



Hearts in Darkness (Nikki and Michael)

By Keri Arthur

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Life has never been so insane for Nikki James. There's another teenager missing. She has another vampire to contend with. Her partner and best friend Jake is in the hospital dying. And a madman is kidnapping the wealthy. Just when it seems nothing else could possibly go wrong, Michael returns-but not for her. This time, however, Nikki has no intention of running from either the case or from what still lies between her and Michael. And she isn't going to let him run, either. The last thing Michael Kelly needs is a confrontation with Nikki-especially when his control over his bloodlust is still so tenuous. But when a kidnapper steps up his agenda to murder, he's forced into a partnership with Nikki to keep her safe. Soon Michael discovers the biggest danger he faces may not be from his need to "taste" her, but from his desire to make her a permanent part of his life-a life that is sure to get her killed. Nikki is determined to make Michael see that life apart is worse than death. But before she can make him see the light, a specter from Michael's past rises that could destroy any hope she has of a future with him. Because this time the threat isn't physical. It's a matter of the heart. Nikki must compete with the woman-the vampire-for whom Michael gave up life.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

I started writing when I was about twelve. I'd just finished reading one of Elaine Mitchell's Brumby books, and hated the fact she killed off my favorite character--so I rewrote the book and changed the ending. I haven't stopped writing since, though it's only in the last few years I've seriously thought about getting published. In 1997, I placed second in the Washington Romance Writers Novel Beginnings contest (specialty romance) with Heart of the Hunter. In 2000, I was short-listed in the Random House George Turner Prize with Spook Squad (urban fantasy). Dancing with the Devil is my first published book.

I live in Melbourne, Australia, and I'm a dessert and function cook by trade. I'm married to a wonderful man who not only supports my writing, but who does all the housework as well. We have one daughter, one dog and a garden full of weeds. When I'm not working or writing, I can be found parked in front of the TV watching re-runs of the X-Files or Buffy.

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One

The breeze whispered around her, its touch like a furnace. Sweat beaded her skin, staining her T-shirt and dripping from her ponytail.

Around her the night pulsed—a bass-heavy rhythm. The air was rank with the scent of sweat, alcohol and chlorine.

Nikki stood in the shadows of an oak and sipped a lukewarm soda. Below her, on the main pool deck, bodies writhed in time to the music, unmindful of the heat or the closeness of others.

They had to be mad. If she had any choice, she would be in the pool, allowing the cool water to wash the heat and sweat from her skin. But instead, she was stuck here in the shadows with a lukewarm cola, awaiting the next move of a wayward teenager.

It was an all-too-familiar feeling. Six months before, she'd followed another teenager and had found herself caught in the middle of a war between two vampires.

Pain rose like a ghost and she bit her lip hard, blinking away the sting of tears.

It was her own stupidity that had driven Michael away. Her refusal to trust, to admit what she'd felt—until it was far too late—had worn him down as surely as the sea wears down a rock. Of course, allowing him to feed on her in an effort to save his life hadn't helped all that much, either. According to Jake, it had left his hard-won control over his blood lust in tatters—at least when he was around her. She wasn't entirely sure whether to believe it, though, because surely three hundred years could not be so easily undone.

But what hurt the most, perhaps, was the fact that he'd left without saying good-bye.

She'd looked for him, of course. She'd spent the first two months after she'd awakened in the hospital doing little else. But America was a big country, with lots of places to hide. And when the man she was hunting lived most of his life in the shadows, what hope did she really have of finding him?

None. Not that it really mattered. She'd keep looking until she found him—though what happened then would very much depend on how he reacted.

The two-way clipped to her lapel squawked. "Nik, are you there?"

It was Jake, her boss and her best friend. He sounded as bored as she was. Nikki pressed the button. "No, I'm at home enjoying a nice, cool bath."

"Forget the bath. A cold beer would go down beautifully right now. The kid still in your area?"

She scanned the crowd. Matthew Kincaid, a redheaded, jug-eared teenager, stood out from the mob. But it wasn't so much his looks as the fact that he towered a good foot or more over his peers. Basketball material for sure—if someone could teach him to catch a ball. Or throw it. But then, given he was a computer whiz with a genius-level IQ, he really didn't need to be risking life and limb—or at least limb—on the basketball courts.

"Yeah. He's hovering near the bar, trying to convince some of the adults to buy him a drink." She hesitated and took another sip of her cola. The warm liquid slithered down her throat and she shuddered, upending the rest into the dirt. "He's not acting like a kid on the verge of running away from home."

"I know. But his mom's paying us to watch him, so watch him we will. Besides, we need the money."

