



*Myla Jackson*

# Tempting

Myla Jackson



*Tempting*

## Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language. This material is meant for mature audiences!



*Myla Jackson*

Copyright ©2005 Mary Jernigan

Cover illustration copyright © 2005 Patricia Foltz

ISBN Not Assigned

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by an information storage and retrieval system-except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a magazine, newspaper, or on the Web-without permission in writing from the publisher.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

Published by: Whispers, 107 Clearview Circle, Goose Creek, SC 29445

#### Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following trademarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Hummer-Nov 10, 1992 Owner: AM GENERAL CORPORATION CORPORATION DELAWARE P.O. Box 7025, South Bend INDIANA 466347024

Enter the Matrix - June 12, 2002 Owner: Time Warner Entertainment Company, L.P. Warner Communications Inc., a Delaware corporation and American Television and Communications Corporation, a Delaware corporation PARTNERSHIP DELAWARE 75 Rockefeller Plaza New York NEW YORK 10019

## Chapter One

Reggie Gallagher ducked behind the last in a row of dumpsters and braced her hands on her knees, dragging in huge gulps of air. Sweat ran down the side of her face, and the black ribbed-knit tank top clung to her breasts. The coastal humidity and heat acted like a steam bath even when she was standing still. For the moment, all she could hear was the ragged gasps of her breath wheezing in and out of her straining lungs. And despite the retched stench of the waste beside her, she welcomed the respite from the chase.

Where was Madison? She'd been right behind Reggie until now.

The quiet of the alley was broken when pounding footsteps entered and raced toward her.

Risking a stealthy glance around the hard metal corner of the dumpster, Reggie confirmed the runner, and she reached out to snag her and pull her in beside her.

"Can't...stop." Madison bent low, her shoulders heaving with the effort to fill her oxygen-starved lungs.

"Breathe," Reggie ordered and tapped the miniature headset positioned inside her ear like a hearing aide. "Where the hell are Jordan and Mike?"

“It’s...as...if...they disappeared.” Madison sucked in air and gushed, “Ah, shit! I can’t breathe. I don’t know if those guys saw me turn down here, but they can’t be far behind.”

“Then let’s go.” Reggie shot another glance around the corner of the dumpster. The alley was empty. She waited another second and then grabbed her sister’s hand, pulling her along behind her.

“There!” The shout of one of their pursuers echoed off the brick of the multi-story structures rising up from their concrete foundations. The buildings spread over entire blocks, channeling Reggie and Madison through the worst part of Houston, leaving few places to hide or take cover. How had the mission gone south so fast? Where was their backup?

“They’ll catch us at this rate,” Madison shouted, between gasps. “Gotta split up.”

“No!” But before Reggie could tighten her grip, her younger sister pulled free and swung left, sprinting west away from the downtown area.

Reggie glanced back at the group of six men closing in behind her. If she played her hand right, they’d follow her and leave Madison alone. The fastest runner on the team at the Paranormal Investigative Agency, she could outrun every man, except perhaps the boss. Tanner was made of iron and muscles. No one could outrun, out gun, or outsmart him.

But if she wanted to live, Reggie had better make it her goal to beat all of his records and then

## *Tempting*

some. She just hoped the hell Madison got away.

Summoning every last ounce of energy, she punched out, running straight for two blocks to ensure the bad boys behind her wouldn't branch off and pursue her sister. Just as she was about to veer east, a shot rang out and something hard and fast slammed against her left shoulder, spinning her around so quickly she crashed into the brick corner of an office building.

Surprise numbed the pain for the first five seconds until her heart resumed function, kicking her blood through her body and out the small hole the size of a quarter on one side of her shoulder. A glance backward confirmed the exit point was a lot bigger. Her stomach lurched, and the pale glow of the streetlamps dimmed. No. She couldn't pass out. *Not now. Have to run. Have to get farther away from Madison.*

As fog crept in around her peripheral vision, Reggie rounded the corner she'd been aiming for and set off at a swift jog, her pace slowing more each time her heels hit the pavement.

No. This couldn't happen. She would not be another one of the victims she risked her life to protect. No way would the gang members or bloodsuckers take her down like they'd done her father.

Heartless bastards! All of them.

Although Tanner said there were good vamps out there, Reggie had it firmly in her mind that the only good vampire was a dead vampire. She repeated the words like a cadence, motivating her

legs to keep pumping and her feet to continue moving away from her attackers.

The only good vampire is a—" With only half a block between her and the six men, she reached the end of the street and swung a hard right, running into a solid wall of steel. Her forehead made contact and then her chest, knocking what little air was left from her lungs. The force of the collision made her bounce backward, her head snapping up. With no air to sustain breathing and her vision blurred, the ground sucked her downward. As her knees buckled, her mouth completed her sentence, "—dead vampire."

"I like to think of it as the living dead." A deep voice with one of those guttural, and incredibly sexy, foreign accents filled her senses, and strong arms reached out to catch her before she hit the pavement.

Her brain cloudy from blood and oxygen loss, Reggie was thankful for the strength of the man in front of her. But she had to get away. Those men would catch up and do who knew what to her. How the hell had the ambush they'd set up for the gang turned into a trap for her and Madison? Where was the rest of her team?

The gang had been waiting for them as if they knew she and Madison were the bait and they'd be alone. How had they known? The entire situation stunk. Could there be a snitch on the inside at PIA? Would Reggie and Madison end up missing like the thirteen young women to date?

Bull shit.

## *Tempting*

She and Madison weren't victims. They were the good guys sworn to catch the filthy scum taking advantage of lone women.

Reggie struggled against the vice grip holding her chest-to-chest with the stranger. When she tried to right herself, her head swam, and her knees refused to engage enough to hold her upright.

"Let me go," she said with more bravado than conviction that she could stand on her own once released.

He chuckled, his chest vibrating against hers. "If I do, you'll fall."

Footsteps rang out on the streets behind her, and her body stiffened. "Let me go!" No matter how strong this guy was, he couldn't go against six men and hope to win. For that matter, Reggie didn't know if he wasn't one of them. Had she run right into the enemy?

The men rounded the corner and skidded to a stop, their leader at the front—Cesar Dominguez, a man Reggie knew from the mug shots on file at the agency and the snake-dragon tattoo on his right arm. He carried a nine-millimeter pistol and had it pointed at the man holding her.

That settled one question in Reggie's numb mind. Her rescuer wasn't one of the gang she'd set out to capture. She would have sighed her relief, but she still didn't know who the hell he was.

"Let me have her, and I won't shoot you," Cesar said, stepping forward.

Her captor paused, not like a hesitation, but as

if to make sure his answer was understood. “No.” A single word, no negotiation, and no compromise.

Reggie could like a guy like this if she wasn’t so uncertain of his alliance. Anyone as incredibly gorgeous and sexy, with an accent that could melt metal, had to be a bad guy. What had he said to her? He liked to consider it living dead? What the hell had he meant by that? Thoughts swirled around inside her head like melting whipped cream in a stirred latte. Why couldn’t she focus?

Could it be the gallon of blood she’d lost running down the street? Reggie trained her blurry gaze on Cesar and clung to sexy man’s chest to keep from slipping to the ground.

“If you don’t turn her loose, then you die.” He pointed the weapon at the dark man’s chest.

Before Cesar could squeeze the trigger, tall-dark-and-sexy dropped his hold on Reggie, smacked the gun from Cesar’s hand so hard it flew high overhead and crashed through a window. And he was back so fast he caught Reggie before her knees gave out.

“What the fuck?” Cesar shook his empty hand, his eyes wide.

“My friend, Nic, is a show off,” another voice said from behind them.

So her captor’s name was Nic. Reggie leaned her head back to peer around the man holding her up, which proved to be a big mistake as the world spun several times before it settled in place.

An even taller man, towering well above six feet, stood behind her guy, wearing a black muscle

## *Tempting*

shirt and black jeans. Where her captor was as dark as a moonless night, this new man was a vision of light. White hair fell to his shoulders, and his pale blue eyes shown in the limited glow from the nearby streetlamps. He was beautiful and built like a Norse god, with muscles bulging beneath the scrap of a shirt.

Even if she hadn't lost a gallon of blood, Reggie might have swooned over these guys. "Where do they come up with guys like you and your buddy here?" Was that her voice, the one that sounded like a drunken sailor? Her head lolled, and her vision blurred.

No. She wouldn't pass out. Good PIA's didn't crap out on the job. No, sir. "I'm a good agent," she muttered and struggled to keep her head upright.

"I'm sure you are," he said soothingly. "But could you shut up for a moment?"

"No way to treat a lady," she pouted and leaned her head against the soft jersey of the black T-shirt he wore, liking the feel of all that muscle beneath her cheek. She could fall asleep cradled as she was in his arms if her shoulder wasn't aching so badly.

"Do you boys need more convincing?" Nic called out.

Reggie's head jerked up, and she glared across at Cesar and his gang of thugs. "Yeah, what he said." If she weren't so dizzy from blood loss and knocking into this man named Nic, she'd get her ass in gear and fight.

“Please.” Nic frowned at her. “I can handle this.”

“Just trying to help.”

“I don’t need your help,” Nic said.

“Too bad.” She pushed away from him and faced Cesar. “You’d better slither back into the gutter you crawled out of, or you’ll be the one to die, punk.”

“Could you have been a little more inflammatory?” Nic asked, shaking his head.

The twinkle in his eye was too cute, and if her shoulder wasn’t hurting so badly, she might be tempted to ask for his number when they were done kicking Cesar’s ass. “I aim to inflame.”

“Seems you hit your mark. Let’s hope he doesn’t hit his.” The twinkle left Nic’s eyes as Cesar slid a knife out of his pocket and clicked it open.

Reggie’s heart leaped at the glint of steel flashing in the glare of a streetlight, instantly regretting her taunting words. With a knife that big and ugly, someone was bound to get hurt. She hoped to hell it wasn’t Nic. It would be a shame to scar any part of his handsome face.

With a wave of his knife, Cesar motioned his minions forward, and they circled Reggie, Nic and the Norse god.

Blondie laughed out loud, his mirth booming off the high rises. “Do they really think they can frighten us?”

“You’re not doing much to persuade them otherwise, my friend.” Nic’s lips twisted.

## *Tempting*

“Then let me demonstrate, since you seem to have your hands full.” He flexed his muscles and stalked the man nearest him.

“Thank you,” Nic said, his voice dripping sarcasm.

Apparently these guys knew each other well. Reggie watched in utter amazement as the Norse god proved he was god-worthy and lifted the man off his feet with one hand and tossed him twenty feet. And he didn’t even grunt or break a sweat.

Swaying slightly on her feet, Reggie wished Nic was holding her steady. He’d seemed so solid and strong. As if he could read her mind, his arm snaked around her middle, and she gladly leaned into him. She never leaned on people. Why did she want to now? Maybe she was already unconscious and this was all a really weird dream.

Cesar lunged at Nic, slicing the wicked knife through the air. Nic dodged neatly, shielding Reggie from the deadly blade. “If you’re through over there, I could use a hand here,” he called out over his shoulder.

“Just cleaning up the little ones. You can handle him for a minute, can’t you?”

Reggie couldn’t believe these guys. She and Madison had high-tailed it out of Dodge when they realized their backup had flown the coup and left them holding the trap by themselves, six to two. Not good odds when the six were mean looking, tattoo-bearing thugs. But Nic and his Norse-god friend hadn’t even batted an eyelash.

Nic shifted her to his left arm. Cesar took

advantage of Nic's distraction and shot forward, plunging his knife into Nic's gut.

"Ha!" Cesar said. "Not as great as you thought you were, are you?"

Nic glanced down at his belly as blood stained his shirt. Then he looked at her as if annoyed. "Pardon me for a moment."

He stood her on her own and then turned to Cesar. "You've irritated me long enough, human."

Reggie's knees buckled, and she dropped to the pavement, the jolt sending pain slicing through her injured arm. Though the pain made her see squiggly bright lights in the darkness of the night, she tried to prop herself in a sitting position with her good arm.

Nic lifted Cesar off the ground and flung him ten yards to the south as if he weighed little more than a sack of sugar. How did he do that?

Some things about Nic and his Norse friend weren't adding up. What had he called Cesar? Human? And they were both incredibly strong. She stared at the cut in his side as he dusted his hands off. It wasn't bleeding anymore.

A cold chill shivered across Reggie's skin. Something wasn't clicking, but her head was too fuzzy to make sense of it.

Damn! Reggie slumped back to the hard black surface of the street. At least Nic and the Norse god were handling Cesar. She didn't have the strength nor could she see straight enough to do anything but lay back and watch the show.

And it was a terrific kick-butt event, with Nic

*Tempting*

tossing thugs like firewood. She'd have to remember to thank them for the entertainment when she felt more herself. And maybe get the man's number. He was a man a girl could sink her teeth into and so vigorous, he'd probably be great in bed. What a babe.

## Chapter Two

“ Why didn’t you leave her where you found her?” Torsten Lang pushed his long blond hair back from his forehead and circled the woman on the dining table. “Or are you collecting strays again?”

Safe in his penthouse apartment, twenty-six stories into the Houston skyline, Nicolae Kovak needn’t fear discovery or interference from Cesar’s disbanded gang of punks. The only danger now was the woman he’d been foolish enough to bring into the secrecy of his lair. But he couldn’t leave her on the street, not alone and as weak as she’d been.

“They would have come back for her.” Nic stared down at the woman’s deep red hair and skin a pearly shade of alabaster dusted with ginger-colored freckles. Her breathing was shallow, her breasts barely rising and falling to the rhythm.

“Did she pass out on her own or did you have some influence?” Torsten asked.

