

Dawn Flames

By K H Blackmoore

He stood in the middle of the sidewalk with his eyes closed and breathed in deeply. The cool night air rushing into his nostrils brought with it the million different stenchs of humanity, as they went about their evenings in the city around him. As always he had to force himself to ignore most of the smells and focus solely on his prey. But even with all of his concentration on a single scent, the strongest of the odors tainted its purity. The bitter acid taste of asphalt combined with rubber and exhaust fumes was most prevalent, nearly overpowering the scent of everything else until he shoved the odor aside. The festering multitude of smells produced by putrid, rotting garbage was also ignored. Shortly behind the scent of garbage was the smell of sweat. It seemed that no matter how much they washed, humans always left the oily smell of sweat behind, like an invisible trail of slug-mucus.

There were thousands of smells, most of them unpleasant, like an orchestra of discord to his senses. But like any true musician he ignored the distractions until he found just the note he was looking for. Only this scent was as harmonious and pleasing as the others were disgusting. This particular smell was a group of scents wrapped

around the perfume of his prey that would lead him to her more surely than a road map.

Opening his eyes, he turned and glided smoothly down the sidewalk in the direction the scent was freshest. She had come by this way only a few minutes before, probably less than half an hour. He swallowed, tasting the tangy sweetness of her on his tongue.

There were a few other people on the sidewalk at this time of night but he ignored them. As usual, most of the people he passed would shiver violently as he walked by. They instinctively sensed the predator in their midst. He enjoyed the smells of vague fear that leached out of their pathetic shivering. Most humans were far too stupid to realize that he would rather eat dirt than suffer through the agony of stench their filthy bodies produced.

Two blocks down the scent left the street. Turning slowly he studied the building that the trail led into. Even standing outside, with the door closed, the smell of alcohol burned his nose, numbing it to the other odors surrounding him. Despite the fiery pain in his nostrils, he was grateful that the ever-present stench of the city was blocked out. Having his sense of smell dulled would make finding his prey harder, but this close to her and he should be able to track her down without too much trouble. He debated waiting outside, where the fumes of alcohol pouring out of the bar would not be so overpowering. She would exit at some point and he could trail her then.

But stalking one's prey was almost as much fun as enjoying the meal itself. Stepping forward, he pulled the old wooden door open. Almost immediately the bitter smell of alcohol hit him with enough force to stop him mid-step. Carried immediately behind it, on the wave of scent overpowering him, was the ever present oil of human sweat. This time it was accompanied by a heavy taste of sulfuric urine and stomach acid. The portion of his mind not wrestling to overcome the unpleasant sensory overload identified the building as a cheap bar. It took an enormous effort to overcome the revulsion he felt at smelling the dingy hovel, but he finally finished his step and entered the room.

The musk of masculinity approached him. Glancing to the side he saw an extremely well-muscled man, easily double his weight and a good eight inches taller than he, was moving towards him out of the corner. No doubt he was the guardian of this putrid establishment. He had no desire to interact with a lesser piece of filth while he was on the hunt.

He glared into the man's face, the barest edge of a snarl curling around his lips. Millennium of their so called "intellect" had dulled humanities basic instincts beyond belief. But enough of

that ancient, hereditary knowledge remained that the bouncer shivered violently at the look and returned to his seat in the corner without speaking to him. With the trial of entry to the building and its door guard completed, he was free to examine his surroundings.

His nose was numb now, the smell of alcohol having dulled his sense of smell until he could barely discern the scents around him. As always, having his smell dulled made him feel curiously blind to his surroundings. Yet enough of the sense remained to let him savor the fragrance of floral scent his prey had chosen as her perfume for the evening. It complimented the bouquet of her natural smells, creating a savory aroma that made his mouth water.

Making a mental effort to focus more on his sense of vision instead of smell, he studied the room in front of him. Small and poorly lit, it was identical to hundreds of other tiny bars in the city. Faded wallpaper was peeling around the edges and stained with dark patches. A wooden bar split the middle of the room as a tired looking waitress served drinks to the few booths that lined the walls. There were few patrons though, as most of the seats were empty. Once again he noticed how unnatural it felt to him to focus so much on his vision.

