in her mouth; her head felt as if it were stuffed with cotton. The mattress beneath her was hard and unfamiliar; when she tried to sit up, she realized her hands were cuffed to the headboard.

Terror bolted through her, clearing the cobwebs from her mind. Where was she?

She tensed as she heard someone slip a key into the lock. A moment later, light flooded the room.

"So, you're awake."

Lainey stared at the man, recognition washing over her in cold waves of fear. "You!" she exclaimed.

"So, you remember me," Red said, rubbing the back of his head. "I, of course, have good reason to remember you. What did you hit me with?"

"A tire iron."

He chuckled softly. "I admire your spunk, my dear." He reached into his pocket and withdrew a syringe. "I've got to go out for a little while," he said, "so you'll have to go back to sleep." Lainey stared at the needle, her stomach churning with fear and revulsion.

"Wait! Why am I here?"

"All in good time, my dear." He wiped her arm with a cotton ball soaked in alcohol, then inserted the needle into her arm.

"Where's Micah?" she asked. "Is he all right? Please... tell... me..."

Her words grew thick, and then darkness engulfed her once more.

Micah paused in mid-stride, his head cocked to one side. For a moment, he had imagined he heard Lainey's voice in his mind.

Going to the window, he stared into the night, his mind probing the darkness. *Lainey? Lainey, can you hear me ?*

Hands balled into tight fists, he listened intently, but he heard nothing, felt nothing, sensed nothing. And yet she was alive. He knew it with every fiber of his being.

She was alive, and he would find her.

When next she woke, it was daylight. She could see a thin stream of light filtering through the heavy black cloth that covered the room's single window.

Filled with an all-encompassing lethargy, Lainey stared around the room. A bed pan and some medical instruments, including a stethoscope, were strewn on a metal table at the foot of the bed. There was nothing else in the room except for a battered four-drawer dresser.

Lifting her head, she stared into the other room, felt her stomach clench with horror as she saw the skeleton in the corner. She was in the laboratory where they'd taken Micah.

Her head fell back on the pillow and she closed her eyes. Why had Red Hair brought her here? Was she bait? Or part of some bizarre new experiment?

The answer came in a flash of intuition. It was the baby. Red Hair was interested in the baby, the first to be conceived by the joining of an Earth woman and an alien man.

Fear for her own safety was suddenly unimportant. She had to get away from here!

But she was so groggy. It was hard to think coherently, hard to think of what she should do. And then Red Hair was there, an evil grin on his face as he gave her another injection.

"I'm almost ready for him," Red said. "The two of you are going to make me rich beyond my wildest dreams. Books, movies, endorsements—why, I'll be famous." He laughed softly. "Rich and famous. Who knows, I might even cut you in for a share."

"Micah..."

"I know all about your alien," Red said, gesturing at the skeleton in the other room. "We've studied his kind for years, wondering if it was possible for our races to interbreed." He patted her stomach lightly, then grinned. "Now we know it can be done."

"You can't do this," Lainey exclaimed, her horror growing by the minute. "It isn't right."

"Right! What has right got to do with it? Do you realize what an opportunity this is? All we have to do is wait and see if you've conceived a child or a monster. Either way, you'll go down in the medical journals, my dear. Why, your life story will probably be a movie of the week. I might even write it myself."

"No..."

"Yes." Opening one of the dresser drawers, he withdrew a camera and snapped several pictures. "I've spent twenty years researching alien phenomena. I have photos and medical data on two alien males and one female. Unfortunately, they all died before we could do any extended research. But the one you call Micah promises to be a most interesting specimen. He's young and healthy..."

Red walked around the bed and took another picture. "And he has a lot to live for."

Withdrawing the needle from her arm, Red left the room, whistling softly as he closed the door.

By tonight, he'd be ready. He checked the cage one last time, made sure there was a new videotape in the camcorder.

History was about to be made.

Lainey stared at Red suspiciously as he ushered her into the laboratory and instructed her to lie down on the examining table.

"What are you going to do?"

"Just relax, Miss St. John. I'm only going to take your blood pressure."

Her gaze darted to the gun snugged in the waistband of his pants.

"Don't even think about it," Red warned in a congenial voice. "Lie back now. This will only take a minute."

Reluctantly, she did as she was told. To avoid looking at him, she closed her eyes as he wrapped the cuff around her arm.

She was thinking of Micah when Red grabbed her wrist.

Lainey's eyes flew open as he fastened a thick strap around her left wrist, anchoring her arm to the table.

"What are you doing?"

"Baiting the trap, my dear."

"I don't understand," she lied, hoping he would tell her what he intended to do, hoping that, somehow, she could warn Micah.

"You will." Whistling an upbeat tune, he unlocked the front door. "My partner. Gene, believed that Xanthians were telepathic. We never had a chance to prove it, until now."

"What do you mean? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to perform a C-section."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"No!" Adrenalin surged through Lainey at the thought of harm coming to her child. Struggling to sit up, she slapped Red across the face, hard. "Let me go, damn you!"

Red grinned impudently as he massaged his cheek, and then he slapped her back.

"Don't do that again," he warned as he pinned her right hand to the table and strapped it down.

Horried, she watched as he filled two syringes, slipped on a pair of rubber gloves, and placed several small vials on a table.

Micah! Micah, help me!

She was sobbing when Red swabbed her arm with alcohol. Trembling with fear and impotent rage, she hardly felt the prick of the needle...

The sound of her voice echoed in his mind as he ran down the dark streets. Her rage, her fear, was like a beacon, leading him down a narrow lane. The building was as he remembered it. Old and made of dark wood, it was located well away from the street.

Lainey?

Micah... no...

He frowned as he neared the door. Her voice sounded sluggish, drugged.

Trap... Micah... go... 'way...

He swore under his breath, wishing he'd taken time to contact Lainey's father. Perhaps it wasn't too late. He glanced around, searching for a place that might have a telephone. And then he heard Lainey scream and he forgot everything but the fact that she was in danger.

He was reaching for the doorknob when a heavy net dropped over him. Before he could fight his way out of it, he felt the sharp stab of a needle, and the world went black...

And then he was drifting, weightless, sightless, in a world of darkness. For a time he thought he was on Einar Three, imprisoned in the bowels of Renegade Hell. He'd languished there for three seasons before they bothered to verify the fact that he wasn't a spy sent to ferret out information but had come on official Fleet business, sent there to act as liaison between Einar Three and Xanthia. The days and nights in the prison had passed with agonizing slowness. His cell had been cold and damp, infested with rodents the size of his fist, with tiny insects with rows of needle-like teeth. Hungry little creatures that had burrowed under his skin and feasted on his blood. Three seasons he had spent in that loathsome place, his nostrils filled with the rank odor of rotting food and his own excrement...

A harsh cry erupted from Micah's throat, jerking him out of one nightmare and into the reality of another.

He opened his eyes to darkness as black as Lainey's hair. A familiar lethargy engulfed him, rendering him powerless. The drug, he thought, struggling to clear his mind. It had to be the drug.

Gradually, he realized that a heavy metal mask covered the top half of his face, that his hands were chained to an iron ring behind his back, and that, while unconscious, he had assumed his natural form.

Lainey, he thought groggily. Where was Lainey?

I'm here. Thank God you're all right.

Are we alone?

Yes.

"Where are we?"

"In the same place they brought you before. Micah, I'm so scared."

"I know... Are you well?"

"Yes. He threatened to take the baby, but I know now it was just a ruse to get you here. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, but the drug... it drains my power... makes it hard... to think."

"He said the mask would prevent you from using your power, too, that even if the drug wore off, you'd be helpless."

"I'm afraid he's right. Can you see me?"

"Yes. You're in a small cage across the room."

"Where are you?"

"Strapped to the examining table."

"Has he hurt you?"

"No. Micah, what are we going to do? He wants the baby, to study."

"Don't worry... I'll think of something..."

Micah closed his eyes. Communicating with Lainey had taken what little strength he had left. A dull ache pounded in his head. He wondered how long the drug would last, and what Red Hair had planned for him.

"Lainey..."

Shh! He's coming!

Micah swore under his breath. The drug, combined with the heavy mask, had not only rendered him powerless, but had slowed his reflexes and diminished his sensory capacity.

He heard a door open, the sound of footsteps, the thud of a heavy box being dropped on the floor.

And then he heard Red Hair's voice, speaking to Lainey.

"Sorry to leave you so long, my dear," Red said. Removing the straps from Lainey's wrists, he helped her from the table, then took her into the bedroom and handcuffed her right hand to the bedpost. "There. I think that will give you a little more freedom. See that you don't abuse it."

"What are you going to do with Micah?"

"Nothing, my dear. Don't worry. It's not good for a woman in your condition. Rest a while, and then we'll have dinner."

"Wait!" she cried, but it was too late. He'd already left the room, closing the door behind him.

Micah heard the man's footsteps crossing the floor and knew the man was standing beside the cage, staring down at him.

"So, my alien friend," Red Hair murmured. "We meet again."

"What do you want with us?"

"So you can speak! I knew it!"

"Answer me!"

Red made a tsking sound. "You're in no position to make demands, my friend. I have your woman here, and her well-being and that of your unborn child, depend heavily upon your complete cooperation."

"Answer me!"

"You're going to tell me about your world, about why you're here. I want to study the differences between us, and the similarities."

A cold chill slithered down Micah's spine as he remembered the humiliation of being strapped to the table while Red Hair examined him, thoroughly and intimately. He knew, somehow, that what the man had in mind this time would be far worse than what he had endured before.

"What of the baby?"

"Ah, the child. Of course, I intend to study it as well," the man said affably. "Think what it would mean if this child inherits your power! Think what it would mean for the human race to be able to destroy its enemies the way you do. Just burn them up with a glance."

"Lainey... ?"

"She's quite safe. You needn't worry about her. After all, I'll need her to take care of the child, for a while at least."

Fear clamped around Micah's heart. "And when you don't need her?"

"Ah, let's not think of that now. Tell me, why have you come to Earth? And how do you manage to change shape?" Red pulled a couple of Polaroid photos out of his shirt pocket. "If I hadn't seen it, and photographed it, I wouldn't have believed it."

Slowly, Micah shook his head. He could feel the drug wearing off, but he remained limp, unmoving.

"You will answer me," Red Hair warned, all friendliness gone from his tone. "You will answer me, or the woman will reap the consequences of your disobedience."

"Coward."

"Why have you come to Earth?"

Purposefully, Micah slurred his words, hoping Red Hair would think he was still heavily drugged. "Did not... come here intentionally. Ship... crashed."

"Are there others of your species here?"

"No."

"Where's your ship now?"

"Destroyed... it."

"You're lying."

Micah heard the sound of a key turning in the lock, followed by the sound of Red Hair's footsteps. A moment later he felt a sharp burning pain in his left arm.

"A scalpel can inflict a great deal of pain without doing much permanent damage," Red Hair remarked.

Micah stifled a groan as the man made another cut in his arm.

"I bugged the woman's house," Red Hair said. "I know you returned to your own planet, and then came back. Next time you lie to me, I'll cut the woman. Where's your ship?"

"Valley... behind... mansion."

"Will it fly?"

Micah hesitated. Immediately, he felt the edge of the blade caress his cheek, felt a warm trickle of blood ooze in the wake of the blade.

"Consider your answer carefully, my alien friend. How do you think the woman will look when I cut her cheek to the bone?"

"My ship will fly."

Red Hair made a sound of satisfaction. Then, without warning, he doused the cuts in Micah's arm with a strong, alcohol-based disinfectant.

Micah swore under his breath as the liquid seeped into the wounds, searing his flesh. Moments later, he felt the sting of a needle in his right arm.

"That should help you get a good night's sleep," Red Hair said cheerfully. "I've got a couple of tests to run in the morning."

Micah heard the man lock the door of the cage; then, whistling softly, Red Hair left the room.

Lainey? Lainey?

Micah frowned. Was she asleep? Or had Red Hair taken her away?

Knowing it was useless, he tugged on the chain that secured his hands behind his back. He had to get out of here, had to get Lainey away from Red Hair before the baby was born. But tugging on the chain only made his arms ache and chafed his wrists. Lowering his head, he tried to shake off the mask, but it was securely anchored in place.

And then the drug took effect and he felt himself falling, falling, into a deep black void.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Wake up, space man." Red Hair's obnoxiously cheerful voice sounded close to Micah's ear. "There's some bread and a glass of water to your left. A basin to relieve yourself in on your right."

"Lainey?"

"She's fine. I'll be back in ten minutes."

Micah sat up. Sometime during the night, Red Hair had freed his right hand. He explored the mask that covered his face. Thick leather straps criss-crossed from back to front, holding it in place. A small padlock prevented him from removing it.

Defeated, he reached for the glass of water and drained it in a single swallow, then reached for the basin, need outweighing his pride.

As promised, Red Hair was back in ten minutes. "Hold still now," he said curtly, "I'm gonna draw some blood."

"You could have saved yourself the trouble and taken it last night," Micah muttered. "It was flowing freely then."

To his surprise, Red Hair laughed. "I never realized aliens had a sense of humor."

"I never realized earthlings were so barbaric," Micah replied contemptuously.

He waited, hardly breathing, until he felt Red Hair's hand on his arm, and then he grabbed the man's wrist and gave it a cruel twist reminiscent of the hold that was commonly used by security officers on the prison planet of Enguath to subdue inmates. "Release me!"

"No way." Red Hair groaned as Micah applied pressure on his arm. "Go ahead, break my arm. Break my neck. It won't do you any good. I don't have my keys with me, and this place is soundproof. You'll both starve to death before anyone finds you."

Micah's grip tightened on Red Hair's wrist. Everything the man said was true and yet it was tempting, so tempting...

Muttering an oath, Micah released his hold on Red Hair, then fell back against the wall of the cage, his whole body tense as he waited for the earthling to retaliate.

But other than shackling his right hand to the wall again, Red Hair didn't seem inclined toward vengeance.

Micah felt the prick of a syringe as the man drew some blood. He heard Red Hair's footsteps as he left the cage, the sound of the key turning in the lock, and then there was only silence.

Lainey? Fear clawed at his insides when she didn't reply. *Lainey, can you hear me? Please, cominza, answer me if you can.*

Micah...

Are you all right?

Yes. Micah heard the revulsion in her voice. *He's examining me.*

Micah clenched his fists as he imagined Red Hair's hands on Lainey, touching her intimately. He felt the rage well within him, the urge to kill surprising him in its intensity.

To his shame, Micah remembered the exhilaration he had experienced when he destroyed Red Hair's two companions. Killing went against everything he had ever been taught, and yet he had not know a moment's regret at taking the lives of those two men. They had threatened Lainey, and he knew he would gladly do it again.

He felt the power rise within him, felt its heat build. Immediately, he forced himself to relax. The mask was made of metal. Should he unleash his power, the heat would incinerate his face before it burned through the mask. He wondered how Red Hair knew such a thing, and then, in a flash of intuition, he realized that the alien whose skeleton stood in the corner had incinerated himself rather than submit to Red Hair's experiments.

Micah, no!

Lainey's fear burst into his mind. Too late, he realized she had been reading his thoughts, that she was afraid he was thinking of doing the same thing rather than allow Red Hair to examine him further.

Lainey, don't be afraid. I won't leave you.

Promise me?

I promise, Micah said, but he knew in the depths of his soul that if it wasn't for Lainey and the child, he would destroy himself rather than submit to more of the earthling's crude experiments.

The next few days were like a nightmare that wouldn't end. Red Hair's constant cheerfulness made Lainey want to scream. He spent hours at her bedside, trying to convince her of how important his work was, of what he hoped to gain. Chief among his goals was the need to prove to a doubting world that aliens existed. There were other extraterrestrials prowling the earth, he said, he was sure of it. And he would find them.

But it was her child that was Red's primary interest, and it was that topic that made up the bulk of his conversation as he wondered, over and over again, whether she carried a boy or a girl, if it would look completely human, or if it would have some of Micah's alien characteristics. Or if, in blending two races, she would deliver a monster. He speculated often on that, too. Would it be inhuman, fit only for a sideshow, or be born mercifully dead?

Sometimes Red took her into the lab and made her watch while he examined Micah, wondering aloud how it was possible for their two races to be so alike, and yet so different. Red constantly pestered Micah for information about Xanthia, its inhabitants and their lifestyle, even though Micah refused to answer him.

Red took copious notes, recording everything he did, jotting down Micah's reactions to various drugs, to pain, to drastic changes in heat and cold.

He took numerous blood samples in an effort to learn why Micah's blood was brown; he took skin samples to try to determine what caused the blue glow to darken when Micah was agitated and faded when he was at rest or asleep. He took X-rays and countless photographs. And made more notes.

Micah communicated telepathically with Lainey whenever he had the chance, but Red Hair kept him heavily sedated most of the time, and she realized that Red kept Micah that way as much as possible because he was afraid of Micah's strength and power, even though Micah's hands were chained to the wall and he was locked in a cage.

They had been Red's prisoners for five days when Lainey went into labor. It began with a small twinge in her back, a slight pain that gradually grew stronger and more intense.

Red was ecstatic when her water broke a few hours later. He practically danced around the bed as he freed her hands and helped her into a chair, warning her to stay put while he gathered up the soiled sheets and replaced them with clean ones, then removed her clothes and dropped a pale green hospital gown over her head.

When she was clean and dry and settled into bed once again, he went into the lab and gathered his instruments together. Returning to the bedroom, he pulled a baby blanket out of the dresser drawer, along with diapers, baby powder, and a soft flannel gown.

Lainey writhed on the bed, wracked by pain and fear. What would Red do with her once the baby was born? Would she be dispensable then, a witness to be disposed of? Helpless and afraid, she cried out as the time between contractions grew shorter and the pains grew stronger.

Death seemed to hover around her as the pains went on and on. Fleeting thoughts of dying in childbirth began to cross her mind, and she wondered if she would die in labor and save Red the trouble of disposing of her. Near exhaustion, she prayed that it would be over soon, that Red would allow her to hold her child, Micah's child, before she died.

Micah...

Lainey, don't be afraid. Try to relax. Don't fight the pain. Relax... relax... everything will be all right...

His voice filled her mind, sure and strong, giving her hope, a lifeline to cling to, as her body sought to expel the child it had sheltered for so long.

As from far away, she heard Red urging her to bear down, to push just once more. There was a blinding flash, and she realized he was taking more of his infernal pictures.

She screamed as the head crowned. A moment later, she heard an infant's cry.

"It's a boy!" Red said.

"Let me see him. Is he all right?"

"Perfect," Red said jubilantly. "Just perfect."

And he was. Tears filled Lainey's eyes as she gazed down at her son. He was small and beautiful, with pale golden brown skin, curly black hair, and his father's silver-blue eyes. An extra bit of webbing stretched between his thumb and forefinger.

She watched through half-closed eyes as Red clamped the cord, then cut it. Taking the baby, he washed and diapered the infant as though he had been doing it all his life.

He slipped the nightgown over the baby's head, wrapped it in a blue flannel blanket, then placed the boy in the top drawer of the dresser while he took care of the afterbirth, washed Lainey, and helped her into a clean gown.

When that was done, he laid the boy in Lainey's arms, then stood by, looking as proud as if he were the father, while she nursed the baby.

There were no words to describe the incredible joy that filled Lainey's heart as her son nuzzled her breast. For a moment, she forgot the hours of pain, the fear, the uncertainty of the future as she cuddled the tiny miracle in her arms. For once, she didn't mind when Red snapped another picture.

It wasn't until Red leaned over the bed and reached for the baby that reality returned, and with it a fiercely protective surge of mother love.

With a wordless cry, Lainey grabbed the water pitcher beside the bed and smashed it over the man's head, satisfaction zinging through her when, with a muffled grunt, Red toppled to the floor.

Ignoring the dull ache that accompanied her every move, she clasped her son to her breast and slid out of bed. Dropping onto one knee, she began going through Red's pockets, looking for the keys that would free Micah, but all she found was a set of car keys, and the key to the handcuffs Red had used on her.

Clutching his car keys, she climbed to her feet and hurried into the laboratory.

"Micah!"

"Lainey?" He turned toward the sound of her voice. "What's happened?"

"I knocked Red out. Do you know where he keeps the keys to that cage and the shackles?"

"No."

With the baby pressed to her shoulder, Lainey searched the lab, her frustration growing by the moment. Damn, where had Red put those keys?

A cry of mingled triumph and revulsion escaped her lips when she finally spied what she was looking for dangling from one of the skeleton's bony fingers. With a shudder, she plucked the keys from the skeleton's hand and crossed the floor to the cage.

It took several tries before she found the key that unlocked the door. Placing the baby on the floor beside her, she knelt down beside Micah and removed the mask from his face.

He stared up at her, blinking against the light.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Micah nodded, his gaze moving to the blanket-wrapped bundle on the floor beside Lainey.

It took another few precious moments to free Micah's hands. "Come on," Lainey urged, "we've got to get out of here before he wakes up."

But Micah was reaching for the baby, drawing the blanket away from the infant's face. *My son*, he thought.

Lainey's heart swelled with love as she looked at the two men in her life, but there was no time for father and son to get acquainted now.

"Please, Micah, we've got to go." Rising, her legs still weak and wobbly from the birth, she took the baby from Micah so he could stand up.

Using the wall for support, Micah climbed to his feet. He could feel the physical effects of the drug that limited his power wearing off and he took several deep breaths, hoping it would help clear his head.

"Ready?" Lainey asked anxiously. "We'll have to take his car."

Micah moved away from the wall and took another deep breath. Caught up in the excitement of the birth, Red had forgotten about the sedative he usually administered in the afternoon. "Let's go."

"Not so fast."

Lainey whirled around, felt the color drain from her face when she saw Red standing in the doorway, one hand pressed over the gash in his forehead, his other hand fisted around a snub-nosed revolver whose barrel looked as large and deadly as that of a cannon.

"Attempted murder and grand theft auto," Red mused. "Not a very nice way to repay the man who helped bring your baby into the world." He wagged the gun back and forth. "Step away from him."

"No."

"It would be a shame if I missed the alien and hit the child."

"You wouldn't!" Lainey exclaimed.

Red's eyes were as cold as winter frost. "Are you willing to take that chance?"

Lainey glanced at Micah. At his nod, she moved away from him.

Red was going to kill Micah. The knowledge of what was going to happen, and her inability to stop it, filled her with such excruciating pain she was certain her soul was being torn to shreds.

A slow smile of satisfaction was spreading over Red's face as his finger curled around the trigger.

Lainey stared at Micah, imprinting his face on her heart as she waited for the gunshot that would end Micah's life and destroy all her hopes for the future.

But the gunshot never came. Instead, a high-pitched whine filled the room, ringing in her ears, sending icy shivers down her spine.

The baby began to cry and she cradled him against her breast, wishing she could shut out the awful sound of Red's anguished scream, a heart-wrenching shriek that seemed to have no beginning and no end.

And then, abruptly, there was only silence.

She started to turn around when Micah's voice stopped her.

"No, Lainey," he said, his voice flat. "Don't look."

For a moment, Micah stood there with his head down, feeling the hatred, the power, recede.

He drew a deep, calming breath, and then he crossed the room and placed his arm around Lainey's waist. He could feel her whole body trembling as he pried Red's car keys from her fist. "Let's go."

Outside, Micah unlocked Red's car, helped Lainey inside, and closed the door. Going around to the driver's side, he slid behind the wheel, took a deep breath, and turned the key in the ignition.

Lainey looked at him dubiously. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"I've watched you often enough," he replied with a shrug, and put the car in gear.

They ditched the car two blocks away from home. Lainey stood in the shadows, unable to stop shivering, while Micah took a rag and went over the car inside and out, wiping away their fingerprints.

And then, ignoring her protests, he swung her into his arms and carried her and the baby home.

She was asleep by the time they reached the house.

Micah sat beside Lainey's bed, his son cradled in his arms. His son. He couldn't get over it—the miracle of life, the wonder of holding a child, *his* child.

He glanced at Lainey. She was sleeping peacefully, one hand pillowing her cheek. He thought of the physical pain she had gone through to bring his son into the world, the fear she'd experienced when Red abducted her, her courage in simply accepting him for who and what he was, for being willing to love him in spite of everything. She was a brave woman, with the heart of a warrior and the soul of an angel.

He gazed down at his son, lightly stroking the boy's downy cheek, fingering the thatch of curly black hair. Never in his life had he known such a sense of awe, such a feeling of protectiveness, as he felt now. He tried to imagine what the child's life would be like, but he couldn't imagine how it would be to grow up in a house instead of in a controlled environment, couldn't begin to fathom experiencing a mother's love and tenderness, a father's concern. How would his son feel when he learned that he was different from other children, that his father came from a faraway star?

Would his son be able to accept the fact that he was different, or would he resent it? And what of his physical differences? The size of his ears, the webbing on his hands, the slight slant of his eyes?

Micah stared out the window. And what of the power? Had his son inherited the inner power that Xanthians were blessed with? If he had, would Micah be able to teach him to use it with restraint? Would his son consider his innate power a curse, or a blessing?

So many questions, so many unknown factors to consider.

Glancing down, Micah saw the baby looking up at him, his expression strangely wise for one so young.

All in good time, his son seemed to be saying, and Micah smiled.

"All in good time," he repeated, determined to enjoy every moment he was allowed to spend with Lainey and their son, afraid, deep inside, that the day would come when he'd have to tell them both good-bye.

Lainey called her parents first thing the next morning. Dolores and Ralph were at the house less than thirty minutes later.

Dolores blinked back tears of joy and relief as she hugged her daughter. "Lainey, thank God, we were so worried. We called the police, but we had no idea where to tell them to look for you."

"It's all right Mom, I'm fine, honest. I'm just so glad it's all over."

Dolores nodded. "Oh! Ralph, did you remember to call the police and tell them she was home?"

Ralph nodded. "They thought I was nuts when I said she'd spent a couple nights at a friend's and we'd forgotten about it."

"Oh, Daddy," Lainey said, laughing. "Was that the best you could think of?"

"Shoot, I was lucky to think at all, what with being a new grandfather and all. Where's that grandson of mine?"

Micah went to make coffee while the new grandparents took turns holding their new grandson, counting his tiny fingers and toes, marveling over how perfect he was.

"He doesn't look much different from other new babies," Dolores remarked. "I don't think anyone will be able to tell he's..."

She glanced toward the kitchen, glad that Micah was out of the room. "It's still so hard to believe that he's an alien. I mean..." She made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "The baby looks perfectly normal except for that bit of webbing on his hands. His ears are only a tiny bit smaller than ordinary. And lots of people have eyes that slant a little."

"I can't help but worry, though," Ralph said. "What happens when he gets sick?"

Ralph looked up as Micah entered the room carrying a tray with four cups and the coffee pot. "We don't know how he'll react to normal childhood diseases like measles and chicken pox. I mean, they might be fatal."

"We'll just have to wait and see," Lainey said.

"My people have done numerous studies on such things," Micah remarked as he poured the coffee. "Our scientists have determined that a child born of an earthling and a Xanthian would be immune to whatever diseases the mother and father are immune to."

Ralph looked skeptical. "But they don't know that for sure, do they? I mean, it's just conjecture."

Micah nodded. "Of course. To my knowledge, no Xanthian has ever joined with a member of another race."

Later, after the baby had fallen asleep at Lainey's breast, Dolores and Ralph insisted that Lainey tell them everything that had happened.

Micah sat back, the coffee in his cup growing cold, his gaze fixed on Lainey's face as she told her story. She made light of her fears, glossed over the pain of childbirth, but Ralph and Dolores weren't fooled, and in the end she told them all of it, how scared she'd been, not only for herself, but for Micah and the baby.

She related how Red had kept her handcuffed to the bed, how he had kept Micah locked in a cage. She spoke of the innumerable photos the man had taken, the tests he had performed on Micah, the copious notes he had taken, recording everything from Micah's height and weight to the amount of food and water he consumed each day.

She told of being in labor, how frightened she had been, not only of the pain, which was worse than she had ever imagined, but for her child's life. Her words came faster as she told how she had hit Red over the head with a pitcher, how she had taken his keys and freed Micah.

"And that man?" Ralph asked, sitting forward. "Where is he now?"

"He's dead." Micah said, taking part in the story for the first time.

Ralph glanced at Lainey, then back at Micah. "You're sure?"

"Quite sure."

"And the body?"

Micah met Ralph's gaze squarely. "There is none."

Lainey's mother stared at Micah, a wordless sound of horror rising in her throat.

Ralph St. John held Micah's gaze a moment and then looked away.

Dolores took Lainey's hand in hers, but it was Micah to whom she directed her question. "What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. It's up to Lainey."

"We'll stay here," Lainey replied. "The three men who knew about Micah are dead. We should be safe now."

"I don't know," Ralph said dubiously. "What about Red's notes? The pictures?"

"If we're to stay here, I'll have to go back and destroy them," Micah said.

"I'll go with you," Ralph said.

"I think it would be better if I went alone."

"Nonsense."

"I think Micah's right, Dad."

"I'll go tonight, if you'll stay with Lainey."

"Of course."

They spent the rest of the day trying to decide on a name for the baby. Dolores wanted to name the baby Ralph, after his grandfather; Ralph wanted to name the baby Monroe, after his own father; Micah said it was up to Lainey. In the end, they named the baby Micah Ralph Monroe.

"That's quite a handle for such a little tyke," Ralph remarked.

"He'll grow into it," Lainey said, smiling up at Micah. "In the meantime, we'll call him Mike, for short."

"Mike," Dolores said, grinning as the baby's tiny fist closed around her finger. "I like that. What do you think, Micah?" she asked, glancing up at him.

But Micah had eyes only for Lainey, and the infant cradled in her arms.

"I think I'm the luckiest creature in the universe."

Chapter Twenty-Five

It was almost midnight when Micah left the house, bound for Red's laboratory.

Lainey was a nervous wreck the whole time he was gone. Her imagination, always active, went into overdrive. She had chewed all the fingernails on her left hand and was starting on her right when Micah returned to the house.

"Where are the pictures?" Lainey asked anxiously. "Couldn't you find them?"

"They're gone."

"Gone?"

"Everything's gone," Micah said. "The building, everything. It looks like there was a fire."

Lainey looked at Micah, frowning. "A fire? Did you..."

"No, I didn't start it."

"Well, then, I guess we don't have anything to worry about," Lainey exclaimed. "I say we celebrate." She looked up at Micah, her eyes luminous. "By getting married."

Las Vegas was nothing like what Micah had expected. A million glowing lights turned the night to day. The hotel was filled with people. And noise. The constant hum of conversation punctuated by excited shouts. Bells ringing. The seemingly endless confusion at the crap table, waitresses calling drink orders, the harsh clatter of silver pouring out of slot machines. And above it all a haze of drifting gray smoke.

The bright lights bothered his eyes; the noise was overwhelming.

They made arrangements to be married the following morning. Then Dolores and Ralph took the baby up to their room so that Lainey could show Micah around.

Lainey found a quarter machine she liked and Micah stood behind her, mildly fascinated by the slot machine, intrigued by Lainey's enthusiasm whenever the machine dropped a few quarters into the tray.

"Darn!" Lainey exclaimed. "One more seven and I'd have won."

Micah grunted softly, and the next time Lainey pulled the handle, he leaned forward and touched the side of the machine with the tip of his forefinger.

When three sevens appeared, Lainey's excited shout nearly deafened him. Jumping up from her seat, she threw her arms around him. "We won! We won!"

With a grin, he gathered her into his arms while bells rang and people stopped to watch.

"Would you like to win again?" he asked, leaning close to her ear.

Lainey stared up at him, a shocked expression on her face. "You did that?"

Micah shrugged. "You said you wanted to win."

"Shhh." Lainey looked around. "Micah, that's cheating."

"Cheating?"

"You did something to the machine to make it pay off. That's cheating. How did you do it? Never mind, don't tell me. Just don't do it again."

She glanced around, wondering if anyone had seen him manipulate the machine. She couldn't keep the money. It wasn't right. She should give the money back to the casino, but how could she explain what had happened?

"You're an idiot, Lainey St. John," she muttered under her breath. She didn't have to explain anything to anybody. All she had to do was keep playing the machine. Sooner or later, she'd lose it all back, she thought, but to her dismay, the machine continued to pay off.

"Micah, stop it," she whispered.

"Stop what?"

"Whatever it is you're doing. I'm trying to lose."

Micah shook his head. "I'm not doing anything."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I have to touch the machine to manipulate it."

"But I'm winning. I never win!"

"Maybe your luck has changed."

Lainey glanced over her shoulder, her gaze moving over Micah in a long, slow glance. Dressed in navy-blue slacks and a light-blue sweater, he looked good enough to eat.

"My luck changed the day I met you," Lainey purred with a seductive smile, and they both knew she wasn't talking about her sudden run of good luck at the slot machine.

They were married the next morning at a small white wedding chapel. Lainey wore a pale pink suit with a frothy white blouse and pink heels; Micah wore a dark gray suit and tie.

There was a moment of confusion when they filled out the marriage license. Micah couldn't use his Xanthian surname and after a hushed conference, it was decided he should use Dolores's maiden name, Forrester.

The ceremony was short, the words were simple, the baby cried through the whole thing, and yet Micah wouldn't have changed a thing. Lainey looked beautiful, like a star flower in full bloom. Their son's soft cries filled him with a sense of wonder as he realized anew that he had helped to create a new life.

He held Lainey's hand in his, blind to everything else as she promised to love, honor and cherish him in sickness and in health so long as they lived. Simple words. Powerful words that bound them together, body and soul, heart to heart. It was with a feeling of reverence that he placed the ring he had bought the night before on her finger, remembering the holy man's words:

The ring is an outward symbol of your union, which from this day forward will have no beginning and no end. May your love always shine as brightly as this token of your devotion to one another.

After the ceremony, they went to lunch at the Tropicana, and then they took a cab out to the airport to catch a flight home.

On the plane, Lainey sat beside Micah. Her husband. She glanced down at the wide, plain gold band on her finger, then lifted her gaze to his face, only to find him watching her through troubled eyes.

"What's wrong?" Lainey asked. "You're not sorry you married me already, are you?"

"No." He took her hand, his long fingers curling around hers. "I was just wondering if maybe you were sorry you had married me."

"Micah, why would you think that?"

"There are so many problems ahead of us, so many things that can go wrong. I never realized how much my presence would complicate your life."

"Micah..."

"What if the child needs a doctor? How will you explain the odd composition of his blood, the difference in his body temperature?"

"I don't know." Lainey threaded her fingers through his. "Let's not look for trouble. Maybe the baby won't get sick. Maybe no abnormalities will show up in his blood or anywhere else." Tenderly, she caressed his cheek with her free hand. "I love you, Micah. Nothing will change that."

Oblivious to the fact that they weren't alone, Micah leaned across the seat and kissed her deeply, possessively. "And I love you," he whispered.

"Hey, that's enough, you two," came a low voice from the seat behind them. "Save it until you get home."

"Oh, Dad, don't be such a prude," Lainey retorted. Glancing over the back of the seat, she made a face at her father. "We're on our honeymoon, for goodness sake."

"Yeah, yeah," Ralph grumbled good-naturedly.

"Leave them alone," Dolores scolded, shifting the baby onto her shoulder, "or I'll tell Micah how you behaved on *our* wedding day."

Lainey grinned as a dull red flush crept up her father's neck. "Tell, Mom," she urged.

"Don't you dare, Margaret Dolores Maria Forrester St. John."

"Mom, you're not going to let him bully you!"

Dolores nodded. "I am when he uses *that* tone, and calls me Margaret."

"Chicken."

"Guilty as charged," Dolores said, laughing.

Shaking her head with mock disappointment, Lainey settled back in her seat again.

"I'll find out one way or another," she muttered, resting her head on Micah's shoulder.

Micah breathed in the scent of her hair, a little bewildered by the relationship between Lainey and her parents. There was respect, but there was also a sense of playfulness that disturbed him even though he found it charming. Would he have that same kind of easy, caring relationship with his son?

Lowering his head, he pressed a kiss to Lainey's hair, wondering if they would have other children, perhaps a daughter with Lainey's beautiful black hair and earth-brown eyes. Maybe another son.

He was still surprised by the powerful emotions that had boiled up inside him the first time he held his son. Were such feelings abnormal, and if not, why did the people of Xanthia agree to let others raise their children? Why would anyone deny himself the joy of holding his offspring, the sense of wonder, of awe, that came from cradling a newborn child? It was beyond comprehension.

And if he had felt the bond of fatherhood so strongly, what must the bond of motherhood be like for Lainey, who had carried the child within her body, gone through pain he could not begin to imagine to give his son life?

His heart swelled with love for this woman who was now his wife as he contemplated all she had gone through since she met him. He knew that if he spent his whole life trying, he could never repay her for her love, her trust.

Chapter Twenty-Six

As it had once before, their life fell into a routine. Lainey started plotting her next book, then spent a week going over the galleys of her last story.

Micah insisted on taking care of her, refusing to let her do too much at one time, insisting she needed to rest more and work less. He did the cooking. He learned how to run the washer and dryer. He even ventured out to do the marketing. One afternoon, when he had sent her off to take a nap, Lainey had informed him that it was a good thing she had her writing to occupy her, since he spent so much time looking after the baby. Another time, she had laughingly accused him of being jealous that she was breastfeeding, because that was one thing he couldn't do for her.

And yet, it was heartwarming to watch him with their son. She remembered what he had said about life on Xanthia, about how children were raised away from their parents, and she wondered how this man, this gentle, loving man, would have been able to endure being parted from his son forever when he could barely stand being away from Mike for more than an hour or so.

Her parents came over often, always with a present for Mike, until the nursery began to look like a toy store.

After six weeks of being treated like an invalid, Lainey rebelled. Insisting that she felt fine, she arranged to have her mother babysit, made reservations at an expensive restaurant down by the beach, bought a new dress, and dragged Micah out of the house, intent on a romantic evening.

"Are you sure you feel up to this?" Micah asked as Lainey backed the car out of the driveway.

"I'm sure I'll go crazy if I don't get out of the house. Honestly, Micah," Lainey said, seeing the doubt on his face, "I feel fine." She reached over and patted his arm. "And Mom will take good care of the baby, don't worry."

"How could I be concerned?" he asked. "She raised you, didn't she?"

"And did a heck of a job!" Lainey declared with a decided lack of modesty. "Isn't it a beautiful night?"

Micah glanced up. The sky was clear, the stars shining brightly. "Beautiful," he agreed, and wondered, not for the first time, how Earth and Xanthia could be so different and yet so similar.

They arrived at the restaurant a short time later. Lainey gazed out the window, her chin resting on her hand as she watched the waves lap at the shore.

"Do they have oceans on Xanthia?" she asked, turning her gaze to Micah.

"Yes, though not as big as this one."

"And fish? And sharks? And whales?"

Micah nodded. "We have a multitude of sea life, different in some ways from yours."

"Different how?"

"We have a fish that has legs and buries its eggs on land."

"Really? I'd like to see that."

"And we have a large fish, what you would call a whale, that is almost a hundred feet long."