“I put her in a trance,” Nic responded. Although, she’d already been in a mild state of shock from blood loss and running into him.

Torsten leaned close to sniff at her neck. “Ummm. She smells tempting.”

His friend’s gesture sent a rush of blood to Nic’s face, and his fists tightened. “Back off.”

## *Tempting*

Straightening, Torsten leveled piercing blue eyes on Nic. "Unless you plan on keeping her, you need get her out of here before she wakes."

"You're back so soon?" Melisande's lilting voice preceded her into the room. When she stepped into the dining area, she ground to a halt, her gaze fixed on the woman lying across the table. "What is she doing here?"

"Bleeding, at the moment," Torsten said, his gaze never leaving Nic. "Shall we serve her up for dinner? She's in the right place."

"Don't be crude, Tor." A faint dip in her delicate brow signaled Melisande's displeasure with Torsten's remark. She strode to the table and perused the woman as if examining a new bedspread for the queen-size bed in her room. "She's pretty in a manly way."

Nic's frown deepened. The woman's curves had burned an indelible impression on his hands. "There's not a manly bone on this woman's body." As soon as the words left his mouth, he realized Melisande was fishing for the answer to his involvement with a strange woman.

The twinkle in Melisande's eye could not be mistaken. Her lips stretched into a grin. "What is it about this woman you felt it necessary to risk all of us by bringing her here?" She lifted a strand of fiery red hair, the coppery highlights reflecting the light from the overhead chandelier.

Nic had asked himself that question all the way back to the penthouse suite, carrying the woman in his arms, refusing to allow Torsten to share the

burden for even a step. “Some of Andrei’s Dragóns would have taken her. I couldn’t leave her to their machinations.”

“So you brought her here? Couldn’t you have taken her to a hospital or dropped her at one of those 24-hour trauma centers?” Melisande shook her head. “This is too messy, especially for you, Nicolae.”

“Melisande is right. We’ll have trouble when she wakes,” Torsten added.

“I couldn’t leave her.” Why was he defending his actions? He was in charge here. “The deed is done.”

“Which brings us to the next question.” Melisande stared down at the redhead. “What shall we do with her now?”

“Looks to me like we have at least three choices.” Torsten held a finger in the air. “The first is to dump her back on the street.”

“Not an option.” Nicolae stepped toward the woman as if preparing to defend her. Her trance was so deep, when he lifted her wrist, he could barely feel the pulse.

“Which leads to your next option, you can turn her into one of us.” Torsten tapped a hand to his chest.

The idea appealed to Nic, but he felt the woman would want to make that choice herself. In all his four hundred and twenty-eight years as a vampire, he refused to force the choice to turn on an unconscious person. “No, I will not turn her.”

“You can heal her and set her free when she is

## *Tempting*

ready. As you did for me.” Melisande’s voice carried through the air.

Melisande had been with him for the past five years, not as his lover, but as his friend and his backup source of the blood he needed to survive. He’d healed an injury inflicted by her abusive father. She was one of the strays Torsten alluded to.

She placed a hand on his arm and looked up at him with her dark brown eyes. “If you choose to keep her here until she wakes, be careful. She could blow your cover.”

“If you don’t have the stomach for it, I’ll sacrifice my services and heal her.” Torsten clapped his hands together. “She’s pretty if you like red hair and pale skin. Me? I prefer a sun-drenched wench of darker skin tones. But I never turn down a pretty woman, especially one with hair the color of polished copper.”

Nic’s teeth clenched. “I’ll take care of her and heal her. After that, I’ll be the one to decide what to do with her.”

“You don’t know how she’ll react when she finds out you aren’t human. She might be frightened. Or worse still, she might not like vampires.” Melisande’s gaze roved over the woman’s face as if recalling her own initial fear.

Nic snorted. He already had an idea about her feelings about vampires. Did he think he could change her mind? “I know the risks for us,” he said, his voice coarse, impatient. Time was wasting, and her wounds needed tending.

But would she want him to touch her? What was it she'd said when she'd run into him? The only good vampire was a dead vampire? A smile tilted his lips upward. Was she afraid of vampires? He couldn't imagine this woman being afraid of anything. Hadn't she proven her strength and determination when she'd stood up against the Dragóns? Even after she'd been wounded.

The woman deserved to walk away whole, even if it was a vampire helping her to do so. He didn't have to turn her, but she might think that was his intent when she came to.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Melisande asked.

Nic sighed. "Yes."

He gathered the red-haired woman into his arms, her blood smearing across his sleeve. Had he not fed an hour earlier, the hunger would have been washing over him in waves. The scent of blood drew him like no other, but he'd had over four hundred years to learn to control his blood lust. He hoped the lessons learned would carry him through the other urges not so easily controlled.

He carried her to his room and turned to close the door.

"Need my assistance?" Torsten asked, his gaze focused on Nic not the woman.

"I do not wish to be disturbed."

"What if she tries to kill you?" Melisande asked.

"I'll take my chances." With a slight kick, the door swung shut, blocking out Torsten and Melisande's worried faces.

## *Tempting*

When he laid her on the bed, she was like a rag doll, completely limp and unresponsive. Her wounds were not mortal, but she'd lost enough blood to weaken her. The trance did the rest. But as soon as he started the healing process, she'd awaken.

Maybe she'd be frightened. More likely she'd be shocked and angry, thinking he was taking advantage of her. Perhaps that was the reason he'd brought her here in the first place.

This woman and her foolish bravado intrigued him as no other in many years.

Nic glanced at the clock. Dawn was only an hour away. If he planned to do this, he'd need to do it quickly.

Without another thought to the consequences, he pulled a knife from the sheath in his boots and slipped it beneath the hem of her shirt, the blade slicing through threads until he peeled back the tank top exposing the wound and a shell-pink, lace bra.

For a woman all in black, the pink bra was a pleasant surprise. In order to heal her, he had to strip her clothing away to expose all entry and exit wounds.

He flipped the front clasp and her breasts spilled out of the lace and into his hands. Okay, so he probably hadn't needed to remove the bra, but he couldn't resist, and the straps might prove to be in the way across her back.

His cock flicked against the confines of his trousers, and Nic ground his teeth together to stave

off his rising desire. Although the surge of lust was inevitable, he had no business coming on to this semi-conscious woman.

When he rolled her to her side, she moaned, a low, weak sound in the large room. Careful not to cause her further pain, he eased the remnants of her shirt over her shoulder and down her arms. The back of her shoulder was a mess of blood and torn flesh from the bullet's damaging exit. At least he needn't worry about removing the slug.

Once he had her top half stripped, he removed his own boots and his bloodstained T-shirt. Then he climbed in the bed beside her and went to work.

Healing an open wound was a delicate line for him to walk, with the taste of blood on his tongue and the silkiness of female flesh beneath his fingers. He'd die a thousand deaths before he finished the job. Resisting her would be a monumental task.

Melisande had been the only other person he'd healed. Doctors were available for this kind of thing. For centuries, he'd lived a quiet existence, blending into the shadows of the places he lived. If he healed every wound, he'd leave himself vulnerable, and others would come to realize the truth of his existence. If they learned of his true nature, they'd hunt him down and kill him. Fear of vampires lead many to destroy them without considering they were still people beneath the undead exterior.

Nic had contemplated that death on occasion, but he wasn't ready to give up on life such as it

## *Tempting*

was. He had Torsten to keep him company and the occasional woman to warm his bed. Melisande provided sustenance when available donors were limited. What more could he want?

The woman beside him lay as still as death, her peaches and cream skin cool to his touch. He skimmed his fingers over a breast and up to the base of her throat where her pulse beat the strongest. With a deep breath, he leaned into her his lips pulling back as his teeth extended.

How easy it would be to sink into her jugular and suck the life-giving blood from her body. To make her immortal to stand beside him for eternity.

He skimmed the long incisors across her neck, pressing lightly, without breaking the skin.

A surge of desire rolled over him like waves crashing against the shore. Struggling against instinct, he proceeded down the base of her throat and across her collarbone to the injured shoulder. He sniffed at the blood still oozing from the wound, like a thick, rich wine to be sipped.

He tasted the nectar, savoring the flavor of her, his body responding to her naked breasts beneath his chin, within easy reach of his mouth. Each pearly mound jutting upward, begging him to take them into his mouth.

She stirred beneath him, her back arching upward, a breast pressing against his chin.

Turning his face just a little, he captured the nipple between his teeth, letting go immediately. He realized his mistake at once. If he didn't get

back to the task at hand, he'd be lost in his own uncontrollable lust.

He turned her onto her stomach, putting those luscious breasts beneath her and out of reach of his roving lips and baser instincts. Then with long sure strokes, he laved the wound on her back until the shattered flesh grew together, the scar shrinking until it disappeared.

She stirred in his grasp, groaning and pushing against the bed.

The taste of her blood an aphrodisiac to his senses, Nic closed his eyes as the red-haired goddess rolled to her back.

He inhaled and let out a long breath, schooling himself to a calm he didn't feel. Yet he fought a losing battle against his body. He had to complete the work and get her out of his bed before he did something they would both regret. He opened his eyes and stared only at the entrance wound, refusing to note the peachy tips of her breasts, now pebbled into tight beads.

With an economy of effort, he sealed the entrance wound and leaned back to inspect his work. The injury wouldn't leave a scar to mar the perfection of her skin.

If he were a gentleman, he'd get off the bed and walk away. He even made a move to do just that.

She shifted beneath him, her hands rising up his torso to clasp around his neck, pulling him closer until his chest rested against her full, ripe breasts.

Nic froze, his arms braced on either side of her

## *Tempting*

shoulders, his mouth hovering over hers.

Her breath blew softly against his lips, the tangy scent of mint filling his senses.

*Move away*, he willed his body. But the body wasn't going anywhere. Nestled against the soft curves, he couldn't tear himself away.

Her leg curved around the back of his calf, and she pressed her crotch to his thigh. "Love me," she whispered, her eyes closed, her body caught in a lusty dream. She probably didn't know who she was or what she was doing, only that she needed to be loved.

Nic wondered who she was dreaming of. Did she have a boyfriend or a husband lurking in her thoughts and somewhere in Houston? With a quick glance down at her hand, he heaved a sigh. No ring. Good. Then who was she thinking of in her lust-filled trance?

He knew the intensity of lust, having experienced it when he was turned so long ago by the venomous vampire he thought he cared for. Had he known the consequences of making love to her and letting his passion take over, he might have chosen differently. But Katarina hadn't given him the choice. She'd fooled him into drinking her blood, turning him into a vampire just like her. When she'd taken what she wanted, she left without a trace. No goodbyes, no false declarations of love.

Swearing never to trick an innocent, Nic knew he couldn't make love to this woman. He had to be very careful. Caught up in lust, he might forget

himself and turn her against her will.

In the meantime, he rolled to his back trying to ignore her attack on his body. For attack was what it was since he fought to resist with every fiber of his being. The draw was too strong, and when her hand drifted over his abdomen, Nic couldn't resist her any longer. He'd only let her touch him, he wouldn't make love like she begged him to. She wasn't in her right mind, still caught in the grip of the trance.

"Please." She nibbled at his ear, sinking her teeth in a little harder than a nip, enough to make him jerk against her. Her hand slipped beneath the waistband of his pants to fondle his cock.

Nic groaned, his nerve endings titillated, testosterone flaming downward, filling him to tight, rock-hard proportions. Resistance might as well be torture. As a vampire, he was even more prone to the call of desire than the average man and much more likely to move on it. Before he could stop himself, his hips thrust against hers in an uncontrolled spasm. Mind over lust, he reminded himself, backing away.

When he shifted, her other hand slipped beneath his hip and pulled him against her, his cock pressing into her belly.

The moist pressure of her mouth moved from his earlobe to his lips, leaving a trail of fiery kisses along his jaw line.

With her hand still in his pants and her tongue delving between his teeth in the exact rhythm of sex, she had him. Nic realized this was going to be

## *Tempting*

harder than he imagined. Feeling his defenses crumbling, he tried to pull her hand away from his cock.

She bit into his bottom lip and held, her hand remaining just where she wanted it, stroking, massaging and stirring his fires to flame.

“You’ll regret this in the morning,” he whispered against her ear. His lips were so close, and her skin had warmed, the peaches and cream texture teasing him until he had to touch his tongue to her neck to judge for himself if she tasted as good as she looked.

He found her to be a heady combination of sweet and salty, like a tangy Margarita, cool to the lips yet warming the pallet as the tequila works its magic. He could drink her all up if he let himself. And maybe he would.

## Chapter Three

Reggie writhed against the sheets, her body burning with need now that the pain was gone. With eyelids too heavy to lift, she gave in to the desire crumbling her inhibitions to dust.

It was only a flight of the imagination, a wild and sensuous escape from reality, and she didn't want to wake up until she'd had her fill. In her fantasy she reached out, her hands finding a warm, solid body to skim across. He was the tall, dark and sexy man she'd run headfirst into in an alley. Had that been in her dream? Her mind tried to make sense of him. He must have been part of her fantasy. No human could launch another person into the air as if he weighed less than a cat.

Settling back, she entwined her hands around his neck and pulled him over her, desperate for a kiss to start. And that would only be the beginning.

He resisted slightly, and she reached up to press her mouth to his. She wanted him to make love to her. Did she say it out loud? Had she begged him? Not caring one way or the other, she looped a leg over him to prevent his escape. If he wouldn't come to her, she'd surely go to him.

It was a dream after all, and she could do anything she damn well pleased.

## *Tempting*

“Make love to me me, Dream Boy.” Her hands slid down his torso and into the confines of his trousers.