Even blinded to his primary sensory input he would have known his prey instantly. She was sitting alone on the stool closest to the wall with a small drink in front of her. A curtain of straight blond hair hid her face as it cascaded off her head and down her shoulders. The skin of her arm was almost as pale as his own, with little evidence of having been exposed to the sun. A tight blue dress clung to her body, exposing the curves of a well-endowed woman. He could not see them from where he was standing, but he knew that her legs must be long and slim, modestly crossed in her dress even though she sat facing the bar.

Moving to one of the empty booths he studied her. It would not do to approach her right now. Even if she had been drinking to the point of intoxication, her instincts would feel his intent and he would spook her. Better to watch her for a little while and use the time to compose himself. He needed to bury the predator inside himself enough that his prey would not feel its approach until it was too late. At his wave the tired waitress, smelling of a cheap perfume that jangled terribly with her natural scents, brought him a glass of water that he sipped while he studied the blond woman in the blue dress.

She was a stunning woman he decided. Even though he had been tracking her for almost a week this was the first time he had actually seen her. In her late twenties, she was older than his usual prey. But there was something about her, something in the way she moved and talked, that set her apart. Once that special

something would have been called royalty or nobility. In this day and age it was called class. But there was no doubt that she was a rare find. He smiled into his glass. Such prey was well worth the effort he had spent tracking her. Even worth the pain the overpowering smell of alcohol was causing him.

Now that he was within reach of his prey, his hunger increased to the point that he could barely control it any more. He had waited too long between meals. It would not do to attack his prey just now though. With a monumental effort he ignored pangs gnawing at his stomach. Finally he felt composed enough to approach the blond haired woman. Picking up his glass of water, he walked smoothly over to the stool besides her.

"Excuse me, Miss." His voice was low and musical. "Would you mind if I sat beside you and talked to you for a bit?"

As her blond head turned to study the person who had addressed her, he made sure to keep his lips closed over his elongated canines. It was difficult to smile without showing his teeth. He could see the thoughts turning in her head. Her desire to be left alone was plain to see on her face but that feeling was slowly being overcome by the desire for company.

After a long pause she nodded her agreement and he swiftly seated himself on the stool at her side. Now that he was closer he noticed that her movements lacked the momentary pause and sudden jerks of one who had consumed even a slight bit of alcohol. The glass besides her hand was still mostly full and beaded with perspiration from sitting too long. She was a woman of class indeed. He was going to have to be extremely careful not to tip her off to his intent. Not that the end result would change.

"You have not drunken much." He commented with a nod at his empty water glass. "I prefer not to consume alcohol myself."

A smile twitched around the corner of her mouth at his words.

"You are really observant. Or have you been stalking me?"

Her words were a joke but both statements were far truer than she realized. This prey was going to be a great deal of fun.

They made small talk for a while. His voice had not been used in months or years but it still spoke with the smooth polish only years of training could give it. He made sure to keep the conversation light and away from anything remotely important to her. Instead he focused on making her laugh. If she came to think of him as a friend, then his attack would give her a feeling of betrayal that would give a distinct flavor when he finally struck.

After almost an hour he felt that his objective had been completed. She was laughing at his jokes and returning with witty remarks of her own. There was a feeling of relaxation about her that had not been there when he approached. The drink by her hand was still had a quarter of its fluid left. It was time for him to make his exit. And if he had played his prey right, she would follow shortly.

Standing slowly, he excused himself from her company, claiming an early day in the morning. As he walked away he could feel her eyes following him. He almost reached the door when he stopped and turned. Looking in her eyes he walked back up to her and took her hand in his own.

"I had a great time talking to you. Maybe we will meet again." He said as he gently kissed her hand. Her intoxicating smell was so strong that it was all he could do to keep from attacking her right there. She was blushing furiously when his eyes looked up and met hers again.

"I would like that. Maybe someday we will." She barely whispered her reply as her pale cheeks flushed even more.