"Sounds like a sea serpent to me."

"You could call it that."

"And do you have dogs and cats and horses? And birds and bees?" Lainey grinned at him. "I can't help it, I want to know everything about your world."

"Xanthia is much like Earth. We have animals similar to yours, just as our people are similar to yours."

"But different."

"In some ways."

"Do you believe in God?"

Micah nodded, his expression somber. "Of course. All intelligent life forms acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being."

"I've never been afraid of being invaded by creatures from outer space," Lainey remarked. "I've always believed that if there were people on other worlds, they would be just like us. I mean, if God created man in His own image here, then He'd probably do the same on other worlds." Lainey grinned at Micah. "I guess I was right, at least where Xanthia is concerned."

"You're very wise," Micah said. "I've been to many other worlds and I've never seen any monsters. The people may not look exactly the same, but all are humanoid in appearance."

"Do they have organized religion on Xanthia?"

"Not exactly. We have places of worship, but people attend whenever they wish."

"Not like here, where we go to church on Sunday?"

"No."

"Are you a religious man?"

Micah nodded. "In my way. On Xanthia, I went to worship once each week when I was home. Sometimes to meditate. Sometimes I went into one of the reflection cells and played one of the religious tapes."

"Would you mind going to church with me?"

"No."

Lainey smiled at him, then sat back as the waitress brought their food.

After dinner, Lainey called home to check on the baby, and then they went for a moonlight walk on the beach.

"We'd better take our shoes off," Lainey suggested. Micah steadied her as she removed her heels and stockings; then he took off his shoes and socks and they walked barefoot in the sand.

"The water is cold," Micah mused. "On Xanthia, the oceans are warm."

"Do you miss your home?" Lainey asked.

"Not when you're with me," he replied, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

A soft sigh escaped Lainey's lips. "Oh, Micah, you should have been a poet."

"Me?"

He laughed softly as he drew her into his arms. She was beautiful in the moonlight. Her hair shimmered with blue highlights, her skin was luminous, her eyes as warm and dark as a handful of earth. She was like the ancient goddess, Zanadeus, who had walked the shores of Xanthia, luring unsuspecting men into the arms of the sea.

Gently, he framed her face in his hands. "You're my home, Lainey," he murmured. "Don't you know that?"

His kiss was warm and soft, filled with promises of forever, of sun-kissed days and moonlit nights, of happiness doubled because it was shared, of sorrow halved because it was understood by another. He kissed her with all the love in his heart, and prayed that it would be enough, knowing his life would cease to have meaning if Lainey ceased loving him.

"Micah, let's go home."

Startled by her request, he drew back so he could see her face. "Is something wrong?"

"No." A faint blush heated her cheeks. "I was hoping... I mean, it's been a long time since we..."

She gazed up at him, her eyes filled with a need that went beyond words.

"Is it all right?" Micah asked. "It's not too soon?"

"It's not soon enough," she murmured, her lips grazing his.

Heat seared through him, instantaneous, as though his whole body had been struck by star fire. She kissed him, and the flames burned hotter and brighter and he knew he couldn't wait until they got home, that he had to have her now, or die.

Swinging her up into his arms, Micah walked swiftly down the beach toward a small cove. Stripping off his coat, he spread it on the sand and then, his hands shaking with urgency, he began to undress her, marveling anew at the perfection of her body, at the silken touch of her skin beneath his fingertips. She was the essence of life, a goddess come to life, a miracle wrapped in moonlight.

He groaned low in his throat as Lainey's hands moved over him, freeing him from his clothing, gliding over his skin. Wrapped in each other's arms, they sank slowly to the ground.

The roar of the surf echoed the pounding of his heart as he worshiped her with his eyes, his touch. His heart swelled with love when she urged him to shed his human shape. She whispered her love as she caressed him, her hands exploring the solid wall of his chest, brushing the webbing on his hands. She nipped his earlobe, and each touch told him more eloquently than words that she loved him for who and what he was, that their differences didn't matter at all, that nothing mattered except the love they shared, the love that had bound them together and culminated in the birth of their son.

Carefully, he merged his flesh with hers, afraid of hurting her in his eagerness. It had been so long, he thought, so long since he'd been able to bury himself within her warmth, her sweetness. Tears burned his eyes as she welcomed him home, her hips lifting to receive him, her arms holding him tight as she whispered his name, then gasped with pleasure as two became one in heart and mind and body.

Her name exploded from his lips in a harsh cry of exultation as they reached for the stars and found them. Together.

Lainey came awake slowly, a smile on her face. Now she knew how Scarlett had felt the morning after

Rhett carried her up that long flight of stairs.

With a contented sigh, she reached across the bed for Micah, but her hand closed on empty air. Disappointed, she slid out of bed, pulled on her robe, and padded down the hallway to the nursery. Sure enough, Micah was there, bent over the white wicker changing table as he sprinkled powder on the baby's dimpled bottom, then put a clean diaper in place.

Lifting the baby to his shoulder, Micah turned around, his eyes caressing her. "Good morning, Mom."

"Good morning." Lainey smiled up at him. "Did I thank you for last night?"

"No thanks are necessary," Micah said, returning her smile. "I assure you it was my pleasure."

"And mine. Are you hungry?"

"Very hungry." His gaze moved over hers, hotter than the tail of a comet. "I could use some breakfast, too."

Happiness bubbled inside Lainey as she took the baby from his arms. "I'll feed the baby, and then fix your breakfast," she said with a saucy grin. "And then I'll see what I can do about that other craving."

Lainey snuggled closer to Micah. Never before had she realized what a blessing it was to work at home, to be able to work at her leisure, to take long lunch breaks in her husband's arms.

With a sigh, she gazed at Micah, feeling utterly content. She loved him, wholly, completely, not just because he was the most handsome man she had ever known, but because he was thoughtful, generous, caring, kind, compassionate... She smiled inwardly, thinking there weren't enough words to describe him.

She started to tell him how much she loved him when she noticed the troubled look in his eye. "What is it?"

"Nothing."

"Micah, I know you better than that. What's wrong?"

"I need something to do, something to occupy my time."

"What would you like to do?"

"I don't know." He rolled onto his side, facing her. "I love you, Lainey, more than my own life, but I can't stay here, in the house, forever. I miss piloting my craft. I miss the excitement, the adventure. Do you understand?"

Of course she understood. She'd die without her writing. It was a part of her, something she had to do. And yet, as dear as her writing was to her, she sensed that flying meant even more to Micah than her writing meant to her. But there were no spaceships for him to fly here.

Frowning, she realized there was no way he could get any kind of job without the required forms of

identification—a birth certificate, a driver's license, a high school diploma, a Social Security number. Some jobs required applicants to be fingerprinted. Did Xanthians have fingerprints? And what if a physical exam was needed?

She groaned softly, dismayed by the seemingly endless documents Micah would need. And yet, such things couldn't be impossible to obtain. There were lots of people who had entered the country illegally and they managed to get by. Somehow, they would find a way.

She was still trying to come up with a solution the following morning when the doorbell rang.

The minute she looked through the peephole and saw Frank Bergen standing on the porch, she knew that trying to find a birth certificate for Micah was the least of their worries.

Hoping Micah wouldn't come home early from his walk, she opened the door.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Miss St. John?"

"It's Mrs. Forrester now," Lainey said, striving to keep her voice calm.

Frank Bergen looked momentarily taken aback. "Married, you say?"

"Yes."

Bergenglanced at his partner, Edward Falk, who looked Lainey over from head to foot, then shrugged.

"Would you mind if we came in for a few minutes?" Bergen asked. "We have some questions we'd like to ask you."

Lainey hesitated only a moment, then stepped back, allowing them entrance. "Sit down, won't you?"

"Thank you."

Frank Bergen sat down on the sofa. Falk remained near the front door. Lainey had the uneasy impression that he was there to keep her from running away.

Lainey sat down in the chair across from the sofa, her hands folded in her lap. "What was it you wanted to ask me?"

Bergenglanced at Falk, then reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a fat brown envelope. Wordlessly, he handed it to Lainey.

She stared at it for a moment before withdrawing the contents. She felt the color drain from her face as she looked at the pictures: pictures of Micah in his human form, and in his own form. Dozens of pictures: Micah, stark naked on the examining table, obviously heavily drugged; close-ups of his ears, the webbing on his hands, the blue glow that radiated from his skin, his genitals; profiles of his face.

She gasped when she saw the first photo of herself, taken before the baby was born, her stomach huge with its burden. There were more pictures, taken while she was in labor. Lastly, there was a photo of herself holding a red-faced baby wrapped in a blue blanket.

Bergen plucked the photos from Lainey's hand. "He's here, isn't he?"

"No. He... he took the child and left." Lainey lifted her chin. "He said it was too dangerous here." Tears trickled down her cheeks. "He's gone," she said again, her shoulders shaking, "and he took my baby with him."

She was crying now, not because Micah was gone, but because she was afraid he would come back while Bergen was still in the house.

Micah, if you can hear me, don't come home.

Edward Falk took a step forward and, after a moment of indecision, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to Lainey.

"Thank you." She sniffed, and blew her nose.

"The baby," Bergen said, leaning forward, his gray eyes burning with curiosity. "What was it like?"

Lainey looked up at him, blinking back tears that wouldn't seem to stop flowing. "It was a boy," she sobbed. "A beautiful little boy."

"Was it... normal?"

Lainey nodded. "Yes, perfectly."

"Damn! Are there more pictures of the child?"

"No." Lainey blinked several times. "How did you get those pictures?"

Frank Bergen jerked as if he'd been slapped. All expression left his face as he stood up and went to stand beside his partner. "I'm afraid that's classified information."

"Yes, of course," Lainey said. "I should have known."

Micah, don't come home! She screamed the words in her mind. There was only one way Bergen and Falk could have gotten those photos. They had gone to the lab. They had seen what was left of Red's body, taken his notes, and burned the place to the ground, then come here, hoping to find Micah and the baby so they could take over where Red had left off.

In the back of her mind, she heard Red's voice telling her that she was going to make him rich and famous.

"Is there anything else?"

"Would you mind if we have a look around?" Falk asked.

"Not at all."

She stayed where she was, conscious of Bergen's scrutiny, while Falk searched the house. He would find the baby's crib, a changing table, some clothing, but nothing else. She could easily explain that away

by saying she hadn't had the heart to get rid of the baby's things yet. Fortunately, there was nothing of Micah's to indicate he was an alien, only the normal male items her husband would be expected to have.

"When will your husband be back?" Bergen asked as he entered the living room.

"I'm not sure. He went away for the weekend. Fishing."

Bergengrunted softly.

"Frank, let's go," Falk said. "You're not gonna find anything."

Bergennodded. "Thank you for your time, Mrs. Forrester."

Lainey forced a smile as she walked the two men to the door, then stood on the porch, watching, as they got into a late-model Ford and drove away.

Relief washed through her, leaving her weak. *Micah* ?

What's wrong?

Nothing now, but don't come home. Some men have been here looking for you.

Are you all right?

I'm fine. How's the baby?

Asleep for now. Where can I meet you?

I don't know. They might be waiting for me to leave the house so they can follow me. We'll have to assume they know where my parents live, so you can't go there. Where are you now?

Near the park down the street.

Keep out of sight. I'm going to see my folks and see if we can't think of something.

Be careful, cominza.

You, too, I love you.

I love you... Micah glanced down at the baby, still sleeping peacefully in his arms. Would the child be blessed with the powers inherent in its father? Micah grunted softly, wondering if he would be able to communicate telepathically with his son, but there was no time to think about that now.

With the baby asleep against his shoulder, he started walking down the street. He saw Lainey pull out of the driveway. A moment later, a dark-blue sedan pulled away from the curb.

"We're in trouble," Lainey said, "and I don't know what to do."

"Do you think they followed you here?" Ralph asked.

"I know they did." Lainey shook her head. "They don't know the first thing about tailing a car without being seen. They're probably parked across the street."

"You think so?"

"It wouldn't surprise me."

"Only one way to find out," Ralph said, and opening the front door, he walked down the porch steps to pick up the evening paper.

He was back a few moments later, grinning like a Cheshire cat. "You were right. There's a dark-blue sedan parked a couple of houses down. Two men inside."

"That's them."

"So, what are you going to do?" Dolores asked. "Micah can't keep the baby out for long. He'll need to be fed soon."

"I know. Listen, I have an idea that might work."

"Let's hear it," Ralph said.

"Micah and I can communicate telepathically..."

"You're kidding!" Dolores exclaimed.

"No. If we can decoy those men away from here, I can arrange with Micah to meet him somewhere."

"And then what?" Dolores asked anxiously. "You can't hide out forever."

"I know."

"What is it, Lainey? What aren't you saying?"

"I'm afraid we're going to have to leave here."

"Leave?" Dolores said, her face going pale at the thought. "But... but where would you go?"

"I'm not sure, but I don't see any other solution. Those men know who I am. They know about Micah, about the baby." Lainey clasped her hands in her lap, fighting back the urge to cry. "They've got pictures of the three of us."

Ralph St. John swore under his breath, and then, seeing the look of anguish on his wife's face, he sat down on the sofa beside her and took her in his arms.

"Ralph, think of something."

"I'm afraid Lainey's right, Dee," he said, sounding older than his years.

"I know I am," Lainey said. "We'll never be safe anywhere."

"Then where will you go?"

"I'm not sure. Xanthia, maybe."

"Xanthia!" Dolores' face paled ever more. "But we'll never see you again. Never see the baby."

"I know, Mom. This isn't easy for me, either, but I don't know what else to do."

Lainey?

I'm here.

Is it safe for me to come there?

No. Those men are parked down the street, waiting for you.

Lainey looked at her parents, at the tears streaming down her mother's cheeks, at the deep lines of sadness etched in her father's face.

"Mom, Dad, I'm so sorry, but..."

"It's all right, sweetie. Just tell us how we can help."

"There she goes," Frank Bergen said. "Try to keep a little distance between us this time."

"Yeah, yeah," Edward Falk muttered. "Where do you think she's headed? Her house is in the other direction."

"You ask the dumbest questions," Bergen muttered. "Where do you think she's going?"

"No need to be sarcastic, Frank."

"Then don't ask stupid questions. She's going to meet him, where else would she be going?"

"But she said..."

Frank Bergen swore softly. Falk might be one of the best UFO experts in the world, but sometimes he was dumber than dirt.

They were on the freeway now, headed toward San Diego. Bergen settled back in his seat and lit a cigarette, happily contemplating seeing his name in the headlines when they told their story to the press. And it wouldn't stop there. They'd do Oprah and Geraldo, all the late-night talk shows, maybe even sell an exclusive interview to the Enquirer. And when they'd milked all they could out of interviews and personal appearances, he'd publish a book based on his own observations, along with the photos and notes that Red had collected.

Bergen grinned as he patted his coat pocket. Red's photos were priceless, especially the ones of the alien. LeMans might have been a mean-spirited SOB, but he'd been thorough. He had taken full-color

pictures of the alien from every conceivable angle. It was just too bad Red hadn't taken more pictures of the baby before the alien killed him.

Frank flipped his cigarette butt out the window. There was a fortune just waiting to be made, he thought. The woman would take them to the alien, and then they'd have them all—man, woman, and child.

"I think we're here."

Falk's words jerked Frank out of his reverie in time to see the woman's car pull into a hotel parking lot.

"Park right behind her so she can't back out, then cover the passenger side," Frank instructed. "I'll do the talking."

Frank Bergen's heart was thudding with excitement as he jumped out of the car. It was all within his grasp, he thought exultantly, fame and fortune, his name in the scientific journals.

He was grinning when he jerked open the passenger door.

The woman behind the wheel looked up, a startled expression on her face. "May I help you?"

"Who the hell are you?" Bergen demanded.

"Mrs. Ralph St. John," Dolores replied calmly. "Who the hell are you?"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Micah was waiting for her inside the mansion. It was somehow fitting, she thought, that they would meet here, at the Grayson place, where it had all begun.

She had kissed her parents good-bye, promising to come back for a visit if at all possible, begging them not to worry, to be happy for her.

And now she sat in front of the hearth while she nursed the baby, staring at another fire that had started as miraculously as the first one.

"Are you sure about this, Lainey?"

Even now, when her heart was heavy at the thought of never seeing her parents again, his voice had the power to ease her heartache.

"Lainey?"

"I'm sure."

Micah crossed the short distance between them and knelt before her. "If I left, you and your family could move away from here." He swallowed hard, unable to envision a life without her. Without his son. "You could make a new life for yourself."

"Micah..."

"I only want you to be happy."

"I am happy. With you."

He took her hand in his and placed them palm to palm. So alike, he thought. Four fingers and a thumb, fingernails, the ability to hold, to hurt. To heal.

So alike, and yet so different. He stared at the webbing between his thumb and forefinger, at the color of his skin, so much darker than hers.

"Lainey, we may never be able to come back here."

She swallowed hard. "I know."

He gazed deeply into her eyes, wondering how he could ask her to leave everything she knew—her home, her family, her country—to face an uncertain future with a man who had no home, no family.

"I love you, Micah," Lainey said, her voice caressing him. "I'll miss my folks, and I hope we can come back some time and visit, but if we can't, I'll accept it because I love you. Because my place..." She glanced down at the baby, asleep at her breast. "*Our* place, is with you."

Micah nodded and then, because he couldn't speak past the lump in his throat, he bent forward and kissed her, knowing she would be able to feel the love that welled in his heart, a love deeper than words could ever express.

"It's time," he said. Rising to his feet, he extinguished the fire, then helped Lainey up.

Her heart was pounding with trepidation and excitement as she watched Micah unearth the remote, and then they were walking down the hill. Lainey was trembling when they reached the place where Micah's ship waited. She had always hated flying, and now she was about to climb aboard a spaceship. The mere thought made her heart beat faster.

Micah deactivated the molecular mask and she watched in open-mouthed wonder as the spacecraft materialized before her eyes. It didn't look like a saucer at all, she thought, more like a sleek, silver-hued bird of prey.

Micah flicked a switch. The hatch opened, revealing a ladder and the dark interior of the ship.

Lainey licked lips gone suddenly dry. A spaceship. This wasn't a dream. It was real.

She couldn't do it, she thought, distraught. She couldn't climb on board that thing and just fly off into the unknown. She couldn't leave her parents, her friends, everything that was familiar. She just couldn't.

She looked at Micah. How could she tell him she had changed her mind, that as much as she loved him, she simply didn't have as much courage as she thought, that she couldn't go with him?

And then she saw the sadness in his eyes and knew she didn't have to say a word.

"I'm sorry." Tears flooded her eyes, and she wondered how she would ever learn to live with the awful pain she saw reflected in the depths of Micah's eyes, pain that she had caused him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered again. "So sorry."

"It's all right, Lainey," Micah said quietly. "I understand." He inclined his head toward the baby. "May I?"

Feeling as though her heart was being torn in half, Lainey handed the baby to Micah, her tears coming harder and faster as Micah cradled the infant in his arms. His eyes glistened with unshed tears as he gazed down at his son.

Tenderly, he caressed the baby's downy cheek, pressed a kiss to the top of its head, lightly stroked the fragile webbing on one tiny hand.

"Take good care of my son," Micah said, barely able to speak for the anguish that engulfed him. "When he's old enough to understand, I hope you'll tell him about me."

"I will. You know I will."

Micah hugged the baby close to his heart for a long moment and then, feeling as though his very soul was being ripped to shreds, he returned his son, the only son he would ever have, into Lainey's keeping.

"Farewell,*cominza* ," he whispered hoarsely. "Be well."

He kissed her then, quickly, deeply, for the last time. She saw the tears in his eyes, tears he made no effort to hide, and then he was walking away from her, and Lainey knew with sudden painful clarity that when he was gone, her only chance for lasting happiness would have gone with him.

"Micah! Wait for me!" she cried, afraid now that he would leave her behind. "Micah, please wait!"

She saw him hesitate, saw him turn, the hope in his silver-blue eyes almost too painful to behold, and then she was running after him, her fear of the unknown swallowed up in the thought of spending the rest of her life without him.

"Lainey!" He caught her in his arms, careful not to crush the baby, as his tears mingled with hers. "Lainey, are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Oh, Micah, I've never been surer of anything in my life."

"I'll make you happy, Lainey, I promise."

"You already make me happy." She smiled up at him through her tears. "Let's go."

Epilogue

Lainey sat at her bedroom window, staring out at the night sky. Millions of stars twinkled overhead, dazzling in their number. Somewhere out there, amongst all those stars, was a small planet she had once called home. Earth. In two days, she would be on her way to Earth. She could hardly wait to see her parents again.

A soft sigh escaped her lips. So much had happened in the last five years. She had been places and seen things she had never dreamed existed as they explored the galaxy, looking for a place to settle down.

In the end, they had made their home on a small planet named Marna Two, which seemed to be inhabited by people who didn't fit in anywhere else.

Marna Two was a lovely place, reminiscent, in many ways, of Earth. The sky was not quite blue, not quite lavender, but something in between. There were grass and trees, oceans and lakes, furry animals and brightly colored birds.

As Lainey had always believed, there were lots of different kinds of people: some with blue hair and very pale skin, others who were incredibly hirsute with enormous eyes. And yet, as varied as their appearances, customs, and languages might be, they were all human in shape, reminding her of a Bible verse found in Genesis:

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."

They had lived on Marna Two for almost four years now, and Lainey was happier than she had ever been in her life. Though they lived on a different planet, life was not so different from the way it had been on Earth. People worked and played, got married and had babies, worried about their children, worshiped as they saw fit.

Micah worked for the Xanthian Peace Keeping Force as a liason between Marna Two and the other planets in the galaxy. It wasn't quite as exciting as his previous occupation, but it was far less dangerous, and it enabled him to spend long hours piloting his own spacecraft.

Months of flying around the galaxy looking for a home had cured Lainey of her fear of flying, and she and the children often accompanied Micah to distant planets while he discussed trade agreements or soothed ruffled feathers.

Best of all, she was able to keep writing. Who would have thought that there would be an audience for mystery novels on a small planet at the east end of the Milky Way? But there was, a voracious market that bought everything she turned out and asked for more.

Yes, she thought, turning away from the window, it had been a wonderful five years.

Filled with a sense of joy that made sitting still impossible, Lainey walked down the hallway to the nursery and peeked inside. The twins, Bronte and Bronwyn, were sleeping peacefully. They were almost three years old, and Lainey was certain they were the most beautiful, most precocious little girls ever born. Micah loved his son, beaming with pride at Mike's every new accomplishment, but the whole family knew that these two little girls had their father completely captivated.

After drawing the covers over her daughters, Lainey crossed the hallway and opened the door to Mike's bedroom. As usual, he lay sprawled on his back, one arm thrown over his head. He was a handsome boy, the spitting image of his father except for his curly black hair.

Quietly, she closed the door behind her and went down the stairs to the first level. She found Micah in the kitchen, hunched over the table, her latest manuscript spread out in front of him.

"Well, what do you think?" Lainey asked. Standing behind him, she draped her hands over Micah's shoulders and nuzzled his ear. "Will it sell?"

"It's a little different from your usual stuff, isn't it?" Turning his head, Micah kissed her fingertips.

"A little. Do you think anyone will believe it?"

Chuckling softly, Micah pulled Lainey into his lap. "I don't know, *cominza*," he mused, trailing kisses over her face and neck. "Spaceships and alien lovers are pretty far-fetched."

Lainey poked him in the ribs. The story was their story, a modern-day romance that took the heroine to heaven and beyond.

Micah groaned in mock pain as she nudged him in the side again, and then he captured her lips with his, savoring her warmth, her sweetness. The fire between them had never cooled. If anything, the attraction that had always been there, the passion and the deep inner love they had shared almost from the beginning, had only grown stronger.

His arm curved around her waist, drawing her closer still. Resting his head on her breast, he breathed in the fragrance that was Lainey. His woman. His wife. The mother of his children. The author of his happiness.

Daily, he thanked whatever fates had caused his ship to crash on a distant planet, just as he thanked the Supreme Being for the woman in his arms, for the children she had blessed him with, for the love and devotion that warmed him, heart and soul.

"Tell me," Micah murmured as he trailed moist kisses along the side of her neck, "how does the story end?"

Lainey gazed deep into her husband's silver-blue eyes, expressive, beautiful eyes that reflected the fathomless depths of his love.

"Can't you guess?" she asked, a small happy smile curving her lips. "They lived and loved happily ever after."

He should have known, Micah thought. Romantic that she was, all Lainey's books ended the same. And as he drew her into his arms and kissed her, he vowed to do everything in his power to ensure that they, too, would live and love happily ever after.

MOONLIGHT

To DAVIS GAINES, SEAN SMITH,

and GRANT NORMAN

My three favorite Phantoms

Thanks for the inspiration

And to Phantom Phans everywhere

May you always be in tune with

The Music of the Night

PART I

Chapter One

The Isle of Mikos

Off the Coast of Greece

He had spent his whole life in a cage. As a child, he hadn't questioned it—it was simply the way things were, the way they had always been.

He had learned to crawl, then walk, then run, on the hard, cold stones.

In truth, it wasn't a cage at all, but a large square room made entirely of rough-hewn gray stone except for the door, which was built of wood reinforced with thick iron straps. There were two beds, two chairs, a table, and a shelf filled with scrolls that contained the learning of the village wisemen—scrolls that were changed each year. A single, iron-barred window was set high in the east wall.

The days passed slowly. His mother, Zoe, read to him for hours at a time. She was the center of his world, his life. He had no contact with anyone else save the guards who brought them food and water. The guards never spoke to Navarre, never allowed their eyes to meet his. Only on rare occasions did they speak to his mother.

As Navarre grew older, Zoe taught him to read and write and cipher.

Once, he heard her mutter something under her breath, something about it being a waste of time to teach him to read and learn his numbers.

"Why, mother?" he had asked. "Why is it a waste of time to teach me these things?"

She had knelt down to face him, her expression filled with kindness. "What do you mean, Navarre?"

"I heard what you said. Why is it a waste of time for me to learn to read and write?"

"I didn't say that."

"You did!" He had stared at her, wondering why she was lying to him. She had never lied to him before.

"No, Navarre," she had insisted, not meeting his eyes, "you must have misunderstood me."

He hadn't argued with her, but later that night, when she thought he was asleep, he had seen her standing at the window, the moonlight casting silver highlights in her long blond hair. The sound of her muffled sobs had brought tears to his eyes.

Sometimes she held him up to the window so he could look out. As a child, he had spent hours

imagining what it would be like to run through the tall grass, climb the trees, play in the clear blue river. Far in the distance stood a gold-domed building made of sparkling white stone. It was known as the Stone Hall Abbey.

Sometimes men clothed in long gray robes came to the window to stare in at Navarre, their pale blue eyes filled with curiosity and a strange kind of awe that bordered on fear.

"Why do they look at me like that?" he asked one day.

"They stare at you because you're such a handsome boy," Zoe replied. She turned her head, but not before he saw that there were tears in her eyes again.

"Handsome?"

"Oh, yes," Zoe said. "You look just like your father."

"Father?" Navarre knew what a father was, of course, from the scrolls he had read. But he had never realized he had one.

Zoe nodded. "He was a very handsome man, your father. He had blue-black hair, just like yours. And his eyes were the same shade of smoky gray. You'll be tall, just as he was," she said.

"Where is my father? What was his name?"

"Your father is dead," Zoe said. She took a deep breath. "You are named after him."

"I am?"

She nodded, a faraway look in her eyes.

"How did my father die?"

Zoe felt the color drain from her face. She had always known she would have to answer his question one day, but even so, she was not prepared. How did one tell a child that his father had been sacrificed to a heathen god? How could she tell her son that he was destined to meet the same cruel fate?

"Mother?" He looked at her through eyes far older than his years as he waited for her answer.

"Do we have to speak of it now?" Zoe asked. She glanced out the window. "Look, the vixen is outside, playing with her babes."

"How did my father die?"

"He was sacrificed to the goddess Shaylyn."

Navarre frowned. "Sacrificed? I don't understand."

"Please, Navarre," she pleaded. "Let us not speak of it now."

"When, then?"

"When you're older."

"How old?"

"When you have seen thirteen summers."

Another year, he thought. Certainly he could wait another year.

In the meantime, there were other questions crowding his mind, questions he had never considered before. It was as if his first query had unleashed an avalanche.

"Why do we live in this place? Why can't I go outside?" Suddenly restless, he began to pace the room. "Where do those other people live, those gray-robed men who come to stare at me?" He glanced down at his hands. "Why is their skin so light when mine is dark? How long will we have to stay here?"

He looked at his mother, eager for answers, only to find her staring at him, her face drained of color, her dark blue eyes filled with sorrow that seemed to have no end and no beginning.

"I'm sorry, Navarre," she murmured, her voice thick. "So sorry. I didn't want this for you. I tried to kill myself, but they stopped me. Your father..." She took a deep breath. "He tried not to touch me, but they drugged him..."

"What are you saying?"

Zoe fell to her knees before her son. Her hands shook as she clasped his. "Forgive me, Navarre, please forgive me."

"I don't understand."

He was looking down at her, looking at her through eyes exactly like his father's. How could she explain? How could she make him understand?

"We're kept in this place because we're prisoners, Navarre. Your father was born here, just as his father before him, and his father before that."

"Were you born here, too?"

"No." She released Navarre's hands and sank back on her heels, her thoughts turned inward. "I was kidnapped by the priests of Shaylyn when I was sixteen. We were imprisoned until the day of your birth, and then your father was taken to the Temple of Shaylyn and sacrificed to the goddess."

Zoe closed her eyes, the memories she had sought to keep at bay flooding her mind as she related the story to her son.

It was the way of the priests, to sacrifice a living male to the goddess Shaylyn every five-and-twenty years in the belief that such a sacrifice would ensure the goddess's continued benevolence, but the sacrifice must be a man who had proven his virility by siring a male child.

Since time out of mind, the priests of Shaylyn had raised men who were destined to be sacrificed. Men who were pure in heart and mind and body because they were never exposed to evil.

For a year, she had been locked in a cage across from Navarre's father. They had been able to see each other, to speak to each other, but never allowed to touch, until the year he was four and twenty.

Aware of what the future held for him and any child he sired, Navarre had refused to bed Zoe, but the priests of Shaylyn had drugged him with a powerful aphrodisiac. She had been horrified when they brought him to her. His deep gray eyes had been glazed with lust, his body ready. She had been frightened of him then. That night, he had not been the gentle man she had grown to love, but a stranger, a man who had no regard for her virginity, no thought at all save to appease his drug-induced lust.

Her protests had fallen on deaf ears, and he had possessed her over and over again, every night for the next fortnight, until his seed had taken root, and then she had been taken away, never to see him again.

He had been sacrificed to the goddess the morning after their son was born.

And now his son was destined to meet the same fate. When Navarre came of age, he would be mated to a virgin and then, when his son was safely born, Navarre would be sacrificed to the goddess Shaylyn.

Zoe opened her eyes to find her son staring down at her, a look of horrified disbelief on his face.

"They are going to sacrifice me, too, aren't they?"

She couldn't say the words, but he read the truth in her eyes.

"How?" he asked. "What manner of sacrifice is it?"

Zoe shook her head. "I know not, Navarre. All I know is that they took me away and I never saw him again."

Navarre spent the rest of the day and night thinking of what his mother had told him, more and more questions crowding his mind. But he had no chance to ask them.

The next morning, when he woke, his mother was gone, and he was alone in the cage.

Chapter Two

Years passed, and he thought he would go mad from the loneliness. And the waiting. The gray-robed men still came to stare at him, but they never spoke to him, and when he tried to talk to them, they turned away, almost as if they were afraid, or ashamed.

Did they know he was to be sacrificed? Was that why they refused to speak to him? But then, no one spoke to him. Not the guards who stood outside the door, not the man who brought him food twice each day, not the man who emptied the slop jar every morning and changed the rough linens on his narrow cot once each week.

His mother had spoken of a sacrifice, but she hadn't known the method of execution. His dreams, heretofore only vague fantasies of being free to explore the vast land beyond his prison, now turned dark and ugly as, each night, he imagined a fate worse than the one he had imagined the night before.

Often, he woke in a cold sweat, the harsh sound of his own hoarse screams lingering in the air. He had nightmares of being beheaded; of being torn to pieces and eaten by wild beasts; or thrown into a pit of snakes; of being bound hand and foot and tossed into the depths of a river. He dreamed of being tied

between four horses and ripped apart...

He had never seen death, but he knew the horrors that haunted his dreams existed because he had read of such things in the scrolls and manuscripts that were his only companions now that his mother was gone.

In the beginning, he had thought such grisly deaths were merely the gruesome creations of the authors, but now he feared he would meet his fate in just such a cruel manner. He suspected that the scrolls that were left in his room had been deliberately chosen to warn him, to prepare him for a hideous death.

But first he would mate with a woman...

A woman. Except for his mother, he had never seen a woman. He knew nothing of females, nothing of mating save that his male member was used in the act.

As the day of his twenty-fourth year grew closer, he scrutinized every manuscript, searching for some clue as to what went on between a man and a woman, but to no avail.

It mattered not. He had no intention of mating with anyone, no intention of begetting a son who would grow up in a cage with nothing to look forward to but a hideous death.

Navarreslammed his fist against the stone wall. His mother had told him his father had tried to refuse to mate with her, and they had drugged him into obedience.

Slowly, hesitantly, he picked up the knife he used for eating and turned it over and over in his hand. The blade was short and slender. And sharp. If he were to cut off that part of him which made him a man, he would be unable to mate. Perhaps, then, they would let him go...

Shutting his mind to what he was about to do, he lowered his breeches and sat on the edge of his cot. The blade was cold against his flesh, as cold as the sweat that covered his brow and dripped down his back.

He wiped the perspiration from his hands and then, with a cry of despair, he hurled the knife against the far wall, cursing himself for his cowardice.

The next morning, five guards came for him.

They backed him into a corner, and when he tried to escape, four of the guards wrestled him to the ground and held him there while the other one shackled his hands and feet. When that was done, they led him out of the cage.

Despite the chains that bound him, Navarre felt a tremor of excitement as he drew in a deep breath. For the first time in his life, he was out of the cage. He felt the coarse texture of sun-warmed earth beneath his bare feet, and then the soft velvet of spring grass as they led him across the meadow toward the gold-domed building.

His gaze darted right and left, drinking in sights he had never seen but recognized from drawings and pictures in the scrolls: flowers, in a multitude of vibrant reds and pinks and yellows, a small herd of black-faced sheep grazing in the noonday sun. Lambs frolicked at their mothers' sides. A shaggy brown and white dog sat beside a handsome young man who carried the crook of a shepherd. Glancing up, Navarre saw a blue bird perched on the branch of a flowering tree.

As they drew nearer the building, he saw horses and cattle and goats. He recognized the beasts from pictures he had seen, but pictures had not prepared him for the reality. They were so much larger than he had thought they would be.

And the noise. The cage had ever been as silent as the grave save for the sound of his mother's voice before they took her away, but now he heard the bleating of sheep, the warbling of a lark, the caw of a crow, the lowing of cattle.

He longed to stop, to run his hands over the grass, to touch the animals, to speak to the shepherd, but his guards urged him onward, refusing to let him explore the wonders that surrounded him.

The building was much larger than he had thought. Up close, the smooth white stones seemed to glow in the light of the sun. There were half-moons and stars, sunbursts and comets carved on each of the two heavy wooden doors.

Four men wearing long black hooded robes stood in front of the massive portal.

They drew back as Navarre approached.

One of the black-robed men opened the door on the left and when Navarre hesitated, one of the guards gave him a push and Navarre stumbled into the building.

For a moment, he could only stare at what he saw. The walls were at least twelve feet high. The domed ceiling was covered with gold leaf. The inside walls were made of luminous white stone. Brightly colored tapestries, woven with the same suns and moons that decorated the outer doors, were hung at intervals. He saw dozens of tall golden candelabra. The light and scent of a thousand candles overwhelmed him.

They led him down a long narrow hallway. Soft carpets muffled his footsteps. Paintings of stern-faced priests and kings lined the walls. An occasional window let in the sun's golden light.

At last, they reached a large round room that was decorated in muted shades of blue and saffron. A man in a long white robe sat behind a small desk, his face hidden in his cowl.

The guards made deep obeisance before the hooded man. "Your Eminence, we have brought the sacrifice, as ordered," said one.

Navarre felt the hooded man's gaze move over him, as cold as ice, as palpable as a touch.

"He will do," the High Priest replied. "Unchain him and take him below. See that he is bathed and fed, then take him to his cell."

"It shall be as you command, Your Eminence."

One of the guards took hold of Navarre's arm, but he shook him off.

"Wait, I want to know..." Navarre grunted as two of the guards twisted his arms behind his back and forced him to his knees.

"You will not speak to the High Priest unless spoken to," the guard on Navarre's right hissed. "You will beg His Eminence for forgiveness."

Navarre had been taught from childhood to be obedient in all things, at all times. He had accepted the fact of the cage; he had accepted his fate; but now, from somewhere deep inside himself, sprang the first seeds of rebellion.

"I will not."

The guard on Navarre's left grabbed a handful of his hair, jerked his head back, and slapped him across the face, hard.

Navarre gasped, startled more by the fact that the guard had struck him than by the faint burning pain in his cheek. In all his life, no one had ever laid a hand on him in anger or violence.

"You will beg His Eminence to forgive you for your impertinence!" the guard demanded.

Still stunned by the fact that the man had struck him, Navarre shook his head. "No."

The High Priest leaned forward, and Navarre caught a glimpse of a face so gaunt, it appeared skeletal; eyes so pale, they seemed colorless.

The High Priest lifted his hand in a faint gesture, and one of the guards drove his fist into Navarre's face.

Navarre groaned as blood spurted from his nose and filled his mouth. He was stunned by the pain, and by the sudden urge to retaliate. He felt his hands curl into fists, and he wondered what it would feel like to strike out, to loose the anger and frustration building within him.

"Apologize," the guard commanded.

He knew it was foolish to defy them, but anger and pain fueled his resistance. Staring at the hooded man, Navarre shook his head. "No."

Again, that faint wave of the hand.

Navarre tried to shield his head as the guards began to beat him, their fists driving into his ribs, his face, his back, until his whole body was throbbing with pain and he fell to the floor, trembling convulsively.

"Enough. He will be of no use to us if you damage him."

The words, low and brittle, brought an end to the beating. Rough hands grabbed Navarre under the arms and dragged him out of the room, along a dark corridor, down seemingly endless flights of stairs, and into a small room that held a large wooden tub and nothing more. They did not leave him to bathe alone. After removing the shackles from his hands and feet, the guards stood at the door, keeping watch.

Gritting his teeth, Navarre disrobed and stepped into the tub. Ignoring the guards, he closed his eyes, sighing as the hot water soothed his aching flesh.

When he emerged from his bath, one of the guards offered him a coarse cloth with which to dry himself, then handed him a long black robe. When he was dressed, food was provided.

Navarre ate slowly, aware of the two men who stood at the door watching his every move.