He was hot and hard and larger than any man she’d ever slept with. Ah, the power of dreams. She could have him any size she wanted. But she wanted him inside her. Now.

“Too many clothes,” she said against his mouth. She pushed him to his back and straddled his thighs, her eyes still refusing to open even though her body was wide awake and flaming.

Not caring, she felt his beauty with her fingers, running her hands across his chest, sparsely sprinkled with coarse hairs. Her fingers traced a path of curls down his torso to his bellybutton and lower until the curls disappeared into the waistband of his trousers.

“This will never do,” she grumbled, sliding further down his legs. Making quick work of the button, she grasped the zipper and gently slid it downward. Unencumbered by briefs or boxers, his cock sprang free and into her waiting hands.

She grasped him and held on, willing her eyes to open to see his magnificence. How could this be a dream when it felt so real? And her usual fantasies included the visual. What was wrong with her eyes to cheat her out of the full effect?

The cock she held twitched, pulsing warmly, filling her palms.

Her hands slid upward to the velvety tip and back down to the base, where his balls nestled in a tangle of hair. Her dream guy moaned and captured

her hands. "Much as I'd love to continue this, you should wake up," he said, his voice deep and as tempting as his body.

"No," she whined. "I don't want to wake up." Where she'd wanted to open her eyes, now she squeezed them shut, afraid if she opened them, her dream would be over, and she'd crash to earth into her cold empty bed.

The man between her thighs sat up, taking her with him until she balanced in his lap, her breasts tickled by the hairs on his chest. Sitting up, laying down...it didn't matter. She liked the feel of his skin against hers with the light musky scent of his maleness assaulting her senses.

A kiss feathered across her lips and then words puffed against her ear. "Open your eyes, pretty lady."

Despite her new determination to keep her eyes closed and make the dream last all night long, her eyelids lifted, and she stared into the face of her rescuer from the alley. She definitely was dreaming.

"Am I awake or asleep?" she asked, her voice a whisper, tentative against the silence of the room.

He smiled, the twinkle in his eyes making him even more than devastatingly handsome. "You're awake."

She could fall into those mesmerizing eyes, and she swayed toward him, the incremental movement enough to establish their nudity was not a dream. His hands splayed across the skin of her lower back, holding her steady, the texture of his fingers

## *Tempting*

pressing into her flesh, reassuring at the same time as it was unsettling.

As if she was still struggling out of the fog of sleep, she glanced down at her breasts. The rosy nipples were taut and pointed where they nestled in the dark curls sprinkled across his upper body.

"I must be dreaming," she argued, feeling a frown pull her forehead downward. She glanced back up at him, tipping her head to the side. "I seem to have lost my shirt."

He nodded toward the floor. "I had to cut it off you."

"I don't understand." As she shook her head, her hair brushed across her shoulders, the feel of it on her skin sending tingling nerve flashes downward where her jean-clad bottom rested against his thighs. His cock rose out of the unzipped flaps of his trousers, huge and strong, ready and resting in her palms.

"Wow!" At first she just stared and then realizing she still held a stranger's penis, she jerked her hands back. "What the hell's going on?" She struggled to free her knees of the tangled sheets.

His fingers curled around her waist. "Slow down before you get hurt."

Slapping at his hands, she rolled to the side and stood, searching for something to cover herself. She grabbed for a pillow and held it in front of her like a shield. "Who are you, and where am I?"

"I'm Nicolae Kovak." The sexy lilt of his words sounded Russian or Romanian. "I brought you to my

apartment because you were wounded and in need of my assistance.”

Balancing the pillow against her breasts, she felt along her shoulder for the bullet wound and found nothing. A quick glance over her shoulder confirmed there was no wound there as well, no sign of an entrance or exit wound. Her foot nudged the ruined black tank top on the floor. It was coated in dried blood. Her blood.

“How?” She stared across the bed at him, watching him wearily as he stood and carefully zipped his cock into his pants, the resulting tent almost comical if the entire situation wasn’t downright insane. What a shame to cover such magnificence. She inhaled a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’ll ask again. What the hell’s going on?”

“First, tell me what you were doing out in that alley with the Dragóns chasing after you.”

She crossed her arms over the pillow and held it tight. “Why should I tell you?”

“It might help me to better explain my actions.”

“So you can lie better?”

“I would not lie to you, pretty lady.” He frowned. “Have you a name? I can’t continue to call you pretty lady although the truth is evident.” His gaze scraped over the tops of her shoulders and the pillow she held in her arms. “It’s only right to know the name of the woman who just shared my bed.”

“I didn’t share your bed.” Anger fueled her

## *Tempting*

words. "You kidnapped me and drugged me or something."

"I did what I had to do to protect you." He shrugged as if his crimes meant nothing. "Your name?"

She thought to refuse answering him, but what did it matter if he knew her name or not? "Regina Gallagher."

"Regina." Her name rolled off his tongue like a caress, and tingles slithered across her skin despite the shock of the uncompromising position she'd found herself in.

"Most people call me Reggie." Why was she telling him this? Had she lost her senses? She couldn't even blame it on her thoughts still being fuzzy. Her head was clear, and her mind raced through possible scenarios for escape.

"Why would they call you Reggie when Regina is such a lovely name?"

"Whatever." She eyed the door, determined to get out of there, yet too curious to leave. "I answered your question. Why don't you answer mine."

"Fair enough." He crossed his arms over his chest.

"Why did you really bring me here?"

"I told you already." He walked around the end of the bed to stand in front of her, effectively blocking her escape route. "You were injured and needed attention."

She hadn't mistaken the slight pause before the word 'attention'. "Impossible. If I had been

injured, there would be signs of a wound still. Nobody heals that fast.” As she said the words, she glanced again at her ruined top.

“Ah, but you see the blood, do you not?” He’d caught her glancing down.

“It doesn’t make sense.”

“When you came into this room, you had a bullet wound in your left shoulder.” His gaze captured hers and held.

“Just how long ago was that?”

He glanced down at his watch. “One hour.”

“But if I was wounded, where is the wound? This whole situation doesn’t make sense.”

“We can talk when you’re properly dressed.” He sighed and turned toward the closet, reaching in for a plain white pinpoint oxford cloth shirt. When he turned back to hand it to her, he said, “I have the ability to heal some wounds.”

“Like magic or something?” Reggie snorted. “The only people I know who can heal a wound that fast are—” All the blood rushed out of her head, and she remembered her last thought before she’d passed out earlier. “Oh damn! You’re a vampire.”

## Chapter Four

Nicolae thought she might pass out when her cheeks turned a pasty gray. Just as quickly as they'd gone pale, they burst into a raging red.

"No fucking way!" she said.

He grimaced. "Do you always use such colorful language?"

"If you find my language offensive, tough."

"Actually..." He studied her closely. "It makes me consider the possibilities."

"It's not even a remote possibility because first chance I get, I'm going to stake your sorry vampire ass!" Her gaze darted around the room as if she were looking for the wooden stake to carry through on her promise.

"If you plan to kill me, you'll have to drive a stake into my heart not my buttocks." His lips twitched as he fought to contain the smile threatening to break loose. He shook the shirt in front of her face. "Please, put this on. I find your breasts very lovely and distracting."

She slapped his hand away and almost dropped the pillow in the process, one side dropping low enough to expose her peachy nipple.

Nic's cock nudged against his pants, reminding him he'd left his body in an unsatisfied condition,

and he'd pay for that in pain until his arousal subsided. If she kept dropping the pillow, that would be a while. "Put the shirt on," he said, his voice more harsh than he'd intended.

"I don't want your damn shirt, your healing, or anything else from you. Just let me out of here." She tried to step around him.

His hands reached out and clamped onto her bare shoulders, the warmth of her skin sending heat waves rippling through him, keeping his erection in the constant state of granite. He let go and stepped back but not out of her way. "I can't let you leave. It's not safe."

"Why?" She stared up into his eyes, hers widening and her mouth dropping open. "You didn't."

"Didn't what?"

She rushed to the mirror hanging over the mahogany dresser. Stretching her neck to the side, she pushed her long red hair back to expose the white column of her throat. "If you can heal wounds, how do I know you didn't bite me and turn me into one of your stinking kind?"

"I didn't turn you, and we don't stink unless we choose to."

"Bull!"

"You didn't seem to mind my scent before you were fully awake."

"I'm talking about what you've done to me. If you made me a vampire, I'll kill you." She turned and shot him a look of pure venom. "And when I do, I'll make it slow and painful."

## *Tempting*

“Step outside when the sun comes up, you’ll know the truth then.” He nodded toward the window. The heavy drapes pulled to the side allowed a stunning view of the city below. The clouds hung low over the city, reflecting the glow of streetlights, making it that much brighter in the darkest hours of early morning.

“I will,” she said, again eyeing the door. “If you’ll just let me by...”

“You can’t leave until morning.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Cesar’s Dragóns are still roaming the streets as well as other less agreeable people.”

“People like you?”

“I’m not here to harm humans.” He sighed. “I came to help.”

“Help?” Reggie snorted. “Help yourself to a woman alone in the night? If that’s the case, I’m here to stop you and every other blood-sucker I can lay a stake into.”

“Big words for just one woman. How do you propose to take out the entire population of vampires?”

“One vamp at a time, buddy. One vamp at a time.” She reached behind her and jerked a drawer from the dresser. With one hand holding the pillow, the other swung the drawer against a doorframe splintering it into pieces, one of which was sharp and long enough to pierce his heart. “Starting with you.”

Nicolae shook his head. “How can I convince you that I’m one of the good guys?”

“Seems the only way you’ll convince me is by letting me stake you through the heart.” She advanced on him, the stick pointed at his chest.

“Need help in there?” Torsten’s amused voice called out.

“No. Everything is under control,” Nic said, never taking his gaze away from Reggie’s. He could always put her back in a trance, but this was much more interesting. He hadn’t felt this alive facing the possibility of death at the hand and stake of a beautiful woman in a long time. Perhaps never.

The sound of the door opening was followed by a long low whistle. “She’s even lovelier without the shirt. I can see why you wanted to keep her to yourself.”

“Not now, Torsten,” Nic said, hiding a smile. “She’s not all too fond of vampires.” He agreed with Torsten that Reggie was lovely with or without the shirt.

“Interesting,” Torsten said. “Some of us aren’t as bad as others. We don’t all go around raping, killing, and draining our victims.”

Reggie growled and leaped at Nicolae. “Move, vampire!”

Nicolae reached out and captured her wrist, knocking it against his thigh until she dropped the stake. Then he spun her around, thrust her arm up the middle of her back and pressed it between her shoulder blades. “Now see what you’ve done, Tor? You made her angry.”

She dropped the pillow and elbowed him in the side. “Let me go.”

## *Tempting*

Nic doubled over but didn't release his hold on her arm, ratcheting it higher up her back. "I don't want to hurt you," he said between gritted teeth.

"Then let me go!" Her foot kicked backward, landing a glancing blow to his shin.

"Not until daylight. The streets aren't safe at this hour." He clamped an arm around her middle, pinning her free arm to her side, and pulled her tight against his chest. "Stop wiggling."

"No." She struggled, her breasts rubbing against the top of his arm, causing him more consternation than the blow to his shin.

"How can I talk sense into you when you won't be still?" he said, grunting as she jabbed another elbow into his ribs.

"You're a vampire. I don't listen to vampires. I kill them."

"Not today, you don't."

"Are you sure you don't need help?" Torsten asked. "She seems to be getting the better of you."

Just what he needed, a persistent pest to distract him when he had his hands full. "Get out!" Nic roared.

The door slammed, none too gently, leaving Nic and Reggie alone again.

Reggie planted her feet on the ground and lurched forward in an attempt to throw him off balance and over her shoulder.

But Nic was ready. He lifted her high into the air and marched her to the bed tossing her to the sheets face first.

Reggie twisted onto her back at the same time

Nicolae threw himself across her body, trapping her flailing arms and legs beneath him.

She fought like a hellcat for several more minutes, and then sagged against him, as if all the wind left her sails.

"I have to go back out," she said, her voice sounding strained and frantic. "Please, let go of me."

He pulled her arms up over her head and held them pinned to the bed, as much affected by her quiet plea as her spirited resistance. But he couldn't let her go. Not yet. "No."

"You don't understand. I have to go back out."

"Why?"

She inhaled and blew the breath out before answering. "It's my job."

"Your job?"

"Yes. We were the bait to lure the person responsible for the disappearances of the thirteen women you might have heard about in the papers. Vampires do read, don't they?"

"Not all of us are animals," he said. Although the animal in him wanted more than words from this woman. "What did you mean bait?"

"Bait to draw out the kidnappers."

Anger as fiery as a red-hot poker seared through his veins. "Bait? What fool would send a woman out as bait?"

"Hey, it was my idea, okay?"

"Then you are a fool." He frowned down at her. "What are you—some kind of cop?"

"We're with the Paranormal Investigative

## *Tempting*

Agency. We search out and destroy bad vampires like you,” she practically spat the last word in his face.

“That explains a little. But you were alone when we found you. Where are the other members of your team?”

“That’s why I have to get back out there. My partner is out there alone.”

“I’ll send Torsten out to see if he can find him. What does he look like?”

“He’s a she. And why would I tell you what she looks like? So Blondie there can capture her, too? No thanks.”

“Whatever you choose to believe, you’re staying put. You’re safer here.”

“I’m no safer here than out there with Cesar’s thugs.” Reggie bucked beneath him, renewing her fighting against his superior weight and strength.

Her pelvis pressed against his engorged cock, and he had to bite down hard not to moan. “You have my promise we will not harm you.”

“As if a vampire’s promise is worth anything? Ha!”