"When don't we?" They'd been working together for close to ten years, and she couldn't remember a time when the business hadn't been strapped for cash. Private investigators didn't make a lot of money—not in Lyndhurst, anyway. And Trevgard—a former client, and the one potential windfall they'd had in recent months—had died before he'd paid them. "Why is Mrs. Kincaid so convinced he's going to disappear tonight?"

"A conversation she overheard when passing his bedroom last week. Apparently, he's been chatting with this girl over the Internet and has formed quite a relationship with her. He arranged to meet her during the party."

Nikki frowned. "That doesn't explain why she thinks he's going to run away."

"The kid's unhappy at home. Hates his dad, who's an alcoholic, and argues constantly with his mom."

"He sounds like your average teenager to me."

Jake laughed softly. "Yeah, I guess. But lately, the kid's apparently been saying that he doesn't need them anymore, that he's found someone who understands him."

Nikki raised her eyebrows. "The Internet friend?"

"Maybe."

"Has Mrs. Kincaid talked to Matthew about this?"

"Yeah," Jake said, voice dry. "And the reply is one I'm not about to use over the two-way."

She grinned. "Has she tried going into his computer when he's at school?"

“He’s password-protected and encrypted both his email and chat logs.”

“Clever kid.”

“Doesn’t take a genius to do that sort of stuff—which he is, remember.”

Maybe it was standard procedure for the kid and Jake, but computers had never been her strong point. “That doesn’t explain why he’s going to such lengths to stop his mom from reading his emails. I would think a kid with his—let’s be polite, and say unusual—looks would be letting all and sundry know he’s in contact with a hot girl.”

“We don’t know that she’s hot.”

“We don’t know she’s not, either,” Nikki retorted. “But maybe he lied about his looks. Plenty of people do on the Net.”

“Yeah, but there’s no indication he’s done that, either.”

Maybe, but given his height, his coloring and those ears, it was more than likely that he had. The Internet would have given him not only anonymity, but also the ability to reinvent himself.

So why would he risk all that to meet this woman and reveal the truth? And why did Nikki have a feeling that it could all go so horribly wrong?

She glanced at her watch. “It’s close to eleven thirty now. Does his mother have any idea when the meeting was going to happen?”

“Midnight, apparently.”

Witching hour. The time when all things dark and deadly came out to play. Things like Michael. Or Jasper.

She shuddered and rubbed her wrist. In the worst of her dreams, she could still feel Jasper’s touch—in her thoughts, and on her skin. But Jasper was dead, burned to ashes by the sun’s heat. His evil could never touch her again.

Michael, on the other hand . . . Thanks to the events surrounding Jasper’s capture, her life was now linked to Michael’s. As long as he remained alive, so would she. But wherever he was, whatever danger he was embracing, if he died, then she would, too—out of the blue and with utterly no warning.

A chill ran through her. She hated being dependent on anyone—and especially on the man who had broken her heart. But, on the positive side, nothing short of decapitation could kill her as long as Michael lived—and her psychic senses told her she’d be in need of such protection tonight. Because she couldn’t shake the certainty that evil of another kind was on the move in Lyndhurst. And if that were true, then Matthew Kincaid could be a target. From what she’d seen, evil liked preying on innocents.

The bass-heavy pounding faded, replaced by a gentler, more romantic song. On the pool deck, the teenagers drew close. There was probably more kissing going on now than dancing.

She looked across to the bar. Matthew was staring at the crowd, his expression a mix of envy and anger. He

slammed his drink onto the counter, then walked away.

“Heads up. He’s on the move.”

Jake sounded relieved. “Where?”

Matthew had disappeared behind the tent that housed the bar. Nikki broke into a run, keeping to the shadows as she skirted the sweating mass of slow-dancing teenagers. Matthew came into sight, his arms swinging as fast as his legs as he strode along the path.

She slowed, not wanting to get too close and attract his attention. “He’s heading for the back gate.”

“Is anyone else in sight?”

“Not unless you want to count the teenagers getting busy under the trees.”

Jake snorted softly. “I’ll bring my car around. Keep me posted.”

“Will do.”

Matthew reached the gate and stopped to unlatch it. She stepped behind a tree. The kid threw the gate open, then glanced over his shoulder. His look was petulant, like that of a child grabbing at candy he knows he shouldn’t have.

It wasn’t his family making him run, she thought with a grin. It was his hormones.

He headed out and turned right. She pressed the two-way, informing Jake, then followed the teenager out the gate.

Matthew’s long strides had taken him a good way down the street. She crossed to the other side, then broke into a run, closing the distance between them. The slow beat of the music began to fade and silence closed in, broken only by the occasional roar of a car engine or the blast of a horn.