The night air had grown colder when he stepped outside. The night air was mercifully free of the taint of alcohol and the burning in his nose began to clear almost immediately. He could not stop the smile that pulled his tight lips back past his startling white teeth and exposed the extremely long canines that sat on either side of his incisors. Thankfully the street was empty now, so that not a soul saw his teeth. Or saw the inhuman leap he took from the center of the street to land on the sign of the store in front of the bar. A second leap brought him within grasping distance of the roof. With grace that a cat would envy he swung himself smoothly with one hand over the edge and landed on top of the building.

The air was far cleaner up higher. The scents of the city were returning as his smell returned. But this high up a soft breeze carried with it the wild, pure scents of the forest. It was too bad that humans felt the need to live in such places of such filth as the city. But a hunter went where the prey was. And if he had read his prey's personality right, she would soon be leaving the bar and returning to her own home.

She did not keep him waiting long. A few minutes after he took his perch on the edge of the roof she emerged from the bar, wearing a blue jacket that matched her dress to protect her from the chill of the night. Now would come the real test of his hunt. He guessed that she must live nearby. Her scents were strong and old around this area. But if she entered a car he would lose her. Even with his enhanced abilities he could not keep up with a motorized vehicle.

Not that it would matter much if she chose to drive. He could have found her home by following an old scent trail. It was just so much more fun to stalk her in person. As he watched, she set off at an easy walk down the sidewalk. He followed on the rooftop. The narrow alleys were easy to jump and he made no noise, moving as dark shadow passing through the night.

She was brave, this prey of his. Or perhaps she was foolish. Did she not know the dangers of being a woman alone at night? Even other humans would prey on such careless victims. As if she felt his thoughts or maybe the burning desire that was beginning to rage inside him, the blonde stopped and looked around her. Pulling her jacket tighter around her shoulders she resumed walking at a far quicker pace.

They passed out of the business area and into a section of housing. These houses were old and cramped. Relics of the industrial age before people began selfishly demanding more space from their living quarters. He had little trouble jumping from one roof to the next, without even a creaking board betraying his passing. The smells were different as well, more wood and the smells of rot and damp that went with it. He preferred such smells. There was less garbage here as well. Occasionally he would smell various domesticated animals in the houses he passed.

It did not take long for them to arrive at her house, although the walk felt like an eternity to him as his hunger began increasing with every step. As he watched from the neighboring roof, his prey let herself into the house. The door locking behind her was as clear to his ears as if he had locked it himself. As if such a thing as flimsy door would save her.

The hallway light behind the door lit, casting shadows through the cracks around the door, followed by a kitchen light. He could see her moving around the sink before she headed upstairs. Her bedroom window faced the roof he sat on and through it he watched as she took off her shoes and jacket. Putting them away in a small closet she sat on the edge of the bed to take off her earrings.

He expected her to change and go to bed then. Instead she left the bedroom and headed back down stairs to the kitchen. It was time for him to strike at his prey. He did not feel the jump to her window, he just found himself balanced on the edge as he gently tried its lock. It slid open slowly and he saw the white reflection of his fangs in the window as he smiled again.

The house smelled strongly of three people. A male and two females lived there. His brain absorbed the information and filled it away. He could not have stopped himself as he slipped inside the room and closed the window behind himself. All of his focus was on

his prey. Besides, the smell of the man was at least a few days old. There was no one in the house that would be able to challenge him.

The lights over the stairs were almost blinding as he walked carefully down them. He could hear the woman in the kitchen messing with dishes, probably washing them. The noise she was making would cover his approach but even so he was cautious. Prey should not know they were being stalked until he chose it. Other hunts had not gone so smoothly.

He paused in the doorway to the kitchen as he looked at his prey. Her long, slim legs were bare now, showing beneath the bottom of her dress. The kitchen light gave a glow to her hair as it cascaded down her back almost half way to her butt. He could see her face in the reflection of the kitchen window as she frowned and rinsed her hands.

Somehow she must have sensed his presence because she chose that moment to look around. The look of shock on her face as she saw him was priceless and he felt his upper lip curl back in a feral smile, exposing the canines he had been so careful to conceal before. It took nearly an entire second for her to overcome her shock. Her terrified scream, when it came, was a melody to his ears. He could smell the spike of adrenalin in her system and could nearly hear the rapid beating of her heart.