When he finished eating, they led him down another long narrow corridor to a small, iron-barred cell which contained a narrow bed covered by a thick blue quilt. There was a square table, a single chair, a small shelf filled with scrolls. A covered chamber pot stood in one corner.

The door closed behind him with a loud clang. Crossing the floor, Navarre sank down on the bed, his eyes closed against the pain that thrummed through him with every breath he took.

When he opened them again, he stared at his surroundings. He was really in a cage this time, a cage made of iron bars. A second cage stood some six feet away. And in it, looking back at him, he saw a young female.

Chapter Three

Navarre stared at the girl for a long while, unable to think or speak. Except for his mother, he had never seen a woman. Zoe had been tall and regal, with blond hair and dark blue eyes; this girl was small and delicate, with a mass of curly black hair and deep green eyes fringed with long black lashes. Her skin was fair, like those of the gray-robed priests. She wore a long, loose-fitting blue robe. Her feet were bare.

He thought her the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

He wondered who she was, and why she was imprisoned, and even as the thought crossed his mind, he remembered that his father and mother had been imprisoned in adjacent cages, permitted to see each other, to speak to each other, but never to touch until the time of mating.

He stared at her, his body tensing.

Was this ebony-haired woman to be his mate?

It took him a moment to find his voice. "Who are you?"

"Katlaina."

Her name was as sweetly feminine and lovely as she was. "Why are you here?"

She tipped her head to the side. "Don't you know?"

Navarre swallowed hard. "Are you... are we...?"

The girl nodded, her cheeks flooding with heat. "I am to be your mate."

In the days that followed, Navarre grew to love the woman with the ebony-colored hair. She told him of her home far to the north, high in the mountains where she had been born; how she had entered a sacred order and taken vows of poverty and chastity; and how, a short time later, she had been abducted and brought to this place. She had been told that she was to be mated to the male destined to be sacrificed to the goddess Shaylyn.

"And if I do as I am told," Katlaina said, "they promised to send me back home when I am no longer

needed here."

"And my child will be the next sacrifice."

"Yes."

"There will be no child," he said adamantly, yet even as he spoke the words, he knew that, should he refuse to mate with Katlaina, the priests of the goddess Shaylyn would drug his food or his water, as they had done to his father.

Which would be better, he mused night after night, to rut with the woman like a mindless beast in heat, or take what pleasure he could find in her sweet flesh? Drugged, he would pay no heed to her wants or needs, nor would he have any memory of the act itself. And since this was the only opportunity he would ever have to enjoy the company of a woman, he thought perhaps he would like to savor it, to remember it.

As the days passed, and his feelings for Katlaina grew, he knew he would take her gladly to his bed. He would be gentle with her, patient, as, together, they learned to pleasure one another.

Through Katlaina, he learned of the other villages on the island, of a way of life beyond the cage. She told him of snow-covered mountains, of lakes that were as blue as the sky, of black pine forests, and trees that were taller than the roof of the palace. She described animals and birds he had seen only in pen-and-ink drawings: the lynx and the bear, jackals and deer, foxes and badgers, pelicans and eagles and sweet-singing nightingales. She told him of her childhood, of frolicking in the snow with her brothers and sisters.

The idea of growing up in a family, with a mother and a father and siblings left him speechless. He could not imagine such a thing. Could not think what it would be like to live in a house, to sit in front of a hearth on a cold winter day, to work in the fields beside a father, to be able to come and go as one pleased. Imagine, being able to go outside, to have the freedom to run, to play, to sit on the grass and contemplate the clouds. It was beyond his comprehension.

There were so many things he knew, he thought ruefully. He had a vast store of knowledge, but no chance to apply it. He had read scrolls on a wide variety of subjects. He knew how to plant a garden, yet he had never so much as held a handful of earth. He knew that figs came from trees, yet he had never seen fruit growing. He had tasted fish, but never seen one swimming; he had eaten eggs, but never seen a chicken.

Hour by hour, the day of his twenty-fourth year approached, and with each passing day, his yearning to hold Katlaina grew ever stronger. Her skin was smooth and clear, without blemish. Was it as soft as it looked? He longed to run his fingers through the dark wealth of her hair, to touch her lips with his, to discover for himself what made a woman different from a man.

Each cage was provided with a screen to insure privacy for their intimate needs. Once each week, they were allowed to bathe.

At such times, when Katlaina stepped behind the screen, Navarre paced the confines of his cell, plagued by feelings he did not fully understand as he imagined her disrobing, sinking down into the tub, the water closing over her.

It was the night before his twenty-fourth birthday when the High Priest appeared at the door of Navarre

's cell.

Navarre stood in the far corner, his heart pounding, as he waited for the hooded man to speak.

"You will be four and twenty on the morrow," the High Priest said. "Will you breed the woman willingly?"

Navarre's gaze slid toward Katlaina. They had taken away her blue robe and clothed her in a diaphanous gown of shimmering silver shot through with fine gold threads. It clung to every inch of her body, outlining her full breasts, the curve of her hips, the slender length of her legs.

Never had he seen anything lovelier. Her hair, as black as ink on parchment, fell over her shoulders to her hips like an ebony waterfall. Her eyes were as green as the grass that grew on the hillside.

He swallowed hard, unable to speak.

"I require an answer, Navarre," the High Priest said. "Will you breed the woman of your own free will?"

Navarre's gaze moved over Katlaina. His blood sang in his veins, then settled, hot and heavy, in his groin, and at that moment he thought that dying would be worth the price of holding her in his arms just once.

"Navarre?" There was the faintest note of amusement in the High Priest's voice, as if he were aware of Navarre's every thought, every yearning.

"Yes." Navarre managed to force the word from his throat. He had no wish to father a son to be the next sacrifice, but he remembered all too clearly his mother's words, her horror at being bedded by a man who had been drugged. If he was to bed Katlaina, he wanted to be fully aware of each moment.

"We will bring her to you on the morrow then."

On the morrow, Navarre thought.

And for the first time, he willed the hours to pass swiftly.

They brought her at dusk. He stared at her for a long moment, unable to think, unable to move. She was here, within his reach, at last.

The silver gown shimmered like molten ore in the candlelight.

"Katlaina."

She stared back at him, her eyes wide, her lips parted. She was trembling all over. He could see the pulse beating wildly in her throat.

"Are you afraid of me?" he whispered.

Slowly, she nodded.

"I won't hurt you."

"You will."

"No!"

"You will," she replied, her voice filled with quiet resignation.

Slowly, so slowly, he stood up and bridged the short distance between them.

Slowly, so slowly, he lifted his hand. He stroked the delicate curve of her cheek. Let his fingers slide through the rich, dark fall of her hair. Traced the finely sculpted outline of her lips. Soft, so soft. Never in all his life had he touched anything so soft, so smooth, so warm. Never had he seen anything so lovely.

"Katlaina..."

"Please do not do this," she begged. "Please..."

"I must." He smiled at her, a sad smile that tugged at her heart. "It's what I was born for," he said, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice. "Would you deny me these few moments of pleasure before I die?"

She looked at him, and her eyes filled with tears. In the days they had been together, she had told him of her life, and he had told her of his. Nights, when he slept, she had wept for him, for the freedom that had been stolen from him, for the things he had never seen, would never see, the life he would never live.

Though she was not experienced in the ways of men, she was not totally ignorant of what went on between male and female. She had grown up on a farm. She knew about breeding, about mating. She had helped bring her baby brother into the world. Her mother had told her that childbirth was a woman's duty, but that, if a woman was lucky in her choice of a husband, if he had the patience to be kind, to be gentle, the getting of children was not unpleasant.

She could not deny Navarre the only pleasure he was ever to know.

Slowly, she reached up and unfastened the ties of her gown. The silver fabric slid to the floor in a silver whisper. She wore nothing underneath.

Navarre stared at her, his mouth suddenly dry, his heart beating hard and fast as his gaze moved over her. She was a study in perfection. Her skin was smooth and supple, her breasts were high and full and beautifully formed. Her legs were long and straight, her feet small.

She was beautiful, so beautiful, he wanted to weep.

Instead, he took a step forward, his gaze searching her face, and when she didn't back away, he caressed her shoulder, let his hand slide down her arm, felt her shiver at his touch.

"Katlaina, I want..."

"What do you want?"

"I don't know."

"I know."

With hands that trembled, she removed his shirt and his breeches, and then he stood naked before her.

He might not know what he wanted, she mused, but his body knew. There was no mistaking the evidence of his desire, or his embarrassment that she should see him in such an aroused state.

He was tall and lean. Clean of line and limb, with broad shoulders and narrow hips. A man in his prime, lusty and virile.

Swallowing her fear, Katlaina took him by the hand and led him to the narrow bed, drawing him down beside her.

"Touch me, Navarre," she said softly.

It was what he wanted more than his next breath, but she was so small, so delicate. What if, in his haste and his ignorance, he caused her pain?

"It will be all right." Her words were low and filled with encouragement, but her eyes held a trace of wariness, of fear.

He lifted his hand and hesitated. "You'll tell me if I hurt you?"

"Yes." *This is my first time, too. Please be gentle with me.*

Tears burned her eyes as he began to touch her, his hands trembling with uncertainty. Curious hands. There were no callouses on his palms, no scars anywhere on his body. Unlike her, he had never done a day's work, never washed a dish or milked a cow or scrubbed a floor. He had never scraped his elbow while chasing after the chickens, or cut his knee when he fell from a tree.

He was going to die.

The thought pounded in her head as his hands grew more bold. Now and again, he looked up at her, his dark gray eyes filled with such tenderness, it made her want to weep.

He could touch her as he wished. Caress her hair, the curve of her breast, the slender column of her throat. He touched her, and his own body came alive. He pressed his lips to hers, and heat spiraled through him. Did it affect her the same?

He groaned softly as his body's need grew painful, afraid of the wild emotions that were raging through him, afraid of hurting her, of disgusting her, of doing something wrong.

But she was there, quietly urging him on. And then her hands were touching him, measuring the width of his shoulders, exploring the fine layer of hair on his chest. Her fingertips traced the muscles in his arms and back. In all the years since they had taken his mother from him, no one had ever touched him with kindness or affection. In all his life, no one had ever touched him intimately. No one had ever caressed him, or aroused him.

He trembled beneath her questing fingertips, his whole body yearning toward her, wanting her, needing her, loving her the more for her patience, her gentleness as she helped him find that which he sought.

The touch of her hands thrilled him, excited him, until he thought he would burst, and then he was sheathed inside her, moving to a rhythm older than time, and he did burst, his body flooding with heat, shuddering, shattering, exploding in the warm, sweet heat of her flesh...

"Katlaina?" He drew back, whispering her name, as the world stopped spinning. "Katlaina, are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

"I'm fine." She turned her head so he couldn't see her tears.

"Katlaina?" He forced her to look at him. "What's wrong? What have I done?" His expression filled with self-loathing. "I hurt you, didn't I?"

"No, Navarre, you didn't hurt me." How could she explain how she felt? He was a part of her now. For a brief time, they had been one flesh. Her heart had beat in time to his. When he died, a part of her would die with him.

"Forgive me," he begged. "Please, Katlaina."

"There is nothing to forgive." She stroked his cheek, unmindful of the tears that welled in her eyes. "I love you, Navarre."

"Katlaina!" Joy and pain warred in his gaze.

"Make love to me." Her fingers dug into his arms, drawing him closer. "I'm not afraid when I'm in your arms."

With a low groan, he buried his face against her breast and she felt the heat of his tears. And then he was moving within her again, making her forget everything but the wonder of his touch, the ecstasy of his kisses, the miracle of two hearts beating as one...

Chapter Four

When he woke in the morning, she was gone.

Alarmed, he sat up, his gaze darting to the cage on the other side of the room. A vast sigh of relief escaped Navarre's lips when he saw her there, asleep in her own bed.

"Katlaina. Katlaina!"

He called her name, needing to know she was all right, that he hadn't hurt her, but she didn't stir, and after a while, he realized they had drugged her. But why?

Never had the hours passed so slowly as they did that day as he waited for the sun to set. He paced the floor for hours, his desire, his need, growing stronger with each passing moment.

She woke an hour before dusk. A guard brought her food, water to bathe in, a transparent gown made of golden cloth.

And then she was in his cage again. In his arms again. In his bed again.

And his need was so great, he took her quickly, swiftly, burying himself in her softness, burying his fear

of the future in the velvet warmth of her femininity.

Later, when his desire had subsided, he gathered her into his arms, one hand stroking her hair.

"Katlaina, I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"No, Navarre."

"They drugged you last night. Why?"

"To ensure that I give birth to a son."

"And if the child is a girl?"

"I do not know. Perhaps they will let you try again. I do not know."

"Have any of the sacrifices ever fathered a girl child?"

"Not that I know of."

"Katlaina, I'm sorry this has happened to you. I wish..."

"What, Navarre, what do you wish?"

"Don't you know?"

She nodded, because she did know. Her mother had told her that there was one special man meant for each woman, and that only those blessed by the gods ever met the one man who was mate to their heart, to their soul.

She knew Navarre was that man. A part of her could not help but rejoice that they had met; a greater part of her grieved because they could have no life together.

He made love to her all night long, tenderly, gently. Passionately.

And then, as the dawn threatened to steal the darkness from the sky, she felt his tears dampen her cheek.

"Navarre..." Needing to comfort him, she wrapped her arms around him. "Do not cry, Navarre..." she whispered. "Please... do not cry..."

It was the pattern of their days and nights for two months, and then he woke one morning to find her cage empty, the linen stripped from the bed, the door open.

"Katlaina!"

He screamed her name over and over again until one of the guards came.

"Where is she?" Navarre demanded. "What have you done to her?"

"Done your part, you have," the guard said. "Your seed has taken root. She's breeding, the woman is."

Navarre's hands curled around the bars, his knuckles white. "When will I see her again?"

The guard stared at him for a moment, and then he shook his head. "You will not," he replied quietly.

"Please, tell me where she is."

The guard started to shake his head, and then he sighed. "She is in a room abovestairs. You needn't worry. They'll take good care of her now."

"Please, let me see her."

"I cannot."

"Please." Navarre blinked back the tears that burned his eyes. "Please."

"I cannot."

"Shall I beg? Is that what you want? I'll go down on my knees, down on my belly, whatever you ask. Only let me see her one more time."

The guard toyed with the hilt of his sword, and then he sighed. "Tonight," he said. "If I can, I will bring her tonight. But for a few moments only."

Navarrenodded, unable to speak past the lump in his throat. It was the first kindness that had ever been shown him.

It was in the last dark hour before dawn when the guard brought Katlaina to him.

"I'll be back for her in a quarter of an hour," the guard said.

"Wait!" Navarre called as the man turned to leave. "Can you not put her in here with me?"

"I haven't got the key," the guard said. "Best make good use of the time you have."

Navarrewaited until the man was gone, and then he reached through the bars, enfolding her in his arms. "Katlaina, are you well?"

"Do not worry," she said quietly. "No harm will come to us." She caressed his cheek. "My poor Navarre. You will be alone again." A tear slid down her cheek as she placed her hand over his heart. "I will never forget you."

"Nor I you."

"I shall pray for a girl," she said tremulously. "Perhaps, if the gods are kind and my child is female, they will let you go."

"Perhaps," he said.

She slid her arms around his waist, drawing him as close as she could with the bars between them.

"Kiss me, myNavarre ," she whispered fervently. "Kiss me until they take me away."

Slowly, reverently, he lowered his head, his mouth slanting over hers to sip her sweetness. She tasted of milk and honey, and he drank deeply, imprinting her taste, her scent, on his memory. His fingers moved in the black silk of her hair, slid inside her robe to caress her breasts, memorizing the softness of her skin, the feel of her in his hands.

"Katlaina..." He breathed her name, and then he kissed her again, silently cursing the iron bars that kept them apart.

"I love you," she whispered. "I will love you as long as I live."

"Katlaina, I..." The words died in his throat as he heard footsteps, and then the guard was there, taking her by the arm, leading her away.

And he was left alone.

Chapter Five

He had been lonely when they took his mother from him, but it was as nothing compared to the desolation he felt now. He ached with loneliness, with desire. For two months, he had known the love of a woman, had known what it meant to experience a man's desire, a man's fulfillment.

And now she was gone, and he would never see her again. Nor would he see the child he had fathered.Navarre stared at the ceiling, unseeing. Once the child was born, his own life would be over, unless his offspring was a female. What would happen then, he didn't know. Nor did it matter, because he knew, deep inside the dark well of his soul, that he had sired a male.

Katlaina. She was in one of the rooms upstairs. So near... Katlaina, Katlaina.

He mourned her loss as though she had died. He refused to eat, couldn't sleep, only lay in his narrow cot, one arm over his eyes, thinking of her, remembering the nights they had shared. The love they had shared.

Katlaina.

Days that had seemed long before seemed endless now.

Three months passed, and he saw no one but the guard who emptied the chamber pot and brought him food twice each day. It was the same man who had brought Katlaina to see him.

Navarrestood away from the door, as ordered, while the guard slid his food tray under the bars.

The man looked at him a moment, then turned away.

"Wait!"Navarre crossed the floor, his hands curling around the bars. "Wait, please."

Slowly, the guard turned around. "What do you want?"

"Katlaina? How is she?"

"To talk to you is forbidden," the guard said, not quite meeting Navarre's eyes.

"Please."

"She's in good health."

"I'll never see her again, will I?"

"No."

"And the... the child. Will I be allowed to see it before...?"

"No."

Navarre pressed his forehead against the bars and closed his eyes. He'd never see her again, never see the child he had fathered. The pain that rose within him was excruciating.

Slowly, he raised his head and looked at the guard. "Please." He dropped to his knees, his hands clasped. "Please."

The guard took a step forward, his pale gray eyes filled with an odd mixture of pity, curiosity, and fear. "Been imprisoned since birth, haven't you?"

Navarre nodded.

"And now you're to be..." The man swallowed hard, unable to say the word.

"Sacrificed."

The guard nodded. In spite of himself, he felt a wave of compassion for the young man. Some said it was an honor to be the chosen one, to give one's life in behalf of the people. But he had never seen it so. "Afraid, are you?"

Navarre made a sound of disgust deep in his throat. "I'm angry! Angry that I am to be sacrificed to appease a goddess I don't believe in, that I am to be killed for people I have never seen."

"I'm sorry," the guard murmured. "Sorry for you. Sorry for me. Like you, I was given no choice regarding my life. I was told that I would be a guard in the palace of the High Priest. Told who I would marry and where I would live. And while I am not to be sacrificed, I have spent my whole adult life inside these prison walls."

"But you can go out when you choose," Navarre said, rising to his feet. "You have a house of your own. A woman of your own." He drew a deep breath and let it out in a long, slow sigh. "You have been kind to me. I would know your name."

"Markos."

"What will happen to me, to Katlaina, if the child she bears is a female?"

The guard looked surprised by the question.

"I know not. Such a thing has never happened."

"Please let me see her again."

"I cannot. I'm sorry."

"Please, Markos."

The guard took a step forward. "You must promise me something if I let you see her."

Navarre frowned at the odd request, wondering what he could possibly do for the man. "I will."

"Before you die, the priests will give you a list of requests."

"Requests?"

"You are being sacrificed so you can carry the messages of the priests to the goddess. They will have you ask her for a good rainfall so that the crops will grow. They will tell you to ask that our men might be strong, that our women might be fertile, that our enemies will fall before us."

"And if I refuse?"

"You will not. Trust me, Navarre, they have ways to extract your promise. Ways you do not wish to learn."

"What do you want of me?"

"When you see the goddess, I want you to ask her to bless me with a son."

"I will."

Markos smiled. "Tonight," he said. "When the moon is waning, I will come for you."

Never had the hours of the day passed more slowly. Finally, after what seemed like days, Markos appeared.

"Promise me that you will not try to escape," Markos said.

"I promise."

"Turn around," Markos ordered, and when Navarre obeyed, Markos lashed his wrists together, then unlocked the cell door.

"There's no need to bind my hands," Navarre said. "I gave you my word."

"But it's my head that will be on the block should you decide a try at freedom is worth more than your word," Markos replied candidly. "Quietly now."

Moments later, Navarre was ushered into a large, sumptuously appointed chamber.

With a long chain, Markos shackled Navarre's left ankle to an iron ring set in the middle of the floor, then released his hands.

"Remember your promise," Markos called over his shoulder as he went out the door. "I will return for you in an hour."

Left alone, Navarre glanced around the room. He had never seen a king's palace, but surely only royalty lived in such splendor. Heavy drapes of pale yellow brocade hung at the windows. Heavy furniture made of dark wood was grouped before a large stone hearth. Colorful rugs covered the floor. A tray of meat and cheese and a jug of wine sat on a tray on a small table.

A soft rustling sound drew his attention and he glanced over his shoulder to see Katlaina enter the room.

"Navarre!" Tears of joy welled in her eyes as she flew across the room.

"Katlaina." He breathed her name as he gathered her into his arms. "Katlaina, Katlaina." Only her name, over and over again. His hands roamed over her body, marveling at the fullness of her breasts, the swell of her belly. It was true, he thought. His seed was growing within her. A part of him would be left behind.

"You are here," she murmured. "I prayed and prayed that I would see you again."

"How are you?" he asked. He spread his hands over her belly, then cupped her breasts, weighing their heaviness in his hands as he imagined his babe suckling there.

"I am well," she said. "But you... my poor Navarre, trapped in that awful cage, alone."

She took his hand and led him to the settee. When he sat down, she curled into his lap, her head resting on his shoulder. "You're here," she whispered. "Really here."

"What will happen to you after the child is born?"

"I have been told I will be sent back to my family with a large dowry."

Sent home, he thought. With a large dowry to appease her future husband for the lack of a maidenhead.

Impotent anger welled within him at the thought of her marrying another man, bearing another man's child.

"Kiss me, Navarre," she urged. "The minutes are passing so quickly..."

"Katlaina..." With a low groan, he covered her mouth with his, drinking in her sweetness, losing himself in the touch of her hands.

Honeyed fire spread through him as their bodies pressed together, the need between them heightened by the months they had been apart.

He marveled at how beautiful she was, her body swollen with his child, her eyes shining with love. He nuzzled the cleft between her breasts, wishing they were already filled with milk so that he could taste her.

He reached for her, and she was there, opening to him, her body welcoming his invasion, closing around him, making him forget that he had only months left to live, that he might never see her again. For now, there was only this moment, this woman, warm and willing in his arms, her voice low and husky as she whispered that she loved him.

Too soon, Markos came to take him away.

His cage seemed smaller, more confining, after the opulence of Katlaina's chamber. His bed was small and empty, his days bleak, the hours of darkness an endless torment as he thought of her, dreamed of her, yearned for her.

Night after night, he begged Markos to take him to see Katlaina one more time. And night after night, the guard refused.

Five months had passed since the last time he had seen her. Five long months, and with each passing day, the sense of time closing in on him grew stronger. Katlaina. She was ever in his heart, in his mind, in his thoughts. Every time he closed his eyes, her image appeared before him, her belly expanding as his child was nurtured within her womb. He had to see her, just one more time.

"Please, Markos." Navarre pleaded with the guard as he had every night for the last five months. "Please take me to her again."

"You don't know what you're asking." Markos let out a sigh of exasperation. After five months, his patience was wearing thin. Every night it was the same, Navarre begging to see the woman again. And yet, in spite of his resolve not to weaken again, Markos couldn't help but pity the man. Poor wretch. What a miserable life the Fates had decreed for him. Born and raised in a cage, bred as if he were a prize bull, and what was to be his reward? Death at the hands of a bloodthirsty goddess.

For the first time in months, Navarre felt a flicker of hope as he studied Markos's expression. Was the man weakening?

"Please, Markos," he whispered.

"I've told you and told you, the danger of being caught is too great to risk again."

"Please! I'll beg the goddess to give you a dozen sons, wealth beyond your imagination, only take me to her again." Navarre's hands closed around the bars until his knuckles were white with the strain. "Please, Markos, I have only two months left..."

"You promise? A dozen sons. Wealth enough to leave this place and make a new life in another town?"

"I promise. That and more, whatever you want."

Markos ruminated for a moment. The risk was great, but so, too, was the reward, if he but had the courage.

"I'll do it," he agreed at last. "Tomorrow night. But this must be the last time."

The last time. The words repeated themselves in Navarre's mind as he held Katlaina in his arms.

The last time he would see her, hold her, touch her.

"Katlaina..."

She snuggled deeper into his embrace, her beautiful green eyes wet with tears. "Navarre, I will never forget you. Never." She drew her fingertip over his lips. "What would you do if you were free? If we could walk out of here tomorrow morning and never look back?"

"Do?" Navarre shook his head. "I don't know. I've never done anything." He shook his head again. "I have knowledge," he mused. "Inside my mind, I have the knowledge of a thousand scrolls, and yet I've never done anything. Seen anything. Been anywhere."

His arm tightened around her. "You tell me," he said. "Tell me what we would do."

"We would go north, to my homeland," Katlaina said. "You would like it there. It is so beautiful, especially in the spring when everything is all green and gold. There is a waterfall high in the mountains. And a lake. And trees, and flowers. And deer and horses and foxes. And birds and fish and ducks and geese. I would show you all of it, Navarre, and I would love you all the days of your life. I would give you children, as many as you wanted. And we would be happy, so happy."

He closed his eyes, listening to her words, and felt an ache grow in his chest, a longing for a place he'd never seen. Mountains, he thought. A waterfall, and a lake. And animals that he had seen only in pictures. And Katlaina, there beside him, his child cradled in her arms.

The ache in his chest grew until he could hardly breathe, until love and hate and rage and bitterness rose up within him, choking him.

Cursing himself for his cowardice, he wrapped his arms around her, holding on to her as if she could somehow save him from the terrible fate that awaited him. He breathed in her scent one last time even as he imprinted her image deep in his heart, that he might carry it with him to the grave.

"Hold me!" he said, his voice husky with the fear that was growing inside him, spreading like some monstrous canker. "Katlaina!"

"I am here," she crooned. "I am here, my Navarre."

With a cry that was half sob, half scream, he ripped the clothes from her body, shrugged out of his breeches, and buried himself within her. There was no gentleness in him now, only an overpowering need to possess her, to fill her with his essence, to hear her cry his name as his body convulsed.

Katlaina. She was the giver of life, the bearer of life, and he buried himself deep within her, hoping that she could somehow cleanse him of his fear of what was to come.

Too soon, Markos came for him. "It's time." The guard's tone was curt as he unlocked the shackle around Navarre's left ankle.

Navarre nodded, and then he drew Katlaina into his arms one last time.

"I love you," she whispered.

"Remember me," he said. "When I'm gone, remember me. No one else will."

Katlaina nodded. "I will, myNavarre . You know I will."

He kissed her gently, tenderly. And then he placed his hands over her belly, a look of amazement flickering in his eyes as he felt the child, their child, move within her womb, and in that moment, he truly realized all that would be lost to him.

He lifted his gaze to Katlaina's face, and she smiled at him through her tears.

"Navarre!" Markos's voice was sharp with rebuke. "We must go!"

"Fare thee well, Katlaina,"Navarre murmured. "I pray you will tell my son of his father."

"Every day."

So much to say to her, he thought, but he couldn't form the words, could not force them past the lump in his throat. He kissed her one last time, and then left her chamber.

There was an unmistakable sound of finality as Markos closed and locked the door of his cage.

Chapter Six

The nightmares began the following night, always the same, yet upon waking he could remember nothing but the terror of being buried alive, smothering in darkness.

As the day of the sacrifice drew nearer, Markos spent more time withNavarre , sitting outside the cage in silence whenNavarre seemed pensive, talking about his own childhood whenNavarre was in the mood to listen.

KnowingNavarre 's penchant for sweets, Markos made sure thatNavarre 's supper always included a tart or some other kind of confection. He changed the scrolls on the shelf each fortnight.

It was just after dawn on a bright spring morning when Markos made an unexpected appearance at the cage door.

"What is it?"Navarre asked, his heart hammering with fear. "Is it time?"

"Not yet," Markos said. "But soon. Katlaina was delivered of a healthy male child less than an hour ago."

A boy. All these months he had clung to the hope that he might sire a daughter instead of a son, that he might somehow escape the fate for which he had been born. There would be no reprieve now. The knowledge left him feeling cold and empty, as though he were already dead.

"When will they come for me?"

"When next the full moon shines."

Two days hence,Navarre thought. A cold sense of dread speared through him. Two days, and his life would be over.

"Markos..."

The guard shook his head. "Do not ask it of me."

"Please."

Markos let out a sigh of resignation. "I cannot promise, but I'll try."

An hour later, Markos returned carrying a small bundle wrapped in a fleecy blue blanket. "You have time for one quick look, that is all."

One quick look.Navarre devoured the child in a single glance, marveling at the infant's tiny fingers and toes, at the thatch of curly black hair, the soft skin that was only slightly wrinkled and red. He felt his heart catch in his throat as the babe opened its eyes and he saw that the boy's eyes were pale gray.

My son, he thought. Joy mingled with despair as the baby's fist curled around his finger.

Tears welled in his eyes as he imagined his son growing up in a room, shut away from the rest of the world.

"My son," he murmured, "forgive me."

Markos cleared his throat. "I must take him back before he is missed."

"I understand. Bless you, Markos, for letting me see him."

"Remember your promise," Markos said.

"I remember,"Navarre replied, his gaze intent upon the infant. "A dozen sons and wealth beyond your imagination."

"Do you... is there anything you want me to tell his mother?"

Slowly,Navarre shook his head. It had all been said.

The next two days were the longest and the shortest of his life.

At dusk the second day, he was taken into a large room and stripped of his clothing. Moments later, a servant was sent in to bathe him. His body was rubbed with fragrant oils and spices. His hair was brushed until it gleamed like polished ebony.

Symbols of fertility and long life were painted on his chest, and then he was dressed in a pair of skin-tight breeches made of delicate cloth of gold. A long cloak made of finely woven black wool lined with whisper-soft crimson silk was draped across his shoulders.

And then the priests entered the room. There were three of them, all clad in long gray robes, their faces hidden within the folds of their cowls.

"You will present these requests to the goddess Shaylyn," said the first of the priests. "You will beg her for a good harvest, for rain in due season."

"You will ask that our women and our beasts will be fertile, that our enemies will be weak, that our men will be strong in battle," said the second.

"You will ask that our crops will be fruitful, that His Eminence will live long, that our people will prosper in the land," added the third.

"And if I refuse?"

"The woman Katlaina will be drawn and quartered, her still-beating heart torn from her breast. Your son will be raised by strangers."

"How will you know if I've delivered your message once I'm dead?"

"The goddess has always granted our requests. Should she fail to do so, we will know that you displeased her," the first priest replied.

"And your mate's life will be forfeit," the second priest remarked, his voice as hard and cold as the stone floor at his feet.

"I will do as you wish," Navarre said.

The three priests nodded. "We will pray for your soul, Navarre," they said, their voices blending as one. "May the goddess Shaylyn accept your sacrifice, that your death will not be in vain, that our people may prosper."

One of the priests offered him a goblet filled with wine. "May your death be as sweet as this fruit of the vine."

Navarre stared at the blood-red liquid for a long moment before he lifted the jewel-encrusted goblet to his lips.

When he had drained the cup, the priests stepped forward, one by one, and placed their hands upon his head. Then they left the room, and he was alone.

A short time later, two men clad in black came to escort him to the sacrificial chamber.

It was in Navarre's mind to resist, but his body felt strangely heavy. Only then did he realize that the wine had been drugged.

The Temple of Shaylyn was located in a large building located across the river behind Stone Hall Abbey. He was hardly aware of the hands that grasped his arms as they led him across a narrow wooden bridge.

The night air was warm, fragrant with a myriad of scents. A million stars twinkled high above. He heard the questing call of an owl, the song of a cricket, the rush of water beneath the bridge. The wood beneath his bare feet was cool and damp.

The Temple was made of finely hewn black stone. Narrow windows were set high in the walls, the glass black and empty, like sightless eyes. A single torch, set in an iron holder, sent shadows dancing across the building's facade.

The thick, iron-barred door opened without a sound, and they stepped into darkness.

"May the goddess bless you," said the guard on his right.

"May the people prosper," said the guard on his left.

He felt a whisper of air as they closed the door behind him, heard the harsh clang as the heavy iron locking bar was dropped into place, and then he was alone in the darkness.

It was his nightmare come true.

He swallowed hard as a hundred candles suddenly burst into flame, and he saw the statue of the goddess, just as he had seen her in his dreams. She was dressed all in white, seated on a white marble throne. Her hair was as black as the night, her skin as smooth and pale as the marble itself. He shuddered with dread when he saw the long black altar located to the left of the throne, and behind the altar, an open casket made of dark oak lined in black silk.

And then, very slowly, the goddess opened her eyes. She stared at him for a timeless moment, and then she was drifting down the stairs toward him.

He heard the whisper of her silken robes swishing across the cold stone floor, the frantic beating of his own heart. He wanted to run, to hide, but he couldn't draw his gaze from her face. She was a being of incomparable beauty, tall and slender, her movements as graceful as the wind. He felt the touch of her hand, as cold as a tomb, saw the horrible gleam in the depths of her fathomless black eyes.

Her voice was like the rustle of dead leaves. "Come to me, my Navarre," she whispered. "Come, quench my thirst."

He wanted to refuse, but he could not speak.

He wanted to run, but he lacked the power of movement.

And then she was reaching for him, lifting him in her long slender arms as though he weighed nothing at all.

Fear rose up within him, choking him. "Please..." He forced the word past the terror in his throat. "Please..."

"Yes," she said, "you please me very well."

She placed him on the altar. He felt her hands move over his chest as she unfastened his cloak, felt her nails dig into the muscle of his left arm. She trailed her fingertips over his shoulders, across his belly, along the inside of his thigh.

"Yes," she said again. "You please me very well."

He couldn't move, couldn't take his gaze from her face, her eyes. She was beautiful, but her touch was as cold as death, and in the depths of her eyes, he saw the endless torment of hell.

"Have those puny mortals sent me a message?" she asked.

Navarrenodded.

"Will you tell it to me?"

"They ask that you will bless their fields, that their women and cattle will be fertile, that their crops will grow, that their enemies will be defeated."

"Always, it is the same."

She bent down, her eyes glowing, and he felt her tongue, hot and moist, skim over the wildly beating pulse in his throat.

"What of you?" she asked. "Is there nothing you desire?"

Through a fog of fear, he remembered his promise to Markos. "I ask that you bless Markos with a dozen sons and the wealth to provide for them."

"Nothing for yourself?"

He was trembling now. "Only that my death may be quick and merciful."

"I am not going to kill you, myNavarre ."

MyNavarre. That was what Katlaina had called him. For an instant, her image flashed through his mind.

"You're going to spare my life?" He felt a faint stirring of hope in his breast, a fluttering as faint as the wings of a fledgling chick.

"I'm going to change your life. I've killed all the others, but not you, myNavarre . You are not like the others, and that intrigues me. You do not grovel at my feet, nor do you weep and plead for mercy. But it is more than that." She ran her hand over his chest. "You tempt me,Navarre , in ways I have not been tempted in five hundred years."

"You're going to let me go, then?" That first faint ray of hope brightened within him, as radiant as the noonday sun. He was going to live. He would see Katlaina again.

The goddess looked down at him, a trace of pity in her eyes. "My,Navarre ," she murmured. "I'm going to give you a new life, one you never dreamed of."

Relief washed through him, warm and sweet, like honey kissed by the sun.

"I'm not going to die, Katlaina," he murmured, and he felt the sting of tears in his eyes.

"Oh, yes." The goddess caressed his cheek. "You must die, but for a moment only, my handsome one, and then you will be reborn into life eternal."

Only then did he realize how quickly hope could be crushed. "I don't understand."

"You will." Her voice grew deep, husky, ominous. There was a sound, like the rushing of many wings, and the candles went out, leaving them in darkness.

He was truly afraid now. The darkness seemed to grow thicker, heavier, yet even in that thick blackness, he could see her face, her eyes. Red eyes, filled with an insatiable hunger and an unholy lust.

"No!" He screamed the word even as he willed his body to move, to run before it was too late. But her hand rested heavily on his chest. Just her hand, holding him down as if he had no more strength than his own newborn child, and he could only lie there, the stone beneath him as cold as the grave.

She bent over him, her eyes glowing. He gasped as he felt her teeth at his throat. His heartbeat sounded like thunder in his ears. Her teeth pierced his flesh, her hands held him immobile. He felt a trickle of blood run down his neck, felt her tongue lap it up. Her touch stole his breath, his life.

He felt the weight of eternity, the loneliness of hell, the coldness of death. And then, gradually, warmth crept back into him, and with it a sense of well-being, of strength, of life.

He opened his eyes to darkness, and yet he could see clearly.

The goddess Shaylyn sat on the end of the altar. Her skin was no longer pale. Her cheeks were the color of ripe peaches; her lips were as red as... blood. His blood. She regarded him through eyes that no longer glowed, but were again a deep, endless black.

"Welcome," she said. "Welcome to the world of the undead."

Feeling weak and disoriented, Navarre sat up. "What happened?"

"I have given you eternal life, my brave Navarre. You need fear death no longer. You will stay as you are now forever. You will not age. You will never be sick. You will have the strength of ten strong men. If you are cut, you will heal."

"What nonsense is this?" Navarre demanded.

"I assure you, it is not nonsense." She stood up and walked the length of the room, then returned to the altar.

"I have lived in this place for five hundred years," she said, and her voice echoed off the walls. "Five hundred years! It is enough."

"You want me to believe you are five hundred years old?"

"No, my Navarre. I am far older than that. In the beginning, I needed to feed every night, but as the centuries went by, the need for nourishment grew less, and when I grew weary of traveling, I came here. I spoke to the priests. I told them I would give them peace and plenty if they would provide me with a living male sacrifice every five-and-twenty years."

She laughed softly, a sound like dead leaves stirred by an ill wind. "Foolish, puny mortals, so eager for something to believe in. As if I had the power to end sickness, to make their crops grow, to end wars and famine and pestilence."

She laughed again, a cold, brittle sound that raised the hairs along Navarre's arms and sent a shiver down his spine. "Mortal men are so easy to manipulate, so fearful of the unknown, so afraid of their own mortality."

She glanced around the room. "It has been a most satisfactory arrangement, but now I grow weary of being a goddess. I yearn to see the world again, to return to my homeland. You may come with me, and I will teach you what you must know, or you may stay here, and learn what you have become."

He did not understand her words, nor did he like the fear that congealed in his heart.

"What?" he asked hoarsely. "What have I become?"

"You are a creature of the night now, my Navarre. One of the undead. You have powers you cannot imagine, powers that will increase as the years pass. You must have blood to live. You will cast no shadow, no reflection. Sunlight is your enemy. Seek her light and she will most assuredly destroy you."

"And what of my father? And his father before him?"

She frowned, perplexed by the question. "They were sacrificed, as you were."

"And are they... did you do to them what you say you've done to me?"