Her struggle was beginning to wear at him. If she didn’t settle down, he might be tempted to shut her up in other ways. “When I give my word, I stand behind it.”

“Just let me go,” she said, her breathing coming in gasps, each breath making her breasts rise toward him.

Fighting anger and frustration, he wondered how much he could he stand and not touch. If he

were to let her loose before morning, she'd be right back out in the same amount of danger she'd been before. "I won't let you go." Truth was he didn't want to let her go. He wanted to fill his hands with her and bury himself deep inside her warm moist center.

"I won't tell anyone where you are. You can blindfold me and lead me out if you have to, but I need to find Madison. She's all I have left."

"You won't be able to help her now, and I won't allow you to go until daylight." The sweet swells of her body were making him crazy. If he didn't get away from her, he'd do something he'd regret. Nicolae grabbed for the shirt she'd slapped aside and tied a sleeve around her wrists.

"Don't you dare," she said, her lips thinning into a straight peachy pink line, her body struggling beneath him.

"I'll do what I have to." He tossed the shirt around one of the posts on the headboard and pulled the fabric until her hands were snug against the wood. He tested its strength before he rolled away from that luscious figure.

His body already missed the warmth of her beneath him, but he had work to do. "I'll be back when the sun comes up." One last look at her half naked body, and he left the room.

\* \* \*

As soon as Nic left the room, Reggie twisted and struggled until she'd flipped over and worked her way to her knees.

With her fingertips, she worked at the fabric

## *Tempting*

trying to untangle the knot he'd tied so expertly. Her twisting to her knees had only complicated the matter and pulled it tighter. The more she tried, the more she realized the knot wasn't getting any looser.

She should have put the damned shirt on when he told her to instead of giving him the perfect method of restraint.

"Want me to untie it for you?"

The sound of a gentle feminine voice behind her made her yelp.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." A pretty pale young woman with hair the color of milk chocolate eased through the doorway and into the room, shooting a look back over her shoulder. "I shouldn't be in here, but I wanted to talk to you."

"Is that right? Only talk? Or are you one of them?" Reggie jerked her head toward the door.

The girl's mouth curved into a soft smile. "No. I'm not a vampire, if that's what you mean."

Anger fired through her veins. Maybe she was one of missing women. "Are you a prisoner, too? What's your name?" Maybe she matched a name on her list of missing women. Or worse, there were more unreported women missing.

Her musical laugh floated through the room as she crossed the room to Reggie. "My name is Melisande and, no, I'm not a prisoner. I live here."

"I don't understand. You're not a prisoner, you're not a vamp, and yet you choose to live here?"

“Yes.” She reached out and tugged at the shirt, pulling the sleeves through the knots. Her glance strayed to Reggie’s naked breasts several times during the process, her cheeks growing redder by the minute.

When Reggie’s hands were finally freed, Melisande stepped back, twisting the shirt in her hands.

“Eh-hem.” Reggie rubbed her wrists wondering about this woman who seemed so young and naïve. “Could I have the shirt, please?”

Melisande glanced up her eyes wide, the flush in her cheeks deepening. When her gaze landed on Reggie’s full breasts, she turned away, shoving the shirt at her without looking. “Please. I didn’t mean to...I’m sorry. Oh, hell...” her voice trailed off, and she turned her back to her.

“Are you embarrassed by my nakedness?” Reggie chuckled. “You’re a strange bird. A woman who lives with vampires is embarrassed by a little nudity, when she has two of the most gorgeous men I’ve ever seen under the same roof.” She shrugged her arms into the voluminous sleeves and buttoned the middle three buttons. The shirt hung to her knees. Since it was the only garment offered, she’d make do. Her tank top was toast.

“I know you must think I’m silly. I see the guys running around with next to nothing on, sometimes even naked, but there aren’t many women around.”

“With those two, that’s hard to believe.” The thought of Tor and Nic traipsing around the

## *Tempting*

apartment with nothing on made her blood shoot to her head and low in her belly at the same time. Whew! She'd seen a good portion of Nic exposed, and he would be hard to forget.

"They never bring them back to the apartment. They don't want anyone to know where they live. It's been that way since Nic brought me to live with them."

"Nic bringing you here, was it your choice or his?" Reggie tied the shirttails around her waist with a firm yank. Did she need to sneak Melisande out of here as well as getting her own butt out? If she had to drag Melisande around Houston, it would slow her from finding Madison, but she didn't feel right leaving her here.

"Mine, of course," she said with conviction. "I really didn't have anywhere else to go, and I've never felt safer."

But Reggie stared at her for a long moment. "Aren't you afraid they'll try to make you into one of them?"

"Oh, no." She shook her head, her straight brown hair swirling around her shoulders. "Nic was turned against his will around four-hundred years ago by a woman he thought he loved. Such a sad story." Melisande sighed.

Nic was in love with another woman? The thought didn't sit well with Reggie, and her fingers curled into a tight ball. She hadn't considered Nic might be taken. "Is she still around?"

"Oh, no. She left as soon as she turned him. Broke his heart." The girl shrugged. "That's why

Nic swore he'd never turn a soul who didn't want it. Tor feels the same. They won't turn me unless I want them to."

So the woman wasn't around, and Nic had morals. Reggie found that hard to believe especially after he'd tied her to the bed. "You're not considering letting them turn you, are you?"

"Maybe someday. I want to have a regular life first."

"Regular? Honey, you live with vampires. There's nothin' regular about that in my books." She glanced toward the open curtains. The battleship gray of pre-dawn crept across the Houston skyline.

"I know. But I hope to have a career and maybe a husband and children someday." She turned toward Reggie. "I'm going to college, you know."

Reggie raked a hand through her tangled hair and then planted both fists on her hips. "Then what the hell are you doing with them?"

"I love them," she said as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "They're my family."

"Don't you have a real family?"

Her head dipped low. "No."

Reggie had to lean close to catch her answer. "What happened to them?"

"My mother died when I was a baby, and my father...wasn't much of a father to me." She looked up, her gaze finally meeting Reggie's. "Nic saved me and brought me here."

"My mother also died with I was a baby." She and Melisande had something in common, but

## *Tempting*

losing their mothers was as far as it went. Her father had raised her and Madison in a loving, supportive environment. That's why his death had hit her so hard, and why she didn't trust vampires. Especially ones with dark, sexy eyes and a body to drool for.

"It's hard growing up without a mother," Melisande said.

"Not if you have a father who gives a damn and a sister you'd give your life for."

"What's that like?" Melisande asked. "Having a father who cares? Mine didn't. He only wanted me for one reason." Her voice dropped to a whisper, and her gaze shifted to her feet.

She didn't name that reason, but Reggie had seen enough in her life as a cop before she joined the PIA that she could guess by what she didn't say, Melisande's father was a sexually abusive son-of-a-bitch. For a brief moment, she could respect Nic for taking this woman-child away from that kind of life.

She reached out and grasped the woman's hands. "Melisande, come with me. I can find you a place to stay and get you set up with scholarships and everything. You don't have to stay here."

"Leave?" Melisande stared up at her as if she'd shaken a screw loose. "Why? I'm happy for the first time in my life. I can come and go as I please, and Nic is paying for my education. I have everything I could want."

"But you're living with vampires." Had they brainwashed her, was she in some kind of trance?

Didn't she get it?

However, Nic had been very persuasive, sexy, and unlike any other man she'd ever met. The touch of his skin against hers hadn't been like she'd thought it would be. He didn't feel at all dead. His body had been warm and pulsing with life, just like one of the living.

Could she be wrong about vampires? Was there such a thing as a good vampire, or was it all a part of his act? Mentally shaking herself, she stared across at Melisande. "Don't you understand? The two guys in the other room are vampires, creatures of the night. Honey, they're bloodsucking monsters!"

"No. *You* don't understand. They might be vampires but they're more human than my father. He was the monster." She yanked her hands from Reggie's. "The sun's up. You can leave now."

## Chapter Five

The door closed behind Reggie with a resounding slam. She hadn't bothered to say goodbye, thank you, or kiss my ass as she left.

And Nic hadn't tried to stop her. He couldn't hold her captive forever. Having promised to let her go at sunup, he wouldn't go back on his word. Even when his insides screamed he was a fool to let her go.

Why should he care?

"I still think you took a big risk letting her leave on her own. Torsten leaned against the bar separating the kitchen from the living area. "She could lead the authorities back here."

"She won't," Nic said, wondering if he was right. Although he'd healed her wound, she hadn't wanted him to. She didn't like vampires, and she was bound and determined to kill every last one of them. What made him think she wouldn't come back with a bunch of her buddies at the PIA and finish him off?

Nothing.

He was living on wishful thinking, and that kind of thinking got a vampire dusted.

"She's pretty, isn't she?" Melisande entered the living area from Nic's bedroom. "I can see why

Nic's enchanted by her. Although she didn't seem to share the sentiment."

"I'm not enchanted." He shot a fierce frown toward Melisande.

She smiled.

"I pulled her out of a tight situation, that's all," he continued as if he needed to explain himself. Like he *ever* explained his actions.

"Then why did you come out of there with a hard-on the size of Copenhagen?" Melisande's gaze flicked to Nic's pants, still slightly bulging from his tumble with Reggie.

Nic's frown transferred to his friend. "I'm not immune to a sexy woman. That doesn't mean I have feelings for her. She's a vampire-hating stranger, for the love of God. She tried to kill me."

"Stimulating, wasn't it?" Torsten grinned. "I don't think I've seen you this intrigued with a woman. Ever."

"Enough," Nic said, his voice firm. All he wanted was to put her out of his mind. "We have bigger problems to worry about than a PIA agent." Even if she had hair the color of fire and skin so soft...Nic forced himself back on track. "Seems our man Andrei, is up to his old tricks."

"Are you sure Andrei's behind the gang attack last night?" Torsten asked.

"I saw a tattoo on Cesar's arm." Nic's chest tightened when he thought of the shots they'd fired at Reggie and how they'd hunted her down. "It was Andrei's mark of the dragon."

"How bad is that?" Melisande asked.

## *Tempting*

“We have no idea how many gang members he might have recruited. They’ve already captured thirteen young women.”

“Damn.” Torsten shoved a hand through his long blond hair.

“We may not have much time.” Nic stared at the curtains covering the windows, the daylight edging in around the sides making him squint.

Frustration welled up inside him. He needed every hour of the day and night to find Andrei. He was as slippery as they came and too evil for too long to change.

“Not much we can do until nightfall.” Torsten yawned. “I’m for some rest.”

“What about me?” Melisande asked. “I can go out during the daylight.”

“No!” Both Nic and Torsten shouted in unison.

“You two treat me like a baby. I’m twenty-three and old enough to make up my own mind.”

“Yeah, and you fit the profile for Andrei’s buyers.” Nic touched a hand to her cheek. “Young, pretty, and alone. We know you can make your own decisions, but we can’t help you during the daytime. Andrei’s been known to get his human minions to work the dayshift for him.”

“Still...” Melisande frowned. “I feel so useless. While Reggie’s out fighting the bad guys, you two keep me cocooned from everything in here. I’m getting bored, and I want to go back to my classes.”

“You will, ma petite, soon enough.” Nic pressed a kiss to her forehead like he would a

child. At twenty-three, she wasn't much more than a child. "Let us take care of Andrei first. No woman is safe out there right now."

"You let Reggie go," she pointed out.

"She's trained in law enforcement and self-defense," Nic said. "Taking care of herself is second nature."

Melisande's brows rose. "Then why didn't you let her leave when she wanted to instead of waiting until daylight?"

Gotcha.

Nic clamped his lips closed. He wasn't going down that path. He hadn't wanted her to leave, but he'd promised her by daylight.

"I think our Nic has met his match in Reggie. Wouldn't you say?" Torsten laid an arm across Nic's shoulders, a smirky grin quirking his lips upward. "In the meantime, let's get some rest for the night ahead. We have a lot of work to do in order to find and rein in Andrei."

\* \* \*

Heads popped up over the tops of walled cubicles as Reggie stormed through the offices of the Paranormal Investigations Agency. When she reached Blake Tanner's office, she marched in without knocking, slinging the door open so fast it crashed against the wall. "Where's Madison?"

She'd been by their apartment before she came to the station. No amount of calling raised her on her cell phone. Reggie's last hope was that she'd made it back to the station in the time it had taken for her to get from Nicolae's penthouse to the

## *Tempting*

station.

Tanner rose from the chair behind his desk, a phone pressed to his ear and scowl on his face. "I understand, sir. We have our best people on the case and hope to have it wrapped up by tonight." He nodded as if the man on the other end of the line could see him. "Yes, sir. I understand how important the safety of the city is to you. Yes sir, I'll keep you informed. Thank you, sir." The line clicked loud enough that Tanner jerked the phone away from his ear with a wince. Then he set it back in its receiver and turned his full attention to Reggie. "Have a seat."

"I don't need a freakin' seat. I want to know where the hell my sister is."

Tanner looked her square in the eye, one of his better traits. He didn't waste words or hold back on the truth. "She never came in after the mission went south. I have ten people out combing the streets for some sign of her and so far, I've gotten no reports."

He walked around the desk and reached out to pat her back, the movement awkward but well intentioned. The man was typical Type-A and didn't know an emotion until it slapped him in the face. But not a man or woman on his team had any doubt he'd give his life for every one of them. "I'm sorry, Reggie."

"Well, sorry ain't cuttin' it." Brushing away a tear, she glared at him through watery eyes. She would not break down in front of this man or any other, for that matter. "She's my sister," she

whispered, biting hard on her lip to keep it from trembling.