Before she had finished screaming he leaped over the table that separated them and grabbed her around the throat with his right hand. Being careful not to overly harm her yet, he spun both of them around and threw her on the table. She gasped as the wind rushed out of her lungs and struggled feebly against his iron grip.

He held her that way for a long second, enjoying the way her scent had combined with the fear and shock. By the time he had pulled his attention back to the present, his prey had also recovered from her shock. She was still screaming, but now her random flailing had changed to blows that targeted specific pressure points of his body. Interesting. She must have had some training in self-defense. If he had been a human attacker she probably would have managed to cause him some serious damage.

But he was not human, not any longer. Her leg kicking his groin might have been the wind blowing against his pants, since he hardly felt it. Her fist punching his chin did nothing but crack several of the delicate bones in her hand. He let her struggle, enjoying the feeling of power her fruitless struggle gave him.

His left hand grabbed her dress around the neck and with one swift motion ripped it off. Underneath the dress, matching black undergarments were decorated with lace and nearly see through. His

smile widened at the sight until it felt like his face would split. He knew that his mouth was clearly inhumanly wide now and her screams took on a fresh note of panic as she noticed that he was not human.

He rotated her enough to place his body between her legs so that she could not effectively kick him. It was time to begin tonight's true entertainment. His right hand, still about her neck, squeezed down with enough pressure to begin choking her and her struggles grew feebler. Before she passed out he let go of her long enough to rip his own clothing off and return to his position between her legs before she could recover. Two swift yanks and both her bra and underwear were shredded, although the ruined remnants of her undergarments still clung to her body.

She had stopped screaming when he choked her, although she continued to struggle against him. It was time to change that. He dragged a pointed finger nail, sharper than a knife and stronger than most animal claws, almost gently down the smooth pale skin of her breast. An angry red scratch appeared behind his finger, trailing it until he reached the peak of her breast. Instead of picking the finger up he pulled down with a sharp jerk, slicing her nipple in half.

The scream that followed held so much pain, fear, and desperation that it put all her previous screams to shame. A delectable coppery scent, beautifully spiced with adrenalin and fear, filled the air as blood trickled down the side of her breast. Almost painful warmth splattered over his finger tip when the beat of her heart pushed more blood out of her ruined nipple in a tiny spurt. He licked the tiny blood spot off his finger.

The taste of her blood was like liquid desire on his tongue. Every cell in his body vibrated with need to have more of this substance. Letting go of her neck, he grabbed both arms and pulled her body down the table towards him with one swift motion.

Harder than a rock, his engorged member penetrated her with a rough tearing motion. Warmth that nearly burned him gushed over his crotch as the coppery scent of blood overwhelmed every other scent. His manhood had torn something open inside her when it pierced her body.

He roared. The sound was the primal, viscous sound of a predator striking. Lunging forward he sank his teeth into her neck over her jugular, swallowing mouthful after mouthful of burning blood as the vein spurted. Lost in ecstasy, it was as if time stopped. All that existed for him was the flavor in his mouth and an unending need to capture as much of it as he could.



He could not say what it was that pulled him out of his revelry. Maybe it was a small sound or a tiny change of scent in the blood soaked air. All he knew was that suddenly he felt a change in the atmosphere and it broke both his concentration and his pleasure.

Furious at the interruption, he looked up from the ruined body of his prey. She was still alive, barely moving as the crimson tide of her blood flowed from what was left of her delicate neck. She would not last long in this state and it was no fun to drink from a corpse.

Standing in the doorway was the intruder on his gory feast. A young girl stood there, maybe thirteen years old at the most. She was wearing an old tee shirt that said Chicago in faded letters and clutching a worn stuffed bear in one hand. Golden hair flowed from her head and showed the little girl's relation to the woman gasping out last of her life in his hands. He tried to move, to attack the newcomer and destroy her for ruining his meal.

But he could not move. The little girl's eyes seemed to have paralyzed him. Deep blue eyes that looked directly into his soul and revealed every secret. There was no fear in her eyes. Only a deep sorrow as she looked at the monster that had just destroyed her mother.