Soft laughter escaped her lips as she shook her head. "No, my Navarre. Never in five hundred years have I spared the life of one meant to be sacrificed."

"Never?"

"Never." She ran her hand over his chest and shoulders, her touch sensuous, her fingertips lightly caressing the strong muscles that flexed beneath his dark skin. And then she held out her hand.

"Come with me," she purred, her voice low and husky and filled with the promise of rapture. "Together we will explore the darkness of your new world."

Navarre stared at her slim white hand, but made no move to take it. "Katlaina..." He whispered her name as if it would banish the terror from his heart.

"She will not have you now, my handsome one. Come with me! I will teach you to hunt the night." She caressed his cheek. "I will show you the world."

"No." He recoiled from her touch, from the predatory gleam in her eyes. "I don't believe you. I don't believe any of this."

She drew herself up to her full height, her eyes blazing dark fire because he had scorned her.

"You will believe, come the dawn," she hissed. "Be happy in your new life, my Navarre. Mayhap we will meet again one day."

He stared at her, certain she was mad, and then, as she dissolved into a sparkling black mist and disappeared before his eyes, he was certain he was mad.

He ran to the doors, but there was no latch on the inside. Hands curled into fists, he pounded on the wood.

"Let me out of here! For the love of Zeus, let me out!" He screamed until his voice was raw, but to no avail.

He felt the hours of the night passing, and then, to his amazement, he felt the coming of the dawn, felt the promise of its heat burning in his blood.

With a hoarse cry, he beat his fists upon the doors again. Tears of frustration scalded his cheeks, and when he wiped them away, he saw that his tears were tinged with blood.

Frightened and confused, he sank to his knees in the middle of the floor. His blood. He could feel it growing warm in his veins. What was happening to him?

He glanced up as a faint ray of sunshine struck the eastern windows, cried out as the brightness burned his eyes. And then a reflected ray of sunlight touched his skin. Pain shot up his arm and he scrambled to his feet, searching for a place to hide.

But the room was empty save for the throne, the altar. And the coffin.

He stared at it in horror and then, as he felt the heat of the sun on his bare back, he ran across the floor, climbed into the coffin, and closed the lid.

And still he felt the sun climbing in the sky, felt its heat drain his strength, felt his limbs grow heavy as the very life seemed to drain from his body.

His last conscious thought was that she had lied, for surely this was death. And then the blackness engulfed him, dragging him down, down, into a stygian sea of oblivion.

Chapter Seven

He woke to darkness. Disoriented, he remained still. Then he remembered where he was, and panic raced through him. With a cry, he raised his hands, throwing back the lid of the coffin.

Breathing heavily, he vaulted over the side. It hadn't been a nightmare, after all.

Taking a deep, calming breath, he walked to the door and pounded on it with his fist.

"Hello? Is anyone out there?"

Again and again, he pounded on the door, but there was no response.

He glanced at the windows and saw that it was dark out. He had slept through the day.

And he was hungry, hungry in a way he had never been before. A terrible, searing pain lanced through his whole body. His stomach clenched. He was hungry, so hungry. He felt as if he hadn't eaten in weeks instead of hours.

He prowled the room, his hands roaming over the thick stone, seeking a hidden passage that would lead him out, but there was nothing. Only cold stone walls, and windows that were beyond his reach.

And the hunger, growing stronger, clawing at his belly, until he thought he would go mad from the pain.

He sat on the throne, his legs drawn up to his chest, shivering convulsively.

He was going to die, after all, he thought, not at the hands of the goddess, but of pain and starvation.

Driven by the agony that knifed through his body, he staggered back and forth, his arms wrapped around his body. It was then that he saw it, an iron handle recessed in one of the stones. Thinking it might be a way out, he took hold of the iron ring, lifting the square of stone from the floor.

He stared into the hole, too stunned to move, paralyzed by the sight that met his gaze. For there, piled one upon the other like pieces of firewood, were the skeletons of the men who had been sacrificed to the goddess, their decaying bones gleaming whitely in the darkness.

He swallowed the nausea that rose in his throat as he realized that the pile of bones lying on the top of the grotesque mound was all that was left of his father.

Sickened, he turned away, the horror of what he'd seen smothered by the ever-increasing pain that clawed at his vitals, drugging his senses, making coherent thought all but impossible.

With the coming of dawn, he went to the door again, pounding on the thick wood with all his might, screaming for help, but to no avail. And at last, the burning rays of the dawn drove him to seek the protective darkness of the coffin once more.

He was going mad, he thought as he closed the lid. Surely he had to be mad to think the sun would burn his flesh. Certainly only a madman would crawl into a coffin to hide from the dawn.

And then he felt it again, the creeping lethargy that stole over him. It wasn't the enervation of sleep, he thought as the darkness dragged him down, but the emptiness of death.

He woke at the setting of the sun, the hunger clawing at him. He climbed out of the coffin, then went to sit on the throne of the goddess. He was astonished at the clarity of his vision. Fighting the hunger that raged through him, he stared at the moonlight reflected on the cold stone floor, mesmerized by the beauty of the pale moonbeam, at the rainbow of colors contained in a single ray of light.

He stared up at the windows, at the stars visible through the thick panes of dark glass.

And the hunger gnawed at him.

A quarter of a century, he thought. It would be a quarter of a century before the priests brought the next sacrifice.

A cry was torn from his throat as he imagined the priests bringing his son to this place. His son.

Rage rose up within him, stronger than the hunger.

He bolted to his feet and found himself standing at the door even before he realized that was where he wanted to go. How had he moved so fast, so silently?

Katlaina. He had to see Katlaina.

But how?

He remembered watching Shaylyn dissolve into a mist. Did he also have the power to change his shape?

"Katlaina." Murmuring her name, he closed his eyes and tried to imagine his body transforming into mist.

He felt an odd weightlessness, and when he opened his eyes, his body was gone. Frightened, yet exhilarated, he willed himself to slip under the door. A moment later, he was outside.

He willed himself to materialize in his own form, then knew a moment of fear when he thought he might fail, followed by a surge of relief as he took on his own shape once again.

Navarredrew in a deep breath, his nostrils filling with a thousand scents and odors, his mind racing to sort them all out. The fragrant scent of grass and flowers and earth, the musty stench of a dead animal lying in the brush, the heavy odor of manure and stale sweat, the not unpleasant smell of horses and cattle, sheep and cows.

He shook his head, hoping to clear it, but the sounds and scents continued to assault him. And then voices poured into his mind—a man and woman whispering in the distant shadows, the chanting of the priests coming from the chapel at Stone Hall Abbey, a baby's cry, a mother's lullaby. He heard the lowing of cattle, the faint fluttering of wings as an owl passed overhead, a horse pawing the earth, the clang of a bell, the scrape of a boot heel, the sound of footsteps growing nearer.

And then his whole being focused on a single scent.

The scent of blood. Warm. Fresh.

He swung around, his nostrils flaring, his mouth watering. And then he was running through the darkness, overcome by an ancient urge that he could neither control nor resist.

The man reared back, his eyes wide with fright, when Navarre appeared at his side.

Navarresaw it all in a glance: the terror in the man's eyes, the bright red blood dripping from the man's arm where he had cut it while trying to right an overturned cart. Blood that seemed to shimmer and glow with a life of its own.

He saw it and smelled it, and then, with a low growl, he was on the man, his hands holding the peasant immobile while he bent over the creature's neck, his teeth, suddenly aching, piercing the man's throat, unleashing a torrent of crimson.

The blood poured down his own throat, hot and thick and rich, carrying the essence of life. He felt the violent pounding of the man's heart, tasted his fear, felt the man's very soul ebb away...

Navarretossed the man aside, a cry of horror rising in his throat when he realized what he'd done. He stared at the blood on his hands, felt the blood trickling down his chin, tasted the last, moist drops on his tongue.

Filled with self-loathing, he dropped to his knees, his face buried in his hands. What had he done? What had he become, that the scent of blood had driven him to attack a man and drain him of life?

Sickened, he knelt there for hours, trying to comprehend the changes that had come upon him. His hearing was keen, his vision vastly improved, so that even the darkness held no secrets. And his strength... he recalled how easily he had overpowered the man.

And the blood... Even the horror of what he'd done couldn't completely obliterate the ecstasy that had come to him when he... His stomach clenched as he relived what he had done. He had torn open the man's throat and drunk his blood. It had been like absorbing the very essence of another human being, embracing his hopes and dreams. Only he wasn't human anymore.

Slowly, Navarre rose to his feet. And then, with no effort at all, he righted the heavy cart with a flip of his wrist. It took even less effort to lift the body and place it inside.

Confused and afraid, he stared at his hands. He felt strong. He felt as though he could tear down mountains, as if he could run forever without tiring, as if he could fly...

Mind reeling, he walked toward the white-domed building that held Katlaina and his son.

Nearing a stream, he paused long enough to wash the blood from his face and hands, and then, taking a deep breath, he approached the building.

He had no trouble getting past the guards on the first floor. No trouble finding the room that held Katlaina and the babe. The door was locked, but it was useless against the power of his hands.

And then he was in her room, crossing the floor, gazing down at the bed where she slept, the child cradled against her breast. An oil lamp, turned low, cast its pale yellow light over the curve of her cheek.

"Katlaina."

Her eyelids fluttered open. For a moment, she stared at him. And then she frowned.

"Navarre?"

He nodded.

"But... how can it be?"

"Katlaina."

She sat up, her long black hair spilling over her shoulders, her green eyes filled with hope and doubt. "Is it really you?"

He nodded, his gaze moving from her face to the child sleeping in her arms.

She drew the blanket back so he could better see the infant. "This is your son."

An emotion he had never known swelled within Navarre's heart as he stared at the child. The boy was small and perfect. "May I... can I hold him?"

"Of course."

Awkwardly, he reached for the child, marveling at how tiny it was. His son. He held him for a long while,

running his fingertip over the smooth, downy cheek, stroking a lock of fine black hair, smiling as he examined the boy's dimpled hands and tiny feet.

"Are you well, Navarre?"

He nodded. "Why do you ask?"

"I... you look different, somehow."

"Different?" He stared at her over the baby's head, wondering if she could see the change in him. "How?"

"I am not sure."

He glanced over his shoulder at the mirror on the wall, felt his heart skip a beat when he saw that he cast no reflection in the glass. He could see Katlaina, he could see the child, but it was as if he were not there.

"Here, take him," he said, thrusting the baby toward her.

"What is it?" she asked, placing the baby on the bed. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing."

Feeling suddenly cold all over, he lifted her from the bed and drew her into his arms. She was as warm and soft as he remembered, and he needed her warmth as never before, needed to be held, to feel the reassurance of her love.

Murmuring her name, he covered her mouth with his. Desire rose up within him. Desire for her sweet flesh. Desire for...

He shook the thought away, repulsed. What kind of monster had he become, to crave the taste of her blood?

"Navarre, what is it? Can you not tell me?"

He shook his head, horrified by the hunger rising within him.

He felt his teeth lengthening, felt his fingers digging into her flesh. Almost, he could taste of warmth of her blood trickling over his tongue, down his throat...

"Navarre! Navarre, stop, you are hurting me!"

Abruptly, he released her and took a step back, his heart pounding wildly in his chest.

And then he saw her face, as pale as the moon, the wary expression in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "Forgive me."

"Navarre... what has happened to you?" He was puzzled by the horror in her voice, the growing terror in her eyes.

"What is it?" he asked. "What do you see?"

"Death." The word whispered past her lips.

He reached for her, but she recoiled from his touch.

"Katlaina..."

"There is death in your eyes, Navarre," she exclaimed softly. "They glow like the fires of hell." Her gaze swept over him as if she had never seen him before. "There is blood on your trousers, and in your eyes. Navarre, what have you done?"

"Katlaina, listen to me, please." He took a step toward her, then paused. She was afraid of him. He could see it, smell it. "Katlaina..."

With a sob, she grabbed the child from the bed and backed into a corner. "Go away, Navarre," she begged, clutching the infant to her breast. "Go away, go away."

She was screaming now, the same words over and over again.

He heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor, voices calling to each other.

He hesitated a moment more, the fear in Katlaina's face searing into his mind and heart, and then, without thinking of what he was doing, he jumped out the window.

He landed lightly on his feet, momentarily stunned that he had jumped from a second-floor window and landed, unhurt, on the ground below.

He could hear Katlaina crying incoherently, the voices of the guards as they questioned her. He saw a light at the window and he melted into the shadows, knowing, as he did so, that it wasn't necessary. They couldn't see him unless he wished it. He didn't know how he came by that knowledge; he only knew it was true, that he could mask his presence from mortals.

Mortals... Fear's icy fingers wrapped around his heart. He didn't know what he had become, but he knew he was no longer mortal, no longer part of humanity.

Filled with rage and fear, he ran back to the Temple of Shaylyn. Hardly aware of what he was doing, he tore the doors from the hinges, then stared down at his hands, amazed at how easily he had brought the doors down. Strength flowed through his arms, his hands, his back and shoulders.

Sobbing Katlaina's name, he began to pull down the stones of the temple. With preternatural speed, he destroyed the walls, the windows. He smashed the coffin, ripped the lining to shreds, overturned Shaylyn's throne.

In the distance, he heard the sound of running feet as the priests of the temple came running to see what was happening.

Like the angel of death, Navarre rose out of the rubble.

A dozen priests knelt on the ground a few yards away. Behind them, Navarre could see villagers gathering. And then, coming from Stone Hall Abbey, he saw the High Priest, followed by Markos.

Effortlessly, Navarre vaulted onto one of the huge stones. He had donned the black cape, and it swirled around his ankles like thick smoke.

"No more sacrifices," he shouted, and his voice echoed and re-echoed in the stillness of the night.

A murmur swept through the crowd. He heard the priests whispering together, wondering what had happened to Shaylyn, wondering what great wrong had wrought the destruction of the temple.

"The goddess Shaylyn has abandoned you," Navarre said, his voice rumbling like thunder. "And I have come to take her place." He fixed the priests with a hard stare. "No more will you sacrifice living flesh. Do so, and I will return, and my vengeance will be terrible to see."

The priests stared at him, their faces as gray as their robes. Slowly, they bowed their heads, their voices lifting as one. "It shall be as you say."

"Markos."

The guard stepped forward.

"From this night forward, this man shall be chief advisor to the High Priest." Navarre turned his gaze on the leader of the priests. "You will heed Markos's words as you would heed my own. He is to have a house of his own, land of his own."

The High Priest lifted his head in defiance. A faint smile touched Navarre's lips as he let the full force of his gaze rest on the man's face.

"It shall be as you wish," the High Priest said, and then, to the astonishment of everyone present, he dropped to his knees before Navarre.

"The woman, Katlaina," Navarre said, "shall be returned to her own people, and her child with her."

"I will see to it personally," Markos vowed.

Navarre acknowledged the guard's promise with a slight nod and then, moving too fast for mere mortal to see, he vanished into the shadows of the night.

He ran tirelessly, effortlessly, soundlessly, the cloak billowing behind him like Satan's breath. Driven by fear, by a sense of exultation that made no sense, he fled through the darkness, until the village and the priests of Shaylyn were far behind him.

And still he ran, his senses reeling, filling with the scents and sounds of the night. Only when he sensed the coming of dawn did his footsteps slow. A part of his mind wondered how he knew that dawn was approaching; another part warned him to find a place where he could pass the daylight hours.

He sought shelter in a copse of trees, digging his way deep into the earth where the sun couldn't find him.

Lying there, waiting for the darkness of oblivion to come upon him, he thought of the man he had killed, of the superhuman strength he now possessed. What had he become? He didn't breathe, but he had life. He cast no shadow, no reflection, but his body still had mass and substance. The sun was his enemy...

He closed his eyes, and Katlaina's image rose to haunt him, her face distorted with fear, her eyes wide with fright.

There's death in your eyes, Navarre, she had said. Death. It came to claim him in waves of darkness, enfolding him, stealing his thoughts, his consciousness. He fought it, still afraid to surrender to the darkness, but it overpowered him, dragging him down, down, into an endless sea of nothingness...

He woke at dusk, emerging from the earth like a moth from a cocoon.

He shook the dirt from his clothing, combed his fingers through his hair, and walked out of the woods to the road beyond.

Ahead, he could see the conical shapes of thatched roofs. He needed food. A bath. A change of clothes.

Feeling stronger with each passing moment, he headed for the village.

The townspeople eyed him warily. He was a stranger in a place visited by few outsiders. Some nodded at him, others drew away. An old woman dressed in black made the sign of the cross when he passed by.

He paused at the entrance to a small inn, drawn by the smell of roasting meat. A young woman stood in the doorway. She wore a long red skirt and a white blouse embroidered with flowers. A riot of red-gold curls peeked out of a dark blue kerchief.

"Good evening, sir." Her dark brown eyes moved over him, obviously puzzled by his attire, or lack of it.

"Good evening, miss." His nostrils flared as he caught the scent of meat and fish. "I'm hungry."

"Come in," she invited. "Mama is just serving dinner."

"Thank you."

He followed her inside, sat at the table she indicated.

"What would you like to eat?" the girl asked.

"Venison, if you have it."

"And to drink?"

He stared at her, confused. Save for the drugged wine the priests had given him the night he was to be sacrificed, he had never had anything to drink other than water.

"We have wine," the girl said. "Or dark ale."

"Ale," he decided, reluctant to taste wine again.

"Ale, it is." She smiled at him in a way that made him suddenly conscious that she was a woman, and he

was a man. And then, with a wink, she turned away and went into the kitchen.

He sat at the table, feeling strangely out of the place as other people entered the establishment. The sound of their voices, their laughter, seemed loud in his ears. The combined smell of so many people in such a small place was overpowering.

A short time later, the girl set a platter and a tankard of ale before him. The aroma of roast venison and boiled potatoes filled his nostrils.

The meat was well-done and left the taste of ashes in his mouth. He took another bite and felt suddenly sick to his stomach. Afraid he was going to be ill, he bolted from the room.

"Wait!" He heard the girl cry after him. "You haven't paid—"

He darted around the corner into the woods beyond. Dropping to his knees, he began to retch violently.

When the spasm passed, he sat back on his heels, panting softly.

He heard her footsteps long before she appeared. Rising to his feet, he wiped his mouth on the hem of his cloak, then turned to face her.

"What do you want?"

"I... Papa sent me to see if you were ill. You ran out so fast... and didn't pay..."

He frowned at her. "Pay?"

"For the meal."

"I don't understand."

Her eyes narrowed in disbelief. "I don't know where you come from, sir, but here, it is customary to pay for one's meal."

He shook his head, the weight of all he didn't know settling on his shoulders. "I'm sorry."

She stared up at him, her expression softening. "Are you sick?"

"No."

"You look very pale." She lifted a hand to his cheek. "Your skin is cold..."

But her hand was so very warm. The heat of it, of the blood beneath her skin, burned through him like sunlight.

"I'd better go," she said, her voice rising. She started to take her hand from his face, then screamed when his fingers closed over hers in a grip like iron. "Please," she begged. "Please, don't..."

"Don't what?" He held his hand against her cheek.

"I don't know. Please, let me go."

Dark rage bubbled up inside him as he saw the fear in her eyes, felt it in the trembling of her body. Smelled it on her skin. What did she see? he wondered. Katlaina had seen death in his eyes when she ran from him in terror. Did this girl see the same?

"You're afraid of me," he said, his voice hard and flat. "Why? I've done nothing to you."

"Please let me go!" She tried to twist out of his grasp, cried out in pain when he tightened his hold on her wrist.

"Why are you afraid of me?" he demanded.

"Your eyes... they're red." She stared up at him, her gaze trapped by his. "Glowing. Inhuman..." A sob rose in her throat. "Who are you? What are you?"

He felt the power coalesce within him, felt it in every fiber of his being. His gaze held hers, his eyes seeing into her thoughts, imprisoning her mind until she had no will but his.

She stopped fighting him, her body suddenly limp. As if in a daze, she cocked her head to the side. Her hair fell back, exposing the length of her neck and the pulse beating there.

He felt the sharpness of his fangs against his tongue, and then he was bending over her, enfolding her in his arms, hiding her in the voluminous folds of his cloak. She stood motionless in his embrace, her arms at her sides, her eyes vacant.

"Forgive me," he whispered, and then, unable to help himself, he pierced the vein in her throat, his eyes closing as her life's nectar filled his mouth.

Laughter. Dreams. Of a home, a child. The ache of a love lost. The joy of a love found... He drank in her thoughts as he drank her blood, heard the pounding of her heart as it sought to beat in rhythm with his own, hers growing weaker, his growing stronger...

With a cry of self-loathing, he withdrew. She would have fallen but for his arms around her.

"It will be all right, Lydia," he said, his voice soothing, hypnotic. "You will go home now. And you will remember none of this."

"Home," she parroted the word without inflection.

"Yes. Go home."

He gave her a little push, and she stumbled forward. He watched her walk toward the village, her steps uneven, wondering how he had known her name, marveling at the power of his mind over hers.

He had so much to learn. About himself. About the world. She had expected payment for the meal. What sort of payment?

He glanced down at the stained cloth-of-gold trousers he wore. He needed clean raiment. Boots. Where did one find such things? Food and clothing had been provided for him since birth.

Food... He grimaced as he recalled the taste of the meat he had consumed earlier. The memory of

eating cooked animal flesh sickened him as the thought of partaking of blood would have sickened him only days ago.

Shaylyn. He had to find her, force her to tell him what he had become. But how? Where did one look for a goddess?

Wrapping his cloak around him, he began to walk west, away from Katlaina, away from the rising sun.

Chapter Eight

The blood. The need for it, the hunger, the passion, burned within him, haunting him, tormenting him. Like a beast gone mad, he hungered for the taste of it even as he abhorred the need, the desire.

He tried to ignore it. He avoided towns and people, living like some outcast on the edges of humanity, but the hunger was excruciating, and he lacked the strength to fight it, to endure it.

He hunted the back streets and byways, taking his sustenance from the sick and the dying. Some deep instinct warned him not to feed off the dead. His existence filled him with self-loathing, yet he continued to hunt, unable to resist the relentless hunger.

Six months passed. Miles passed. The moon was his sun, and he explored the world in her pale silver light. He saw mountains and valleys, herds of cattle and horses, flocks of sheep and goats, villages large and small.

He learned to shut his mind to the constant barrage of sounds that assaulted his ears. He learned the extent of his abilities, and for a while he was heady with power. He had the strength of ten men, the ability to transform himself into a dark mist, or into a wolf, to shield his presence from mortal eyes. He could, with a glance, bend another's will to his own.

In time, and with great effort, he learned to control the hunger that was ever present. He learned that he could feed off the blood of animals, though it was not so strengthening, or satisfying, as the blood of humans.

In the beginning, confused and uncertain, filled with power and anger, he had killed those he fed upon, feeding off their fear as he fed off their blood, until he had lost every shred of humanity, until he was truly a monster, a creature so vile he could stand it no longer. Filled with guilt and regret, he had vowed never again to kill for the sake of killing, never to take a life except to defend his own.

He slept in the bowels of the earth, wondering, on occasion, why she didn't vomit him up, for it was there, resting deep in the ground where the sun could not find him, that he was most aware of the vast gulf between himself and humanity. His was a life against nature. Unclean, he thought, he felt unclean, defiled by the life he led.

He had searched for Shaylyn in every village and town, hoping she could restore his humanity, but she seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth, and, day by day, his hope of finding his way back to mortality grew fainter.

And he was lonely. So lonely. He thought often of Katlaina, of the son she had born. Had she returned to her homeland? Did she ever think of him? His son would be crawling now. Soon he would be walking, talking. Would she tell the boy about his father when he was old enough to understand?

With a sigh, Navarre shook his melancholy thoughts from his mind. He had not fed in two days, and the hunger was growing stronger, more insistent.

He smelled the village long before he saw it, his nostrils filling with a miasma of odors that meant people. Smoke and sweat, the fragrance of perfume and hard-milled soap, the sickening scent of roasting meat, the pungent odor of human and animal waste.

As he drew nearer, he saw that it was a large village. Flocks of sheep and goats grazed on the hillsides. He heard the lowing of cattle, the rustle of feathers as chickens settled for the night, the warning bark of a dog, a child's laughter, a woman's tears.

Ordinary sounds, he mused. The sounds of life, the kind of life that was forever lost to him unless he found Shaylyn.

Lamplight glowed yellow in the windows of the cottages he paused as he made his way toward the center of the village. He paused outside one of the cottages, listening to the clatter of pots and pans as a fair-haired woman prepared the evening meal. He heard the high-pitched laughter of a little girl, the deeper, answering laughter of her father.

Pain twisted through Navarre's heart as he caught sight of the family gathering around the kitchen table. They bowed their heads, and he heard the father offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the food they were about to eat, for the roof over their heads, for the peace and plenty they enjoyed.

He stood on the outside, looking in, yearning for the life that had been denied him, for the carefree childhood he had never known, for the father he had never seen.

He had a sudden urge to smash his way into the house, to tear down the walls, to let them see the horror that he had seen in other eyes before he drained them of their lives.

For a moment, he imagined what it would be like. The father would rush forward to defend his family, but his puny mortal efforts would be wasted. The woman would cry and beg mercy for her child. And the girl... She would look at him through eyes filled with terror...

With a feral growl of self-hatred, he turned away from the cottage, despising himself for what he had become. He was every man's enemy, every child's nightmare, a soulless aberration who had no right to prey upon the lives of others—no right except the innate desire to survive.

It was on a dark winter night that he was set upon by thieves. Ordinarily, he would have heard their approach, but on this night, he was sunk in the depths of despair. He was weary of the life he led. He longed for Katlaina, longed to spend his days and nights at her side, and yet, for reasons he still did not fully understand, he knew such a thing could never be.

The thieves were upon him in a trice. Two of them bore him to the ground and before he could summon his wits, the third stabbed him through the heart with a very long, very sharp, knife.

With a gasp of pain, he tried to fight them off, but the blood flowing from his wound drained him of strength.

As from far away, Navarre heard them complaining because he had no money, and then darkness

descended upon him. His last conscious thought was that death had found him at last...

He woke feeling groggy and disoriented. For a moment he lay where he'd fallen, wondering why he was still alive. Surely the thrust of the knife should have killed him.

Slowly, he sat up, his hands probing his chest for the wound. His fingers encountered torn cloth where the blade had pierced his shirt, but there was no wound in his flesh, no sign that he had been attacked save his torn and bloodstained shirt.

He stood up, feeling weak and light-headed. Blood, he thought, staring at the crimson stain that spread across his shirt front. He needed blood.

Staggering slightly, he made his way toward a large pasture located across the road. He knew somehow that he was far too weak to seek nourishment from a human source. For now, bovine blood would have to suffice.

He grimaced as he crossed the road and slipped between the rails of the fence. A placid cow provided the sustenance he needed, and then, feeling only a little better, he sought a place to pass the night, wondering, as the darkness settled over him, why he was still alive.

Another six months passed. He had given up all hope of locating Shaylyn, and then he found her. Or, to be more accurate, she found him.

He was sitting in the far corner of a small inn, staring out into the rain-swept night, when a faint movement caught his eye. Startled, he swung his head around to find her sitting across from him.

"So, my handsome one," she purred, "we meet again."

"Shaylyn." He breathed her name, wondering, as he did so, if she was real or merely an illusion.

"You have survived your first year," she remarked. "So many do not."

Leaning forward, he grabbed her by the hand. "Tell me," he demanded. "Tell me what I am."

"Don't you know?"

"No. Tell me. I was stabbed in the chest. It was a mortal wound. Why didn't I die?"

She laughed softly. "Ah, my handsome Navarre, still so much to learn. You are already dead."

"No." He shook his head, refusing to believe.

"Yes. I told you as much the night I brought you over. Didn't you believe me?"

He shook his head again. "No."

With a speed that defied even his vision, she pulled a thin-bladed knife from a fold of her skirt and stabbed him in the arm.

He tried to jerk his hand from hers, but she held on to him without effort. "Watch," she said.

And watch he did. Watched with stunned horror and amazement as the blood stopped flowing and skin and muscle knit themselves back together in a matter of minutes.

"You are *vampir*. One of the undead. You cannot die by being stabbed, my Navarre, because you are already dead. But, be warned, even the strongest vampires can be killed. A wooden stake through the heart will kill most of us. Young ones, like you, must avoid the sun."

"Vampire." He spoke the word slowly. In all the scrolls and manuscripts he had read, he had never come across the word.

"There have been vampires since the beginning of time," Shaylyn said. "I have made and destroyed hundreds of our kind."

Navarre swallowed the knot of fear that had lodged in his throat. "And have you come to destroy me?"

"No. I only came to see how my youngest fledgling is doing."

"I'm lonely," he confessed, not meeting her gaze. "I long for..."

"Katlaina." The word hissed past Shaylyn's lips. "If you want the woman, Navarre, why not take her? Use her as you will, then destroy her."

"Destroy her! Are you mad?"

"You cannot live like other men. You cannot father a child. If you desire the woman, take her and be done with it. But you must not tell her what you are. She will hate you for it. If people suspect what you are, they will hunt you down."

"Why didn't you just kill me?" Navarre asked bitterly. Surely that would have been better than the life she described, better than the life he had been living. He stared at his arm, still stunned by the miraculous healing. Vampire. One of the undead. What did it really mean?

"If you don't want to take the woman, then leave this place. Go to the city, Navarre. Find yourself a place to live. Don't shut yourself away from mortals. Laugh, Navarre. Dance. Find a woman to love, and then, when she begins to age while you remain the same, move on and love again."

"Is that what you do?"

"Yes. I've hunted the world over, Navarre. I have known many mortal men. The world is a very big place. There is much to see. Much to do." She shrugged. "If living in the city doesn't appeal, then go find yourself a small village in the mountains and be a god. The peasants will revere you. They will build you a place to live and sacrifice virgins to appease your hunger."

"No!" He shuddered as he imagined Katlaina being brought to him as a sacrifice.

"Do what you will, then," she said irritably. "Forever is a long time. You must find a way to fill it."

"And if I don't wish to be part of the world?"

"Then bury yourself in the earth, myNavarre ."

"I don't understand."

"Dig yourself a hole and go to sleep. But beware—when you wake, you will be too weak to feed off any but the smallest, most disgusting of creatures."

"Have you done this?"

"Once, shortly after I was made." She stared past him, her thoughts turned inward. "It was like sleeping. I dreamed things, heard things. Strange things. And when I woke, I realized that what I had heard was the voice of the earth, changing."

She looked at him then, the light of desire glowing in her eyes. "Come, hunt with me,Navarre ."

"No."

"Still determined to travel alone, I see." She stood up, a vision of dark beauty. "Mayhap we will meet again, my young friend."

"Wait." He rose to his feet, a feeling of emptiness coursing through him. He hated her for what she had done to him, but she was all he had now.

"What is it?" she asked, suddenly impatient.

He didn't know how to tell her what he wanted, but she knew. With a sigh, she drew him into her arms and held him tight.

"It will get easier,Navarre ," she murmured, stroking his hair. "Don't shut yourself off from the world. That way lies madness."

Shaylyn sighed as she felt his arms steal around her waist. Shudders wracked his body. She should have hated him for being so stubborn, for refusing to hunt with her, live with her, as she had intended. But she couldn't hate him. In spite of all he had been through, there was an air of innocence aboutNavarre , a deep inner goodness that she feared would be his undoing.

"Navarre." Murmuring his name, she pressed her lips to his.

For a moment, he clung to her, his arms drawing her up against him. He felt her heated response, knew, in that moment, that she was his for the taking. Almost, he surrendered to the temptation of the warm body pressed intimately to his. But it wasn't just physical relief he wanted. No, he wanted the love and caring that went with it.

He wanted Katlaina. Gently, he released his hold on Shaylyn.

"Come," she said, holding out her hand. "Walk the night with me."

"No." The thought of watching her hunt, of seeing her prey upon some helpless mortal, draining the helpless creature of blood, filled him with revulsion.

"Just a walk,Navarre ," she promised.

It was still raining. Thunder rolled across the heavens; lightning crackled; a chill wind rode the rain.

Shaylyn lifted her face to the sky, laughing softly as the rain washed her cheeks.

"I've always loved winter," she mused. "The darkness. The violence of a storm. The power of lightning."

She was like the storm, he thought. There was lightning in her eyes, violence in her soul. And yet she was beautiful, even now, with her hair falling in damp strands down her back. Her gown clung to her, molding itself to her body, revealing ample curves.

The sight teased at his desire, but it was Katlaina he longed for, Katlaina whose lips he yearned to kiss. Katlaina... He shook her from his mind, and yet, deep inside, he knew he would not rest until he had seen her again.

Chapter Nine

Traveling by night, he made his way north, to the mountains. The countryside was everything Katlaina had said it was. Beautiful and green, lush with trees and grass and flowers.

He walked down a narrow lane. Cottages lined the roadway, their windows dark at this time of night. The air was cool, fragrant with new-cut hay and the scent of damp earth. A dog barked as Navarre passed by, but he silenced the animal with a glance and moved on, drawn toward a small, vine-covered cottage at the end of the lane.

He placed his hand on the narrow door, closed his eyes, and concentrated on the dwelling's inhabitants. And knew that this was where Katlaina lived.

Her scent drew him toward the back of the house. Peering through a small square window, he saw Katlaina. Clad in a long white sleeping gown, she sat in a rocking chair, singing a lullaby to the child cradled in her arms.

Katlaina. His voice whispered to her mind. *Katlaina* .

Slowly, she looked up, a frown drawing her brows together.

Do you ever think of me?

"Navarre?"

I have missed you.

Rising, she placed the sleeping child in its bed, then stood in the middle of the room, her hands clasped to her breasts. "Navarre, where are you?"

I am nearby, waiting for you. Will you come to me?

He saw the doubt reflected in her eyes, and it cut him to the heart.

I will not hurt you.

She shook her head, and when she spoke, he heard tears in her voice. "I cannot. I... I am afraid. Please go away."

I must see you. Come to me, Katlaina.

Slowly, she took a step toward the window.

She was more beautiful than he remembered. Her hair fell over her shoulders like a waterfall of ebony-hued silk. Her skin was smooth and unblemished. She stared at him through eyes as green as new grass; eyes filled with the memory of the love they had once shared. Eyes filled with fear as she recalled their last meeting.

I will not hurt you. He stared at her, wanting her, unable to enter the house unless she bade him do so. *Katlaina, please ...*

He saw the hesitation in her eyes as she opened the window, then took a wary step backward. "Navarre..."

In a single fluid movement, he was over the sill. "Katlaina, I have missed you. Longed for you..."

"You should not be here." Her gaze moved over him, wary and confused, hopeful and fearful.

"Come away with me."

"I cannot."

"Why?"

"I... I have a husband." She placed a hand on her stomach. "We are to have a child."

He stared at her in disbelief, the hurt cutting deep into his heart and soul. "No."

"I am sorry, Navarre. I thought never to see you again."

"Do you love this man?"

"Yes."

"As you once loved me?"

Katlaina lowered her gaze, unable to bear the pain she saw in his eyes. And behind the pain, she saw death. It frightened her now as it had frightened her before. Unaware of what she was doing, she took a step backward, instinctively placing herself between Navarre and her son.

The move was not lost on Navarre. His eyes narrowed with suppressed fury.

"Do you think I would hurt my own flesh and blood, Katlaina? Do you fear for your own life, as well?"

She lifted her chin defiantly, but said nothing.

"I want to see my son."

She hesitated, and Navarre clenched his fists, waiting. He could bend her mind to his, force her to let him see the child, but he wanted it to be her decision.

"Very well," she murmured, and stood aside.

Navarre crossed the room to stare down at his child. His son. The only son he would ever have. The boy was pink of cheek and fair of face. His hair was black and curly, like his mother's. He made a soft sound of contentment as he sucked his thumb.

"He seems a fine boy," Navarre remarked.

"He is."

"What name did you give him?"

"Navarre." Her answer was barely audible.

"Will you tell him of me, when he's older?"

"Of course."

He looked up at her, the tender feelings he had experienced while looking at his son swallowed up in bitter fury as he imagined Katlaina in the arms of another man, bearing another man's child when she was his.

His fangs pricked the inside of his lower lip; his hands curled into fists as he contemplated storming through the house, finding her husband, tearing him limb from limb. It would be so easy. So easy...

As if she had read his thoughts, Katlaina stepped forward and grabbed him by the arm. "Navarre, no!"

"You were meant to be mine," he said, his voice filled with anguish. "I loved you. I still love you."

"And I loved you," she whispered. "But you are no longer the man I loved."

"I am!"

"No. I do not know what happened to you in the Temple of Shaylyn. I thought you had been killed, yet you came back to me. But the man I knew is dead, and the man before me looks at me through soulless eyes."

She choked back a sob as she moved away from him. "I wish I could still love you, Navarre. But I cannot. I cannot! Please, I beg of you, go away from this place and never return."

"Katlaina..."

"Please, Navarre, for the sake of the love we once shared, for the child born of that love, I beg of you, go away."

Loneliness knifed through him, cutting his heart from his flesh, destroying whatever was left of his soul, until he felt as though he were lying naked upon Shaylyn's altar once again, his blood draining from his

veins, leaving him cold and lifeless.

"Katlaina..." He held out his hand, silently begging for her to touch him, to make him whole again.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Navarre," she whispered hoarsely. "I wish I could help you. I wish I could go with you. But I cannot. I cannot..."

She stared at him, remembering how tenderly he had loved her. Aching for him, she took a step forward and wiped a tear from his cheek, then stared, in horrified confusion, at the blood-red drop on her finger.

She looked up at him as he reached for her.

"Kiss me, Katlaina," he begged, his voice hoarse. "One last kiss."

She could not refuse him, even though her heart pounded with fear and every instinct she possessed urged her to flee, to run before it was too late.

"Please do not hurt me," she pleaded softly. "My son... our son... needs a mother's care."

He gazed down at her, the ache in his heart beyond pain. "I will not hurt you," he promised. "I ask only a kiss of farewell, one kiss, to warm me through eternity."

She could not refuse him. His lips were cool against her own. Her eyelids fluttered down as he deepened the kiss, and she felt his loneliness, his need, the bitterness that welled within his soul.

It was a kiss that branded her soul. And then, like a shadow running from the sun, he was gone, and she knew she would never see him again.

Chapter Ten

During the next few years, time lost all meaning. He went on a voyage of discovery, experiencing the things he had only read about in the scrolls. He learned to ride a horse, to fight with a sword, to sail a ship by the light of the stars.

He took up residence in an abandoned cottage and surrounded himself with animals of every kind—dogs and cats, sheep and goats, pigs and chickens, horses and cattle, ducks and swans—watching them as they bred and bore young, watching the young ones grow to adulthood and repeat the never-ending cycle of life.

He planted flowers and watched them bloom.

He planted a vegetable garden and watched it grow, though he had no use for the food itself.

He ventured into the nearest town and observed the people. Except for his mother, Katlaina, and Markos, he had never interacted with others. He knew nothing of courtship or marriage, nothing of ordinary, day-to-day living.