"I know, and we'll find her." He turned away, his motions jerky. The man probably wasn't used to tears on a team consisting predominantly of men. If she and Madison hadn't gotten in his face and more or less worn him down, they would never have been allowed on the team. "We recovered Macias and Jones where they'd set up audio surveillance."

Reggie gulped back her tears, her breath caught in her throat. "Dead?"

"Didn't even have a chance. Necks broken and both drained. Looked like the works of vampires. Up until you walked in the door, we thought you and Madison were going on our list of missing women."

He didn't complete the thought. Instead of both of them going on the missing women list, Madison would be the only one unless she miraculously appeared in the next few hours. Where the hell was she?

"I have people out looking for you both. I'll let them know at least *you're* back." He sighed and sat behind his desk, rifling through the stack of files until he unearthed one. He glanced across at her. "I take it you're not going to get any rest after being up all night?"

"You got that right. I can't rest until I know where was Madison is."

"Good, then you can follow up on a lead we just got. An A. Skirko owns a warehouse on the waterfront. Word on the street has it that he might be involved somehow with the disappearances. I

## *Tempting*

want you to take Humberto and check it out. And this time, don't lose your partner." His words weren't said with malice, but he meant it nonetheless. The rule in this business was to fly with a wingman and never let him out of your sight.

Reggie understood, but her reckless sister didn't always play by the rules, and sometimes that came back to bite her. Hopefully, this time the bite wasn't from a vampire.

"By the way, where were you? Why didn't you report in?" Tanner pinned her with a stare. "You had us all worried."

Now was the time to tell her boss she'd been detained by a vampire and held until dawn. If she were a good agent, she'd do it without hesitation. An image of Nicolae Kovak sprang to mind. The image where he wasn't wearing a shirt and neither was she. Her body tensed all over again. "When I lost Madison, I hunkered down in a safe place until daylight."

His attention was back on the stack of documents in front of him. "Smart move. Next time, try to get a call in to me."

"Yes, sir." She spun on her heel and headed to her desk. Once seated, she gathered her thoughts. Where was Madison? The only leads she had were the Dragons and the folder Tanner had given her.

The Dragóns were a diverse group of gang members, primarily from the poor neighborhoods. Kids who'd been left to run the streets by parents who were either too spaced out on drugs or just didn't give a damn. Those kids grew into criminals,

running in packs like rabid dogs, ripe for any illegal way to make a buck. Nothing was off limits to them. Stealing, killing and kidnapping women would be right up their alley. But was there a bigger fish to fry at the core of their work?

Reggie poured over the file of A. Skirko, foreign-born businessman with substantial financial holdings in the Houston area, including shipping ties and warehouses along the waterfront. She jotted down the addresses of the places that might be used to hold over a dozen, make that fourteen women, counting Madison. Reggie refused to believe any one of them was dead, and her sister was only waiting for her to find her and save her sorry ass.

And she'd kick it from here to tomorrow, after she was safe and sound back home.

"Bert?" she yelled, as she rose from her desk.

"Yo, Reggie, good to see you back in one piece. Like the shirt." He nodded at the cleavage no amount of tying could cover.

He was a notorious, yet harmless womanizer, but all-in-all not too bad. Reggie had worked with him on occasion when Madison was out sick. "Keep it in your pants, Casanova. We have work to do."

In one of the agency's nondescript gray sedans, they traveled east along the congested highways crisscrossing the metropolitan spread that was Houston toward the inland waterways and ports. When they turned onto the road where one of the warehouses was located, Reggie caught glimpses of the water between the rows of buildings.

## *Tempting*

Clouds churned in the sky, blotting out the sun and turning the water to a perpetual dark gray.

Reggie parked the car three buildings shy of their target, pulling around back out of sight. When she got out, she was hit with the full force of the coastal humidity the air conditioner had effectively cut up to this point. “Remind me why I live in Houston?” she grumbled.

Her family had been in Houston as far back as her great-great grandfather. They’d settled in this area, coming all the way from Ireland to start over in the new world. Why couldn’t she have found a cooler, drier place to start a new life?

With her sister’s life hanging in the balance, she had to hurry. Reggie broke into a jog, covering the distance between the buildings with Bert barely keeping up.

All the warehouses looked pretty much the same, and she feared she’d lose count or get the wrong one. Then she recognized the symbol painted in bold black across the back door of one of them. She’d seen it in the file and on Cesar’s arm in the form of a tattoo. It was a circle made of the coil of a snake’s body with the head and tail of a dragon. “I’ll take door number one.”

“Sure this is it?”

“Absolutely.” She grabbed the doorknob on the off chance it would open, only to be disappointed. The door was locked.

“How do you suggest we get in?”

“There has to be a way.” She scanned the walls of the steel and metal sided building. Without so

much as a window close enough to the ground to crawl into, the place was a veritable fortress.

A truck rumbled along the street out front, slowing to a stop.

Reggie ran toward it, calling back over her shoulder, "Come on."

Tucked in the shadow cast by the morning sun, Reggie and Bert skimmed along the sheet metal siding to the front where a delivery truck stood. The driver honked three times and waited.

When the giant doors rolled open, a man stepped out to speak to the driver.

"Be ready. We're going in," Reggie said, never taking her gaze from the truck.

"What? Are you crazy?" Bert whispered. "We don't know how many people are inside."

"A chance we'll have to take." Especially if her sister was inside. "I tell you what, you stay out here and keep you eyes peeled for trouble."

"I can't let you go in by yourself."

"Better just one person than two. That way, if I get in trouble, you can go for help. If I'm not back in twenty minutes, call Tanner."

"I don't like it."

"Tough. I'm going." The truck's engine rumbled, and it rolled past the building, and then backed in. Reggie crept up to the passenger side and crouched low, walking inside with the truck until she passed the doorway at which time, she ducked behind a stand of crates on pallets.

Her heart hammered against her ribcage as her eyes adjusted to the darker interior of the

## *Tempting*

warehouse. As soon as the truck cleared the entrance, the giant doors closed.

Good. She was inside, and the alarm hadn't gone up. Male voices echoed in the cavernous interior. Reggie peeked around the corner of the crate.

Eight men stood around the newly arrived delivery truck, all looking like one or the other of Cesar's thugs—tattooed, earring-wearing muscular guys in black. Great. Her nightmare from last night. Only this time there would be no vampire to rescue her. He was safely tucked in his apartment until sunset. Definitely a limitation in her book. Not that she wanted him to save her.

While the men focused on the truck, Reggie moved away from the door and farther back into the warehouse half the size of a football field. Stacks of wooden crates rose to ten feet high, creating a maze for Reggie to work her way through one row at a time. Until she came to a solid block of containers thirty feet wide and thirty feet long. Reggie edged her way around the periphery until she found an entry into the stack.

Voices carried to her, sounding closer than before, and she could hear footsteps moving her direction.

Before she could think, she ducked into the wall of crates, finding a neat row of more wooden boxes. Only these weren't stacked. Fourteen of the coffin-sized containers lined the walls, each with the tops off and white blankets covering the contents.

“Are they ready for shipment?” a male voice asked. “The boss doesn’t want any more screw ups.”

“They’re ready.” Reggie recognized Cesar’s voice from last night. Damn she was right in the middle of something.

She ducked behind one of the crates in the shadows of the far corner and held her breath. If they caught her, it would be up to Bert to get word back to the PIA. By then, it might be too late.

The footsteps halted in her little room and paused in front of one of the boxes.

“When do you want us to seal the containers?” Cesar asked.

“Not until the last minute. Each box is ventilated, but we don’t want to risk keeping them confined for too long. Our customers want them fresh not suffocated.”

What were they talking about? Reggie tried to read between the lines. Were they discussing fresh foods or the missing women? Anger boiled inside her. How could these animals play with lives the way they did? But she knew how psychopaths worked. They had no remorse.

“Are they drugged?” Cesar said.

“Sort of. The boss put them in some kind of trance. They’re asleep until he wakes them.”

“Must be nice to be a vamp. Wish I could use that trick on my old lady.” Cesar laughed.

The other man remained silent.

“Well, anyway, the boss oughta be happy with this shipment,” Cesar continued, all humor wiped

*Tempting*

from his voice.

“He’d have been happier if you’d gotten the other sister last night.”

Reggie smothered a gasp. Although she’d guessed they’d been talking about the women, hearing reference to her sister almost made her blow her cover. As angry as she was, she could take two men, but the other six, and who knew how many more there might be, could take her out, and where would that leave her sister and the other thirteen young ladies being held hostage?

“That wasn’t our fault. She had help,” Cesar said.

“Another reason the boss was pissed.”

“Hey, that guy nearly broke my arm!”

“He let you live.”

“Barely,” Cesar muttered. “What did the boss say?”

“Nothing. Come on. We have work to do before the boss gets here tonight.”

The men left the room, their footsteps carrying them away from the crate room and Reggie.

For the first time in the past few minutes, she breathed. When she thought the coast was clear, she jumped to her feet and pulled the white blankets aside one at a time. Beneath each was a woman laid out in what looked like makeshift coffin-like structures lined with rich colored fabrics. Velvet, satin, taffeta—no expense spared to outfit and present the merchandise. Reggie’s stomach rebelled, and she fought the urge to throw up. All were young and beautiful and in a deep

sleep.

When she reached the last one that stood closest to the entrance, her hand shook as she yanked the blanket aside.

There, nestled in white satin sheeting was her sister with the flaming auburn hair. She wore a black lace skirt and an old-fashioned black corset, cinched tightly to emphasize her already generous bust line.

“Madison,” Reggie whispered into her ear. She couldn’t breathe until she felt the beat of her sister’s pulse. Then she patted Madison’s cheek. “Wake up, Madison. Wake up.” She increased the sharpness of her slap until realization sank in. No matter how hard she tried, she wasn’t waking her sister. Whatever “the boss” had done had all these women in a deep trance.

Reggie stood staring around the room. How could she get Madison and all the rest of the women out? They were like dead weight. Even if she could carry her sister, she couldn’t get past all the men out front. And if she did, what would happen to the rest of the women? If these people knew they’d been discovered, they’d leave and take all the evidence with them.

Much as she hated doing it, she had to leave Madison and go get help. Lots of help.

Making a quick pass around the room, she put the blankets back the way she’d found them. Then dropping a kiss on her sister’s cheeks, she whispered, “I’ll be back.”

## Chapter Six

The sense that Reggie was in trouble forced Nic to do something he hadn't done in a long time—venture out during the daytime.

If the clouds weren't covering the sun's deadly rays, he wouldn't even attempt going out until dark. As was typical of Houston, clouds came in from the Gulf, sometimes lingering all day and night. The weatherman had predicted cloudy skies until close to midnight.

"I'm not feeling good about this," Torsten said, shoving an arm into the long, lightweight overcoat with the high collar.

Nic pulled gloves onto his hand and adjusted the collar of his black trench coat upward to protect the back of his neck. "Being a vampire can be a pain."

"But we live forever," Torsten countered.

"If we aren't staked in the heart by well-intentioned citizens, fried in the daylight, or otherwise dusted."

Torsten stopped halfway into his coat and stared at Nic. "Tell me again why the hell we're going out?"

"We have to stop Andrei."

"Uh huh. Andrei. Right." The expressive lift of

Torsten's eyebrows conveyed a lot more than the sarcasm in his words. "I'm thinking its one redhead that's got you all excited."

"I'm going out for one thing and one thing only—to bring Andrei down."

"And if you get a little taste of red, you'll be all that much happier?"

"Quit teasing him, Tor." Melisande emerged from Nic's room, carrying two broad-brimmed hats like the gangsters wore in the early nineteen hundreds. "Wear these."

"You don't think we'll stand out with those?"

"No more than you'll stand out with the black trench coats on a hot and humid day in Houston. Just tell them you're going to a Matrix convention if anyone asks."

"By the way, where are we going?" Torsten stood at the door, settling the hat at a jaunty angle on his long white hair.

"PIA headquarters." Nic stepped past the slack-jawed Norseman and strode down the hall. A small smile quirked his lips upward.

The drive to PIA headquarters was nothing less than hair-raising. Daytime traffic in Houston was worse than anything Paris at night had ever been.

"Tell me again why we're going to PIA headquarters? Do you have a death wish or what?" Torsten gripped the armrest of the HUMMV hard enough to leave permanent grooves in the leather.

"That's who Reggie works for, and I think they may prove of assistance in our quest to find and eliminate Andrei and his band of Dragóns." He

## *Tempting*

swerved around a car and zipped off the exit ramp leading to the collection of high-rise office buildings of downtown Houston.

"This idea doesn't make sense, Nic. You know how the PIA works—kill the monster now and ask questions later."

"They won't harm us."

"Are you sure?"

No, he wasn't. But by showing up in the daytime, he might get past the front desk without them really knowing what they were. "Just remember to remove the coat, hat, and gloves before we get to the front desk."

"Great." Torsten leaned his head back, his sunglasses pointing to the ceiling. "I'm riding with a lunatic to a destination no sane vampire would walk into without a submachine gun and extra ammo belts."

"I'm telling you, they'll be glad to see us." He hoped.

"Sure. Whatever." Torsten rode in silence for the rest of the short drive into the parking garage of the office building housing the PIA headquarters.

After parking in the darkest corner next to the elevator, Nic climbed out and removed his hat, gloves, and jacket.

Torsten did the same, squinting at the light peeking in from beneath the parking decks. "You sure the sun's not coming out today?"

"The weatherman said cloudy until midnight."

"Since when has the weatherman gotten it right?"

“Let’s hope he’s right today. I don’t plan on frying. Not with the possibility that Andrei’s behind the missing fourteen women.”