Ice froze his veins. In the reflection of those eyes he saw himself, not as a sleek predator stalking and feeding, but as a monster destroying something beautiful and precious. Tearing his eyes away from their blue captors he stared in horror at the body still impaled on his own. Bile rose in his throat and he jumped back, causing the corpse on the table to twitch lifelessly. Horror filled him where only moments ago ecstasy had reigned. He could feel those blue eyes pitying him, even though he could not bring himself to meet their gaze again. Unable to take it anymore he dove through the kitchen window in a shower of broken glass and fled into the night.

He ran. His bare feet could not feel the cold pavement beneath them as he tried to escape the horror he felt. Lights blurred as he passed with the speed of the wind. He could not say where he was running to, only that he must get away. But the faster he ran, the more the sorrow in those blue eyes followed him.

The pale light of dawn finally forced him to stop. He was crouching in a graveyard when the painful light of pre-dawn crept over the horizon and made his skin tingle painfully. With no place better to escape the rays of the sun, he broke into a crypt and crouched behind one of the coffins for shelter. Sleep did not come easily and at last he passed out from pure exhaustion.

It was nearly midnight when he awoke. His normal dreams of glorious violence had been replaced by giant blue eyes that stared mournfully at him as they watched him commit atrocity after atrocity. Violent shivering seized him and it was nearly an hour before he could recover the strength to move. Pale hands shook as he grabbed the cold stones of the crypt to steady himself. Gone was the powerful, sleek predator of the night before. The cold star light illuminated the empty grave yard as brightly as the day as he crept slowly out of the grave that had sheltered him.

The smell of the city had faded. His frantic flight had carried him out into the country side, although the smell of humanity still surrounded him. But instead of exciting him as they had before, now the smells nauseated him. Leaning over a grave stone he was violently ill as his stomach rejected everything about who he was.

Dawn was only a few hours away by the time he managed to leave the graveyard. The smell of laundry soap drew him to a clothes line where he scavenged a pair of jeans and shirt. They were baggy and hung on his frame poorly but he did not care how he looked. Hunger pangs warred with nausea. He could not remember ever feeling so distraught in his entire life.

Without a conscious decision he found himself headed back into the city. There would be more places to hide and far more opportunity to feed there. At least that was what he told himself as he plodded along through the darkness, the night air around him filled with the sounds of nocturnal wildlife.

The ground he had covered in one night of furious running took him nearly three nights to walk back. By the time he arrived the hunger pangs were so bad that he found himself growing dizzy. Not bothering to hunt, he located a homeless man sleeping in an alley and tried to feed despite the rancid smell and terrible taste on the man's skin.

His hunger overcame his sensibilities and he found himself drinking heavily from the man's neck. But just as he was starting to feel the feeling of rapture he always felt while feeding, the image of the little blond girl with the sad eyes flashed before him. Guilt crashed down like a wave and he flung the homeless man's body away from him. It was only by trying desperately to focus on his hunger and repeated swallowing that he was able to keep from throwing up. By the time he composed himself he discovered that he was no longer hungry. Despite the fact that he had consumed far less blood than he usually drank.

He stood in the garbage of the alley and shivered violently despite the fact it was a warm night. He could not grasp what was happening to him. He was a predator, humans were the prey. It was

not pleasant, but that was life. How else would the human population be kept in control unless something fed on them like they fed on farm animals? This was the circle of life.

But the blue eyes of a little girl had disrupted his life. And it was time to figure out why. He would watch this little girl until he figured out what spell she had cast on him. Then he could free himself from it and resume the violent pleasures of his normal life.

Dawn was still hours away. He could make it across the city and be at the girl's house before dawn. It would not give him any time tonight to watch her but he could find a place to hide from the sun's rays and be ready tomorrow night.

Shortly after dusk the next evening he was standing on the same rooftop he had stood on before, watching the blond woman in her bed room. From his perch he could see the board covering the shattered window he had thrown himself from. The lights were still on in the house and he could smell the little girl and a man who must be her father. For the first time in longer than he could remember, there was a new scent on the wind. It took him a while to realize the scent was the same thing he felt when he saw the little girl's blue eyes. It was sorrow.