He lingered in the shadows, listening to the farmers as they talked of crops, of planting and harvesting. He tried to imagine what it would be like to toil in the heat of the noonday sun, to till the ground, to feel the sun-warmed earth in his hands. He watched the women gather their children close as darkness spread her cloak across the face of the land. He heard the lullabies they sang, the stories they told—tales

of kings and queens, of enchanted cottages, of demon creatures of the night. He watched the children, marveling at their innocence and their insatiable curiosity, at the way they embraced life without fear.

And always, lurking in the back of his mind like the ache of an old wound, was the memory of his own child. He saw babies learning to walk and lamented the fact that he had not been there to see his own child take its first step. His son would be almost five now. What was he like? Had Katlaina told the boy of his father?

Sometimes, alone in the dark of night, he wept for his own lost youth and innocence, for the learning and experiences that had been denied him. At those times, he cursed the fate that had kept him locked in a cage for the first five-and-twenty years of his life, that had deprived him of a normal childhood.

On a whim, he booked passage on a ship and left the Isle of Mikos. Like a vagabond, he wandered the earth, never at peace, never at rest, a part of his heart always yearning for home.

Try as he might, he could not forget Katlaina, or his son. Twenty-five years later, drawn like the tide to the shore, he returned to Mikos and made his way to Katlaina's village high in the mountains to the north. At dusk, he walked down the narrow dirt road toward Katlaina's cottage.

She was sitting outside, shelling peas. A young woman sat beside her, a dark-haired child suckling at her breast.

Navarre paused in the shadows, careful to stay out of their sight. Katlaina, still beautiful in spite of the passage of time, in spite of the fine lines that fanned out from her eyes, in spite of the gray in her hair. Katlaina...

His gaze moved to the young woman. Was this Katlaina's daughter? He frowned, trying to find a resemblance, but there was none.

He drew back as the cottage door opened, and a tall, handsome young man with curly black hair and eyes the color of thunderclouds stepped outside. Smiling with pride, the young man ruffled the babe's hair, kissed the young woman, then caressed Katlaina's cheek.

Something deep within Navarre's heart cracked as he stared at his son. He opened his mind and let their thoughts flow into his soul, felt his throat grow thick as he sensed the love that bonded them together.

He looked at his son, now over thirty years old and a man grown, at the child in the woman's arms. *A grandchild*, Navarre thought, and wondered if the babe was boy or girl.

Tears stung his eyes as his gaze rested on Katlaina's face. *Do you ever think of me ?* he wondered. *Do you know how much I miss you? How much I love you ?*

He drew deeper into the shadows as Katlaina's head jerked up and she glanced toward the copse of trees where he stood. Had she seen him?

"What is it, Mother?" the young woman asked.

"I don't know." Katlaina shook her head. "I... thought..."

"Thought what?"

Katlaina smiled up at her son. "I thought I heard your father's voice."

The young man frowned. "My father? Here?" He looked around, his gaze searching the road.

"Just an old woman's fantasies," Katlaina said with a self-conscious smile. Placing the bowl of shelled peas under her arm, she stood up. "Supper will be ready soon."

"I'll help you," the young woman said, but Katlaina shook her head.

"No, daughter, I'd rather be alone, just now. Enjoy the quiet of the evening with your husband and child. I'll call you when it's time to set the table."

Oblivious to the tears that dampened his cheeks, Navarre watched her disappear into the house and close the door behind her.

For a moment, he thought of following her, of pulling her into his arms, of crushing her body to his. The memories of the nights they had shared crowded his mind, vividly reminding him of the sweetness of her lips, the supple feminine flesh that had teased and tantalized him with every touch, every caress. He longed to inhale the fragrance of her hair, speak her name, tell her that he had never forgotten her, that he loved her, would always love her.

But she had a husband now. The thought knifed through him. And how would he explain his presence to his son? How would he explain the fact that he had not aged in the last five-and-twenty years, that he looked like his son's younger brother, not his father?

When Katlaina called them in to dinner, he crept around the side of the house and peered through the window. They sat at a small round table, talking quietly as they shared a simple meal. The scent of candles and fresh-baked bread filled the room.

He imprinted the image on his heart and mind and then, unable to watch any longer, he disappeared into the shadows.

Painful as it was, he went back to the village in the mountains every year. Young Navarre fathered eight healthy children—five sons and three daughters. He built a new house close to Katlaina's cottage so he could care for his aging mother.

Time and again, Navarre was tempted to reveal himself to his son, and yet something, some instinct, warned him that it would be folly to do so.

In the dark of night, when his son's family lay peacefully sleeping, he walked through the house on silent feet, gazing down at his grandchildren, feeling a sense of pride as he saw his likeness in their faces. Dark of hair and skin, they all bore the unmistakable stamp of his lineage.

And always, he lingered in Katlaina's room. Her husband had died long since, and now she lived in the cottage alone, with only a mangy yellow cat for company.

His grandchildren were all grown, his son showing his age, the night Navarre heard Katlaina weeping. Silent as a drifting shadow, he listened to her cries and then, as if a heavy weight had suddenly descended on him, he knew she was dying, knew that it was a secret she had kept to herself. Knew, deep in his soul, that she would be gone before the morning's light.

Katlaina.

He heard the gasp of her indrawn breath as she sat up, her face wet with tears. "Navarre, are you there?"

And because he loved her, because he could not bear the thought of her dying alone, he went to her.

"Are you real?" she whispered, "or only a ghost conjured from my imagination?"

"Real enough," he replied softly. "If you want me to be."

She stared up at him, trying to see his face in the darkness.

"Light a candle," she said. "I want to see you."

Reluctantly, he did as she asked. He saw the wonder in her eyes, the trepidation, the curiosity.

"How is it possible?" she murmured.

She stared at her hands, the skin wrinkled with age, yet he had not changed at all. More than fifty years had passed since she sent him away, and yet he was as tall as she remembered. His shoulders were still broad, his back unbowed by the passage of time. His hair was thick and black, his skin smooth and unlined.

She shook her head in disbelief. "How?" she asked again. "How is it possible that I have aged a lifetime, and you have not aged a day?"

"A gift," he replied, "from the goddess Shaylyn."

"The devil's gift," Katlaina exclaimed, awed by the unearthly miracle that stood before her.

Navarregrunted softly. It was the devil's gift, indeed, he thought bitterly, to stay forever young when all you loved withered and died. He could scarce stand the pain of looking at Katlaina. Her beautiful green eyes were faded and dulled by time. Her hair, once as black as his own, had gone completely gray. The skin he had loved to touch, skin that had once been smooth and clear, was now careworn and lined.

As if sensing his thoughts, she looked away. "Why are you here?"

"I've come every year," he admitted. "To see you, to see my son and his family."

"Every year," she said, her voice edged with pain. "Every year, and only now have you made your presence known."

"You sent me away, Katlaina, remember?"

"I remember."

He heard the regret in her voice, the harsh rasp of her breathing as she sought to draw air into her lungs.

She was dying. She had no reason to fear him now, he thought bitterly.

"Navarre." Just his name, but it held a lifetime of yearning, coupled with the knowledge that she would never see him again.

Gently, he drew her into his arms and cradled her to his chest. Tenderly, he stroked her cheek, and once again he saw the beautiful young girl who had taken him to her bed and her heart.

"I love you," she whispered. "I never stopped."

He nodded, unable to speak. She was dying. The thought struck him again, harder this time.

"Kiss me," she begged. "One kiss, to warm me through eternity."

He recognized the words, the same words he had spoken to her so long ago. Tears stung his eyes as he lowered his mouth to hers. Her lips were warm and dry and unbelievably sweet. Even now, when he knew she was dying, she tasted of life and sunshine.

He kissed her with all the love in his heart, and for a moment, he was young again, mortal again. Tears burned his eyes as her strength ebbed and her lifeforce slipped away. One last kiss, and her last breath mingled with his, the warm radiance of her spirit illuminating the darkness of his own for one brief moment before her soul freed itself from the bonds of mortality.

"Katlaina." He hugged her to him, holding her close until her body grew cool, until the first rays of the sun peeked over the horizon.

Only then did he release her. Never before had he felt so completely, irrevocably, alone.

A last look, a last caress, and then he ran out of the house and into the woods, pursued by memories, and by the relentless, unforgiving light of the sun.

Interlude

He never went back to the mountains of Mikos. The thought of watching his son grow old and die was too painful.

He spent the next two hundred years on a small tropical island pretending to be an ancient god of war come back to life.

He dwelt in a temple hewn of red stone. It stood atop a lush green hill, surrounded by trees and brightly colored wildflowers. The villagers brought him live animal sacrifices to assuage his hunger, showered him with finely wrought gifts of gold and silver, of fine-twined linen and costly furs. They provided him with whatever he desired and asked nothing in return, save that he slake his horrible thirst on the blood of beasts and let the people of the island live in peace.

When the burden of his existence grew too great, he slept deep in the earth, rising when the people of the village called his name.

After two hundred years, he wearied of being an object of worship. Gathering up the myriad riches the villagers had bestowed upon him over the centuries, he left the temple in the dead of night and caught passage on another ship.

For a time, he wandered aimlessly, not caring where he was. He kept aloof from the people around him,

afraid they would look into his eyes and see that he was not one of them, afraid he would be hunted and destroyed, as those believed to be witches were hunted and destroyed.

And time passed, and the world changed.

He went to France . It was there, in a dark cafe, that he met others of his kind. The Undead. They had sensed his presence in the cafe immediately, and he realized that they all seemed to have the ability to detect the presence of others who possessed the Dark Gift, as did he. It manifested itself in a sudden tensing of his muscles, a subtle tingling along his spine.

It was there, in that same dark cafe, that he learned that vampires had existed as long as humankind. The world of the Undead was a world filled with mystery and suspicion, a closed world where secrecy was essential to survival, where the slightest whisper of the word "vampire" could incite mortals to rise up in fear.

No vampire ever trusted another of his kind. The Undead could be found in every city and clime throughout the world, each one jealously guarding his hunting ground. The elders often killed their younger counterparts. There was a vague sense of brotherhood, but no sense of loyalty except, perhaps, between a master and his fledgling.

He learned that he could initiate a mortal and that, once initiated, that mortal would serve him for as long as the mortal lived. If he wished, the mortal would hunt for him, kill for him, dispose of the remains. He learned that he had the power to pass the Dark Gift to others. With age, came an increase in physical strength and mental abilities.

He thought of Shaylyn, who had lived for thousands of years. Were there others even older than she? What powers did they possess?

It was in Paris that he saw his first revenant—a brute neither human nor vampire, neither alive nor dead. It was little more than a walking corpse, its putrid flesh rotting from its skeleton. It was by far the most frightening, most foul-smelling creature Navarre had ever seen.

He heard of bizarre rituals that were believed to ensure that a body would stay dead. In the Balkans and Greece , stakes were hammered into the chests of corpses to pin the body to the grave; nails were inserted in the hands and feet and hair, symbolically attaching the corpse to the earth to ensure eternal rest. In some parts of Eastern Europe , peasants would not use the word owl for fear the nocturnal bird might be a transformed vampire hunting the night for blood.

He spent but a short time in France . The presence of the other vampires made him uncomfortable. He was an interloper, an outsider, and he found himself constantly looking over his shoulder, fearing that they might try to destroy him. He left France without a word of farewell.

There followed long years of loneliness and darkness, a sense of being lost. He had been close to only a few people in his life; all those he had known—his mother, Katlaina, his son—had died long ago.

Filled with bitterness, he wandered the world, watching the changes take place. Rulers fought their way to power, and then were destroyed. Boundaries changed. Gods changed. People changed, while he remained the same.

There were endless wars and revolutions.

There was poverty and hunger.

Plagues and floods and earthquakes decimated cities.

But, sprinkled amid the ruin and destruction, were scattered beacons of light.

He read the works of Shakespeare and Poe, Dickens and Browning, Dumas and Disraeli.

Great composers influenced the masses with their music: Brahms, Haydn, Beethoven, Handel, Paganini.

Great artists made their mark upon the world: Degas, Whistler, Monet, Cezanne, Renoir, Picasso, Raphael. Rodin and Michelangelo sculpted masterful works. Charles Garnier designed the Paris Opera and the casino at Monte Carlo .

And Navarre was there to see and hear it all. He was at Covent Garden to see Handel's *Alcina* . He was in Vienna when Mozart's first opera was performed. He saw the first paved sidewalk laid in Westminster . He walked the corridors of the Louvre when it was new, rode one of the first velocipedes down the streets of Paris .

He sat in the sacred silences of the great cathedrals, absorbing the scent of incense and candles. It was there that he was most aware of the vast gulf that stretched between himself and the rest of humanity. It was there, amid the silent statues of the saints, that he felt the weight of eternity, the bitterness of damnation.

He indulged himself in the world of opera, went to the ballet in France and England and Italy . He toured the Paris Opera House, knelt in Notre Dame, admired the ceiling in the Sistine Chapel.

In the dark of night, he wandered through the museums and art galleries of the world, his keen eyesight making it possible to view ancient wonders and works of art.

He saw the invention of miraculous machines. Gas lights replaced candles; electric lights replaced the softer, more romantic gas lights; automobiles replaced the horse and buggy; washing machines replaced scrub boards.

Silent movies became the rage, only to be replaced by movies with sound and brilliant color. Minstrels were replaced by radios. The printed page replaced handwritten manuscripts and scrolls, making it possible for the written word to be available to everyone and not just the rich. He had always loved to read, and now he devoured books and plays and the dissertations of great men, but the deep, inner loneliness never left him.

And always the question, why me? Why had the Dark Gift been bequeathed to one such as he? He had no great wisdom to pass on to the world, no God-given gift of music or poetry or art. Better that the gift of eternal life had been bestowed on one such as Mozart or Aristotle or a hundred other more deserving men than he.

And when the questions became too many, when the loneliness grew overwhelming, he went to ground, sometimes for a decade, sometimes longer, sleeping deep in the bowels of the earth. But even in his death-like sleep, he was aware of the changes going on around him.

Voices seeped into his mind, their faint whispers telling him of the latest invention, the latest war, the latest plague. He was aware of new fads, new countries, new kings and new presidents.

Cocooned in the dark bosom of the earth, he slept through the wars and the plagues, emerging during times of peace to discover, first hand, the changes that had come to pass while he rested.

"Time," Thoreau had said, "is but the stream I go fishing in."

For Navarre, blessed with the gift of eternity, no truer words had ever been spoken.

PART II

Chapter One

Moreno Bay

The Present

Adrianna let out a sigh of exasperation as she stared at the sign on the front door.

CLIFF HOUSE ANTIQUES

V. NAVARRE, PROPRIETOR

the neatly lettered sign read.

OPEN DAILY

SIX PM TO NINE PM

Peculiar hours, she thought as she perused the huge old house, which sat alone near the edge of a windswept cliff overlooking the sea. The building was said to be at least a hundred years old, and looked it. The paint, which had once been dark green, had faded long ago. White shutters covered the windows. The grass was in need of cutting; a profusion of brightly colored wildflowers bloomed in scattered patches along the circular driveway.

A wide veranda ran the length of the front of the house; there was a narrow, iron-railed balcony on the second floor. All the windows appeared to be closed up tight.

Adrianna heaved a sigh as she turned back toward the street. For weeks, she'd been looking for an antique oak armoire. She had mentioned her lack of success to one of her customers the day before and the woman had remarked that she'd seen just such a piece on display at the antique store out on Old Piney Branch Road.

Adrianna glanced over her shoulder, reading the shop's hours again before she opened the car door and slipped behind the wheel.

"I'll be back," she muttered, turning the key in the ignition, "though I've never heard of any antique store that kept such ridiculous hours, or was located in such a deserted place."

She stared at the house again, thinking it looked like some monstrous beast poised to dive off the cliff. Then, with a sigh, she put the car in gear and headed back to town, annoyed that she had wasted her whole lunch hour to drive all the way out there, only to return empty-handed.

Navarre stood at the second-story window, watching the woman as she slid behind the wheel of a light-green Honda Accord. He could have gone downstairs and let her in, but he made it a habit to avoid visitors during the afternoon.

With the passage of time, his need to sleep during the day, to avoid the sun, had altered somewhat, and though he was still compelled to sleep through the hours of the afternoon, when the sun was high in the sky, he was able to move about during the early hours of the morning.

Occasionally, he even ventured outside, though it was necessary to wear dark glasses to protect his eyes and a heavy coat or jacket to avoid exposing his sensitive skin to the sun.

Ah, but the wonder of being able to watch a sunrise after almost two thousand years! He didn't know what had wrought the miraculous change that allowed him to endure the sun. Perhaps it was merely the passage of so many years; perhaps it was some internal change, but whatever it was, he didn't care. The joy of being able to feel the warmth of the sun, even through layers of cloth, to inhale the fragrance of a bright spring morning, was still new and exciting, and still filled him with awe.

Sometimes, when the sun was high in the sky, he yearned to shed all his clothes and run naked along the beach, to throw back his head and feel the sun on his face, but he knew that to do so would be fatal. He was not completely immune to the sunlight, only able to endure it for short periods of time.

But the fact that it was necessary to be cautious when he went outdoors was not worth lamenting. His newfound ability to face the daylight at all was a blessing he had never expected to obtain.

He had learned long ago to live within the boundaries his peculiar lifestyle imposed. Here, in this place, he had found contentment for the first time in centuries. He spent his days in lonely isolation, sleeping away the hours of the afternoon, walking the cliffs in the light of the moon. And during the evening, from six to nine, he opened the door to his house and took on the guise of an antique dealer.

In centuries of travel, he had accumulated a wealth of antiques. He would stay here for another ten or twenty years, until people began to talk about the fact that he never seemed to age, and then he would move on and find another house located in a remote place. Perhaps he'd be an antique dealer again. Perhaps not.

He felt the heaviness descend on him as the sun climbed toward its zenith. Turning away from the window, he ascended the narrow stairway that led to the attic. It was a large room with a sloped ceiling and an oak floor. A small oval window was set high in the far wall. He had boarded it up long ago.

Stepping into the room, he bolted the door and sat down on the edge of the big brass bed located in the far corner of the room. No damp cellars for him, he mused as he removed his shoes and socks, shrugged out of his shirt and pants. No morbidly confining silk-lined casket. He much preferred a firm mattress and clean sheets that smelled of soap and sunshine.

Naked, he slid under the covers. With a sigh, he closed his eyes and felt the lethargy of his death-like sleep steal over him. Just once, he thought, just once he'd like to fall asleep in the arms of a woman.

The sound of someone pounding on the front door roused him from a dreamless sleep.

Rising, Navarre pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater and made his way downstairs. A glance out the window told him it was a few minutes after six.

He ran a hand through his hair, then opened the front door.

The woman stood on the porch. He had not seen her face clearly earlier; now, in a single sweeping glance, he saw that her eyes were a vibrant shade of blue, her nose was small and straight, and her mouth was full and sensuous. She wore her dark blond hair in a loose roll at the nape of her neck.

Adrianna couldn't help staring at the man who opened the door. She had expected an older man, someone in his late sixties, perhaps, but the man standing before her was in the prime of life. Handsome, virile, and so tall she had to tilt her head back to see his face.

And what a face! His eyes were a clear gray beneath straight black brows. His mouth was wide, his nose as sharp as a blade, his jaw square and firm. He wore a black sweater that emphasized his pale complexion. A pair of faded blue jeans hugged his long, muscular legs. His feet were bare. He had hair a woman would die for; thick and black, it fell past his shoulders.

"Mr. Navarre?"

"Yes."

"I..." She swallowed, flustered by his intense gaze. She had the fleeting impression that if she looked into those fathomless gray eyes too long, she would lose her very soul. "May I... that is, are you open?"

He nodded. Taking a step backward, he motioned for her to enter. She noted that his hands were large, the fingers long, the nails short and square.

Adrianna hesitated a moment before she stepped inside, wondering if she was making a mistake. The house, which had appeared old and romantic in the bright light of midday, now seemed fraught with menace when viewed in the swirling shadows of twilight.

Or perhaps it was the man who intimidated her, with his sober mien and cool gray gaze. Such a deserted stretch of land suddenly seemed an unlikely location for an antique store. Was it merely a front for something else? Had she stumbled on a Mafia hideout?

"Everything on the first two floors is for sale," Navarre said. "Feel free to wander around. I'll be in the kitchen if you have any questions."

Without waiting for a response, he turned and walked away.

Adrianna stared after him until he was out of sight, the sound of his voice echoing in her mind. Never had she heard such a voice, so soft, so deep, so compelling. And his eyes... She shuddered. Was it her imagination, or was there something otherworldly about those eyes?

One thing was certain, there was something decidedly mysterious about Mr. V. Navarre, and she stood there for a moment, trying to decide what it was. Shaking off her fanciful thoughts, she turned around to close the door behind her, and then left it open.

It was a beautiful old place, obviously well-cared for inside, despite the neglect outside. The woodwork and floors were of dark oak. The walls were covered with Victorian-looking wallpaper. Heavy, dark-green draperies hung at the windows.

But it was the furniture that held her attention. There were a few pieces she was certain dated back to the thirteenth century. She ran her hands lovingly over a fragile Queen Anne sofa, admired the graceful lines of a Sheraton table, stared in awe at an ancient Greek urn.

There were chamber pots and bed warmers, laces and cloths, fireplace screens and grandfather clocks, porcelain dolls dressed in long gowns, oak desks, flat irons, old pictures and wall hangings, dishes and glassware, silverware and cooking utensils made of silver and gold, brass and pewter. A suit of armor stood in one corner.

There were signs from stores long gone, posters advertising operas and ballets, circuses and lynchings.

There were pot-bellied stoves for heating and wood-burning stoves for cooking; there were ice boxes and vegetable bins. One room held a bar reminiscent of the kind seen in old Westerns. There were shelves of all sizes filled with knickknacks and bric-a-brac. Other shelves held canister sets and cookies jars, sugar bowls, cream pitchers, and salt and pepper shakers. A large box held a variety of mismatched silverware.

She was unaware of the passing of time as she wandered from room to room, her fingers caressing the back of a velvet-covered settee, plinking out a tune on an old player piano, gently stroking the head of a china doll.

She saw a Queen Anne chair that dated back to the 1730s, an Empire cane-backed daybed that she knew had been made in China in the 1840s, and a Federal square-backed sofa that dated back even further than that. She thought it odd that all the mirrors were covered.

The rooms upstairs held bedroom furniture. Here, too, the mirrors on the highboys and chests were covered with cloth.

She saw a number of armoires, some of oak, some of dark red mahogany, but none caught her fancy.

She paused to study a Chippendale canopy bed, then moved on to a nineteenth-century sleigh bed. But it was a turn-of-the-century canopy bed that drew her eye. Made of mahogany and pine, she was certain it was well over a hundred years old.

"Find anything you like?"

His voice went through her like the rumble of distant thunder, and she whirled around, startled to find him standing in the doorway behind her.

"Everything." She made a sweeping gesture with her hand. "I've never seen such a treasure trove."

"I've been collecting for a very long time," he replied with a shrug.

"Really?" She frowned. He didn't look much older than she was, but then, looks could be deceiving.

"Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"Well, I was hoping to find an armoire, but..." She smiled self-consciously. "I really like this bed."

"It's a fine piece," he replied. And indeed it was. Long ago, it had been the bed he slept in. "The mattress is new, of course."

"Of course," she repeated, mesmerized by his gaze, by the sound of his voice, the sheer masculinity of the man.

"Care to try it out?"

"What?"

"The bed. Would you like to try it out?"

A strange warmth unfurled in the pit of her stomach as she thought of lying down on the bed while he was in the room. Slowly, she shook her head. "I don't think so."

She was a pretty woman, Navarre thought. She wore a blue silk dress that complemented the color of her hair and skin. The soft material subtly emphasized the curve of her hips and the swell of her breasts.

He had been long without a woman, and he felt a sudden frisson of heat lance through him as he imagined her lying on the bed, her hair spread on the pillow, her lips slightly swollen from his kisses...

He swore under his breath as he reined in his wayward thoughts. In his time on earth, he had known many women. He had courted them for a short time, and then left them before the inevitable questions began, before people began to wonder at his eternal youth. As time went on, he had chosen to remain alone for longer and longer periods of time.

He had loved no woman since Katlaina. There had been many he admired, many who had held his affection for a short time, but none who had claimed his heart.

"Mr. Navarre?"

He glanced over his shoulder to find her staring up at him. She was young, he thought. So very young.

"I'd like to buy the bed."

"For yourself?"

Adrianna frowned. "Does it matter who it's for?"

"No, of course not."

"How much is it?"

"For you?" He shrugged. "Four hundred dollars."

"But it must be worth twice that!" Adrianna exclaimed.

"That's my price. Do you want it or not?"

"Yes. I don't have any way to pick it up, though. Do you think..." She hesitated, hating to ask a favor when he was practically giving her the bed.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

"Could you possibly deliver it?"

"If you wish."

"That's great." She reached into her handbag. "I guess you'll want a deposit."

"No. You can pay me when the bed is delivered."

"Fine. Well..." She held out her hand. "Thank you."

Navarretook her hand in his. It was small and delicate; her skin was soft and smooth, warm with life. His gaze held hers as he bowed over her hand and kissed it.

His lips, though cool, seared her skin like sunlight magnified through a looking glass.

Adrianna stared at him in utter astonishment. No one had ever kissed her hand before. It was such an old-world gesture, it left her momentarily speechless.

"Will tomorrow be soon enough?" he asked.

"Tomorrow?" She stared up at him, blinking in confusion.

"To deliver the bed?"

"Oh, yes, tomorrow will be fine." She laughed selfconsciously as she scribbled her address on the back of her business card. "What time shall I expect you?"

"Seven?"

"That late," Adrianna murmured, disappointed. Tomorrow was Saturday; she had hoped to have the bed delivered earlier in the day.

"Is there a problem?"

"No," she said quickly. "Seven will be fine. Thank you."

She felt his gaze burning into her back as she left the room. It was all she could do not to glance over her shoulder as she started down the stairs.

Outside, she took a deep breath. Never, in all her life, had she met a man who affected her so strangely. It wasn't just his looks—she had seen tall, dark, handsome men before. She had even dated a few.

She slid behind the wheel, put the key in the ignition, and then, almost against her will, she glanced up at the house. She could see him standing at the second-story window, watching her. In spite of the distance between them, she could feel his intense gaze on her face, as soft as a sigh, as intimate as a caress.

With a rueful shake of her head, Adrianna put the Honda in gear and pulled out of the driveway. She wasn't usually given to such flights of romantic fantasy, but there was something about Mr. V. Navarre that conjured up images of castles and dungeons and knights in shining armor. Maybe it was the fact that he dealt in antiques, she mused as she entered the flow of traffic leading into Moreno Bay, or maybe it was the aura of old world charm that seemed to cling to him.

She wondered absently what the V stood for.

And then she grinned. He had kissed her hand! Warmth curled through the innermost part of her at the memory.

Impulsively, she lifted her hand and pressed her lips where his had touched. Immediately, his image rose before her, his hair as black as Satan's sins, his eyes as gray as rain clouds. And with his image came the memory of his finely sculpted lips brushing across the back of her hand, searing her skin...

Butterflies danced in her stomach as she wondered if he would deliver the bed himself.

Chapter Two

The next day she was as nervous as a schoolgirl as seven o'clock approached. She had never been so anxious, or so uncertain, in her whole life. She had hardly spoken a dozen words to the man, yet she had thought of little else since they met. His image was permanently etched in her mind. She could still hear the sound of his voice, soft yet deep.

The rumble of a truck sent her running to the living room window. Her heart seemed to skip a beat when she saw him pull up in front of the driveway.

Her stomach was churning with excitement as she ran to the door. She looked out the peephole, watching him as he opened the door of a late-model black Chevy pickup and stepped out. He wore a pair of black jeans, a dark-green T-shirt, and a black leather jacket that seemed to emphasize his broad shoulders. She had forgotten how big he was.

Her mouth went dry as she watched him walk to the rear of the Chevy. He lowered the tailgate and then, with no apparent effort, picked up the bed frame and carried it toward the house.

Adrianna opened the door as he reached the porch. "Hi." She opened the screen door, then stepped back so he could enter the house, frowning when he remained on the porch. "Come on in."

Foolish girl, Navarre mused as he crossed the threshold. *It was never safe to invite a vampire into one's home, for, once invited, he was free to come again*. But then, she had no way of knowing who, or what, she had asked inside.

And still he hesitated, some deeply buried sense of honor questioning whether he wanted to violate the sanctuary of her home.

She was frowning at him, obviously puzzled by his reluctance. Drawing a deep breath, he crossed the threshold. "Where do you want this?"

"Down the hall. First door on the left."

Adrianna ran a nervous hand over her hair. Her house, not large to begin with, seemed to shrink with his presence.

"Can I help you with anything?" she asked when he returned.

"I can manage."

He made several trips back and forth, carrying the canopy, then the mattress as if they weighed nothing at all.

As he carried the box spring into her room, she followed him down the hall.

Navarre glanced up, his gaze meeting hers for the first time. "Shall I set this up for you?"

"Please."

Removing his jacket, he tossed it over a chair, then pulled the necessary tools out of his back pocket and began to bolt the frame together.

Adrianna toyed with the collar of her blouse as she watched the play of muscles in his broad back and shoulders. He worked quickly, efficiently, with an ease and grace of movement she'd never seen in a man before. His hair fell over his forehead, and she had an almost irresistible urge to smooth it back.

Too soon, he was finished. She watched as he reached for his jacket and shrugged it on.

"I'll write you a check," Adrianna said. "How much do I owe you for delivery and set-up?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite."

"But..." She bit down on her lip, trying to think of a way to repay him for his help, to keep him there just a little longer.

"I made an apple pie this afternoon," she said cheerfully. "Would you care for a slice?"

"No, thank you."

She smiled to cover her disappointment, then turned and hurried into the kitchen to get her checkbook. In spite of his willingness to set up the bed, it was obvious that Mr. V. Navarre wasn't interested in spending any more time with her than necessary. And that was fine with her, Adrianna thought irritably. He looked like an old grouch, anyway.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

Damn, he'd snuck up on her again. Adrianna whirled around, the check in her hand. "I don't know what you mean."

"I didn't mean to insult your hospitality," he explained quietly, and the sound of his voice moved over her like a caress. "It's just that I... I'm on a rather strict diet."

He didn't strike her as a health nut, and he sure didn't look as if he needed to lose weight, but she kept both opinions to herself. Instead, she shrugged, as if his refusal to accept her hospitality was of no importance.

"Well, thanks again for your time and trouble," she said, and thrust the check toward him.

"It was no trouble, I assure you." Taking the check, he folded it in half, and slid it into the pocket of his jeans.

Her fingers tingled from where his touched hers. It was most disconcerting, she thought, the way his slightest touch went through her like an electrical charge.

"Well, thanks again," Adrianna said. "For everything."

"You're welcome."

She waited, breath held, to see if he would kiss her hand again.

As if he knew what she was thinking, he closed the short distance between them and took her hand in his. Though his skin was cool, a rush of heat engulfed her, and then he was bowing over her hand, pressing his lips to her flesh, making her heart pound as if she'd just run a marathon.

And when he looked into her eyes, she knew she'd never be the same again.

"Good evening, Miss Grant."

"Good night."

She stood in the doorway, watching as he walked down the porch stairs and climbed into the Chevy, and she wanted nothing more than to run after him.

She waited, hoping he'd wave, hoping he'd look back at her, but he pulled away from the curb without a backward glance.

Navarreswore softly as he drove away from her house. What was there about the girl that touched him so, that made him burn with desire when every instinct warned him away? She was a nice girl in every

sense of the word, he thought bleakly.

He shook his head ruefully. She lived in a small white house in a small town. According to her business card, Miss Adrianna Grant owned a combination bookstore/coffee shop located on Wind Willow Road. No doubt she went to church every Sunday, dated a fine, upstanding young man, and hoped to marry, settle down, and have the requisite two children, preferably a boy and a girl. She had probably never traveled more than a hundred miles from home in her whole life, never seen poverty or cruelty first hand.

She was the kind of woman he made it a habit to avoid. A nice girl. Sweet and innocent. Untouched by the ugliness of the world.

He slammed his foot on the brake as he pulled into the driveway of the old house he'd called home for the last five years, annoyed because he couldn't put Miss Adrianna Grant out of his mind, because, for the first time in more years than he cared to remember, he wanted something he couldn't have.

Stepping out of the truck, he closed the door with a bang. For a moment, he stood staring at the moonlight shining on the water and then, with a sigh, he walked down the steep, narrow path that led to the beach.

Removing his shoes and socks, he walked along the shore, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. He could scarcely recall the last time he'd been involved with a woman. Had it been a hundred years ago? A thousand? He searched his mind for a face, a name, but none came to mind save that of Katlaina.

He swore under his breath. Katlaina. Even after all this time, he had no trouble summoning her image to mind, remembering how beautiful she had looked the first night he made love to her, the way she'd felt in his arms, the sound of her voice as she whispered that she loved him...

A low cry of anguish rumbled in Navarre's throat as eons of loneliness rose up within him. Once, long ago, Shaylyn had found him. She had been as beautiful as he remembered, her black hair as shiny as polished ebony, her eyes as dark as a moonless night. He couldn't deny that he had been happy to see her. It had been a relief to be able to be himself, to share his innermost thoughts with someone who knew who and what he was.

They had talked the whole night long, parting at dawn to take their rest, and then met again the following evening.

Shaylyn had asked him to go to Greece with her, to stay with her for a lifetime or two. At first, he had refused, but, in the end, he had agreed. With Shaylyn, he didn't have to hide his true nature, he didn't have to watch every word, every action. He didn't have to make excuses for not eating, for sleeping during the day, for the blood hunger that burned like a sickbed fever through his body, overshadowing his humanity.

But, as comfortable as he had felt in her presence, he had left her before the year was out. Shaylyn was a true predator. She relished the hunt, the chase, the kill. He did what he had to do in order to survive; she did it for pleasure. He took what sustenance he needed and left his victims alive; she toyed with those she hunted, relishing their fear, draining them of life. In the end, he had kissed her good-bye, wished her well, and left her without regret.

There had been no one special in his life since then. When the needs of the flesh grew overwhelming, he sought out a woman who possessed the Dark Gift, a woman who understood his needs, who could endure the force of his lovemaking, who was not repelled by the otherworldly light that sometimes

glowed in his eyes. Such encounters inevitably left him feeling physically satisfied but empty deep inside.

Over the span of time, he had learned to control his physical needs as he had learned to control his lust for blood. He had immersed himself in learning, in travel. He'd visited every country in the world, studying their diverse cultures, learning their languages, their religions. His only regret was that he could not sample the native foods.

Occasionally, he had come across others of his kind. He treated them with respect, outwardly friendly but inwardly always on guard, especially when in the arms of the women of his kind.

And when the loneliness grew too great to bear, when the truth of what he was weighed heavily on his conscience, he went to ground, burying himself deep in the earth until the endless darkness and the eternal quiet forced him to the surface once more. And after a rest of thirty or forty years, he was ready to face the future again, eager to go out and discover what new inventions and changes had occurred while he slept.

And then he had come here, to this sleepy little town, and decided to stay. It was quiet, peaceful, the last place in the world anyone would expect to find a vampire.

He had bought the house on Old Piney Branch Road because it reminded him of a Victorian home he owned in England, and then he had arranged for the furniture and other items he had collected over the last several hundred years to be shipped there. Who better to run an antique store than a man who had lived for hundreds of years, who had known some of the great craftsmen of days gone by?

He had been happy here, he thought, as happy as he had been anywhere. Content. At peace with himself and the world around him. Until yesterday, when a petite young woman with dark blond hair and innocent blue eyes had wandered into his house and made him wish for a way of life he could never have.

Adrianna sat on the edge of her new bed, running her hand over the antique ivory lace bedspread she had found in her great grandmother's trunk earlier in the day, remembering how Navarre had filled the room.

He was an extraordinary man, she thought, remembering the intensity of his gaze, the husky sound of his voice, the ease with which he had carried the bed into the house.

Rising, she went to stand in front of the mirror that hung over the antique oak chest of drawers on the other side of the room.

She wasn't beautiful, she thought, but she was passably pretty. She didn't have the slender shape of a model, but her figure wasn't bad. At least it went in and out in all the right places. She'd never had any trouble finding a date, and even the men who weren't romantically attracted to her seemed to find her company pleasant. Except for Navarre. He hadn't paid her any attention at all, she thought pensively. And that was too bad, because he was the only man she'd found the least bit interesting since she broke up with Kevin over a year ago.

With a sigh, she turned away from the mirror and went into the kitchen. Fixing herself a piece of pie and a glass of milk, she went out on the front porch. It was a pretty night, with just enough of a breeze to keep the heat at bay.

The houses on either side of her were dark. Old Mrs. Lopez always went to bed when the sun went down, and Mr. and Mrs. Kelsey had gone to Florida to visit their daughter.

Sitting down in one of the deck chairs, she propped her feet on the porch rail. "V," she mused between bites of pie. "Victor? Vaughn? Vance?"

She grunted softly. "Vinnie? Vito?" No, he didn't look Italian.

"Vladimir?" She chuckled softly. "Vladimir Navarre."

She put the dish and the glass down on the floor beside her and gazed up at the stars, feeling suddenly lonely.

She wished that she hadn't said no when Marty Defore called and asked her to go out with him tonight. Even though she didn't find Marty the least bit attractive, he was a nice guy and they always had a good time together...

She blew out a deep breath. She didn't want to go out with Marty. She wanted to see Navarre .

A movement to her left drew her gaze and she saw him standing at the end of her driveway, almost as though she had conjured him up from her mind.

He inclined his head in her direction. "Good evening, Miss Grant."

"Hi." She swung her legs down and sat forward in her chair, her arms folded on the railing. "Nice night for a walk," she remarked, and then thought how foolish that must sound. Surely he hadn't walked here from Cliff House.

"Yes."

His gaze met hers and a long silence fell between them. Adrianna felt her mouth go dry as she tried to think of something to say, but words failed her and she could only stare at him, her gaze trapped in his, like a moth helplessly snared in a web.

He seemed to be a part of the darkness. His hair was the color of the night, his skin as pale as the moon. He was wearing the same black jeans and leather jacket he'd worn earlier that evening, the black of his clothing blending into the shadows that surrounded him.

Navarre stared at her, mesmerized by her youth, her beauty, the innocence in her clear blue eyes. Her hair, loosed from the coil at her nape, fell well past her shoulders and he had a sudden urge to run his hands through her hair, to press her body to his and feel her warmth. Her skin would be soft and warm, vibrant with youth. Her blood would be as sweet as her lips. Even from here, he could smell the life flowing through her veins...

The hunger, kept under tight control for centuries, rose up within him, clawing at his vitals with fingers of flame.

He felt the prick of his fangs against his tongue and he cursed softly, looking away lest she see the blood lust that was surely glowing in his eyes.

Adrianna blinked. Feeling as if she'd been freed from some sorcerer's spell, she shook her head. "What

are you doing here?"