Matthew strode on, looking neither right nor left. She swiped at the sweat dripping from her chin and studied the street ahead. They were in the Heights—a ritzy and very expensive section of Lyndhurst nestled in the western edge of the mountains that ringed the town. Below them, lights blazed—a neon sea of brightness that outshone the stars. Matthew could have been heading toward any one of those lights, but her gaze stopped at the docks.

That’s where he’s going, she thought.

The two-way buzzed softly. “Nik, I’m in the car. Where are you?”

She pressed the receiver. “Ocean Road, just past Second.”

“I’m parallel on West. Let me know if he changes direction or meets a car.”

“Will do.”

They continued on—Matthew striding out, Nikki half running to keep up with him. Boxlike shapes began to loom up around them as houses gave way to factories and warehouses. The faint wash of traffic seemed to die completely and, in the silence, her breathing seemed strained and harsh.

Ahead, Matthew stopped in the puddle of an overhead light and glanced at his watch. He looked briefly to his right, then turned left, heading into a small side street. Nikki pressed the two-way. “He just turned into an alley. He’s heading your way.”

“Last cross street?”

She frowned, thinking back. “Sixth.”

“Just passed it. I’ll park and wait.”

She stopped near the street entrance and peered around the corner. Matthew was nowhere in sight.

Swearing softly, she hurried down the street, keeping an eye on the fences lining either side of the road, looking for gaps or gateways the teenager could have used. Nothing. But halfway down, on the right, she came across a small street. Matthew was a dark shadow moving quickly away.

She sighed in relief. “He’s turned off again,” she told Jake. She glanced up, studying the unlit street sign. “Heading down Baker’s Lane toward the docks.”

“That street comes to a dead end.”

She hoped it was just a figure of speech and not a reality. “It’s a rather odd place to meet an Internet friend, don’t you think?”

“If it is a friend he’s meeting, yes. But all sorts of perverts go trawling the chat rooms looking for innocents like Matthew.”

She kept close to the fence on the off chance that Matthew might turn around. At least in the darker shadows lining the fence, she’d be harder to spot. “The problem is, I’ve got a feeling it’s not your average pervert we’re dealing with.”

Jake groaned. “That’s all we need. I’m heading in—and bringing a gun.”

“Be careful, Jake. I really don’t like the feel of this.”

“Then maybe I’ll call the cops, just to be safe.”

“And tell them what? That I’ve got a feeling?” Even Col MacEwan—a senior detective and the officer who’d helped them during the mess that was the Trevgard investigation—wasn’t likely to come running over something like that. He might believe in her psychic abilities these days, but even he would want something more concrete than a feeling.

Jake grunted. “Don’t do anything stupid until I get there.”

Meaning she could do something stupid after? She grinned, though it didn’t ease the tension knotting her

stomach. “You do remember that I really can’t die, don’t you?”

“If Michael is to be believed,” Jake retorted. “And even if he is, that’s no reason to needlessly throw yourself into danger.”

“Trust me, I’m really not planning to do that anytime soon.” Because while it might be hard for her to die, she could get injured—and badly enough that she might wish to die.

The street narrowed, and the warehouses on either side seemed to loom in on her. She skirted several Dumpsters and screwed up her nose. Judging from the amount of garbage overflowing onto the street, they hadn’t been emptied in several weeks. Combine that with the heat of the last few days, and the result was revolting.

Matthew stopped. She ducked behind a stinking Dumpster, holding her breath as she peered around the side. He was studying the buildings to either side, but after a few seconds he turned and ran toward the fence on the left. She waited until he’d disappeared over the top, then followed.

“He just climbed a fence. Third warehouse from the end.”

“Wait for me.”

“I might lose him if I do.”

Jake swore. “Damn it, be careful.”

“You be careful. I’m not the one most at risk here.”

“But you’re not immortal, either, and I’m positive Michael didn’t tell you everything about his gift of life everlasting.”

She smiled grimly. Michael had never told her more than what he thought she needed to know. Bare facts, and nothing more—especially when it came to anything concerning his past or what he did for a living. Or how greatly he’d risked both their lives . . .

“I’m heading over.”

She grabbed the chain link and pulled herself over the fence. Dropping to the ground on the other side, she crouched, her gaze sweeping the darkness. The building had to be some sort of produce warehouse. Packing crates were lined in neat rows, those closest containing the limp remnants of lettuce leaves.

Matthew could have gone anywhere, so she stayed where she was, listening intently. The wind moaned through the silence, raising the hairs on the back of her neck. She rubbed her arms, then reached down, withdrawing a knife from her right boot. Made of the purest silver, it was one of two she’d had specially designed after her encounters with Jasper. If an old kitchen knife with only the smallest amount of silver in it could stop him, her new knives should stop just about anything. That’s what she was hoping, anyway.

Users Review

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Kiley Kaufman:

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