Feeling completely exposed and a little nervous about walking during the daylight, Nic kept to the darkest path leading to the elevator and breathed a sigh when he climbed in and scanned the sign indicating what could be found on each floor of the fourteen-story building. P.I.A. Headquarters was located on the second floor. He punched the button and grinned at Torsten.

The tall blond Norseman shook his head. “You owe me big time for this.”

\* \* \*

Getting out of the building took a little more time than getting in. The truck wasn’t going anywhere until midnight, and the big doors remained closed. Reggie worked her way around the building, hugging the shadows for ten minutes until she came across a door leading out—the door that had been locked from the outside at the back of the building. She scanned the door handle for any signs of security alarms. There were no warning signs that an alarm would go off if she opened it.

She had to take the chance. The only other opening was at the front, and a man was stationed there. On the count of three, Reggie took a deep breath and opened the door, stepped out, and closed it behind her. She didn’t hear any sirens or buzzing sounds to indicate an alarm had gone off. But she wasn’t taking any chances. The quicker she got out of sight the better off the women inside

*Tempting*

would be.

She sprinted toward the edge of the side of the building where Bert was supposed to be waiting. He stood with his back to her, checking around the corner and down at his watch.

“Psst!”

Bert jumped and spun toward her, his eyes wide until he recognized her. Then he was running toward her, and they beat a hasty retreat to their car parked three long buildings away.

Once they were on the road and away from the warehouse district, Reggie’s heartbeat returned to semi-normal.

“What the hell happened in there?” Bert demanded.

“I found them.”

“The women?”

“Fourteen of them.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah.” And it was killing her that she’d left them there. “We have to get back to headquarters for help. This is a bigger operation than the two of us can handle.”

“No kidding.” He leaned back and turned his head toward her. “You all right?”

“No.” But she had to hold it together until this was all over. “Madison is in there.”

“Damn.”

\* \* \*

Spinning sideways into the parking garage, Reggie parked the car in a no-parking zone next to the elevator and leaped out before the engine had

time to completely shut down. She punched the elevator button, and when it didn't open immediately, she turned to the stairwell, climbing the three flights from the garage to the second floor.

When she burst through the door into the offices occupied by the PIA, heads turned. With the lives of fourteen women hanging in the balance, Reggie didn't waste time on pleasantries. She jogged through the rows of cubicles straight to Tanner's office.

She didn't wait for permission to enter. She pushed through the door. "Tanner, I found them."

Tanner wasn't alone. Sitting with their backs to her were two men in long black trench coats, one with sooty black hair down to his shoulders, and the other with hair longer than hers and so blond it could be considered white.

She swallowed her heart and felt it land like a rock in the pit of her stomach. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Nicolae Kovak and Torsten Lang stood as one and turned toward her. Torsten's face was split in a long grin, whereas Nic's face was set in a serious frown. Even the frown looked sexy on the man.

What was wrong with her? Good-looking men never had the impact on her like this one. Why couldn't he be human?

"Reggie, it's so good to see a friendly face." Torsten hugged her like a long-lost friend, not the stranger she'd met during the wee hours of that dark morning when she'd needed saving from a

*Tempting*

pack of rabid gang members. When Torsten stepped backward, Reggie could see her boss's angry expression.

"Care to explain?" he asked.

"Not really," she said.

"We were just telling Agent Tanner about the incident this morning," Torsten said.

"Thanks," Reggie said. Nic still hadn't said a word, and it made her all jittery inside. She found herself anxious to hear his low baritone voice with the foreign accent.

"Next time you debrief me on an operation, don't leave out the important details," Tanner said.

Worry for her sister pushed through her thoughts of Nic. How could she think of him at a time like this? "How did they get in?"

"Walked in during broad daylight," Tanner responded.

"The cloud cover helps," Torsten offered.

"They want to help recover the women and bring in the guy responsible for their disappearances."

Reggie put aside her uneasiness and turned to Tanner. "I found them."

"The women?" Tanner's frown lifted. "Where?"

"In the A.S.E. Warehouse near the waterfront."

"Why didn't you bother to call in? We could have sent someone over in a matter of minutes."

"I didn't trust the lines. Another part of last night I didn't mention was that I think someone knew about our set up and sabotaged it before we

even started.”

Tanner’s jaw tightened. “We’ve lost two good men already and possibly Madison. Think it’s an inside job?”

“I didn’t want to take the chance,” Reggie said.

“It’s just as well you didn’t send anyone down there immediately,” Nicolae finally spoke up, his voice turning Reggie’s knees to mush.

“Why is that?” Tanner crossed his arms over his chest as if daring Nic to say anything he wanted to listen to.

Nic’s lips thinned. “If you retrieve these women now, you will not deal with the main problem.”

“Andrei Skirko,” Torsten filled in. “A.S. of A.S. Enterprises.”

“What exactly did you learn at the warehouse?” Tanner shot the question at Reggie.

“They plan to move the women tonight at midnight. They have the truck in place, and their boss is due to be there for the event.” She looked from Torsten to Nic. “I take it the boss is this guy, Andrei?”

“Yes. He’s a four-hundred-twenty-two-year-old vampire we’ve been following off and on over the centuries cleaning up after him.” Nic stepped closer, his presence raising her body temperature with each step.

Reggie held her ground, refusing to let him know she responded in any way to his presence, even though her heart was hammering in her chest

## *Tempting*

and perspiration popped out on her upper lip. “Why should we trust you?”

“We have the same interests at heart,” he said, his voice soft and directed only at her.

“I seriously doubt that,” she said, her voice a little less convinced than her body. What was wrong with her? She shouldn’t be even mildly attracted to Nicolae Kovak. He was a vampire; she was human. It was just wrong.

“Be that as it may.” He winked and then turned to face her boss.

A good thing, too, because her skin was tingling all over, and her mind wasn’t focusing on anything past his lips.

Nic swept his arm out. “We of the vampire world are very much like you.”

Tanner snorted.

Nic nodded but didn’t comment on the derogatory sound. “There are good vampires,” he nodded toward Torsten, “and very bad vampires. When a bad vampire is out of control, Torsten and I are sent in to...fix things.”

“So you’re some kind of vampire cops?” her boss asked.

“More like special forces. We come in, assess, identify, and eliminate the problem. We work on our own or with local police forces and even the federal government. Check with the CIA. They’ll vouch for us.”

“Thanks, I will.” Tanner punched a button on his phone. “Maury, call the CIA and ask if they’ve ever worked with a Nicolae Kovak and Torsten

Lang. Get on that ASAP.”

“Thus our reason for being here.” Nic continued when Tanner switched off the intercom. “Which I was getting to before Agent Gallagher arrived.” He shot a glance back at Reggie.

The glance lit a fire in her, and she stepped forward. “I don’t really care why you’re here. We need reinforcements to go into that warehouse and retrieve those women.”

“And if you do, you might save these women, but Andrei will be free to do it all again.” Nic stared hard at Reggie. “If not in Houston, in some other city where women are equally vulnerable to him.”

“What is he doing with them?” Tanner asked.

Torsten stepped forward. “He’s selling them in foreign countries as sheep to other vampires.”

“Sheep?” Reggie asked.

The muscle in Nic’s jaw twitched. “It’s a crude term for someone who feeds the needs of a vampire, whether it’s blood or lust.”

“In other words, they’re trafficking women, forcing them to be sex slaves and blood donors for the highest bidder?”

“American women bring a higher price.” Nic’s tone was hard.

Reggie spun on her heels. “I’m getting Madison out of there, and I’m gonna bust some serious heads while I’m at it.”

Nicolae laid a hand on her arm, dragging her to a halt before she reached the door. “You can’t. Andrei will get away. Hopefully, they don’t know

## *Tempting*

you found them and they'll continue with their planned shipment. We have to be there when it happens and when Andrei shows up to direct operations."

"I hate to say he's right, but the vamp has a point, Reggie." Tanner glared at Nicolae. "You can let go of her arm now."

Nicolae held on for a second longer and then released her, leaving his warm imprint on her skin.

"But I can't just leave Madison there." Reggie stepped up to Tanner's desk, trying hard to ignore the other two men in the room.

"We'll get her out of there, but we need to get Andrei as well." The PIA lead tapped a pen against the hard metal of his desk. "How?"

Reggie stared at him. "I can't believe you're going along with vampires while my sister is lying in some warehouse waiting to be shipped out to the highest bidder. Did you consider these guys might be lying?"

"I told you I haven't lied to you," Nic said, his voice as warm as melted chocolate.

Fighting to control her temper, she faced Nic. "I don't know that, and I've never trusted the word of a vampire. It's one of your kind who killed my father."

A muscle worked in Nic's jaw. "I see."

"What do you see?" She stared at him, refusing to back down or be sucked in by his handsome looks. "All I see is the enemy in friendly territory."

The phone on Tanner's desk buzzed, and he punched a button. "Tanner."

“Sir, CIA says the two names you gave me check out. They also said these guys are the pros, and to let them be fully involved in whatever operation you’re conducting.”

“Thanks.” He stabbed the button and stared across the room at Reggie. “I know how you feel about Madison. I feel the same way. She’s one of my people.”

“No, you *don’t* know how I feel,” Reggie said. “She’s *my* sister not yours.”

“Granted,” he nodded. “However, we need to take out Andrei so he can’t do this to other women.”

“Precisely,” Nic agreed.

“I don’t trust you even if the CIA swore on a stack of Bibles. You’re vampires!” Or was it herself she couldn’t trust around Nicolae? He’d saved her from Cesar and hidden her until daylight to keep her from getting hurt. What had he done so far to prove himself untrustworthy?

He was a vampire. A vampire Tanner was willing to believe in. Should she? For her sister?

“Agent Gallagher,” Tanner said in a warning tone. “If I have to, I’ll pull you off this case.”

Her heart stopped cold in her chest and then it leapt into motion, beating twice as fast as normal. “You can’t do that. Not while my sister is in that animal’s hands.”

“Then you have to have confidence in me and believe they will get Madison and the other ladies out alive.” Her boss stood with his hands propped on his hips.

*Tempting*

She stared from Tanner to Nic and back to Tanner. If she wanted to be there when it all went down, she had to shut up and go along with their tactics. Pushing her shoulders back, she gave Nicolae a cold stare. “What’s the plan?”

## Chapter Seven

“How in hell you got Tanner to agree to this, I’ll never know.” Reggie wasn’t letting go of her anger any time soon. Nic suspected that if she did, she might fall apart. The worry for her sister had to be colossal.

“I really think he wants you to keep an eye on me or vice versa.” Nicolae leaned against the counter of her kitchenette, studying her as she paced from her refrigerator to the stove and back.

“You’re the vampire. It’s not as if I can easily dispose of you if you tried to do something. Hell, you can out muscle me by at least ten to one.” She slammed a jug of orange juice on the counter and turned. “What do you want with the PIA? Can’t you fight your own kind without our help?”

“Yes, but there’s just the two of us, and Andrei’s got a few more on his side at the moment.”

“Uh-huh. Yeah. And I’m supposed to feel good about leaving my sister in that hell hole?” Her eyes filling with tears, she turned her back to him and yanked a skillet from beneath the cabinet, giving him a terrific view of black denim molded to her firm, rounded bottom.

He had to count to ten before he could think

## *Tempting*

straight and then count ten more before he could form a coherent sentence. “It only makes sense to wait until midnight to catch Andrei. Tanner has people watching the warehouse throughout the day and evening in case any trucks come or go.”

“I should be there. I’m just glad he handpicked the team.” With a flick of her wrist, she turned the knob on the stove and the burner beneath the smooth surface glowed red. “I still hate to think there’s a leak in our department.” Placing the skillet on the burner, she sprayed it with cooking spray.

Nicolae liked the casual ease with which she moved around the kitchen as if she were as at home here as out on the streets busting badass monsters. “You’re a strange woman, Regina.”

She turned, a frown creasing the smooth skin of her forehead. “Me? I’m human, *you’re* the vampire, and you’re calling *me* strange?”

“Last night I saw a tough young woman stand up to a crowd of really nasty men.” He nodded at the stove and the pan. “Tonight I see a completely different side of you working in a kitchen as if you know your way around.”

A smirk lifted the corner of her mouth. “A girl has to eat to keep up her strength. I’m not passing out on the job. My sister needs me.”

“These days, women who work in jobs like yours don’t always have the time to cook.”

“Don’t get the wrong impression. I’m not very domestic. Ask me to clean a bathroom, and I’ll throw the toilet brush at you. This—” she waved

her hand at the stove, “I call self-preservation. My sister was—” her voice broke, and she turned away, the moisture back in her eyes. “My sister and I live together, and she’s a really lousy cook.”

She touched her finger to the middle of the pan and jerked it away. “Ouch!” Her finger went into her mouth, and she looked across the room at Nicolae as if waiting for him to say something. “Why are you really here?” she blurted out around her finger.

He wanted to answer her, but he couldn’t think past her lips. Just that little movement of putting her finger in her mouth had him salivating and wishing he was the finger. The way she’d touched him last night still lingered in his body’s memory, crying out to finish what they’d started when she was still in the grip of his trance. Only this time, he wanted very much for her to be fully awake and participating with her eyes wide open.

The longer he stared, the wider her eyes grew, her gaze darting to his mouth.

He knew he shouldn’t, but he couldn’t resist stepping closer until he stood toe-to-toe with her in the middle of the kitchen. “As I told you before, I’m here to bring Andrei down.”

“No.” Her finger slipped from her lips, and she stood looking up into his eyes, hers wary. But she didn’t back away. “Why are you here in my apartment?”

“I wanted to make sure you were safe. It’s dark outside.”

“I’ve been around in the dark by myself before.