He lifted one black brow. "Walking."

"You walked here from Cliff House?" she exclaimed. "But that's almost ten miles."

Navarreshrugged. "It's good exercise, good discipline."

"I see," Adrianna replied, though she didn't understand at all. "Would you... would you care for a cup of coffee?"

"No, thank you." He clenched his fists, suppressing the hunger raging through him. "It's late. I should be going."

"Maybe some other time."

"Perhaps. Good night, Miss Grant."

"Good night."

He turned on his heel and walked back the way he'd come, knowing he had to put as much distance between them as possible, knowing that, for his sake, and for hers, he must never see her again.

Chapter Three

Navarre knew she was there before he opened the door. He'd sensed her presence even before he came downstairs.

He opened the door and her nearness filled his senses. She wore a V-necked pale blue sweater, black slacks, and sandals. Her hair fell down her back in soft golden waves. Navarre took a deep breath, inhaling the mingled scent of soap and skin that was hers and hers alone.

Adrianna smiled uncertainly as Navarre opened the door. She had every right to be here, she assured herself. It wasn't as if she was coming to see *him*. After all, the man owned a business, and she was a customer. The fact that his place of business was also his residence didn't mean a thing.

But it did. She had spent all day Sunday trying to convince herself that she didn't care a fig about the man, or what he thought. She had invited him to share her company twice, and twice he had refused. She didn't have to be hit over the head; then again, maybe she did, because she had come here directly from work, not even going home long enough to grab something to eat.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Adrianna pasted a smile on her face and stepped into the house.

She felt Navarre's gaze on her back as she walked into the spacious front parlor.

"Anything I can help you with?" Navarre asked, coming up behind her.

"No," she replied brightly. "I'm just browsing."

She didn't have the courage to face him, certain he would read the lie in her eyes. But she could feel his nearness. The sheer size of the man was overpowering; his masculinity made her limbs tremble and her

insides ache with longing. It had been madness to come here, she thought, but she was here now, and she'd just have to make the best of it.

Trying to ignore his presence, she wandered around the room, pausing to study an oak hall tree, a three-tiered mahogany table, an old school desk, complete with inkwell. But no matter where she was, she was aware of Navarre. He stood in the doorway, his arms folded over his broad chest, one ankle crossed over the other. Once, she slid a covert glance in his direction, only to find him staring at her, his gray eyes narrowed.

He held her gaze for a long moment, and she felt the heat climb into her cheeks. She wasn't fooling him for a moment, she thought. He knew exactly why she was there. All she could do now was bluff her way through and make as hasty and dignified an exit as possible.

Reaching for the first thing that came to hand, she picked up a shaving mug emblazoned with the words "Buck's Barber Shoppe" and asked the price.

Adrianna heard the amusement in Navarre's voice as he named a figure, but the words themselves didn't register. He was wearing black again, she noticed. Black jeans and a faded black "Phantom of the Opera" T-shirt that hugged his broad shoulders and chest like a second skin.

"Shall I wrap it up for you?" he asked.

Adrianna blinked, startled to find him standing directly in front of her, wondering how he had crossed the room without her even being aware that he'd moved.

She stared up at him, transfixed by his stare. "What?"

"The shaving cup. Shall I wrap it up for you?"

She looked at the object in her hand as if seeing it for the first time. "Oh. No, no, I... I was... no."

"Why did you come here today, Adrianna?"

She shivered at the sound of her name on his lips, at the husky sound of his voice. "Why?"

Try as she might, she couldn't draw her gaze from the web of his stare. "Because—that is, I..."

She took a deep breath. Lying had never come easily to her, but she was prepared to tell a whopper now, anything to make him stop looking at her like that, as if he knew her every thought, her deepest, most intimate secrets.

She opened her mouth to speak, to tell him she was looking for a gift for her boyfriend, but Navarre's eyes were fixed on hers—fathomless gray eyes that delved into the nethermost regions of her very soul.

"Adrianna?" His voice was harsh, demanding the truth.

"I came to see you."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

But he knew. Throughout the centuries of his life, women had been attracted to him, seduced by the dark power he possessed.

"Go home, little girl." He took the cup from her hand and put it back on the shelf. "Go home before you get hurt."

His voice was as soft as the first spring rain, as intimate as a lover's caress.

Adrianna swayed toward him, drawn like the tide to the shore. "I'm not a little girl."

"Aren't you?" His voice was thick, so thick he could scarcely speak.

"No." She tilted her head back, the better to see his face, parting her lips to give him ready access to her mouth.

Navarregazed into her eyes, and in their clear blue depths he saw sunshine on a summer day, the ocean at rest beneath a cloudless sky, lovers entwined on a sandy beach.

Her nearness enflamed his senses, senses that were sharper, stronger, more discerning, than those of a mortal man. Her nearness was intoxicating, her scent as alluring as the Siren call of the sun.

Muttering an oath, he lowered his head and covered her mouth with his.

Heat coursed through him, firing his blood, chasing away endless centuries of loneliness. Unable to resist taking her in his arms any more than he could resist the blood hunger that kept him alive, he pulled her into his embrace, gathering her body against his.

Her body fit to his as though she had been sculpted to his measurement. Her breasts were warm and firm against his chest; her hair fell over his arm in a waterfall of honey-gold silk.

She sighed as he deepened the kiss, her breath fanning his cheek, fanning his desire. He could feel the rapid beating of her heart, smell the blood that flowed in a crimson rush through her veins.

His response to her touch, her nearness, was immediate and obvious. He expected her to pull away, to scream for help, to slap his face.

She did none of those things; instead, she wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him closer, her tongue darting out to touch his, a little moan of pleasure rising in her throat.

What insanity was this, he thought as his tongue delved deeper into her mouth. Was she mad, or was he?

Common sense demanded that he put her from him, that he send her away, but the need to hold and be held was stronger than logic, more compelling than reason. He couldn't let her go, not now, not when she felt so good, so right, in his arms.

He could only imagine what would have happened next if he hadn't heard the sound of footsteps in the foyer.

With a muttered oath, he put Adrianna from him and took a step backward.

"Go home, Miss Grant," he said, his voice like sandpaper over steel. "Don't come here again."

Before she could think, before she could argue, he left the room. A moment later, she heard his voice welcoming another customer.

Giving herself a mental shake, Adrianna squared her shoulders and left the house, determined never to go back.

That night, her dreams were filled with drifting shadows, images without form or substance. She heard a voice calling to her from out of the shadows, a deep voice, filled with the loneliness of a thousand lifetimes. It was a sound of such sadness that it caused her heart to ache with compassion, and even though she knew she shouldn't wander into the shadows, even though she knew that danger lurked in the swirling mists of darkness, she felt impelled to follow the sound of that voice.

Abruptly, she found herself adrift in a sea of blackness. Too frightened to move, she searched for a light, any light at all, and then it was as if a movie screen unfolded before her eyes. A barrage of images flickered before her: images of a man in a cage, of a woman with devil-black hair and eyes. She saw another woman, her green eyes filled with love and fear as a tall dark man rose over her. There were scattered images of ancient castles and kingdoms, of time passing, of a man buried deep in the earth, a man who was not dead, but not alive.

She screamed as the blackness dissolved into a warm red river that pulsed with the very essence of life. Nausea rose up within her as the blood engulfed her, filling her mouth and throat, mingling with the blood in her own veins, until she was drowning in the scent and the taste and the texture...

She woke with a scream on her lips. Still caught in the terror of her nightmare, she sat up and flicked on the bedside light. But it wasn't enough to chase away the terror that engulfed her and she bolted out of bed, running through the house, turning on every light in every room.

As she passed the living room window, she felt an overwhelming urge to look outside. Heart pounding with trepidation, she pressed herself close to the wall and peered into the darkness.

At first, she saw nothing and then, as her eyes adjusted to the night, she saw a dark figure lurking in the moon-dappled shadows beneath the old oak tree at the end of her driveway.

She blinked, and he was gone, leaving her to wonder if she had imagined it, or if she had really seen Navarre staring back at her.

Navarre turned away, blending into the night as he headed toward home. He had known from the beginning that going to her house would be a mistake, but he had been unable to stay away. Knowing he must never see her again, he had nevertheless felt the urge to be near her one last time, and so he had gone to her house in the dead of night.

Standing in the shadows, he had given free rein to his senses as he focused on Adrianna. In his mind's eye, he had seen her sleeping in her bed, seen her as clearly as if he stood in the room. She slept on her left side, one hand pillowed beneath her cheek, her hair splashed like gold paint upon a white pillowcase. He had inhaled and drawn her fragrance into his nostrils, into the very essence of his being, absorbing the smell of her shampoo, her toothpaste, the soap she had bathed with, and, overall, her own feminine

scent.

Knowing it was wrong, he had probed her mind, curious to know what dreams kept her company while she slept. He had been unprepared for the link that had formed between them, startled to discover that, even as he was probing her thoughts, she was delving into his. Scattered images of his past lives had been woven into her dreams, though she had not been aware that it was his past she was dreaming about. And then, before he could close his mind to hers, before he could erase the growing horror that filled her mind like a dark plague, she had come awake with a scream on her lips.

And still he had lingered in the dark, waiting. He had seen the lights go on in every room of the house, and then he had seen her peering into the darkness. Their gazes had locked for one brief instant, and then he had turned away, feeling as though he had left a vital part of himself behind.

By morning, Adrianna had convinced herself it was all just a bad dream.

She got ready for work, ate a quick breakfast, and left the house. She paused at the end of the driveway, staring at the old oak tree where she had imagined she saw Navarre. She moved to stand under the tree, then felt her skin prickle as if she had received a mild electric shock.

Alarmed, she jumped onto the sidewalk, then glanced up and down the street, wondering if anyone had seen her behaving so foolishly.

Clutching her handbag in a death grip, she hurried up the driveway, opened the garage door, slid behind the wheel of her car, and drove to work.

She still felt a sense of pride when she saw her name on the door. She had bought the bookstore a year after she graduated from high school. For Adrianna, it had been a dream come true, made possible by the inheritance her great-grandmother had left her when she passed away. Still, it had been scary, going into business when she was only nineteen. But it had been good for her, giving her a feeling of self-confidence she'd never had before.

Sitting in her office helped put everything in perspective. She had met a rather odd man. She'd had a scary nightmare, and that was all.

Adrianna heaved a sigh as she opened her checkbook. It was time to put the night's foolishness behind her and get down to business.

But, try as she might, she could not put Navarre from her thoughts. No matter how often she pushed his brooding image away, it sprang right back up again. What secrets was he hiding behind those fathomless gray eyes? Why did he keep such peculiar hours? Why had he kissed her with such passion, and then sent her away with a warning?

What did the V stand for? She had the most peculiar feeling that if she could discover his first name, she would unlock the mystery that was Navarre.

Like a sleuth on the trail of a killer, she went to work. She called her friend, Nancy, who worked at the DMV and asked her to check Navarre's records.

"V. Navarre," Nancy said a few minutes later. "Says he was born in New Mexico on September first,

nineteen-seventy. He's six foot, four inches tall, has black hair, gray eyes, weighs two hundred and twenty pounds."

"Yes, that's him," Adrianna remarked. "Thanks, Nancy."

"Why the sudden interest in this guy?" Nancy asked. "I've never heard you mention him before."

"Nothing, just curious."

"Uh-huh."

"Honestly, Nancy. I just wondered if the V stood for anything."

"Why don't you just ask him?"

"Because I'll probably never see him again."

"Navarre? Navarre? Say, isn't that the name of the guy who owns the antique store out on Old Piney Branch Road?"

"Yeah. I bought a bed from him last weekend."

"I see."

"No, you don't. Listen, I've got to go."

"Sure, well, keep me posted."

"All right, I will. Bye."

Frowning, Adrianna hung up the phone and went out to wait on a customer. Apparently, there was no mystery to be solved. The letter V didn't stand for anything.

Chapter Four

A week passed. For Navarre, they were the longest seven days of his entire life.

Why, he raged as he paced restlessly from one end of the house to the other, why was he so intrigued by Miss Adrianna Grant? In his time, he had known women who were smarter, women who were more beautiful, more voluptuous, more everything. But he had never known one who had eyes quite that shade of blue, hair quite that shade of blond, a smile that made him believe anything was possible. She filled his thoughts by night and his dreams by day.

Like a schoolboy in the throes of his first crush, he made excuses to pass by her house, her shop. Sometimes, feeling like an adolescent fool, he followed her, always keeping out of sight, always careful to screen his presence from her mind.

He followed her home from work in the evening; he followed her when she went out to dinner with a girlfriend; he followed her into the movie theater one night.

Sitting in the back and off to the side, he had spent two hours watching her face, watching her reactions

to the bittersweet love story unfolding on the screen. Her laughter filled him with sunshine; her tears made him long to comfort her.

Trailing after her as she walked home from the theater, he had cursed himself for being a fool. But he couldn't stop thinking of her, couldn't stop remembering the sweet womanly scent of her skin and hair, the way she had fit into his embrace, the intoxicating taste of her kisses.

He couldn't stop thinking of her; could not stop wanting her.

Prowling through the quiet rooms of his house, he told himself to take her and be done with it. She wanted him, whether she knew it or not. He could make her his at any time. With the power of his mind, he could call her to him. He could mesmerize her with the power of his gaze, bend her will to his, take what he wanted and send her away, the knowledge of what transpired between them erased from her mind with a word...

He swore a vile oath as he brought his fist down on a heavy oak table. He didn't want her like that—no better than a puppet while he pulled the strings. He wanted her warm and willing, fully aware of what was happening between them. He wanted to hear the sound of his name on her lips; he wanted to gaze deep into her eyes and see love reflected there...

Love! He cursed under his breath. Where had *that* come from? Love, indeed. What woman would love a creature like him, a man who was not a man at all, a man who lived by night and existed on the blood of others?

He thought of Katlaina, and pain ripped through him. She had promised to love him forever, and he had believed her. Even now, almost two thousand years later, he could remember the look in her eyes when he appeared to her after he'd been changed. She had stared at him in revulsion, sickened by the look of death in his eyes. She had recognized him for what he was—an inhuman monster. Even the recollection of her acceptance of him years later, when she was dying, could not banish the agony of that moment when she had backed away from him, her face as pale as death, her eyes wide with fear and loathing.

He cursed bitterly. He had lived almost two thousand years, and in all that time, he had never loved another woman. He had lived alone, though he could have taken any woman he desired, taken her and used her and tossed her away.

But now he was wanting a woman, one particular woman, very badly. Adrianna... Surely he deserved to have this one woman. He had lived alone for almost two thousand years, taking only the blood he needed to survive, leaving those he drank from alive when he could so easily have killed them. He had spared countless lives. Surely he deserved this one woman...

With a strangled cry, he stalked out of the house. He wanted her, and he would have her before the night was out, and heaven help anyone who got in his way!

With preternatural speed, he made it to her house in a matter of minutes. The drapes in the living room were open, and he could see her sitting on the sofa, her face bathed in lamplight, an open book, on her lap.

Lingering in the shadows under the oak tree, he saw a faint smile curve her lips as she turned a page. Curious to know what had brought such a melancholy expression to her face, he probed her mind, surprised to discover that she was wishing a knight in shining armor would ride into her life, sweep her off her feet, and carry her away.

He cursed softly. She was so young, so innocent. There were no fairy-tale endings in life—only pain and loss and endless loneliness.

A rueful grin twisted his lips. It would not be a gallant warrior in sun-bright armor sweeping her off her feet this night, but a monster in the guise of a man. For too long, he had pretended to be something he wasn't.

Tonight, he would unleash the beast within him.

A low, animal-like growl of remorse rumbled deep in his throat. For a moment, he thought of turning away, of returning home, his desire unfulfilled, his hunger unfed. With sheer effort of will, he forced the thought from his mind. A lion did not feel sympathy for its prey. It made its kill, clean and quick, took what it needed to survive, and moved on.

And so would he. Like the lion, he would take what he needed, what he wanted, and move on.

Adrianna sighed as she put the book aside and went to answer the door. She was no dreamer, no schoolgirl, to believe in fairy tales and happily-ever-after, but, oh, how she wished the man of her dreams would suddenly appear.

Wondering who would be coming to see her so late at night, she slid the safety chain in place, then opened the door.

She gasped when she saw Navarre standing on the porch. Speechless, she blinked up at him. Maybe dreams *did* come true!

She swallowed, then moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Hello."

Navarre's nod was curt. "Hello."

He wasn't wearing armor or riding a white horse, she mused, but he looked terribly handsome in a dark gray sweater and sweat pants.

She lifted one hand to the safety chain. "Would you like to come in?"

He stared down at her, at the pulse throbbing at the base of her throat, at the wonder in her blue eyes, and slowly shook his head. "No."

"Oh."

He felt the keen edge of her disappointment, knew, instinctively, that she had foolishly cast him in the role of white knight. White, indeed, he mused, when his whole life had been spent in darkness.

She licked her lips again, and he felt the stirrings of desire unfurl within him. "Did you want something?"

"The bed." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he knew he had picked the wrong topic of conversation. It was all too easy to picture her in the bed he had once slept in, lying beneath the canopy, her hair spread over the pillow, her eyes heavy-lidded with passion.

"The bed?" she repeated, puzzled.

"Yes, I... I came by to make sure you were happy with it."

She hesitated a moment before answering. She was happy with the bed. It was beautiful and comfortable and yet, even though she knew it was silly, she couldn't help feeling that her new bed was somehow responsible for the strange dreams she'd been having.

"Is something wrong with it?" Navarre asked.

"No, of course not. I found an old lace bedspread for it in my great-grandmother's trunk. My mother told me it was part of great-grandmother Hall's dowry from the old country. Would you like to see it?"

Every instinct shouted at him to say no, to turn away before it was too late. Too late for her. Too late for him. Instead, he found himself nodding.

Adrianna closed the door so she could remove the safety chain, then invited him inside with a smile and a wave of her hand.

All too aware that he was making a mistake, he followed her down the corridor that led to her bedroom.

He hadn't paid much attention to the room before. Now, he noticed that the walls were papered with a delicate blue-and-rose print. An antique oak dresser stood across from the bed; an oval mirror hung on the wall. A rag doll sat in a small rocking chair located in one corner. Pale blue curtains hung at the window; a blue carpet covered the floor.

He stood in the doorway, careful to avoid the mirror.

Adrianna ran her hand over the spread. "It looks good, don't you think?"

Navarre nodded. Indeed, the ivory lace spread looked as if it had been made for his bed, this room, this woman.

He clenched his fists at his sides to keep from crossing the floor and taking her in his arms. It would be so easy, he thought, so easy to press her down to the bed that had once been his and satisfy his desire, his hunger, in one swift, fatal embrace.

Adrianna looked up then, her gaze meeting his. The expression glittering in his eyes sent the breath rocketing from her lungs. She was no expert on men, but she knew desire when she saw it, and never had she seen it burning hotter or brighter than in this man's eyes.

Awareness hummed between them, vibrant, palpable, so intense, it was frightening.

She took an involuntary step backward as he pushed away from the doorway and moved toward her. There was a predatory gleam in the depths of Navarre's eyes, a hunger that went beyond desire, a need that transcended the boundaries of time.

With a cry of despair, she shook her head, her foot catching on the bedspread as she recoiled from his touch.

The look in her eyes, so like the look he'd once seen in Katlaina's, cut Navarre to the heart, ravaging his soul as the sun would ravage his body dared he linger in its light too long.

He began to tremble convulsively as he fought to control the hunger raging through him. Never had he wanted a woman as he wanted this woman. Never had the urge to take what he wanted been so strong.

Never before had he truly realized how difficult it was to separate the desires of the flesh from the desire for blood.

"Forgive me," he rasped, and fled the room as if pursued by the devil himself.

Outside, he took a deep breath, willing his hands to stop shaking, his heart to stop pounding. Foolish heart, to be so easily swayed by the fear in a woman's eyes.

At home, he stood at the attic window and stared out into the darkness.

"Vampire." He spoke the word aloud, as if to remind himself of who and what he was.

Vampire. A solitary, soulless creature who hunted the night.

Vampire. An inhuman monster who lived off the blood of others, who dared not befriend humans for fear that desire would turn to blood lust, that a kiss of affection might be a prelude to sudden death.

Vampire. A ghoul who was not welcome in the world of humanity or among his own kind. Territorial creatures, those of the undead, jealous of their hunting grounds, secretive in their ways, zealous in the protection of their lairs.

"Vampire!"

Never had he loathed the word, loathed what he was, as he did at that moment.

Never before had the gulf between himself and the rest of the world seemed so wide, or so deep, or so impossible to cross.

Adrianna wandered through her house, bemused by what had happened between herself and Navarre. In spite of what he'd said, she didn't believe for a minute that he had come knocking at her door to ask if she was happy with the bed! So why had he shown up at her door so late at night?

She shied away from the answer that immediately came to mind, yet she could not forget the desire she had seen blazing in his eyes, could not forget the tension that had hummed between them like an electrical current.

She wondered what would have happened if she hadn't backed away, if he had pulled her into his arms, tipped her face up to his, and kissed her. Would she have protested, or would she have melted in his arms like butter left too long in the sun?

Going into the bedroom, she changed into her nightgown, brushed her teeth, then settled herself in bed to read for a few minutes.

But she couldn't concentrate on the story. Something kept niggling at her mind, something about Navarre...

She stared at her reflection in the mirror hanging on the wall across from the bed, and then it hit her. When he had crossed the room toward her, he had passed in front of the mirror. She had seen her face, the fear in her own eyes, but Navarre had cast no reflection in the glass.

"I must be hallucinating," she muttered, and picked up her book, determined to put it out of her mind. It had been nothing more than her mind playing tricks on her because she'd been so upset.

But that night her dreams were again filled with shadows, and lurking deep in the shadows was a tall dark man with hair as black as ink and gray eyes that burned into her heart and soul, leaving her aching and empty and yearning for something she dared not name. A man whose voice penetrated every fiber of her being, calling to her from the depths of sadness, wordlessly pleading for comfort and acceptance.

She woke with the dawn, her eyes wet with tears.

Chapter Five

Adrianna frowned, then shook her head. "I don't think so, Nancy, not tonight."

"Come on, Addie, I'd go with you."

"But I don't want to go."

"Why not?"

Why, indeed, Adrianna mused ruefully. At the moment, the last thing she wanted was to see Navarre again. "I don't think Cliff House is open on Sunday," she fibbed.

"Of course it is. Come on, it'll be fun. Russ is out of town, and we can go to dinner after."

Adrianna sighed, wondering how she could wriggle out of this without hurting her best friend's feelings.

"Pick you up in ten minutes," Nancy said, and hung up the phone before Adrianna could object.

The prospect of seeing Navarre made Adrianna as nervous as a cat as Nancy drove out of town toward Old Piney Branch Road. How could she face him again after last night?

"You're awfully quiet this evening," Nancy remarked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I'm just tired. I spent the day working in my garden." Adrianna glanced over at her friend. She'd known Nancy Kendrick since first grade. Nancy was a pretty girl, with dark brown hair, brown eyes, and a winsome smile. Once, they'd been almost inseparable, but then Nancy had married Russ and even though they'd remained close friends, they didn't get together as often as they once had.

Too soon, Nancy was pulling into the driveway at the end of Old Piney Branch Road.

Adrianna stared at the old house for a long moment, took a deep breath, and stepped out of the car.

"He sure keeps weird hours," Nancy remarked as they climbed the porch stairs. "I don't know how he

expects to make any money when he's only open three hours a day."

"Maybe he doesn't need the money," Adrianna remarked flippantly. "Maybe the antique business is just a hobby."

"Yeah, right." Nancy stared at the door. "Do we knock, or just walk in?"

Adrianna shrugged. "Just go on in, I guess," she suggested, hoping she could get in and out without seeing Navarre.

For a time, Adrianna and Nancy wandered together from room to room, admiring a display of Louis XV furniture, grimacing at an old voodoo death mask, laughing as they tried to imagine churning butter in an old wooden crock, but then Nancy went upstairs to check out the bedroom furniture, leaving Adrianna in the dining room trying to decide if she wanted to spend a hundred dollars on an old English plant stand.

Even though her back was to the door, she knew the exact moment he entered the room. Every nerve ending in her body tingled with his presence, every fiber of her being was acutely, achingly, aware of him.

"Adrianna." His voice, soft and low, speaking her name, just her name, and yet she heard so much more.

Slowly, she turned around to face him. Awareness stretched between them, thick with need.

Adrianna swallowed hard, afraid of the emotions his mere presence aroused in her, afraid of the restless yearning she read in his eyes.

Navarre took a step toward her, waiting for her to back away. When she didn't, he took another step, and another, until he was almost close enough to touch her. He curled his hands into tight fists to keep from doing just that, afraid that if he dared touch her just once, he would never let her go.

For a moment, they gazed into each other's eyes, and then Navarre let out a deep sigh that seemed to come from the very depths of his soul.

"Adrianna," he murmured. "What are we going to do?"

She didn't pretend she didn't understand, didn't make any of the dozens of coy gestures so common to women. She just stood there, her gaze locked to his, and then shook her head. "I don't know. What do you want to do?"

Heat flared in the depths of his eyes. "I want to make love to you."

She wasn't shocked or even surprised by his answer. Still, his bold reply brought a quick blush to her cheeks. It was what she wanted, too, though she couldn't admit it. Not to him. Not even to herself.

But Navarre heard the quickening of her breath, saw the wanting in her eyes.

He whispered her name as he moved toward her, needing to hold her, to feel her warmth, to taste her sweetness.

The sudden wariness in her eyes halted him in mid-stride. She wanted him, he thought bitterly, but she was still afraid of him.

"I won't hurt you," he vowed, praying that it was a promise he could keep. "Please don't be afraid of me."

"I'm not."

It was a lie, and they both knew it.

"Addie, where are you?"

Nancy's voice cut through the tension between them.

"In here," Adrianna called.

Navarre swore under his breath as a dark-haired young woman entered the dining room.

"Oh, there you are," Nancy said. She glanced at Adrianna's flushed cheeks, then looked at the man standing nearby.

Adrianna forced a smile. "Nancy, this is Mr. Navarre. He owns the shop. Mr. Navarre, this is my friend, Nancy Kendrick."

"Charmed, madam," Navarre said, inclining his head in Nancy's direction. "Welcome to my house."

"Thank you. Did you find anything, Addie?"

"No."

"Me, either. At least, nothing I can afford." She smiled apologetically at Navarre, then looked at Adrianna again. "Are you ready to go?"

Adrianna nodded. As much as she had dreaded coming here, now she found herself hating to leave. "Yes, I guess so."

Navarre stepped forward and took Adrianna's hand in his. "I hope you'll come again, Miss Grant."

"I will, thank you."

"And you, too, Ms. Kendrick." He smiled at Nancy, but he didn't release his hold on Adrianna.

"Thank you, Mr. Navarre." Nancy stared pointedly at his hand, which was still clasping Adrianna's. "Addie, are you ready?"

"Yes."

Adrianna was keenly aware of Navarre's gaze on her back as she followed Nancy out of the room.

"Well!" Nancy exclaimed as soon as they were in the car, "what was *that* all about?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know darn well what I mean! What's going on between you two?"

"Nothing."

"It looked like something to me. He couldn't keep his eyes, or his hands, off you."

"Don't be silly."

"Silly! There was so much tension in that room you could see it."

"Nancy..."

"Addie!"

"For goodness sakes, I just met the man. There's nothing going on."

"There will be," Nancy predicted. "There will be."

Adrianna sank onto the sofa, a cup of hot chocolate cradled in her hands. Dinner with Nancy had been fun, once she got her friend off the subject of Navarre. But then, Nancy was always fun, always able to see the bright side of life, always able to find humor in the grimmest of situations. Her cheerful nature had made her one of the most popular girls in high school. Adrianna had always envied Nancy her easy way with people, her ability to see things as they really were.

They had lingered over coffee, talking about Russ, about the new mall being built at the other end of town, reminiscing about high school. It had been after ten when Nancy brought her home.

A sigh escaped Adrianna's lips as she thought of Navarre, his gray eyes intent upon her face, his voice soft and husky as he whispered that he wanted to make love to her. It was what she wanted, too, and yet she couldn't help being afraid of what it would mean, of the changes it would make in her life.

She set her cup aside, wondering if she was ready to deal with all the implications of surrendering her virginity to Navarre. Though he appeared to be only a few years older than she, there was an air of sophistication and experience about him that made him seem much older. No doubt he'd known many women, while her experience with men was limited to heavy petting sessions in the back seat of her old boyfriend's car, and one brief encounter that had, fortunately, ended before any damage had been done.

Navarre. She closed her eyes, wondering what it would be like to let him make love to her...

A knock at the door roused her from the edge of sleep. Yawning, she went to the door. "Who is it?"

"Navarre."

Her heart did a somersault at the sound of his voice. With hands that shook, she released the security chain and unlocked the door.

Taking a deep breath, she ran a hand through her hair and opened the door. And he was there, filling her vision, a tall, dark man dressed in a white T shirt and jeans.

"Navarre." His name whispered past her lips. His gaze moved over her. She'd been asleep, he thought.

Her hair, slightly mussed, fell over her shoulders. "May I come in?"

"I don't know. It's late..." She lifted her hand, then let it fall. "Sure, come on in."

She stepped back so he could enter the house, then closed and locked the door behind him, only to stand there, uncertain what to do next.

He solved the problem for her by taking her into his arms. It occurred to her that she should protest, that she should be insulted, annoyed, angry. Instead, she rested her head on his chest and closed her eyes.

"I had to see you," he murmured. "I tried to stay away. I told myself you were too young, too innocent, that I had no right to want you." His hand stroked her hair, then slid down her cheek. "Tell me it's all right for me to be here, Adrianna. Tell me you don't want me to go."

"I don't want you to go."

She felt a shudder pass through his body as his arms tightened around her.

"I need you, Annie," he said, his voice low and husky.

"Navarre..."

"Shhh, it's all right. Just let me hold you a moment more, and then I'll go."

She didn't understand the urgency in his voice, the sadness, the distant echo of loneliness. But he needed her. She could understand that, and she stood in his arms, content to be there, with her face pressed to his chest, listening to the slow, steady beat of his heart.

Time lost all meaning. An hour might have passed. An eternity might have passed.

"I'd better go," he said, his breath tickling her cheek. "It's late."

But still he didn't release her. Her nearness was intoxicating, her warmth mesmerizing. He'd made it a point to feed before coming to her house and now, for these few moments, he could be near her without being afraid. It felt so good to hold her as an ordinary man might hold a woman, to stroke the softness of her hair and skin, to press kisses along the slender curve of her throat without fearing that the blood hunger would overcome him.

Gently, he tipped her face to his and kissed her. And she melted in his arms, her body meshing with his, her breasts warm and soft against his chest. Her arms slid up around his neck, and she drew him closer, moaning softly as his tongue slid over her bottom lip.

"Navarre..."

"I know," he murmured. "I feel it, too."

He kissed her once more, and then, with regret, he let her go.

She gazed up at him, her expression slightly dazed, her lips parted. She was so beautiful, he thought, so innocent. He had no right to interfere in her life. And yet, even knowing it was wrong, he couldn't stay away.

"I'd better go before this gets out of hand."

Adrianna nodded. She didn't want him to leave, not yet, but he was right. Another minute in his arms and she'd be inviting him to her bed. And she wasn't ready for that, not yet.

He kissed her once more, and then he was gone.

There were no bad dreams that night.

Chapter Six

In the morning, she woke with a smile on her face, a sense of well-being flooding her soul.

"Navarre.Navarre .Navarre !"

She giggled out loud. Never in all her life had she felt like this. No schoolgirl crush had ever had her dancing around the house, laughing for no reason at all while she got dressed.

She was too excited to eat, so she settled for a quick cup of coffee, brushed her teeth, and went to work two hours early to stock the shelves.

She sang in the car, she sang while she opened cartons and placed the new romance novels on display on the rack in the front of the store. There was a definite trend toward paranormal romances these days, she mused as she read the titles. Ordinary heroes had been replaced by ghosts and werewolves, aliens and vampires...

She shook her head, and then frowned.

Vampires.

Navarre had cast no reflection in her mirror.

With a shake of her head, she put the thought from her.

A moment later, she was driving toward Cliff House.

She sat in the car, her fingers curled over the steering wheel, staring at the old house. She'd never realized how spooky the old place really was.

Resolutely, she stepped out of the car, telling herself there was nothing to be afraid of. She didn't believe in vampires. And even if such loathsome creatures did exist, everyone knew they slept in their coffins during the day.

Clutching her car keys, she climbed the stairs and knocked on the door.

Her heart jumped into her throat when the door opened and Navarre stood there, looking dark and dangerous in a pair of tight black jeans and a black sweatshirt.

"Adrianna!" Navarre exclaimed, and then smiled. "What are you doing here?"

She stared up at him, wondering what she could say.

Navarre frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"No. No, I... I just wanted to see you."

"Come in."

She hesitated, her gaze darting past him, sweeping over the interior of the house.

"Adrianna?"

She murmured a quick thank-you and stepped inside, wondering if she'd just made what could be a fatal mistake. But that was silly. There was no such thing as vampires. She was simply letting her imagination get the best of her. *That's what comes of reading too many paranormal romances*, she mused. *You start to see monsters in the closet*.

She shivered as she felt his arms around her. Were his hands unusually cold, or was it just that her skin was suddenly so warm?

"I'm glad you came," Navarre said, his lips brushing the top of her head. "Would you care for a cup of coffee?"

"Yes, thank you."

Relief seeped through her. Everyone knew that vampires couldn't consume normal food.

"It's instant," he said. "I hope you don't mind?"

"No, that's fine."

She followed him down the hallway into the kitchen. Glancing into each room they passed, she noticed that all the drapes were drawn against the morning sun.

She sat at the table while he filled a teapot with water and set it on the stove to heat.

"It's dark in here," she remarked. "Why don't you open the curtains?"

"Bad for the furniture," Navarre shrugged. "I can't afford to have the fabric on some of those old pieces fade any more than it already has."

Adrianna grunted softly. Of course! Why hadn't she thought of that herself? Her grandmother had always kept her house dark, claiming the sunlight would fade the carpet.

She felt a flutter of excitement in the pit of her stomach as she watched him move around the kitchen, taking a cup from the shelf, adding a spoonful of instant coffee, filling the cup with water.

"Do you take cream or sugar?" he asked.

"Both, please."

It was only when he placed the cup before her that she realized he wasn't having any.

"I don't care for coffee," he said in answer to her unspoken question. "I only keep it on hand for company."

"Oh."

"Are you taking the day off?"

"No." She glanced at her watch. "I'll have to go soon. The store opens at ten."

His gaze moved over her face in a soft caress. "Would you care to go for a walk along the beach?"

His question put the last of her doubts to rest. "That sounds wonderful."

He smiled as he slipped on a pair of dark glasses, then took her hand in his. "Ready?"

The next hour was magical. Adrianna kicked off her shoes and they walked hand in hand along the beach, watching the sun dance on the water, listening to the quiet whisper of the waves against the shore, watching the gulls wheel and soar against the cloudless sky.

Sitting in the shade of the cliff, she told him of how she'd bought the bookstore, and how one of these days she was going to have to sit down and go through all the old boxes that she'd found in the attic of the building.

"The previous owner was a gypsy woman. I don't think she ever threw anything away." Adrianna laughed softly. "My great-grandmother didn't either. I inherited a huge old trunk when she passed away. I started to go through it a couple of times, but it made me sad, somehow, going through her things, so I just locked it up and put it away."

"The loss of a loved one is never easy," he remarked, "but time is a great healer."

"You sound as though you're speaking from experience."

"Yes."

He glanced out at the ocean, and Adrianna knew intuitively that he was thinking of another woman in another place.

"Would you care to talk about it?" she asked.

His gaze moved back to her face, and he shook his head. "No. It was a long time ago."

"I've been doing all the talking," Adrianna said, forcing a note of cheerfulness into her voice. "Tell me about you. Where did you live before you came to Moreno Bay?"

"Many places."

"Really? Like where? I've never lived anywhere but here."

Navarre blew out a deep breath. "Europe, mostly."

"Have you been to Paris? And Italy? Oh, I'd love to go to Italy. Is it wonderful?"

"I suppose so."

"You suppose so! Tell me what Europe is like. Did you see the Eiffel Tower and the Tower of London? Did you go to Venice?"

Navarre nodded.

Adrianna sighed. "I guess I'll never get there."

"Anything is possible," Navarre remarked. He glanced up at the sun, still amazed, and inordinately pleased, that he could endure the weak winter sunlight for short periods of time. He could feel the heat penetrating the heavy sweatshirt and pants he wore, making his skin tingle. Soon, he would have to go inside, but not yet. He wanted to spend a few more minutes sitting on the beach with Adrianna, pretending he was no different than any other man she knew.

"Do you have family here?" she asked.

"No. Do you?"

Adrianna nodded. "Well, not really *here*. My dad's company transferred him to California during my senior year."

"Why didn't you go with them?"

"I wanted to graduate with my friends. My great-grandma said I could stay with her, and my mom thought it was a good idea, since Grams was so old. It's her house I'm living in. She left it to me in her will, along with enough money to buy the bookstore."

"Do you have brothers or sisters?"

"Oh, yeah. I've got two brothers. Todd is fifteen, and Troy is sixteen. They came to stay with me last summer. At least, they said it was to see me. I suspect they just wanted to check out the girls in town and see if they'd missed anything while they were gone. I suppose next year I'll go there."

"Of course," he said quietly, though he disliked the thought of her leaving town, even for a day. "Family is important. You should stay close to them."

She looked at Navarre, wondering if she was imagining the longing, the loneliness, she saw in his eyes.

Navarre glanced up at the sun again, his eyes narrowing against the brightness that burned his eyes in spite of the dark glasses.

Rising to his feet, he pulled Adrianna up beside him. "As much as I've enjoyed this, I have to go."

"Of course. I didn't mean to take up so much of your time." She pulled her hand from his. "I really should be getting to work."

"Annie, don't." He drew her into his arms and kissed her cheek. Her skin was as smooth and warm as a

sun-kissed peach. "I'd rather be here, with you, than anywhere else."

"Navarre..."

"I wish I didn't have to go." With a low groan, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her, ignoring the heat of the sun that burned through his clothing and seared his flesh.

Breathless, Adrianna gazed up at him. "I don't have to go to work," she murmured.

"But I do." He kissed her again, deeply, passionately. "Annie, I'm sorry, but I have to go. I'll see you tonight," he said and then, after one last kiss, he ran down the beach to the path that led up to Cliff House.

Adrianna frowned as she watched Navarre run effortlessly up the steep slope until he was out of sight. He was in a hurry, all right, there was no doubt of that.

Picking up her shoes, she made her way up the path, hoping, as she did so, that Navarre had left the kitchen door open so she could get her keys, which she'd left on the table.

The door was unlocked, the house quiet, when she stepped into the kitchen. "Navarre?"