This early in the evening there were still humans out and about. He had to be careful that no one saw him as he crept about, peering into the windows of the little girl's house. He discovered that her room was on the second floor opposite her parents' bedroom. From the neighbor's roof on that side he could see over the curtains and into her room.

Feeling like a gargoyle, he crouched on the roof top, watching as the little girl prepared for bed. Shortly after he took up his position her father came in to tuck her in. The man's face was stained with tears and he held the little girl for a while and rocked her. Over the man's shoulder he could see those blue eyes. They were watery but the little girl did not cry. The look of anguish in them felt like someone had stabbed him in the gut.

He crouched there without a single muscle twitching for hours. The little girl was sleeping deeply, her golden hair splayed out like an angel's halo on her pillow. He could not have said what it was that held him there, watching the little girl sleep.

It was nearly dawn when a blast of pain struck him like a bolt of lightning, causing him to twitch with enough force to sink his fingers deep into the wooden beam of the roof below him. With the pain came a brilliant flash of memory.

He was a little boy, maybe ten at the most, running through a field of ripe golden wheat. Laughter flowed from his lips as he spun, catching a little girl behind him and falling down. Golden hair glowed in warm sunlight as it fell over his face and he brushed the hair away so he could see brilliant blue eyes that bubbled with mirth.

As quickly as it came, the memory passed, leaving his entire body burning in agony. Unable to move he fell sideways and slid down the roof to fall two stories to the ground. Landing with a violent thud, he twitched uncontrollably until darkness overcame him and he passed out

Dawn was a faint hint of light on the horizon by the time he came to. His muscles were weak and trembling uncontrollably. It was all he could do to drag himself up to the house he had spent the night perched on and pull himself underneath it. Safe from the burning rays of the sun he passed out again.

By the time he woke again the violent shaking had subsided. He lay in the dirt and felt a bug crawl across his face, but he could not summon the will to brush it off. The emotions of the memory he had experienced was fading quickly, leaving only a deep sense of regret as it passed. He could still remember the little boy laughing and the little girl, but they felt dim and far away. It was strange. Until now he had never remembered anything from his past. With a violent shock he realized that he did not even know his own name.

He wondered what it was that had caused him to forget so much about his past. The blank spot in his mind where his past should be ached as he probed it. The only images he got from his mind was the memory the night before, of the little girl and boy playing under the sun. The sun. Strange that he could not remember when even the faintest of its light had not burned his skin painfully.

Midnight had come and gone by the time he crawled from beneath the house. He wanted more; he wanted to know who he was. He wanted to remember the little boy and girl. But his mind was a dark crevasse that allowed no light to penetrate it. But there were blue eyes in the house next door that had cracked that darkness and let him see in. Maybe they would again.

He sat on the peak of the roof that night watching the little girl sleep until the morning light was so strong that his skin cracked and smoked without any memory presenting itself. The dirt beneath the house was damp and clammy when he finally retreated from the rays of the sun in defeat.

His obsession with his past, and the little girl that was the key, quickly established a new rhythm for his life. Gone was the

monster that would stalk beautiful women and eat them. He spent every night watching the little girl. When hunger forced him to feed he would just find a homeless person, or sometimes even neighborhood pets, to ease his hunger quickly so that he could return to his vigil. Many nights he delayed dangerously long before seeking cover from the sun, usually beneath a local house.

The memories did not always come. When they did, each one was accompanied by a blinding pain in his head, although he did not fall off the roof again. Yet he embraced the pain willingly to see just another glimpse of his life before he became a monster.

In the memories he often saw the other girl with blue eyes. Those flashes of his past grew as he saw the little boy that he had been playing with the girl or interacting with what must have been his family. They lived in a rural house and his family grew wheat. He never did learn where the little girl came from. As time passed the boy grew and so did the girl, but slowly, ever so slowly did the memories reveal more. The two of them seemed to be inseparable. And he never did learn his own name.

The years passed without him realizing it. The details of his own life that were so difficult for him to remember he learned instead about the little girl who had changed his life and whom he now watched over like a dark angel. It was impossible for him not to develop feelings for her. He felt so protective of her, a feeling completely foreign to him. The girl he watched and the girl from his memories were so similar.