## *Tempting*

I don't need you to protect me."

Her defiance pleased him. He liked a woman who wasn't afraid to stand up for herself and speak her mind. Especially if she had flaming red hair, smooth, creamy shoulders and... "Did you realize your skin is the color of cream sprinkled with cinnamon?"

Her breath caught on a little gasp. "My freckles are none of your concern, and you're changing the subject."

"Yes, I am." His hands came up to clasp her elbows. "I came here because I find you intriguing, and I want to know you better."

"Me?" she squeaked and backed into the stove.

Taking it as a good sign that she hadn't tried to knee him or hit him with the skillet, he closed the distance. His hands slid up her bare arms to her neck, his thumbs skimming her jaw. "You're a beautiful woman, Regina Gallagher."

"And you're treading on dangerous ground, vampire," she said on a whisper, her lips full and open, ready for—

The harsh scent of something burning broke through his concentration. Gripping her waist he spun her away from the stove and the smoking skillet with the blackened cooking spray.

Regina grabbed the pan and held it under the faucet, the spray hissing until the pan cooled. She stood with her back to him longer than necessary as if avoiding the unavoidable.

\* \* \*

What was wrong with her? He was a vampire,

for godsakes! A gorgeous vampire wearing a black trench coat, looking for all the world like he'd stepped out of a Matrix movie ready to sweep her into his arms and carry her off to have hot and dirty sex. Sweat beaded on her upper lip and between her breasts. "Don't," she said, surprised at how ragged her voice sounded to her own ears.

"Why, when we both feel it? Regina, it's inevitable." Stepping up behind her, he removed the pan from her grasp and laid it in the sink. Then with slow, deliberate movements, he turned her in his arms and stared down into eyes, his own a piercing pale blue.

"I need to eat," she said, her hands fluttering against his chest. She needed to eat? What was wrong with her? This vampire who looked good enough to eat was about to kiss her and all she could say was 'I need to eat'? *Think, Reggie!*

"I need you." He bent to take her lips, his mouth covering hers, his tongue licking at her bottom lip.

Her lips parted on a gasp. Think?

Think what?

Think about how good he felt against her, how warm his lips were pressed to hers. How gently he touched her, smoothing his hands down her back to curl around her hips and bring her even closer.

Nicolae dove in and plundered, thrusting his tongue through her teeth to duel with hers.

Thought wasn't an option. Feeling, tasting, and touching were instinctive and natural, and she thrust back with both her tongue and her hips. The

## *Tempting*

hard evidence of his arousal pressed into her belly, making her want more.

Reggie's hands crept up his chest and circled behind his neck, tangling in his hair and tugging him closer. At the same time, her lips moved against his, voicing a thought as random as this encounter. "This is wrong."

"Maybe so, but I can't help myself." His kisses moved from her mouth to her throat.

Had he tried to resist the draw between them as much as she had?

Hard, sharp teeth skimmed over the sensitive skin of her neck, and she didn't fight him. He could sink his vampire fangs deep into her jugular and drain her dry, and she'd welcome it gladly.

"You must have me in another one of your trances," she whispered, her head thrown back to give him better access.

"No, my Regina, I want you on your terms." He grasped the hem of her tank top and dragged it up her waist and over her head, tossing it to the kitchen table.

She could have resisted. Instead she pressed her body against his, shoving his coat from his shoulders.

When he let go of her long enough to straighten his arms, his black trench coat fell to the floor, the buttons clicking against the ceramic tile.

Skin. She wanted to be skin-to-skin with him, and it couldn't be soon enough. Taking charge, she ripped his black T-shirt up and over his head, slinging it to the floor. Then her hands moved over

the rivet at the waistband of his jeans and yanked it loose, sliding the zipper down with more desperation than care.

“Easy,” he said, his hands grasping hers. Then he slid his jeans down, kicking off his shoes until he stood naked and proud, his penis hard and pointed in her direction.

Reggie’s breath caught in her chest. Last time she’d seen him, she’d been in the shock of waking up from a trance. Now that she had time to study him from head to toe and all those gorgeous parts in between, she was speechless.

His sultry look turned confused. “What?” He glanced down at himself and back to her.

“Are all vampires as well equipped?” she asked, excitement feeding through her veins like fire on dry tinder.

“Not that I go around looking at other vampire’s cocks, but I’d venture to say it’s one of the perks.” His eyes narrowed into the dark and sexy look of the hunter. “My turn.”

She stood like a deer mesmerized by oncoming headlights, frozen to the kitchen floor, her bottom leaning against the kitchen sink. When she should be remembering what happened to her father at the hands of a vampire, all she could think about was what this vampire’s hands were going to do to her.

As she stood in her bra and jeans, Reggie’s body sweltered in her own skin.

Nic moved closer, his body calling out to the inner wanton in her.

## *Tempting*

Feeling highly overdressed, Reggie was ready to shake free of all encumbrances standing in the way of her and him.

He slid his engorged cock against her belly. Instead of telling him to get lost and running like a frightened child, she pressed closer, unable to quell the surge of unbridled lust washing over her like a tidal wave pulling her under and dragging her out to sea.

His hands tugged her jeans over her hips and downward until he knelt at her feet to lift her legs one at time, releasing her of the stiff fabric.

“I’m going to hate myself later,” she moaned, her legs spreading wider as his hands rose up the insides of her thighs.

“Maybe so, but I’m going to love you now.” His fingers slipped into her folds until he found her moist center. First one then two fingers slid in, abrading her vaginal wall with the rough texture of his hands.

Reggie squirmed, her legs spreading wider, giving him more access to her. She clamped her teeth on her tongue to keep from begging him to take her.

Dragging his moistened finger between her folds, he swirled her juices around and around the little nub of her clit, teasing but not touching the swollen tip.

When he flicked his finger against that special place, she rose on her tiptoes, her hands clutching at his hair, pulling him closer.

He grabbed her by the hips, hiked her bottom

up onto the counter and replaced his finger with his tongue lapping at her hypersensitive clit in much more aggressive and sensuous strokes.

Reggie welcomed the cold countertop against her hot ass as she spiraled toward that ultimate peak. Spurred by that magical tongue lavng her clit, her body erupted into a cataclysm of sensations. Her orgasm was so exquisitely intense, she didn't realize she'd shouted out loud until she heard Nic chuckle, his breath warm against her thighs.

"Stop laughing. You did that to me."

"But you yell with such gusto." He kissed the inside of her thigh and looked up at her with those wickedly blue eyes gleaming.

"Shut up and fuck me." She tugged at his hair until he stood and wrapped her legs around his waist, his penis positioned at the opening to her pussy, the velvety head poised to plunge into her slippery depths.

He hesitated.

"Oh for the love of Mike, do I have to do everything?" She grabbed his hips and slammed him home, her cunt absorbing all of him inside, the walls stretching to accommodate his size.

As he moved in and out of her, she leaned back, her head resting against the cabinets. "Why," she inhaled sharply as her body clenched around him, reveling in his strength. "Why did you stop a moment ago?"

He pumped in and out of her, his eyelids drooping over those ice-blue eyes, his lips pulled

## *Tempting*

back over his teeth, exposing the long incisors. “I was going to scold you,” he said, his voice breathless and strained.

“Scold me?” she asked, as he pressed deeper. How much better could this get and she not fall apart?

“For saying fuck.” His body rammed hard on the word, and he held steady, the muscles in his arms and legs tense. “But I decided I like it when it’s you.” He pulled back slowly, hissing as he did, and then he rocked into her again, holding her hips against his.

His cock pulsed inside her, the sensation pushing her over the edge yet again. She cried out, grasping his shoulders, holding on as she rode the wave until they both coasted in to the shore and collapsed against each other.

When she could breathe again, she pushed back without breaking their intimate connection and stared down at where they were still joined, his cock still hard and deep within her.

“Definitely a perk,” she said. And then the world came back to her like a train wreck. Her body stiffened, and she pushed against him. “Damn.”

“What?” He slipped free of her warm, moist center, the cool air in the apartment a shocking blast to his heated shaft. His hands retained their hold on her thighs.

“I shouldn’t have done that.” Her voice was soft and sad, and her eyes filled with tears. “I shouldn’t have made love to the enemy.”

## Chapter Eight

She slapped his hands away and pushed him aside, running from the room, her tight, white ass sexy even as she disappeared around the door into her bedroom.

He followed her across the living room and stood in front of her closed door. “Regina, I am not the enemy. Why do you refuse to believe me?”

“Are you a vampire?” she called out through the wooden panels.

“Yes but not by choice.”

“Then you’re the enemy!” she shouted. “I can’t believe I just did what I did. My sister will never forgive me, and my father, God rest his sole, is probably rollin’ in his freakin’ grave. What was I thinking? Where are my black running shoes?”

Nicolae smiled as he listened to her run-on ranting.

She might regret now, but she’d be back again. He’d bet a trip into the sunshine on it. The amount of passion they’d shared couldn’t be a fleeting blip on her radar. It came from deep within her. Otherwise she would not have reacted with such vigor and intensity with a being she professed to despise.

However, if he didn’t settle the issue of Andrei

## *Tempting*

Skirko and free Reggie's sister and the other women purloined from the streets of Houston, there wouldn't be a next time. Of that he was certain. Regina's sister meant a lot to her. If something were to happen to her while they had been making love, Regina would never forgive herself or him.

While she busied herself in her room, Nicolae returned to the kitchen. After he dressed, he cleaned the burned skillet and cracked two eggs into it.

When Reggie emerged, showered and dressed in black, he held out a plate to her. "Sit and eat." He didn't ask, he ordered. Knowing she'd refuse, he was prepared to take up the gauntlet.

"I'm not—"

He held up a hand. "When was the last time you ate?"

Pressing her lips together, she looked as though she might not answer. "Yesterday at noon."

His brows rose. "And you're arguing with me? Sit. And. Eat." He plopped the plate on the table and pulled the chair out for her.

"I'm not hungry." She said, but her gaze followed the plate to the table. "Okay, so maybe a little." She sat and picked up a forkful of scrambled eggs.

"Hard sex tends to work up an appetite."

She glared at him over the fork. "Don't expect a repeat performance." She shoved the fork in her mouth and chewed, continuing to frown.

"I don't expect anything," he said, leaning

against the refrigerator, his arms crossed over his chest. It was true. He didn't expect anything, but he knew she'd come around with enough of the right persuasion. If only they had more time.

A quick glance at his watch, and he straightened. "When you're ready, we need to go."

Her fork clattered to the plate, and she stood so fast her chair teetered on two legs and crashed to the floor. "I'm ready."

\* \* \*

No matter how much experience she'd had with late-night stakeouts, Reggie couldn't control her galloping heart rate. Hovering in the shadows across the street from the A.S.E. warehouse, she tapped her finger to the headset, hoping it was in good working order as she awaited the signal to move in.

A hand on her arm made her jump. "Don't do that," she whispered.

"I think he's been dying to touch you for the past thirty minutes." Torsten chuckled. "Not that I blame him. You do look pretty amazing in black."

"Leave it alone, Torsten," Nicolae warned.

"You're too obvious, Nic," Torsten continued. "Can't you see she doesn't want anything to do with you? Isn't that right, Reggie?"

"Right," she answered. If she said it often enough, perhaps she'd feel it. At that moment, though, she was scared. Scared for her sister and scared for herself.

How had she gotten in so deep with Nic in less than twenty-four hours? And he a vampire, no less.

## *Tempting*

No matter how much she damned her own actions, she couldn't stop thinking about the way he'd held her and touched her. Just thinking about him made her go all warm and wet between the legs.

What she didn't understand was why he hadn't tried to bite her even when she gave him ample opportunity. Twice now he could have sunk his vampire teeth into her. Yet he hadn't.

Melisande had said a woman had turned Nic. She hadn't given him the choice, forcing him into a life of immortality. A life some would find appealing.

Reggie got the impression Nicolae found living forever was lonely. Another chink in the wall she'd attempted to erect around her heart where Nic was concerned. In her attempt to hate him, she didn't want to know the heartless bastard might not be heartless after all.

Her thoughts drifted again to her kitchen and the image engraved in her mind of Nic standing there naked and beautiful, his cock hard and huge for her. Her breath caught in her throat, and her body caught fire all over again.

Nicolae leaned close. "Thinking about me?"

"No." She instantly regretted how weak her answer sounded. Mentally, she shook herself. Was she going soft? How could she keep her edge against the vampires, werewolves, and other creepy creatures roaming the streets of Houston if she couldn't keep her thoughts out of Nicolae's pants?

A long black limousine drove up to the doors,

which immediately opened as if the people inside had been watching and waiting for it to arrive. Once the vehicle slid inside, the rest of the PIA team moved into place. This was it. The black limo had to be the one carrying Andrei.

"I'm moving in," Blake Tanner said into the radio. He had insisted on being the lead with the C-4 explosives they planned to use to breach the doors.

A shadow slipped across the face of the building and stopped directly in front of the large doors, now closed to the outside. After ten seconds, he moved back the direction he'd come.

Over the radio, she heard, "Five, four—"

Reggie ducked behind the protection of the building and leaned against the solid muscles of Nicolae Kovak. As much as she tried to tell herself not to get used to having him around to depend on, she couldn't help the sense of security lent to a tough situation.

He shifted his thigh against hers, and that surge of heat he'd inspired earlier warmed her belly and dampened her panties.

Damn. How was she going to explain him to her sister?

If Reggie had been vampire hater, Madison was twice as bad. She'd been the one to find her father and hold him as he gasped his dying breath. Her hatred ran deep and unbending.

"—two, one." A loud explosion echoed off the sides of the buildings, shattering the relative silence of the waterfront.