She picked up her keys and walked through the rooms downstairs. There was something about Cliff House that made her walk softly, that made her feel that she wasn't alone even though it seemed apparent that the house was empty. And yet, strange as it seemed, she couldn't help feeling that Navarre was nearby. She felt his presence all around her.

She glanced up the stairway, and then, after a moment's hesitation, she climbed the stairs to the second floor, wandering slowly from room to room. A narrow set of stairs led to what she assumed was the attic. A narrow chain stretched from one side of the bannister to the other. A neatly lettered wooden sign, with the words private, keep out, hung from the center of the chain.

Adrianna felt her pulse quicken as she stepped over the chain. On tiptoe, she climbed the stairs, which led to a solid oak door.

She stood there for several moments, her hand hovering over the doorknob, her heart pounding in her ears, and then, overcome by a sudden irrational fear, she turned and ran down the stairs and out of the house.

Lying in his bed, hovering in the shadow world between awareness and oblivion, Navarre listened to Adrianna's footsteps as she moved from room to room, as she climbed the stairs to the attic. He could hear the frantic beating of her heart as she stood outside the door, then the quick tattoo of her footsteps as she ran out of the house, suddenly afraid without knowing why.

But he knew why. A primal instinct buried deep in her subconscious had recognized the danger that lurked beyond the door.

He took a deep breath when he heard her drive away. He grimaced against the pain that stalked his body, caused by his exposure to the sun. But the pain was of no consequence when compared to the pleasure of walking along the beach with Adrianna, of seeing her face in the full light of day, of watching

the sunlight dance in the wealth of her hair.

Closing his eyes, he waited for the darkness to descend, waited for the blackness that would carry him into oblivion; the blessed darkness that would heal him while his body took its unholy rest; the cursed darkness that kept him from sharing the daylight hours with the woman he loved.

He groaned softly, the pain in his heart rivaling the pain in his flesh. He had no right to love her, no right to let her love him.

And as the blackness washed over him, he knew he would have to let her go.

Chapter Seven

"Not tonight, Marty," Adrianna said. "I really don't feel like going out."

"Come on, babe," he coaxed. "It's Friday. A movie and a meal is just what you need."

"I don't think so." She gazed out the front window of the book store, watching the rain come down. "I just want to go home and curl up with a good book."

"You're sure?"

"Afraid so."

There was a slight pause on the other end of the receiver, and then a sigh.

"Listen, Addie, tell me the truth. Am I wasting my time? If I am, just say the word and I won't bother you anymore."

"Do we have to talk about this now?"

"Yeah. Just tell me the truth, Addie. I'm a grown man. I can take it."

"We're friends, Marty. We've been friends for a long time, and I'm afraid that's all we'll ever be."

"Sure you won't reconsider? I'm a heck of a catch."

"I know. I'm sorry, really, but..."

"Hey, don't sweat it." He laughed, a hollow, forced sound. "We can still be friends, and if you ever change your mind, well, like they say, I'll be around."

"Thanks, Marty. Good-bye."

"So long."

Adrianna hung up the receiver, then sat back in her chair and stared out at the rain again. It was the first big storm of the year, and she loved it. She loved the thunder, the rain, the lightning that lit up the sky.

Another couple of hours and she could close up, go home and take a hot bath. Later, she'd curl up on the sofa with a pizza and a good book.

The idea wasn't as appealing as she'd made it sound. What she really wanted was to see Navarre. She'd spent every minute of the last four days waiting for him to call, waiting to see him again.

Why hadn't he called? She closed her eyes, reliving the time they'd spent on the beach. Had she read more into his words, his kiss, than he'd intended? She remembered the night he'd come to her house, remembered the sound of his voice when he'd told her he needed her. Had it all been a lie? If so, what had he hoped to gain?

She slammed her palm against the desk top. It made a satisfying *smack*. If only she had Nancy's confidence! A dozen times in the last four days, she'd reached for the phone, only to hang up. She couldn't call him. She'd chased him too many times already. This time, it was up to him.

And what if he never calls?

"Then he never calls!" The words hung in the air. How had she fallen for the man so fast? She hardly knew him, hardly knew anything about him. But the thought of never seeing him again sat like a lead weight in the pit of her stomach.

"Damn you, Navarre, why don't you call me? Please call me..."

Muttering a very unladylike oath, she jumped to her feet. She wouldn't chase after him any more. It was Friday, and she was going out! She didn't need Mr. V. Navarre.

She glanced at the sign behind her desk, and read the words aloud: "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle."

With a nod, she picked up a stack of books and carried them out to the front of the store. She'd fill the "New Romance" section, and then close up early. So what if it was only four-thirty? That was one of the advantages of being the owner, she thought as she arranged the books. You could go home whenever you wanted.

She grimaced as she heard the bell over the door ring, announcing a customer in the shop. Darn! So much for quitting early.

Pasting a smile on her face, she turned around, her breath trapped in her throat when she saw Navarre standing inside the door.

His gaze reached out to her, probing, searching, and then he held out his arms. "Annie?"

The ice around her heart melted at the sound of his voice. With a sigh, she flew to his arms like a bird to its nest.

"Navarre, it's been four days. I thought..." She bit the words off. She wouldn't ask questions. He was here, and that was all that mattered.

Arms locked tightly around her waist, he rested his forehead against hers. "I'm no good for you, Annie," he whispered. "Tell me to go away before it's too late."

"No!"

"I'm so afraid," he said, his voice thick with anguish. "So afraid I'll hurt you."

"You won't."

Her words were like acid, eating at his heart. "You don't know..."

She lifted her hand to his mouth, stilling his words. "I missed you."

He groaned low in his throat. He shouldn't have come here. He could hurt her in ways she couldn't begin to imagine. The thought of what he was capable of sickened him, yet he lacked the willpower to stay away from her. He'd tried. Oh, how he'd tried, but her memory haunted his nights and tormented his days, until he could think of nothing else but Annie—Annie, in his arms. The scent and the taste and the touch of her. Annie...

"I was just about to close up," she said, taking his hand. "Come on, we'll go to my place. I'll fix dinner and we can watch a movie or something."

Helpless to resist, he watched her lock up the store.

"Where did you park?"

"I walked." It had been wonderful, walking in the rain. Bundled up in a heavy jacket and a scarf, with the clouds hiding the sun, he had relished the opportunity to be outside, to tread the damp ground in the daylight, as if he were a mortal man.

"We'll take my car then," Adrianna said, "and I'll drive you home later."

She couldn't stop looking at him, couldn't stop touching him, assuring herself he was really there, in the car beside her. The day, which had seemed gloomy in spite of the rain, suddenly seemed bright and filled with possibilities.

"I love winter," Adrianna remarked as she pulled into the driveway. "It's my favorite time of the year."

Navarre nodded. "Mine, too." A wonderful time of year, winter, he mused. The sun was less intense, the days were shorter, the nights longer.

Adrianna switched off the engine, then smiled up at Navarre as he slid out of the car and came around to open her door. Hand in hand, they ran up the stairs to the porch.

"What would you like for dinner?" Adrianna asked as she unlocked the door.

Dinner! What did people eat these days? "I don't care," Navarre said with studied nonchalance. "Whatever you like."

"I was thinking of ordering in a pizza. I've got a good bottle of wine I've been saving for a special occasion."

"Pizza will be fine."

"Good."

He watched her go through the house, turning on lights, drawing the curtains. He glanced quickly around the living room, relaxing when he saw there were no mirrors in evidence.

"Here, let me take your coat."

He shrugged out of the heavy jacket, removed the scarf, and handed them to her.

"Make yourself at home," she invited. "I'll just go hang these wet things in the bathroom."

He was sitting on the sofa when she returned to the living room. "I called for the pizza," she said, sitting down beside him. "I hope you like cheese with everything."

Navarre nodded, wondering just what "everything" included.

"Should we have a fire?"

"If you like."

She started to get up, but he put a restraining hand on her arm. "I'll do it."

"Okay."

She loved to watch him. She had never known a man who moved the way he did, always in control, each movement light and seemingly without effort. He walked that way, too, hardly making a sound, as if his feet barely touched the floor.

He knelt in front of the fireplace, deftly arranging the wood before striking a match. There was a quiet *whoosh*, followed by the crackle of flames, and then a warm glow filled the room.

Adrianna smiled at him as he sat down beside her. "Cozy," she remarked.

Navarre nodded. There was something primitive about the sound of the rain combined with the heat of the flames. He could smell the wood and the fire and the storm.

And the woman.

Hunger rose within him. A hunger that had nothing to do with food, and everything to do with Adrianna.

He stared into the flames, feeling the hunger swell within him, feeling his desire flare to life, as hot as the fire blazing in the hearth.

The sound of the doorbell came as a relief.

Adrianna jumped off the sofa to pay for the pizza.

Minutes later, she had dished up the pizza and poured two glasses of wine.

"To us," she said, lifting her glass in a toast.

"To us," he repeated.

Adrianna sipped her wine. It was warm and smooth, but not nearly as intoxicating as Navarre's gaze. His dark gray eyes seemed to glow as though lit from within, the heat reaching out to caress her skin. She blinked, startled by the force of his gaze, by the unshakable impression that he *had* touched her, that his hand had stroked her cheek even though she hadn't seen him move.

Navarre held her gaze a moment more, and then looked away, breaking the bond between them. How easily she succumbed to the force of the dark power he possessed! How easy it would be to steal into her heart and mind, to make her long for his touch. She had no weapons with which to fight him, no knowledge of the monster who shared her table.

The knowledge that he should not be there struck him with the force of a blow. She was a young, vibrant woman with her whole life ahead of her. He was not of her world, and he had no right to make himself a part of her life, no guarantee that he could be with her and not destroy her.

Adrianna placed two slices of pizza on his plate. The smell of sausage and pepperoni sickened him.

"Dig in," Adrianna said, smiling at him. "Tony's makes the best pizza in town."

He stared at his plate a moment. It would be so easy to bend her mind to his, to plant the illusion that he was eating in her mind while he disposed of the nauseating mess on his plate, but he couldn't bring himself to play games with her mind, couldn't bring himself to exert his power over her. If he was going to dwell in her world, then he would play by her rules.

Lifting a slice of pizza, he took a bite. It was the first solid food he had consumed in almost two thousand years, and it took all his formidable self-control to chew and swallow.

"How do you like it?" Adrianna asked.

"It's the best pizza I've ever had," Navarre replied, thinking it was the first, and last, he would ever eat.

They spoke of inconsequential things as they ate. He was relieved when the meal was over. He waited until Adrianna carried the dishes into the kitchen, and then he went into the bathroom, shut the door, and retched.

When he returned to the front room, Adrianna was sitting on the sofa watching the local news.

"It's awful, isn't it?" she said, gesturing at the television screen. "They found a lady huddling in an alley near one of the beach shacks last night. She'd lost a lot of blood, and she kept babbling about a monster who had bitten her neck, just like Dracula."

Navarre went suddenly still as he stared at the screen. He had never taken blood from anyone who lived in Moreno Bay. Always, he went to a neighboring town, choosing his victims with care, making certain that he erased all memory of his presence from their minds.

"Navarre? Are you okay?"

"Yes, fine."

He slipped his arm around Adrianna's shoulders and drew her close. Was it just a bizarre coincidence, or was there another vampire in Moreno Bay?

Adrianna snuggled against him, then lifted her face to his.

"Aren't you..." She bit down on her lower lip to keep from asking him to kiss her.

"What is it?"

She stared up at him, mute, the wanting evident in the depths of her clear blue eyes.

"Annie." He pressed her head to his chest and held her tightly, a sudden nameless fear knifing through him.

He felt her hand caress his cheek, then slide down his neck to rest on his chest. "Don't make me beg, Navarre," she whispered.

His arms tightened around her as he gazed out the window. It was still raining, a hard steady rain. The sky was a cold, leaden gray. He stroked Adrianna's hair while his mind probed the darkness, but he had no sense of another vampire in the area. And yet that, in itself, proved nothing. There were vampires older than he who could shield their presence from his mind. He tried to tell himself the woman had been the victim of some drug-crazed maniac, but he knew, deep inside, that he was no longer the only vampire in the city.

Adrianna moved restlessly in his embrace, the warmth of her body pressing against his, her nearness, her heat, chasing every other thought from his mind.

With a low groan, he slanted his mouth over hers and kissed her, and at that moment, there was nothing else in all the world but the woman in his arms, her lips parted in gentle surrender, her hands moving over his chest and back, kneading the muscles in his arms. Her hands were warm against his skin, and he luxuriated in her touch, basking in the sensations that rippled through him. So long, he thought, it had been so long since he had allowed the touch of a human hand.

He stretched out on the sofa and drew her close, molding her body to his, marveling anew at how well they fit together. He rained kisses on her brow, her cheeks, the tip of her nose, before he claimed her lips again. Sweet, he mused, so sweet. She moaned softly as she pressed herself against his arousal. Desire shot through him, hotter than any flame, and he knew he had to let her go, now, before it was too late.

And even as the thought crossed his mind, he felt his body's response, felt the sharp prick of his fangs against his tongue as his urge to make love to her warred with the need to sink his teeth into her throat and drain her of life.

The scent of her desire mingled with the scent of her blood. With a low groan, he began to kiss her neck, his tongue lingering over the pulse that throbbed there. He had fed before he came to her, and yet the need to drink from her, to taste her, spiraled through him.

Caught up in the wonder of his touch, she made a soft sound in the back of her throat as she turned her head, exposing her throat to his hungry gaze as she writhed against him.

She gasped with mingled pleasure and pain as she felt his teeth scrape against the tender flesh of her neck.

Navarre froze, the awareness of what he'd almost done chilling him to the depths of his soul. Never, in all the years since Shaylyn had forced the Dark Gift upon him, had he stooped to taking the blood of one

so young, so innocent.

"Navarre?" She called his name, her voice drugged with passion.

Abruptly, he sat up and buried his face in his hands. He could feel the hunger raging through him, knew his eyes betrayed the same unholy lust he had often seen in Shaylyn's. He ran his tongue over his fangs, sickened to think of what he had almost done. He'd been a fool to come here, a fool to think he could be near her and not want her. All these years, he had congratulated himself on his ability to control the hunger. Only now did he realize that lie had been kidding himself, that he hadn't controlled it at all. It hadn't been the hunger that was controlled, but himself. He had refused to put himself in any situation that might get out of hand. He had kept his distance from mortals, never letting himself care too deeply, never letting himself get close for fear he wouldn't be able to take a woman's love without taking her very life as well.

"Navarre?"

He felt her stir beside him, felt her hand stroke his back. "Is something wrong?"

"Annie, go to your room and lock the door."

"What?"

"Please, just do it."

"I don't understand. What's wrong?"

"Do it!"

His voice echoed off the walls like the crack of doom. Frightened, she jumped off the sofa and ran down the hall. He heard the sound of her door slam shut, the harsh rasp of the lock falling into place.

In the next instant, he was out the front door, running down the rain-slick sidewalk.

Foolish creature, he thought as he darted across the street. *Try as you might, you can't outrun what you are.*

Chapter Eight

Adrianna cowered against the door, her heart pounding, her breath coming in ragged gasps. What had happened out there? One minute he had been kissing her until she was drowning in ecstasy, and the next he was ordering her to her room as if she were a naughty child.

For a moment, she held her breath, her ears straining for some sound from the other room. Nothing. Adrenalin pumping, she began to pace the floor. Never in all her life had she heard a voice like that, felt such menace. Try as she might, she could find no explanation for his peculiar behavior, and as the minutes ticked by, she began to wonder if she hadn't overreacted, or perhaps imagined the whole thing.

She glanced at the clock on her bedside table. Twenty minutes had passed.

On silent feet, she crossed the floor, turned the lock, and opened the door. "Navarre?"

He didn't answer, but his name seemed to hover in the air, repeating itself over and over again. *Navarre, Navarre, Navarre* ...

She took a cautious step down the hallway, her heart beating in triple time as she paused to listen, but all she heard was the pounding of her own heart, and the steady drip of the rain.

Her throat was dry, her palms damp, when she reached the doorway to the living room. "Navarre?"

She glanced around the room, then checked the kitchen and the den. He was gone.

The breath she'd been holding escaped in a long sigh. She didn't know if it was disappointment or relief.

She moved through the house, double-checking to make sure all the doors and windows were locked, wondering at her sudden compulsion to check them yet a third time. Moreno Bay was a small town. Nothing ever happened there. There was no crime to speak of. Until the incident reported on TV that night, the last offense of any note had occurred when Milt Evans got drunk and drove his pickup through the front window of Mavis Harper's Dress shop.

Still, as she drew the shade over the kitchen window, she couldn't shake off the feeling that something evil was lurking outside in the shadows.

Navarre stood on the balcony of Cliff House, his hands clenched at his sides, his face turned up to the sky. He closed his eyes as the cold rain pelted his face and chest.

For the first time in years, he wished he had the right to pray, to plead with a loving God to protect Adrianna, to keep her safe. From himself.

He should leave there, he thought, leave tonight while the memory of what he had almost done was still fresh in his mind. But all he could think of was how good it had been to hold her in his arms, the way her hands had felt as they caressed him. For the first time in centuries he had felt loved, cared for. For one brief moment, he had dared to hope that he could spend time with Adrianna without destroying her.

Besides, he couldn't leave town, not until he learned who, or what, had attacked the woman in the alley.

He stood there until dawn, oblivious to the cold and the rain, his thoughts turned inward. Eons ago he had resigned himself to what he was. He had learned to appreciate his supernatural powers, to enjoy the increased physical strength, the constant good health. He didn't age. He was never sick. He had traveled the world time and time again. And when he grew weary of living, when the loneliness grew too great, he had only to go to ground for a decade or a century, and when he surfaced, the world was new again, fresh again. Perhaps he should go to ground now and sleep away the years of her life.

Heedless of the passing hours, he stood there, gazing in the direction of Adrianna's house, picturing her asleep in the bed that had once been his, imagining a lifestyle he had never known.

The rain stopped with the coming of the dawn, and still he stood on the balcony, staring at the rainbow that stretched across the sky. He watched the sun rise, a brilliant burst of color that painted the horizon with vivid slashes of ocher and crimson.

With a sigh, he turned away and went into the house. Feeling drained of all hope, he changed into a pair

of jeans and a black turtleneck sweater. Barefooted, he wandered through the house. He took a deep breath, and the faint floral scent of Adrianna's perfume filled his nostrils.

Adrianna...

And even as her image rose in his mind, he sensed her presence, heard her knock at the door.

He swore under his breath, wondering what madness had brought her there.

"Navarre? Navarre! Open the door. I know you're in there."

Angry that she had dared to seek him out, he stalked to the door and flung it open.

Adrianna took a step back, alarmed by the rage that glittered in his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I..." She took another step backward, then straightened her shoulders and stood firm. "I had to see you."

"Go home, Adrianna. You're not safe here. You're not safe with me."

"Why?" She gazed up at him, her blue eyes shining with unshed tears. "Tell me what's wrong. What have I done?"

"Done?" He groaned deep in his throat. "You've done nothing. Please, Annie, please go home where you belong."

Her concern for her own safety dissolved when she heard the anguish in his voice, saw the pain in his eyes.

"Please tell me what's wrong," she urged. "Let me help you."

"You can't help me. No one can." He stared past her, judging the time, knowing he would have to seek his rest soon.

"I'm not leaving, Navarre. Whether you want to admit it or not, there's something special between us, something I don't want to lose." She laid her hand on his forearm, felt his muscle flex and tighten at her touch. "I'm falling in love with you."

"No!"

It wasn't the reaction she had hoped for. She had expected him to be surprised, perhaps disbelieving, since they had known each other such a short time. A part of her had hoped he would be happy, that he would sweep her into his arms and tell her that he loved her, too.

But there was no joy in his expression, only a soul-deep misery. She felt suddenly foolish and a little embarrassed. She'd never thrown herself at a man before, never realized how devastating unrequited love could be.

She stared up at him, wanting to run away, to crawl into a hole and hide, but she seemed rooted to the

spot, unable to move, unable to think of anything but the way she'd felt in his arms the night before, the way he'd held her and kissed her.

"What happened last night?" she asked. "Just tell me that, and I'll go away and never bother you again."

"Come in," he said, and turned away without waiting to see if she followed him or not.

A shiver crept up her spine as she entered the house. As usual, all the drapes were drawn and the interior of the house was dark and cool.

She followed Navarre into the front parlor and sat down on the edge of an Early American sofa, her hands folded in her lap.

Navarre stood at the hearth with his back to her. "I'm going to tell you something you probably won't believe," he said, still not facing her. "And then I want you to leave. No questions asked."

Hardly daring to breathe, she waited for him to go on.

He could feel her watching him, and he stared into the fireplace, wondering how to tell her what he was. Should he just blurt it out? Or should he let her see him as he really was?

"Navarre?"

"Do you believe in the supernatural, Adrianna?"

"The supernatural? You mean like ESP and psychic phenomena, stuff like that?"

Slowly, he shook his head, and then he turned around to face her. "I'm not like you," he said flatly. "I'm not mortal."

She started to laugh at the absurdity of what he was saying, but then she looked into his eyes, and in their fathomless depths, she saw that he was telling the truth, or at least what he believed to be the truth.

"I was born almost two thousand years ago, on a small island off the coast of Greece." He lifted his hand in a broad gesture that encompassed the house and its contents. "All this furniture, the bed you bought, is mine, collected over hundreds of lifetimes."

"No." She shook her head. "That's impossible."

"Sometimes I wish it was."

"So you're trying to tell me you're immortal?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"I don't believe you."

"It's true nonetheless."

"You want me to believe you've lived for almost two thousand years?"

"I'm not alive, Adrianna. I've been dead for close to two thousand years."

One of them was insane, she thought, not certain which of them it was. Him for speaking such nonsense, or her for listening, and almost believing.

"Why are you doing this?" She fisted the tears from her eyes. "If you don't want to see me again, just say so! You don't have to make up some outrageous lie!"

"I'm not lying. Look at me, Adrianna."

Reluctantly, she met his gaze, felt the blood in her veins turn to ice as his eyes took on an eerie red glow and his lips drew back, exposing two long teeth that could only be called fangs.

"Now do you believe?"

"It can't be. There's no such thing as... as a..."

"I believe vampire is the word you're looking for, and I can assure you, they do exist."

She blinked, and he was beside her, his hand closing on her arm. She felt the steel-like strength of his grip, the coolness of his skin, as he guided her into the next room.

A muscle throbbed in his jaw as he placed her in front of a large oval mirror, then stood beside her and removed the cloth that had covered the surface.

Adrianna stared at her reflection, hardly recognizing the face that stared back at her, her eyes wide and afraid, her lips parted as she drew in a shaky breath.

Navarre cast no reflection at all.

"But... but it's daylight, and you're awake." She shook her head, her mind refusing to believe what she knew to be true. "I saw you eat... we walked on the beach..."

She turned to look at him, then glanced at the mirror again, and all the color drained from her face.

He watched her expression turn to one of horror and disbelief, and then, with a wordless cry, she fainted.

He caught her in his arms, held her effortlessly to his chest. He would hold her for just a minute, he thought, then take her outside and put her in her car. He glanced around the room, knowing he dared not stay at Cliff House any longer. If he left now, he would have time to find a place to go to ground before the heat of the sun became unbearable.

But one minute stretched into two, and then three, and still he held her close, his heart aching at the thought of never seeing her again. Would she betray him, now that she knew what he was? And if she did, who would believe her?

Thunder rumbled across the sky. A jagged bolt of lightning ripped through the clouds. He couldn't leave her in her car, not in this storm.

Instead, he carried her upstairs and put her to bed in his bed. Unable to help himself, he lay down beside

her and gathered her into his arms. He would hold her close a few minutes more, and then he would leave.

But the sun stayed hidden in the clouds, giving him a reprieve, and he continued to hold her, his gaze never leaving her face.

"Forgive me," he murmured. "I never meant to cause you pain."

She stirred at the sound of his voice. He watched her eyelids flutter open, saw the confusion in her eyes turn to fear when she looked at him.

"Tell me it isn't true."

"I wish I could."

"Are you... Did you...?" She licked her lips, then raised a trembling hand to the side of her neck.

"You're fine, Adrianna. You fainted, that's all."

She looked up at him through eyes filled with terror. It was an expression he had seen on countless faces when the one he had chosen to drink from realized what he was.

"What are you going to do to me?"

Fear. He could smell it on her. It sickened him that he was the cause of it. "Nothing."

He brushed a wisp of hair from her brow, a muscle flexing in his jaw when she recoiled from his touch.

Slowly and deliberately, he put her from him and stood up. "You can stay here until the rain stops," he said, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice.

"Where are you going?"

"Out."

"Where?"

"I need to find a place to spend the day."

She glanced around the room. It was large, but sparsely furnished, containing only a large dresser, a chest of black lacquer, and the bed. "I thought vampires slept in coffins."

"Some do," he said, his voice gruff. "I don't care for it."

He saw the questions in her eyes, the doubts that lingered even in the face of reality. "Good-bye, Adrianna."

The words were soft, and final. He was leaving, and she knew that if she let him go, she would never see him again.

She watched him turn away. Now she understood the loneliness she had so often seen in his eyes, heard

in his voice. She had a sudden, inexplicable need to hold him, to comfort him.

He opened the door, and she saw him hesitate, take a deep breath, and then take the first step that would carry him away from her forever.

"Navarre! Wait!" Jumping out of bed, she ran after him. "Wait! Please wait!"

He stiffened as he felt her arms wrap around his waist, felt the warmth of her body pressing against his back.

"Don't leave me," she whispered. "Please don't leave me."

"Annie, you don't know what you're saying."

"I don't care what you are. I don't want you to go."

"I don't want to go." The words came from deep within, as if they'd been dredged from the very bottom of his soul.

"Then don't go." She dragged him around to face her. "I love you. I've never loved anyone before."

He shook his head, amused and amazed by the woman standing before him. "Annie, my sweet Annie, don't you know you're not safe here, not safe with me?"

"I don't care."

"I care."

"You've never hurt me before."

"I wouldn't hurt you now, not intentionally." He sighed, resisting the urge to pull her into his arms. "Do you know the story of the rattlesnake who offered to carry a rabbit across a river?"

She shook her head.

"The rabbit said no, because he was afraid the snake would eat him, but the snake promised he wouldn't, and the rabbit believed him. When they reached the other side of the river, the snake bit the rabbit. 'Why?' the rabbit asked. 'You promised!' 'I couldn't help it' the rattler explained with a smile. 'I'm a snake'."

Navarre's eyes begged for her understanding. "I'm a vampire, Annie. And sometimes, even after all these years, the hunger is stronger than I am."

"Tell me to leave, then." She looked up at him through wide blue eyes filled with love and trust. "Tell me you never want to see me again, and I won't bother you any more."

He opened his mouth, but his tongue refused to obey his mind's command. "I can't. Heaven help me, I can't send you out of my life."

He glanced at the window. Even though boards covered the window, he knew the clouds had passed, knew the sun was high in the sky, as a familiar heaviness began to steal over him.

"Go home, Annie. I'll come to you tonight."

Fighting the lethargy creeping over him, he stood in the doorway staring after her. Never before had he taken his rest in a place known to another. Never, in the near two thousand years of his existence, had he trusted anyone, male or female, mortal or vampire, to know where he passed the hours of the day.

It grieved him to think she might betray him, but he knew it was possible. Once she was away from him, once she'd had time to think about what he'd told her, there was always a chance she would decide he was a danger to her, a danger to the town. Given time to think, she might come to the conclusion that he was evil and should be destroyed. And though he wasn't totally helpless during the hours of daylight, he was still weak, still at his most vulnerable.

With a sigh, he closed and bolted the door, then settled back on his bed, knowing that if Annie betrayed him, nothing else would matter anyway.

Chapter Nine

She didn't go to work that day. She didn't really do anything except sit and stare into the distance. It was as if her whole life had been put on hold.

Vampire.

It was impossible.

Still, her grandmother had claimed to see an angel before she died. And there was a lady in town who claimed to be a witch. Maybe there really were stranger things in heaven and earth than she had dreamed of.

But vampires?

She thought of all the grade-B horror movies she'd seen growing up. The monsters had always been pictured as horrible ghouls clad in flowing black capes, preying on the blood of innocent young women, turning helpless mortals into mindless zombies. In the movies, vampires were evil incarnate, the very essence of darkness and depravity, a sin against nature. They were cruel, heartless, unfeeling, incapable of tender emotions.

But Navarre was nothing like that. Was he? Would she think differently if he looked more like Lon Chaney and less like Daniel Day-Lewis?

If he was a vampire, how could he endure the sunlight? They had spent a morning walking on the beach. She had seen him eat sausage pizza and drink a glass of wine.

But he cast no reflection in a mirror. And she had seen his fangs, and the hideous glow in his eyes. She remembered inviting him into her house, remembered reading somewhere that a vampire could not enter a house unless he had been invited. And she had invited Navarre. There would be no keeping him out now, she thought, even if she wanted to.

She stared outside, willing the sun to set, and then she laughed, a nervous, shaky laugh. Maybe she was insane, she thought. Who else but a lunatic would be sitting on the floor, wishing the sun would go down because she was eagerly awaiting the appearance of a vampire?

He came with the setting sun, his expression wary. He avoided meeting her eyes, almost as if he was afraid of her. Or ashamed.

Adrianna closed the door behind him, then stood there, uncertain what to do next. "Vampire."

He stiffened at her use of the word, all his senses suddenly alert. "What?"

"The V. In your name. It stands for vampire, doesn't it?"

He nodded, a wry smile curving his lips.

"So," she said, nervously toying with the folds of her skirt, "what do we do now?"

"I don't know." He paced the floor in front of the fireplace, back and forth, back and forth, like a caged tiger. "I've only loved one other mortal," he remarked quietly, "and it was a long, long time ago."

Adrianna stared at him. "You love me?"

He frowned at her as if she weren't very bright. "Of course."

"You never said so before."

"I know." He crossed the room and took her into his arms, holding her carefully, as though he was afraid of hurting her. Very gently, he kissed the top of her head. "I do love you, Annie," he murmured.

"And I love you!"

"I only hope you don't regret it."

"I won't," she whispered, lifting her face to his. "I won't..."

He would have let her go then, but she clung to him, molding her body to his in silent invitation.

"Annie..." He shook his head. "This isn't a good idea."

"Why not?"

How could he explain it to her? How could he tell her that it wasn't only passion she aroused in him, but a terrible hunger?

"I think I'll die if you don't kiss me," she said petulantly.

"You might die if I do."

She thought he was kidding her, but when she looked into his eyes, she saw that he was serious. Dead serious. A fit of hysterical laughter bubbled up inside her. Dead serious, she mused. No pun intended!

"I think I'd better go," Navarre said, easing out of her arms.

"Go where?"

He didn't answer. He didn't have to.

"It's true, then? You... you drink blood?"

He nodded curtly, his expression grim.

"Did you...?"

"Did I what?"

"That woman in the alley... did you do that?"

"No." He ran a hand through his hair, his dark eyes pleading with her. "You've got to believe me, Annie."

"Have you ever done anything like that?"

He turned away, wondering how he could explain, how he could make her understand.

"Have you?"

"Yes." He whirled around to face her. "Yes! I've told you what I am." The condemnation in her eyes was like acid eating at his soul. "Annie, let me explain."

"Can you?" She loved him, but she couldn't condone murder.

"When first I was made, I couldn't control the hunger within me. You can't understand the pain, the need. It's worse than any drug addiction, any craving. In the beginning, drunk with power and driven by a force that was stronger than I was, I took what I needed without regard for what I was doing, for the lives I was taking. It was only later that I learned that I didn't have to kill to survive, that I could take what I needed without doing any harm. Still later, I learned I could drink from animals, that their blood would sustain me for long periods of time..."

His voice trailed off as he saw the look of horror and revulsion in her eyes. It cut deep, yet a part of him welcomed it. Perhaps now she would realize what sort of monster he was. Perhaps she would send him away. He wouldn't blame her if she did. In the long run, she would be better off without him.

"And now?"

He sighed, as if shrugging off a heavy burden. "There are plenty of sheep and cattle in the area."

She looked so relieved, he almost didn't tell her the rest. But she deserved to know it all.

"I can't survive off the blood of animals indefinitely," he said flatly. "From time to time I have to have human blood."

"Like the lady in the alley."

"Dammit, Adrianna, I never touched that woman!"

"Then who did?"

"I don't know. Another vampire, I suspect."

"Another one?" She shuddered, and then she laughed ruefully. "Welcome to Moreno Bay, village of the damned."

"It's not funny."

"I know." Images of *The Lost Boys* rose in her mind and she imagined herself running through the house, filling the tub with holy water, sharpening stakes, hanging strings of garlic around the windows and doors.

His gaze met hers. "This isn't going to work, Annie—you know that, don't you?"

"I don't know what I know any more. Except that I love you."

Like two frightened children, they sought comfort in each other's arms. He never meant to kiss her, only to hold her, to find solace in her nearness even as he sought to soothe her fears.

But his lips whispered over hers, and then it was too late to turn back, too late to think, too late to do anything but feel.

The skin beneath his fingertips was as smooth and soft as he had imagined. Her hair was like silk in his hands, her breasts were warm and full, lush with promise.

Effortlessly, he swung her up in his arms and carried her down the hallway toward her bedroom, toward the bed that had once been his, the bed he had so often imagined sharing with her.

And now she was there, and he was beside her. Fear rose within him as their bodies came together. He tried one last time to pull away before it was too late, but she refused to let him go, and then he was rising over her, his body meshing with hers.

He felt the hunger rise within him, urging him to take her blood, and he fought it back, refusing to let it destroy the woman he loved. He heard Adrianna's voice, whispering that she loved him, and the blood lust shriveled and died. And for that moment, he was free of the Dark Gift, free to love her without fear. He had never known such ecstasy. Not with Katlaina. Not with Shaylyn.

With a sigh, he buried his face in the lush valley between her breasts and lost himself in the warmth and the wonder that was Annie.

"How did you become a vampire?" she asked later. She was lying in his arms, her head resting on his shoulder. "Is it done like they say in the books? Did she drain you of blood, and then give it back to you?"

"Yes."

"Did you want to be a vampire?"

"No." He wound a lock of her hair around his hand, delighting in its softness. He could single out the scent of her hair from the other scents that clung to her—the flowery fragrance of shampoo, the clean, fresh smell of the sun, the faint odor of the hairspray she had used earlier in the day. He released his hold on her hair, felt the thickness of each individual strand as it slid past his fingers. He hadn't wanted to be a vampire, he thought, but he liked the supernatural powers that came with the Dark Gift.

He took a deep breath, and then he told her of his childhood, of how he'd spent his whole life locked up in a room. He told her of Katlaina, and felt the pain of her loss burn through him again. He told her of Shaylyn, of how he had hated her, of how he'd spent time with her long ago. He told her about traveling over the world, of the changes he had seen, of the times when the burden of existence had been overwhelming, and he'd gone to ground, sometimes for a few years, sometimes for a century or more. How, sometimes, it was the only way he could hang on to his sanity.

She listened quietly, occasionally interrupting him to ask a question.

It was near dawn when he finished his tale. Coming back to himself, he gazed at Adrianna, surprised to see tears in her eyes.

"You're crying," he exclaimed softly. "Why?"

"Because you've been so alone. But you're not alone now," she whispered, stroking the curve of his jaw. "I'll never let you be alone again."

Her words cheered him even as he realized that, sooner or later, he would lose her as he had lost Katlaina. But he would not dwell on that now. Later, there would be time to lament her mortality, to wonder how he would face an endless future without her. But for now, for this moment, he would take the love she was offering without question, without hesitation. Take it as a gift, freely given, and hope she would never regret the giving.

"I wish you didn't have to go."

In lieu of words, he kissed her. They had spent the entire night in each other's arms, making love, dozing, making love again.

At dawn, they had showered together, taking turns washing each other, making love again, with the water sluicing over them.

Later, wrapped in a towel and a smile, Adrianna had fixed herself a pot of coffee while Navarre sipped a glass of warm red wine.

And now they were in bed again. Navarre stroked her hair, remembering how, only a short time ago, he had wished he could fall asleep in the arms of a woman. He'd done that last night. Fallen asleep in Adrianna's arms, then come awake with the first whisper of dawn to feel her lips brushing his cheek.

But now the sun was climbing in the sky. Even though the curtains were drawn, he could feel the subtle change in the air as night turned to day, smell the sun-warmed earth and grass.

With a sigh, he cupped Adrianna's face in his hands and kissed her and then, ignoring his body's immediate response to even that slight bit of loving, he slid out of bed and began to dress.

Adrianna sat with her back against the headboard, the sheet tucked under her arms. Never, in all her life, had she expected to find the ecstasy, the peace of mind and spirit, that she had found in Navarre's arms.

Her gaze caressed him as he dressed, admiring the width of his shoulders, the long line of his back, the sinuous way he moved. Already, she was counting the hours and minutes until she could see him again. Be with him again.

When he was ready to go, Navarre knelt beside the bed, needing to hold her, to touch her, one more time.

"Tonight?" he asked, and it was both question and promise.

"Tonight."

He ran his knuckles over her cheek in a last, quick caress, and then he was gone.

Navarre swore softly as he left Adrianna's house. The storm had passed, the sun was warm, and he had lingered too long. With one arm flung over his face, he willed himself toward home, his speed increasing until he was virtually invisible to the human eye.

He vaulted up the stairs to the porch, opened the door with a wave of his hand, and raced up the stairs to the attic.

Inside, he slammed the door, then stood with his back braced against the wood, his breath coming in hard, short gasps.

"I thought you were never coming."

He whirled around at the sound of her voice, familiar even after the passage of so many years.

"Shaylyn!"

She was reclining on his bed, her black hair falling over her shoulders like a dark cloud, her black eyes glittering.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Waiting for you, of course."

She was still beautiful. Still deadly. He knew then who had attacked the woman in the alley.

"Why are you here, Shaylyn?"

Shaylyn shrugged. "Do I need a reason?"

She uncurled from the bed in a smooth, graceful movement, reminding Navarre of a sleek black panther.

"I've missed you, my Navarre." She ran her hands over his shoulders as she swayed seductively against him. "Tell me you've missed me, too."

"What do you want, Shaylyn?"

"I should think that would be obvious."

He caught her hands in his as his body grew heavy. "I can't talk to you now." It was an effort to speak, to think. He glanced at the bed, then at Shaylyn.

She nodded her understanding. "Until later, my sweet," she purred, and, with a wave of her hand, she transformed into an iridescent black mist and disappeared from his sight.

Navarre fought the darkness sweeping over him. His feet felt like lead as he made his way toward the bed. His last thought, as the blackness dragged him down into oblivion, was that he'd have to find another place to pass the hours of daylight.

Chapter Ten

Adrianna went to work, not only because she was in desperate need of something to occupy her mind, but because the bookstore was, after all, her only means of support.

Thursdays were usually quiet, and today was no exception. Her regulars came in for coffee about ten-thirty, then browsed through the racks for half an hour or so.