The little girl in the house's name was Amare. Her mother, the woman he had killed, had named her that, saying that it was the Latin word for love. He also learned that she had been named after her great-great grandmother. As he watched the girl grew into a teenager. Like any teen she was often rebellious and snuck from her father's house more than once. He followed these nocturnal adventures from a distance, always ready to move in if another predator should threaten her. But he was never needed.

Amare was an adult now. Soon she would graduate college. But more importantly she would also be married soon. He was not sure how he felt about the marriage. Often he had to remind himself that she did not belong to him. But he had come to know Amare as he did not know anyone else, especially himself. It was impossible not to have a feeling of loss about it.

Finally that fateful day came. He crouched in his usual place on the peak of the roof, watching as soon as he could. Inside the house Amare still wore her white wedding dress as the after party dragged on into the night. She really was a beautiful woman. She had inherited the class her mother had shown. And the white wedding

dress fit her body perfectly as her golden hair spun and those blue eyes flashed with joy. The urge he felt to enter the house and join the party was sudden and unexpected.

Finally the last guest left and shortly afterward, so did her father. He overheard the conversation on the front porch as her father said good bye. The man told his daughter that his gift was the house. And he choked up as he told Amare that her mother would have been proud of her.

It was only an hour later that Amare and her husband went to bed. As he watched, clutching the wood of the roof top for support, the man Amare had married kissed her slowly. It took all his self control not to break into the house and kill the man, especially as the two of them began to make love.

It was then that the memory struck. Like the first, like all the previous memories, it felt as if he had been struck by lightning. Only this time the pain passed with a tearing motion that left him weak.

He was standing in the front of a small church. The wooden pews were worn from years of use. Most of the seats were filled with people in suits and dresses, although it was difficult to see the details as everything was awash in the color cast from the enormous stained glass windows that lined both walls.

He was standing in a warm glow of sunlight himself, holding hands and looking into blue eyes that pierced his soul. In those eyes he saw a glow, a life all their own. She was so happy that it was all she could do to stand still. The little girl he played with all those years had become a truly stunning woman.

To his left a dull voice droned on but he could not tell what the man was saying. There was only room in his world to stare at the woman he loved so much and he tried not to burst from happiness. Finally the man said:

"Do you Amare, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

Her voice was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard as she answered: "I do"

"And do you, Renato, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

The memory ended as quickly as it had begun, or so it felt to him. As the memory ended, it felt like a door had been opened in his mind. All the memories of his life came flooding back to him in an over flowing wave, pouring into his mind more quickly than he could

processes them. Renato could not imagine how he ever have forgotten so much about himself.

He remembered holding his first born son, a little boy with his mother's eyes and hair. He remembered holding his daughter. He remembered coming home every day from working on the farm and kissing his beautiful wife.

Something warm struck his hand, pulling him from the memories. He glanced down to see a wet spot on the back of his hand. He touched it curiously. It was warm and he could smell the salt in it. Another drop fell beside it and he realized that he was crying.

The eastern horizon was beginning to glow but he did not care. Straightening up he looked for the last time on the sleeping face of the woman who looked so much like her great-great grandmother. A gentle smile spread over his lips. She looked so happy, asleep in her husband's arms. He wished them well, knowing that he would never see them again.

Leaping off the roof he ran, faster than he had ever run before. It was a race, between him and the sun. There was a small graveyard on the edge of town he had to get too. In it was buried the love of his life, his own Amare.

Renato knelt in the grass, brushing fallen leaves away from the headstone. The stone was cold beneath his touch but he kissed the name carved there before turning to face the rising sun. The cracking of his skin should have been incredibly painful. But instead all he could feel was an overwhelming desire to be with Amare again. He smiled as the first rays of the sun struck him.

"I am coming love. Sorry for making you wait so long."

The flames of dawn ignited his body in a flash of fire, burning him as he smiled. It would be good to see his love again. There was no pain, only a brilliant light as the sun purged his soul with fire and freed Renato from the darkness inside.