## *Tempting*

“Move in!” The call went out over the radio.

Reggie and Nicolae raced across the street and into the gaping hole filled with smoke that used to be the large sliding doors.

Shouts rang out, and bullets zinged over their heads.

As planned, Reggie dove to the left behind the stacks of crates. She rolled to her feet and ran toward the back of the building where her sister and the thirteen other women were kept. Nicolae and Torsten followed her through the maze as the other agents worked through the resistance, creating a needed diversion.

At the first sign of trouble, Andrei would head for the women. Not only did they make for good resale, they would also be useful in negotiating himself out of the current circumstances.

Reggie, Nic, and Torsten had to get there first.

As they neared the crate-sided room, Nic reached out and snagged her arm, indicating he should go first.

Since their enemy was another vampire, Reggie didn't argue. Somewhere between last night on the street with Cesar and now, she'd allowed herself to trust Nicolae. Trust enough to save her sister. If Andrei was as bad as they said he was, she wouldn't stand much of a chance. As she followed Nicolae, she bent to retrieve the wooden stake wedged like a knife in her boot sheath.

“I hope you don't plan to use that on my friend,” Torsten whispered as they moved around to the open end of the room.

“Not unless he’s been lying to me all along,” she said and hoped the hell she hadn’t misplaced her trust. Madison was the only family she had left in this world. She couldn’t bear to lose her. Nor could she stand the thought of going on alone.

When they rounded the corner of the giant stack of crates, Nicolae stopped, and Reggie all but crashed into him.

When she steadied herself against his back, she felt his muscles go rigid.

Reggie’s heart skipped several beats and crashed to a halt when she moved around Nicolae to see their nemesis. A man, as dark and dangerous looking as Nic, stood in the doorway of the makeshift room. Draped across his arms was the unconscious body of her sister, Madison.

“Andrei,” Nic said, his tone more of an accusation than a greeting.

“Ah, Nicolae, what brings you to this part of the world? I thought you were enjoying the night life in Paris.” Like Nicolae, Andrei’s voice was heavily laced with a foreign accent.

“You know I go were the scum lands.”

“Tsk, tsk. Always doing the council’s dirty work, are you? Saving the unworthy innocents. Who was there to save us from a fate worse than death, huh, Nic? Brother?” His voice rose, echoing off the wooden walls and disappearing toward the high ceiling.

Brother? Reggie staggered backward, cold hard dread settling in the pit of her belly. She stared at the man she’d allowed herself to trust. Had he lied

## *Tempting*

to her? Was this nothing more than an elaborate trap?

"We didn't have a choice when we were turned," Nicolae was saying. "That doesn't make it right to do the same to others."

"You think that's why I brought these lovely ladies here?" Andrei's eyebrow rose.

"Not really." He crossed his arms over his chest. "I see you as one with a complete lack of control."

"Control." Andrei snorted. "You preach of control, and what does it buy you? Nothing. Whereas, I can have everything and everyone money can buy. Do you know how much these women will bring on the sheep market?" he asked.

Reggie's fear melted as a blast of white-hot anger burst forth. "You bastard! These women are people not cattle." She lunged toward him, brandishing her stake.

Nicolae's arm shot out, clenching around her elbow, hauling her back behind him. "Stay out of this."

"Is this man your brother?" she demanded.

"He used to be," Nicolae said, his tone filled with sadness.

"My brother disenfranchised himself from me over our many years of shared immortality. He fancies himself as a crusader for the less fortunate." Andrei lifted Madison higher. "I've taken the life of this less fortunate. What are you going to do? Kill me? You don't have the balls to do it."

Reggie gasped, her chest squeezing so tightly she couldn't breathe.

Nic's narrowed into slits. "I'll kill you just like any other rogue I'm sent out to retire."

"Where's the family loyalty, brother?" Andrei sneered.

"My brother died centuries ago." Nic's jaw tightened, and he stepped forward. "Put the woman down."

"No." The smile on Andrei's face was an evil taunt.

"Let go of my sister." Reggie strained against the hand holding her back, no longer willing wait for the two vampires to duke it out.

"And such a tasty treat she was. Unfortunately, I didn't save anything for the sale. Ah well, what's one loss? I still have thirteen left."

"Let her go, Andrei." Nicolae's voice was low and deadly.

"Always out to save the innocent," Andrei said, his face drawing into a scowl. "Such a shame you're too late to save this one." He straightened his arms, and Madison dropped.

Her body hit the concrete with a soft whomp, and she rolled to her back.

Reggie jerked out of Nic's grasp and dove for her sister.

The scene erupted in a flurry of movement as Torsten and Nicolae leaped for Andrei.

The evil brother dashed into the room full of inert bodies.

As the men crashed and thumped against the

## *Tempting*

wooden crates, Reggie knelt next to her sister and felt for a pulse. Her hand moved from her sister's cool cheek to her neck.

A sob rose in her own throat as she searched for any indication there was still some life left in her. Then the faintest nudge tapped against her desperate fingertips and then another. She was still alive but barely.

"Reggie?" Madison whispered.

As Reggie leaned forward to hear her sister's words, the loud crashes from inside the crate room faded into the background.

"I'm dying," she said, her lips a ghastly shade of blue, her cheeks pale and gray.

"No, Madison. You can't. You're all I have."

Her sister's chest jerked as she tried to laugh, her lips twisting into a humorless smile. "I'm dying just like our dad."

Anger surged in Reggie's veins. "I won't let this happen. He won't get away with it." Grabbing the stake she'd dropped on the floor, she left her sister's side and walked into the room.

Torsten flew through the air, hit the box next to her, and slid to the floor. Nicolae and Andrei were locked in a fierce battle to control the splintered board in Andrei's hand.

Without stopping to think or even reason through her actions, Reggie strode forward and swung the stake as hard as she possibly could.

Seeing the stake coming at him, Andrei pulled Nicolae around and in front of him.

At the last second, when Reggie thought for sure

she'd killed the wrong vampire, Nic backed up and the sharpened weapon plunged into Andrei's heart.

"That's for my sister!" She shouted. Then she ran back to Madison and collapsed across her, sobbing. She couldn't die. Not Madison. Not her beloved sister.

\* \* \*

All the pressure on Nicolae's arms slackened as Andrei staggered backward and sagged against the corner of a wooden box containing one of the women he'd kidnapped.

Hundreds of years peeled away, leaving Nic facing the dying face of his younger brother. Andrei had always been out for a good time, womanizing and drinking into the dark hours of the morning. "I'm sorry we couldn't see eye to eye," Nic said softly.

"As am I," Andrei gripped his chest and exploded into a cloud of dust that smelled of death and old bones.

Nicolae doubled over, the ache in his heart equaling the pain in his gut.

Torsten's strong arm circled his shoulder. "I'm sorry about your brother, Nic, but you're needed."

Reggie.

Forcing his grief to the back of his mind, he looked around to find Reggie sprawled across the near-lifeless body of her sister.

Reggie looked up at him, eyes red-rimmed, tears trailing down her cheeks. "Help her."

"Andrei drained her," Torsten said. "She's dying,"

*Tempting*

“Don’t let her die. You can’t!” Reggie moaned, wrapping her arms around her sister as if by sheer force she could keep her alive.

“I won’t turn her unless she wants it,” Nic said, his heart breaking along with Reggie.

“You’re a vampire. You can heal her like you healed me.”

He shook his head. “Andrei took her too far.”

“Then take her the rest of the way. I’d rather she lived as a vampire than not at all,” Reggie stared down at her sister, her tears soaking the dying girl’s cheeks. “Please.”

“No, Reggie. I won’t be a vampire.” Madison’s eyes opened slowly, like it took more effort than she had left in her. “Let me die.”

“No!” She leaped to her feet and ran to Torsten. “If he won’t do it, you can. How do you do it? Tell me!”

“I’m sorry, Reggie. I’m with Nic. I won’t go against his wishes.”

Reggie turned to Nic, the fear and sadness of losing the only sibling and family left to her emanating from her green eyes. She came to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, burying her face against his chest. “Please, I beg you.”

He wanted to do as she asked more than he could stand, but Madison didn’t want to be turned. “You’ll have to take it up with your sister. I won’t turn her against her will.”

Reggie stared at him, tears welling in her eyes. “Then turn me,” she said, quietly. “Turn me so I can save my sister.”

“No, Reggie, don’t do it.” Madison lifted an arm toward her sister and, it fell back to the ground.

“I won’t stand by and let you die.”

“I’d rather die than be one of them.” Madison’s voice was fading, and her eyes closed as if keeping them open was too much effort.

Reggie dropped to the ground beside her sister and gathered a limp, cold hand in both of hers. “They aren’t all the same, Maddie. There are good ones and bad ones. Nic and Torsten saved you and all the other women. Don’t you see? You could be one of the good ones.” A sob escaped, racking her body.

Nic knelt beside her and cradled her in his arms, his heart breaking for her. “Do you really believe what you said?” he asked. “Do you believe I’m not the enemy? Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she cried against his shirt. “Please don’t let my sister die. I love her so much.”

The relief of hearing her say she trusted him and that she didn’t think of him as the enemy was like a heavy curtain being lifted to let the sunshine in. Taking a deep breath, he let it out slowly. “All right, I’ll turn her.”

The racking sobs stopped and she stared up at him through watery eyes. “You will?”

“Nic, remember how you felt when you were turned and didn’t want it,” Torsten warned.

But Nic could only see the tentative smile on Reggie’s face. If he didn’t help her sister, that smile would disappear. He’d risk Madison’s anger

## *Tempting*

for Reggie's love any day. "Give me that stake."

Reggie leaped to her feet and retrieved the stake from where it had fallen after she'd dusted Andrei.

"Sounds like they have the rest of Andrei's gang under control." Torsten laid a hand on Nic's shoulder. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I've never been more sure." Reggie was the first woman to capture his admiration in centuries. He didn't want her to lose her sister when he had the power to save her. "I want a chance at love."

"And you hope to buy that love with her sister's life?"

"If need be." Nic frowned, not liking the way Torsten made it sound. "Madison will learn to deal with being a vampire, just as you and I have."

Reggie pressed the stake into his palm and said, "I'll help her come to terms."

He took the stake with one hand and captured her hand with the other. "We'll help her, together."

Reggie smiled and turned to Madison. "What do I need to do?"

"Just believe." Nic braced himself and then stabbed the stake into his wrist. Blood gushed from the fresh wound, spilling out onto the ground.

Dropping to his knees beside Madison, he lifted her with his uninjured arm and pressed his wrist to her mouth. "Drink, Madison."

"No." Too weak to fight, she turned her head to the side.

Reggie knelt beside Nic and held her sister's

head straight. "Do it, Madison," she said, her voice choked with tears. "I love you, and I won't let you die."

Trapped by the two sets of hands holding her, Madison had no choice but to drink the blood of a vampire, and Nic hoped the hell he was doing the right thing.

"How much does it take?" Reggie asked, her voice only a whisper.

"Just a drop is all that's needed." That's all it took to turn him more than four hundred years earlier.

When Madison's throat moved, and she swallowed, Nic laid her head on the concrete, and he moved back.

"What happens now?" Reggie asked.

"Your sister joins the ranks of the living dead. By morning, she will no longer walk in daylight and live to tell. Her thirst for blood will have to be fed to sustain her life, such as it is. And if she isn't staked, beheaded or otherwise dusted, she can live forever."

Reggie stood next to Nic and wrapped her arms around his middle. "I understand your reasons for not wanting to turn her. Thank you for saving her anyway."

Nic pushed a strand of her red hair behind her ear. "I don't know that I have. I hope she won't awaken to hate you and me both."

"I'll take that chance," Reggie said looking up into his face.

"Just like you took a chance on me?" He rested

*Tempting*

his hands on her hips, his pulse leaping in his veins. "Any regrets?"

She smiled. "Only one and I plan to remedy it soon."

Nic frowned, a picture of her staking Andrei flashed through his mind. "Does it involve staking anyone in the immediate vicinity?"

She laughed and the sound was like music. "No stakes." She stood on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his lips. "My one regret is that I don't know much about you. I want to know everything."

He pulled her against him. "How long do you have?"

"A life time," she said, resting her cheek against his chest.

He slid his hands beneath her shirt and up the middle of her back, liking the silky smoothness of her skin. "I don't know," he stared toward the ceiling. "It might take longer for me to tell you everything. Are you willing to stick around for awhile?"

Her fingers found their way inside his shirt. "As long as it takes, baby. As long as it takes."

*Myla Jackson*

### **About Myla Jackson**

Myla Jackson began writing in 3rd grade when she penciled a story about a princess in a castle in a magical land. She's been telling stories ever since. Her parents can verify, but I wouldn't ask them about the gray hair! It took the turn of the century for her to seriously pursue her writing. Her older sister, Delilah Devlin, challenged her to write a romance novel, and together they began the journey to publication.

After many writing contests, critique groups, and successes along the way, Myla won the 2004 RWA Golden Heart for Best Paranormal Romance and sold her first novel. In 2005, she released TROUBLE WITH HARRY with Ellora's Cave, thus launching the writing debut of her more sensual stories.

She enjoys writing fast, fun, and sexy stories that elicit laughter as well as tears from her readers. And she still works closely with her sister, Delilah, the devilish Diva and goddess of sizzling sex scenes.

Readers may visit her on the web at [www.mylajackson.com](http://www.mylajackson.com).

*Tempting*



Spicy, sensual love stories which leave a reader breathless, intense plots, alpha males, strong heroines and sizzling dialogue—find it all at Whispers!

[www.whispershome.com](http://www.whispershome.com)