During a lull, Adrianna went up into the attic and opened one of the boxes that held the books left behind by the previous owner. She grabbed a couple and carried them downstairs, not looking at the titles until she was seated at her desk.

The first book was an old reference book on medieval castles. The second was called *The Handbook of the Undead*.

Adrianna stared at the title, her heart pounding erratically. After a moment, she opened the book and began thumbing through the pages. There were sections on how to prevent a vampire, how to recognize a vampire, how to destroy a vampire.

She felt a sense of excitement as she turned to the index in the back of the book. And there, under C, she found Curing the Vampire, How to, on page 386.

Was it possible? she wondered. Could Navarre be cured? Her gaze skimmed the instructions. There was a recipe for a potion that must be mixed during the dark of the moon and consumed by the vampire the moment he woke from his rest. A note at the bottom suggested that, for best results, the potion be mixed by a Transylvanian gypsy, preferably a virgin.

Adrianna grimaced, wondering where they'd find a gypsy of any kind in Moreno Bay.

She ran her finger over the ingredients for the potion: a smidgen of mugwort, a pinch of larkspur, a dash of foxglove, a touch of yarrow, a generous helping of cinquefoil, hyssop, rue, and a hint of garlic.

Adrianna frowned. The dark of the moon. Transylvanian gypsies. It sounded ridiculous, and yet, what if it would work?

Her romance book club ladies came in at four, laughing and talking about the latest novels they'd read. They met at her store every Thursday afternoon, to talk about the book they'd read the week before, and

to pick a new one for the coming week. Adrianna was a big fan of romances, and she usually sat in with them. But not today. She was too immersed in *The Handbook of the Undead*, and so she just waved and told them to help themselves to coffee and cookies.

The book was fascinating, though she found it hard to believe anyone could take it seriously. In the Philippines, a vampire called *anawang* was believed to be a beautiful female vampire, who was able to marry and have children; however, at night, it flew to other houses to drink the blood of its victims.

In Bulgaria, they believed that a vampire could be destroyed if it could be forced into a bottle, then thrown into a fire.

According to the book, those who were likely candidates for vampirism were those who were born with a red caul, with teeth, or a red birth mark. The seventh son of a seventh son was also likely to become one of the undead, as were those who died without benefit of baptism. A vampire might be made from a corpse if a cat jumped over the body, or the deceased died by drowning.

She frowned when she read that vampires must rest in a coffin. Navarre slept in a bed, just like anyone else.

Much was made of the fact that vampires could be held off by a cross, or other holy relic. Adrianna didn't know if that was true. Anne Rice's vampires had been unaffected by the sight of a cross. Still, on the off-chance there might be some truth to that theory, she made a mental note to buy herself a crucifix before the day was out.

Holy water was also considered to be powerful against vampires. It was said to burn the skin of the undead like acid. It could also be used to detect the presence of vampires. If poured on ground that was under the evil influence of a vampire, it would boil and smoke. Pouring holy water into an empty coffin would seal it against future habitation.

Vampires were also believed to be unable to swim or cross running water, as water was a purifier which would wash away evil and sin. In Greece, those believed to be revenant were banished to a small island, thus isolating them and keeping them from preying on the living. Sometimes, if a body was thought to be possessed, it was put in water. If the body floated, it was believed to be a vampire.

She grunted softly as she read the ways to detect a vampire: red eyes, fangs, long nails, pale skin, aversion to bright lights, no appetite, never seen during the daylight hours, reluctance to enter a house without an invitation...

The description fit Navarre perfectly, except for the part about the daylight hours and the long fingernails. She frowned, remembering the night he had delivered the bed. She'd held the door open for him, but he hadn't entered the house until she had asked him inside.

He really was a vampire. She'd known it before. Believed it. But somehow, reading the paranormal characteristics he possessed in print made them even more real. More frightening.

According to the book, vampires were able to create other vampires, to fly, to dissolve into mist, change size or dimension, and transform themselves into animals. They were also said to be able to control the elements and animals, to scale walls with ease, to hypnotize mortals with a glance.

She felt her gorge rise as she turned to the section on destroying the vampire. Staking, beheading, piercing with a sword, extracting the heart... She shuddered at the gruesome images such methods

invoked.

It was after six when she closed the book and put it aside.

She glanced outside, surprised to see that the sun was going down. Dusk. The time when the undead began to stir, when evil made itself known...

She switched on the lights, then hurried through the store, making sure the back door was locked, checking the windows. She collected the clay's receipts and locked them in the safe in the back room.

As she stepped outside and locked the door, she had the sudden, uneasy feeling that she was being watched. Panic rose within her even as she tried to convince herself she was being foolish, that she was just overreacting, that her imagination was working overtime because she'd spent the afternoon reading about the undead.

But she couldn't shake the feeling of impending doom as she unlocked her car and slid behind the wheel.

She was afraid, and yet her first instinct was to drive out to Cliff House, to see Navarre, to curl up in the sure protection of his arms, to tell him she might have discovered a cure.

She didn't like the thought that niggled at the back of her mind, the insidious notion that he liked being a vampire, that he had been playing with her all this time, lulling her into a false sense of security before he buried his fangs in her throat and drank her dry.

Chapter Eleven

Navarre woke with the setting sun. It was going to rain again, he mused as he went downstairs to shower and dress. He could smell the storm in the air, and even as the thought crossed his mind, he heard the first distant echo of thunder.

Moments later, dressed in a heavy white sweater and a pair of faded blue jeans, he settled down to wait.

She didn't keep him waiting long.

"Shaylyn." He murmured her name as she swept into the parlor, looking every inch the goddess she had once pretended to be. A sleek black gown clung to her voluptuous body. Her hair fell over her shoulders and down her back in lush black waves.

"Navarre." She paused inside the doorway. He could tell, by the rosy hue of her cheeks and the brightness of her eyes, that she had just fed.

She crossed the room and sat down beside him, one hand resting possessively on his right thigh. "I've missed you, *mi amor*," she purred.

"Have you?"

She ran her hand up and down the length of his thigh. "The centuries have been kind to you, Navarre."

"And to you." He met her gaze, his face impassive as her fingertips dug into his flesh. "Why have you come here now?"

"I told you. I missed you." Her hand glided along the inside of his thigh, her touch familiar, intimate. "Haven't you missed me, even a little?"

"No."

"You could have lied, Navarre."

"Would you prefer that to the truth?"

She drew her hand from his thigh, the movement tense and angry.

"So, tell me," she said curtly, "what have you been doing with yourself since I saw you last?"

Navarre shrugged. "Living one day at a time, like everyone else."

Her laugh was dry and bitter. "But you're not like everyone else."

"Thanks to you."

"Indeed."

"What do you want?"

"I want you," she replied. "I want to stay here for a while, and I want you to show me around."

"No."

She went on as if he hadn't spoken. "I've never spent much time in America. I thought you would show me the sights." She leaned toward him, her face filling his vision. "I thought it was time to renew our acquaintance."

He forced himself to remain seated, though he desperately wanted to put some space between them. "No."

"You dare refuse me?"

"I want you to go, Shaylyn. There isn't room enough for the two of us here."

"And what if I don't want to go?"

"You know the rules. I was here first. If you want to stay, you'll have to convince me to leave. Or destroy me."

"You think I won't?"

"I don't know. But I do know you hunted in my territory. And then, when you let the woman live, you didn't even bother to erase her memory of what happened. I can't afford mistakes like that in my terrain, Shaylyn. I don't hunt in Moreno Bay, and I don't want you hunting here, either. I don't want you here at all."

She stood up, her dark eyes blazing with anger. "How dare you speak to me like that!"

"I have every right, and you know it."

"If it wasn't for me, you would have rotted away centuries ago."

He stood to face her, hoping to intimidate her with his size and physical strength, even though he knew her powers were still superior to his. "If it wasn't for you, I might have had a home and a family."

"A home!" She spat the word. "A family! I gave you immortality, and now I want a small part of it."

"I can't give it to you."

"Can't, or won't?"

They glared at each other for stretched seconds, and then, as one, they whirled around.

"Adrianna!" Navarre exclaimed softly.

She started to run to him, and then she saw the other woman. Saw her, and knew that she was a vampire. Lifting a hand to the recently purchased cross that rested beneath her blouse, Adrianna murmured a quiet prayer, hoping that the crucifix did, indeed, possess the power to thwart a vampire. And then she glanced at Navarre, wondering if he had invited the woman here, and if so, for what reason?

She didn't care for the answer that came quickly to mind. Still, Adrianna couldn't help wondering if the other woman had been invited for dinner, and if she was intended to be the main course.

She took a step backward, her gaze fixed on Navarre's face. "Did I come at a bad time?"

"So," Shaylyn remarked, "this is the reason you have no time for an old friend." Her gaze moved over Adrianna in cool assessment. "Does she know what you are?"

"She knows."

Sensing Adrianna's inner distress, Navarre crossed the room and placed a protective arm around her shoulders.

"I see. Aren't you going to introduce us?"

"Adrianna, this is Shaylyn."

"So nice to meet you, my dear," Shaylyn said, her voice laced with venom.

Adrianna pressed closer to Navarre, every instinct, every sense of self-preservation urging her to run for home as fast as she could. She looked up at Navarre, her gaze pleading for assurance that he could protect her from the latent fury in the other woman's eyes.

"Have you nothing to say?" Shaylyn demanded.

"It's... it's nice to meet you, too."

"I'm warning you, Shaylyn, leave her alone."

Adrianna cringed before the wrath in the other woman's gaze. Never had she seen such anger, such jealousy.

"Send her home, Navarre. You may go back to her in a few days, after I'm gone, but for now, I want your time. All of it."

"You're no longer a goddess, Shaylyn, and I'm no longer your slave. I have my own life now, and you have no part in it."

"I'd choose my words more carefully, if I were you," Shaylyn said sweetly, and before he could stop her, she fixed her gaze on Adrianna, her devil-black eyes narrowing with the intensity of her hatred.

With a gasp, Adrianna pressed her hands to her head as a terrible burning pain filled her skull. A low moan rose in her throat as the pain increased. Lights danced in front of her eyes; the strength went out of her legs and she would have fallen if Navarre hadn't caught her in his arms.

"Shaylyn, stop it!"

"As you wish."

Once she was freed of the vampire woman's hold, the pain receded, leaving only a dull ache. Adrianna looked up at Navarre, her eyes filled with fear. She tried to tell him she wanted to go home, but the words wouldn't come. Panic engulfed her, and she raised a hand to her throat, her lips moving, though no sound emerged.

"Dammit, Shaylyn, enough!"

"Oh, very well." With a wave of her hand, Shaylyn broke the spell. "Puny mortal. She has no resistance at all to the power of suggestion."

"Nor has she had thousands of years to learn to be cruel."

"And you, my fine fledgling, have lived long enough to know better than to speak to me like that. The day will come when you will regret those words."

"Shaylyn!"

But it was too late. She was gone.

Adrianna blinked in disbelief. One minute the woman had been standing not two feet away, and the next she was gone in a swirling iridescent black mist.

Muttering an oath, Navarre swept Adrianna into his arms and carried her to the sofa where he sat down and cradled her against his chest. "Are you all right?"

Adrianna nodded.

"Does your head still hurt?"

She shook her head.

"Dammit, Adrianna! Say something."

"Is she the vampire who made you?"

"Yes."

"She's very beautiful."

"Yes. And very selfish. And cruel. And self-centered."

"She loves you."

"She doesn't know what love is."

Adrianna shrugged. "And she wants you."

He couldn't argue with that. Shaylyn had sought him out from time to time through the centuries, but after the last time, he'd thought himself free of her. He knew now that he had been wrong, that in Shaylyn's mind, at least, he would always be hers, subject to her beck and call.

"Adrianna, I want you to go away for a while. Take a vacation. Go see your parents."

"Because of her?"

Navarre nodded. "I'm afraid for you, afraid of what she might do."

Adrianna smiled wryly. "You mean a woman scorned, and all that?"

"Laugh if you want, but Shaylyn has always been very possessive of those she's made. She's angry with me now, and I don't want you to be caught in the middle."

"I'd like to say I'm not afraid, but I am."

"You'd be a fool if you weren't."

"I may be afraid, but I'm not leaving."

"Annie..."

"No! I'm not going to run away and let her have you."

"Annie, in spite of what I said, I belong to her."

"What do you mean?"

"It's her blood in my veins, her life force that made me what I am."

"That doesn't mean she owns you."

"No, but she's a very powerful vampire. No one knows how old she is, or if she can even be destroyed. Some say that she no longer has to rest during the day, that she's immune to the deadly effects of sunlight."

"Is that possible?"

"I don't know." Navarre frowned. It had taken him almost two thousand years to be able to endure the sun for short periods of time. Shaylyn had existed longer than any vampire he knew. It was possible that she no longer needed to seek shelter during the light of day, which made her all the more dangerous to him.

Adrianna glanced over her shoulder, as if she expected to see Shaylyn hovering nearby.

"She isn't here," Navarre said.

"How do you know?"

"Vampires can sense the presence of one of their kind."

Adrianna made a sound of disbelief. "If she's immune to the sun, maybe she's also able to conceal her presence."

Navarre frowned. He, too, had thought of that, and it worried him. The only edge he had was being able to perceive when she was near.

"She wouldn't hurt you, would she?"

"She can't hurt me," he replied, "at least not much."

"But she could destroy you."

Navarre nodded. There was no doubt of that, especially if she was able to move about when the sun was high in the sky. His only hope was to find a new place to rest until Shaylyn lost interest in him and left town.

"Navarre?"

"What?"

"Do you like being a vampire?"

"Does it matter?"

"Would you go back to being a mortal, if you could?"

"I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"What if there were a cure? Would you use it?"

"Adrianna, what are you talking about?"

"I found an old book up in the attic at the store. It was called *The Handbook of the Undead*. There was a recipe for a cure."

A cure! Navarre stared at Adrianna, wondering if such a thing were conceivable. In two thousand years, he had never considered the possibility of being mortal again. And even as he considered it, he knew it held no appeal. He had no wish to grow old and die, no wish to give up the wondrous powers he possessed, especially now, when those powers seemed to be expanding, when he was able to see the sunrise and walk in the morning light. Who could say? Perhaps in another hundred years, it would no longer be necessary for him to hide away during the long hours of the afternoon. Perhaps he'd even be able to overcome his need for blood and be able to partake of mortal food again, live a normal life...

Normal. Never, since the day of his birth, had he been normal. Even before he was born, Fate had decreed that he would not live as others lived. He had been brought into the world for the sole purpose of being sacrificed to Shaylyn. It was a Fate he had avoided thus far; he had no desire to become her prey at this late date.

And yet... He stroked Adrianna's cheek, thinking how wonderful it would be to spend his life at her side, to father her children and watch them grow.

She was watching him, her eyes wide with apprehension and hope. "You don't want it, do you?"

He considered a lie and opted for the edge of the truth. "I don't know."

"We could be so happy together if you were..."

"Human?"

"That's not what I meant," she said quickly, though they both knew it was. "It's just that we can't have a future together now—I mean, maybe you don't even want to have a future with me, but, oh, Navarre, I love you so much!"

"And I love you. Never doubt that."

"I'm afraid of her."

"So am I," he admitted softly. And he knew that, even if he wanted to, there was no way he could possibly try Adrianna's cure. Not now, when his strength as a vampire was all that stood between them and Shaylyn's wrath.

Chapter Twelve

Shaylyn walked down Moreno Bay's narrow main street, heedless of the rain that soaked her skin and clothes.

He had refused her. For a mortal! It was beyond comprehension. No man had ever refused her. No vampire, either. Except for Navarre. From the moment she had first seen him in the Temple on Mikos almost two thousand years ago, she had wanted him, wanted him so badly that she had bestowed the Dark Gift upon him. And that night, he had turned his back on her, preferring to go off on his own rather than accompany her on a voyage of discovery.

And because she was proud, too proud to admit she should have killed him as she had killed all the

others, she had abandoned him to his fate, certain he would never survive on his own.

But he had survived. Survived and grown strong.

She recalled the months they had spent together eons ago. He had been everything she had desired in a companion, everything she needed in a lover. He could be strong. He could be tender. Sometimes he had been cruel, and she had gloried in it. In all of it. There had been times when she taunted him without mercy, purposely stirring his rage, delighting in his anger. Their joining, always satisfying, had often been violent, but never dull. He had only one shortcoming, and it was that one weakness that had ruined their relationship.

Shaylyn crossed the street and kept walking, heading toward the beach, cursing Navarre's unfailing sympathy for the puny mortals who provided his sustenance. Shaylyn had no qualms about taking what she needed. She was a predator in thought and action. The blood of mortals fueled her existence, and she took it with a single-mindedness that left no room for compassion or pity. At times, she took them quickly and painlessly; at other times, she toyed with them, amused by their puny cries for mercy. Not so Navarre. He took only what he needed and left his victims happily alive and unaware of what he'd done.

Hands clenched, she walked along the beach, oblivious to the chill wind and the rain. Lightning flashed across the heavens, and still she walked, her thoughts turned inward. Navarre.

His strength troubled her. How could one who drank so sparingly of the sustenance of life grow so strong? Pausing, she stared out at the roiling ocean. Had he grown strong enough to destroy her?

In her time, she had vanquished dozens of vampires, some made by her own hand. She had killed them without a thought the very instant she began to suspect that their strength, or their cunning, might be a threat.

Perhaps it would be wise to destroy Navarre, as well.

Cloaked from mortal eyes, Shaylyn entered the bookstore. For a time, she stood in the shadows, watching Navarre's mortal lover as she moved around the store, chatting with customers, opening boxes, placing books on the shelf.

Did Adrianna know where Navarre took his rest?

Shaylyn glanced outside. It would be dusk soon. She had spent most of the day searching for Navarre's resting place. She had gone to Cliff House first, even though she had known he would not be there. The woman's house had seemed the next likely place, though Shaylyn hadn't expected to find him there, either, and, indeed, she hadn't.

She had spent hours exploring the town, poking into deserted beach houses, checking the cemetery, an abandoned warehouse, the cellar of an old church. All in vain. She had detected no sign of Navarre. Had he grown strong enough to cloak his presence from the one who had made him? If so, he was more dangerous than she had imagined.

She waited until Adrianna closed the shop, then materialized in front of the woman's startled gaze.

"Good evening, my dear," Shaylyn said, pleased by the very real fear she read in the girl's eyes.

"Wh-what do you want?"

"Want? What makes you think I want anything?"

Adrianna took a step backward, intimidated by the fearful glow in the other woman's eyes, by the evil that radiated from her like smoke from a fire.

"You needn't be afraid," Shaylyn said, backing Adrianna into a corner. "I mean you no harm."

"You don't?"

"Of course not. You're Navarre's friend, aren't you?"

Adrianna nodded.

"Of course you are! You needn't worry. I just wanted to see him for a few days. Navarre and I are old friends. Very old friends."

Adrianna cowered against the wall, her gaze trapped in the web of Shaylyn's stare.

"Nothing to be afraid of," Shaylyn purred as she took Adrianna's hand in hers. "Such lovely hands," she mused, rolling up the sleeve of Adrianna's sweater. "Such smooth skin. Nothing at all to be afraid of, my dear. We're going to be good friends, you and I."

"Friends," Adrianna repeated.

"Yes," Shaylyn said. "Relax, Adrianna. It will be over in a moment, and you will remember nothing save that I came here to ask for your friendship."

"My friendship." Adrianna felt a sharp prick as Shaylyn bent over the bend of her elbow.

"That's right, my dear. We're going to be good friends now, aren't we?"

Adrianna blinked at the other woman, then shook her head. "I'm sorry, did you say something?"

"Only that I must be going. I'm so glad we've cleared things up between us. Give my love to Navarre when you see him."

"Yes, I will."

"And tell him I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to see him again, but I've decided to go to Paris. My plane leaves at seven."

"Seven."

"That's right."

"I'll tell him," Adrianna said, but she was talking to the air. The woman was already gone.

"She said what?"

"She said to tell you she was going to Paris, and that she was sorry she didn't get a chance to say good-bye."

Navarre frowned. Could it possibly be true? Had Shaylyn really left town? It seemed unlikely, and yet...
"Did she say anything about coming back?"

"No." Adrianna smiled up at him. "I missed you today."

"I missed you, too."

"I'm going to get a cup of coffee," she said, taking him by the hand and walking down the hallway toward the kitchen. "Would you like a glass of wine?"

Navarre nodded. Sitting down at the table, he watched Adrianna move about the tiny kitchen. After pouring him a glass of wine, she microwaved a cup of instant coffee, then sat down at the table across from him.

"So," he said, his gaze intent upon her face, "what did you do today?"

Adrianna shrugged. "Nothing much. It was slow for a Friday. Have you given any more thought to what we talked about the other night?"

"You mean my becoming human again?"

"Uh-huh."

"No. I'm not sure it's something I want."

"Oh." She looked away, but not before he saw the hurt, the disappointment, in her eyes.

"Annie..."

"Maybe we'd better stop seeing each other."

"Annie!"

She shook her head, annoyed by the tears that filled her eyes. "I can't just be your lover, Navarre. I want something more out of a relationship than just...just sex."

"Dammit, Annie, we have more than that, and you know it."

"I know." She looked up at him then, her eyes dark with tears. "But I'm going to grow old. What then? How will you feel when I start to look like your mother?"

"Annie, dammit, Annie, I..."

"I couldn't stand that, Navarre. I'd rather end it now."

Navarre stood up, his hands clenched at his sides. She was right, he thought bitterly. It was better to end it now, before she got hurt.

"Good-bye, Adrianna," he said quietly.

She stared after him, too numb to think, and then a voice echoed inside her mind, sharp and demanding. *You little fool! Don't let him go. Tell him you love him, that you want to be like him. Ask him to show you where he sleeps. Tell him you want the Dark Gift so that you can be his forever.*

His hand was at the front door, reaching for the latch, when he heard Adriana's voice calling his name.

"Navarre! Navarre! Wait, don't go!"

He turned around, opening his arms to catch her as she flew down the hallway toward him.

"Don't leave me!" she cried. "I didn't mean it!"

"Annie!" His arms closed around her, holding her tight, pressing her against him so that their bodies touched from shoulder to thigh.

"We can work it out," she said. She lifted her face to his, her eyes awash with tears. "Make me what you are," she whispered. "I want to be with you, only you, forever."

"Annie, no."

"Yes! Please, Navarre, do it now!"

Eyes narrowed, he stared down at her, his mind probing hers, but he detected no sign that she had been initiated. And still he hesitated. He would be a fool to underestimate Shaylyn.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "Do you mean it?"

Her reply was quick and certain. "I'm sure."

Frowning, Navarre brushed her hair aside, his gaze skimming her throat. No puncture marks marred the perfection of her skin.

"Please, Navarre?"

It was hard to resist when she was looking at him like that, her eyes dewy with tears, her lips slightly parted, her expression filled with trust and desire.

He rested his brow on the top of her head. "Think about it for a while, Annie," he remarked softly. "There's no hurry."

"But I want to be like you. I want to sleep where you sleep, and wake up in your arms."

It was tempting, so tempting. In two thousand years, he had never made another vampire. Never loved a woman other than Katlaina.

He closed his eyes as he imagined what it would be like to have Adrianna forever at his side. Together,

they could roam the world. He could show her all the wonders of the ancient world; together, they could explore the future. Ah, the lure of having her share his dark sleep, of waking each day with her in his arms. With Adrianna by his side, he would never again be alone.

Lowering his head, he let his tongue slide over the pulse beating in her throat, felt his fangs lengthen at the thought of piercing her tender flesh. One quick bite was all it would take. And then the ecstasy of drinking her sweetness, drinking until her essence filled him, flooded him. Listening to her heartbeat fluttering wildly, like a frightened bird, slowing, slowing, to the brink of death, and then the magic of bringing her back, changed to a creature who would be forever young, forever beautiful.

Forever cursed, as he was cursed.

He drew back, his gaze moving over her face, imagining her eyes glowing with the lust for blood, her full pink lips stained crimson.

"Navarre?"

"Not tonight, Annie." He placed his hands on her shoulders and held her away from him. "Let me think on it."

"Don't leave me."

"I won't."

She moved into his embrace again, her head resting on his chest. "Are we going to make love?"

Her voice was soft and low, with a husky, sensual quality that sent heat spiraling through him to pool in his groin like lava. His arms tightened around her, a low groan rumbling deep in his throat as her breasts were crushed to his chest. She thrust her hips forward in silent invitation, and he knew he was lost.

Sweeping her into his arms, he carried her down the hall to her bedroom. He made short work of removing her clothes and his. There was no patience in him now, no tenderness, little gentleness, only an urgent need that refused to be ignored, a hunger that went deeper than desire.

He cradled her to him, clinging to her as the world spun out of focus. She wanted him. He needed her. She had begged him to give her the Dark Gift. Did she know what she was asking?

He sheathed himself deep within her, wanting only to bury himself in her sweetness, to forget everything but the woman in his arms, but the questions would not be denied. Why had she asked him to bring her over? She had never mentioned it before, never hinted that she would welcome the Dark Gift. Indeed, she had asked if he would accept a cure, said it was the only way they could have a life together. What had changed her mind?

"Navarre!" She cried his name as she found fulfillment.

A moment later, he forgot everything as he found his own release. And then, for a long while, they lay wrapped in each other's arms.

Later, he made love to her again, more slowly this time, taking her to the peak again and again before he carried her over the edge.

He was almost asleep when he sensed the dawning of a new day. Gently, he extricated himself from her arms.

"Where are you going?" she murmured sleepily.

"It's near dawn," he said, pressing a kiss to her brow. "I've got to go."

"No, stay."

"I can't."

"Then take me with you."

"No."

Insist on it. the voice inside her head demanded. *Don't let him leave you behind .*

"Please, Navarre. I want to stay with you all day."

"No, Annie. I don't want you to... I don't want to frighten you."

"You won't."

"Annie, don't ask this of me."

"I am asking." She looked up at him, her eyes filling with tears. "Please don't leave me. I'm so afraid when you're gone." Her eyes went blank for a moment, and then she smiled. "Please, Navarre, this will give me a chance to see what it's like for you during the day. Please?"

Everything within warned him to say no, but he couldn't help thinking it might be a good idea for her to see, firsthand, how he spent the day, the deathlike sleep that held him in its power. And if she got scared, she could always leave.

Knowing he might be making a terrible mistake, he wrapped her in a blanket, lifted her into his arms, closed his eyes, and willed himself to the place where he rested during the day.

Adrianna blinked, and blinked again, bewildered by the sudden change of surroundings. "Where are we?"

"An ancient underground graveyard."

"Are we still in Moreno Bay?"

"No." Gently, he put her down. A blink of his eye brought a fat white candle sputtering to life.

Her eyes seemed huge in a face gone suddenly pale as she stared at the rotting timber above her head, wrinkled her nose at the smell of death and decay.

Shivering, she huddled deeper into the folds of the blanket. "Why did you bring me here?"

"I needed a new place to rest."

"Why?"

"Because too many people know about Cliff House."

"No one knows except me."

"And Shaylyn."

"But she's gone."

"Is she?" He took hold of her arm, his grip like steel. "Has she turned you against me?"

"No!" She winced as she tried to twist out of his grasp. "Please, Navarre, you're hurting me."

"I'm sorry." He released his hold on her immediately.

"Couldn't you have found a more pleasant place to rest?"

"I was in a hurry when I came here. A vampire is vulnerable during the hours of the day, Adrianna." His gaze pierced her heart and soul. "Never, in all my existence, have I let anyone, mortal or vampire, know where I took my rest. Until you."

"Navarre..."

Be silent!

"What's wrong?" He watched her carefully, wondering what she was hiding.

"Nothing." She glanced at the dirt beneath her feet with dismay. "Do you sleep on the ground?"

"No." He picked up the candle with one hand, held out his other hand in silent invitation.

She didn't hesitate as she put her hand in his and let him guide her deeper into the catacombs. Gradually, the passageway widened, and she saw a pile of quilts and blankets spread on the ground.

Navarre placed the candle on a flat rock, then drew Adrianna into his arms. "Are you sure you want to stay here?"

She nodded, her eyes wide, guileless.

"Will you make love to me before I sleep?"

At her nod, he drew her down onto the blankets. He wondered briefly if he was making the biggest, most fatal mistake of his existence, but then there was no more time for thought, there was only the woman in his arms, and the magic of her touch filling him with light and love where before there had been only darkness and loneliness...

Adrianna sat bolt upright, her whole body trembling as she glanced around the cavern, her heart

pounding with dread.

"She's coming!" She grabbed at Navarre's arm, shaking him, willing him to wake up.

The panic in Adrianna's voice penetrated his daytime slumber.

"Navarre, wake up! She's coming!"

Adrianna needed him. The knowledge severed the darkness that held him fast.

"Navarre!"

He knew, an instant before it was too late, that they were no longer alone. Thrusting Annie behind him, Navarre struggled to his feet.

"You've done well, my foolish little mortal," Shaylyn said smugly. "And now you will finish what you have begun."

Adrianna stared up at the vampire woman. "What do you mean?"

"I mean to destroy him, and you shall be the instrument of his destruction."

"No!"

"Oh, yes."

"I won't. You can't make me."

"Can't I?" Eyes narrowed, Shaylyn stared at Adrianna. Her lips curled back in a hideous smile as Adrianna dropped to the ground and began to writhe in pain.

"Shaylyn," Navarre rasped. "Leave her alone." He swayed on his feet as the darkness sought to enfold him. "Why are you doing this?"

"You're a threat to me, Navarre. I haven't survived this long by being foolish. Your powers are too strong."

"No." He stared at Adrianna. She was curled into a fetal position, her hands pressed to her head, her mouth open in a silent scream of agony. "Let her go."

"Does it bother you to watch her?"

"Shaylyn, I'll do whatever you want. Only leave her alone. She's done nothing to you."

"She took you from me."

"No." He closed his eyes, willing the darkness away. But he could feel himself growing ever weaker as the sun climbed higher in the sky.

"Stand up, Adrianna," Shaylyn demanded.

Adrianna tried to refuse, but her limbs moved with a will of their own. Her legs felt as though they were weighted with lead as she went to stand beside Shaylyn.

"Take this," Shaylyn said, and thrust a knife into Adrianna's hands. The handle was of thick wood, the blade was long and slender and made of pure silver. "When I tell you to, you will cut out his heart and throw it into the fire."

Adrianna tried to refuse, but no words passed her lips.

Shaylyn glanced at the blankets that had served as Navarre's bed, her nostrils flaring, her eyes narrowing. A moment later, the bedding burst into flame.

Navarre felt the heat of the fire at his back, but he didn't take his gaze from Adrianna. Powerless to move or speak, she stared back at him, her eyes filled with a silent plea for help.

Slowly, deliberately, Shaylyn took hold of Navarre and forced him down to the ground. Exerting her superior strength, she crouched behind him, her hands pinning his shoulders to the ground.

"Now, Adrianna," she commanded.

"Navarre..." His name escaped Adrianna's lips even as she moved toward him. "No," she whimpered. "Please don't make me."

But even as she begged Shaylyn for mercy, Adrianna was kneeling beside Navarre. She stared at her hand as if it belonged to someone else, watched in numbed horror as the hand lifted the knife.

Summoning every ounce of will she possessed, she dragged her gaze from the blade and looked down into Navarre's eyes. There was no condemnation in his deep gray eyes, only a deep and abiding expression of love and understanding. And forgiveness.

"Do it!" Shaylyn's voice cut across the stillness.

Tears filled Adrianna's eyes as she tried to resist. But she had no will of her own, no power to refuse. Her hand tightened around the handle of the knife as she prepared to plunge it into Navarre's chest.

"I love you, Annie," Navarre whispered, and closed his eyes as the knife arrowed toward his chest.

Time seemed to slow as the knife descended toward Navarre's heart. His voice, his words, rang in Adrianna's ears, stronger and louder than the screech of Shaylyn's command.

Drawing from the wellspring of Navarre's love, Adrianna launched herself at Shaylyn, shuddering with horror as she drove the blade into the other woman's breast.

Shaylyn shrieked with pain and outrage as the knife pierced her flesh. Cursing loudly, she grabbed Adrianna by the shoulders, holding her in a vice-like grip as she buried her fangs in Adrianna's throat.

Blood spurted across Navarre's face, hot and warm. His blood, he thought, and wondered why there was no pain.

It took all his strength to open his eyes, to drag himself out of the arms of the darkness.

Shaylyn and Adrianna were locked together in a violent struggle, each trying to wrest the knife from the other. Blood spurted from a deep gash in Shaylyn's left breast. A crimson tide gouted from a hideous wound in Adrianna's throat.

He knew in an instant that somehow Annie had found the inner strength to defy Shaylyn's command, that she had turned the knife on the vampire, and that she was going to lose her own life in trying to save his.

Feeling as though he were moving through thick mud, he struggled to his feet and lunged forward, his hand grabbing for the knife.

The silver seared his skin even as the blade sliced into his hand, but he ignored the pain as he wrenched the knife from Adrianna's grasp and plunged it into Shaylyn's breast again, cutting the heart from her body, flinging it into the fire.

A scream unlike anything he had ever heard filled the air, and then Shaylyn was falling, weightless, lifeless, to the ground.

With a feral cry of triumph, Navarre tossed the bloody corpse into the flames.

Staggering, he made his way to Adrianna's side. Dropping to his knees, he gathered her into his arms and pressed his hand to the wound in her throat. Her blood was hot against his palm, her blood mingling with his. Unable to help himself, he bent his head and licked the blood from her neck. Its heat, its life-giving force, burned into him, strengthened him, driving away the darkness.

"Annie! Annie, can you hear me?"

"Navarre... ?"

"I'm here." He stared into her face, willing her to open her eyes. "Don't leave me."

"I'm... sorry..." Her voice, low and weak, seemed to come from far away.

"It wasn't your fault. Annie! Please, Annie, don't leave me."

Blood. So much blood. The scent of it was all around him, seeping into his pores, filling his nostrils, tempting him to finish what Shaylyn had started.

"Annie, help me!"

Her eyelids fluttered open, and she stared up at him, her gaze unfocused. Death lurked in the shadowed depths of her eyes.

"Am I... going to..." She swallowed. "To die?"

Navarre nodded, unable to speak, unable to lie to her.

"Want to stay... with you."

"Annie, tell me what to do."

"Do?"

She was dying. Her breathing was shallow and uneven, the life was fading from her eyes.

"Forgive me," he whispered, and letting her head fall back over his arm, he pressed his mouth to the hideous wound in her neck, felt the sweet, salty taste of her blood as it flowed into him and through him.

He drank deeply, absorbing her life, her essence. Her pulse slowed, her heartbeat grew faint as her strength ebbed, flowing into him, renewing him.

Sated, he lifted his head and gazed down into her face, now drained of all color.

"Forgive me," he murmured again, and pressed his mouth to her throat once more, stealing away the last precious drops of life.

Chapter Thirteen

She opened her eyes to a blinding white light, and quickly closed them again. She was dead, she thought sadly, and all the stories were true. There really was a white light. And voices...

"Annie? Annie!"

She gasped as she was swept into a pair of strong arms.

"Annie..."

Navarre's voice, calling to her, pleading with her to... what?

She opened her eyes again and saw his face hovering over her, his deep gray eyes filled with concern. And regret.

"Navarre? Am I dead?"

He shook his head as he brushed a lock of hair from her brow. "No."

"What is it?" she asked. "You look so..." She shrugged, unable to decipher the expression in his eyes.

"How do you feel?"

"Feel?" She glanced around, her gaze mesmerized by the glow of the candle, by the colors trapped in the dancing flame, by the blue-gray smoke that spiraled upward. Realizing that it was the candlelight that had blinded her, she frowned, wondering why it seemed so bright, wondering why she had never before noticed how many colors could be seen in a single flame.

"Annie?"

"I feel fine. A little strange... what happened? Where's Shaylyn?"

"She's dead."

"She is?" Adrianna frowned, searching her mind for some recollection of what had happened. "She wanted me to kill you..."

Adrianna sat up, her hands moving over Navarre's chest. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"Why do you keep asking me that? I'm fine. I..." Slowly, she raised her hand to her throat. "She bit me... I cut her with the knife, and she bit me. I was bleeding, dying..." Her voice rose in panic.

"Navarre, what happened?"

"You were dying," he said, refusing to meet her eyes. "Bleeding to death. I... Adrianna, forgive me, but I couldn't let you go. I've been alone for so long, and I love you so much. I... I took your blood."

"My blood?"

He nodded, hoping she would understand. "I took your blood, Annie. I drained you to the point of death. And then I gave it back to you."

"You took my blood?" Her eyes widened with comprehension. "You made me what she was. What you are."

"Can you forgive me?"

"I don't know."

"I'll take care of you, Annie, I swear it. You won't have to hunt. You won't have to kill. You can exist off my blood."

"What do you mean?"

"I've never made another vampire. My blood is very strong, very powerful. When you feel the lust for blood, I'll give you a little of mine." He smiled sadly at her look of revulsion. "Mixed with wine, it's not so bad. It will sustain you."

"I can't be a vampire," Adrianna exclaimed. "What will my mother say?"

Navarre's brow furrowed. "Annie..."

She felt a bubble of hysterical laughter rise in her throat, and then deflate, like a balloon pricked by a pin.

"I'm a vampire." She shook her head. It was incomprehensible. And yet she knew it was true. She could feel the increased power in her limbs. Her senses were alive as never before. She could hear distant sounds, see through the darkness as if it were day.

And Navarre was there beside her. She could hear the steady beat of his heart, feel his apprehension, his concern. His love.

And then, to her delight, she discovered she could read his thoughts.

Forgive me, Annie. I never meant to hurt you. I know it was selfish of me to bring you over without your permission, but I couldn't let you go. Please, forgive me. I have no excuse, except that I love you. ...

I forgive you, Navarre. And I love you, too.

With a start, he rose to his feet. *Are you reading my mind ?*

Joy bubbled up inside her. *Yes. I can't seem to help myself. Do you mind ?*

"I don't mind," he said, stroking her cheek. "My heart, my thoughts, my life, they're all yours, my darling Annie, to do with as you wish. We're bonded now, by blood."

"And by love."

"You're not sorry, then?" he asked.

She thought about it for a moment, then shook her head. "No."

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him, hard. She couldn't be sorry, not when it meant she could spend a lifetime, a hundred lifetimes, with Navarre.

She let her fingers curl into the hair at his nape. "Besides, if I ever decide I want to be mortal, I can always try that recipe I found."

"Annie." What a wonder she was! He had expected a variety of reactions from her: fear, disgust, regret, hatred. He had not expected acceptance, or humor, and he knew, without doubt, that he could not live without her. "If you ever decide to try to regain your mortality, we'll try it together. Now, if you want."

She smiled up at him. "Right now, all I want is you. My love, my life."

He whispered her name as his arms drew her close. She'd never been more beautiful, he thought. And she was his. For now and for always, she was his.

Together, they would explore her new world.

Together, he thought, sweeping her into his arms.

Together.

Forever.