



XII

The Eternal Kiss
DIANA CASTILLEJA

THE HANGED MAN

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Tease Publishing LLC

www.teasepublishingllc.com

Copyright ©2008 by Diana Castilleja

NOTICE: This eBook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This eBook cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This eBook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.



Distributed by Fictionwise.com

CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Chapter Eleven](#)
[Chapter Twelve](#)
[Chapter Thirteen](#)
[Chapter Fourteen](#)
[Chapter Fifteen](#)
[Chapter Sixteen](#)
[Chapter Seventeen](#)
[Chapter Eighteen](#)
[Chapter Nineteen](#)
[Chapter Twenty](#)
[Chapter Twenty-One](#)
[Epilogue](#)

* * * *

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

tease Dark Tarot

The Hanged Man

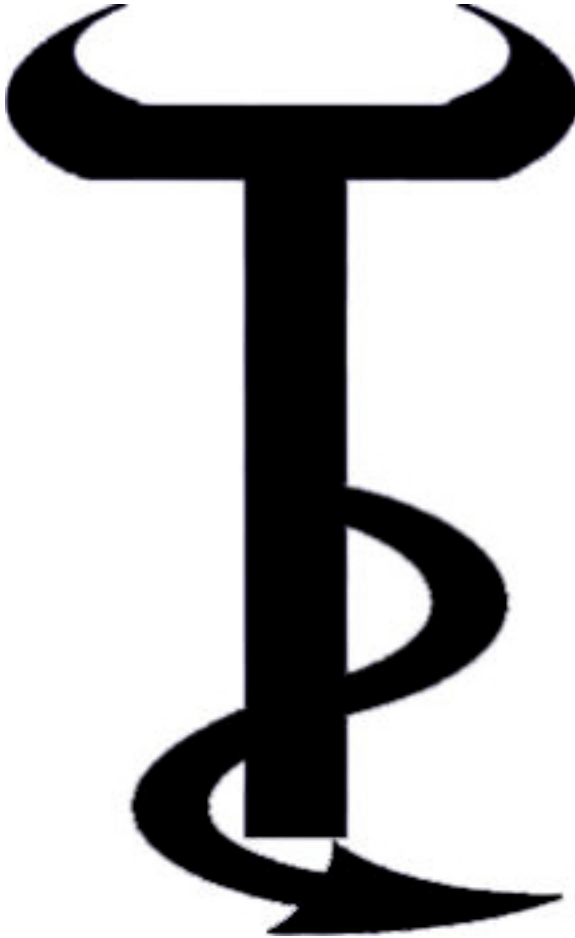
The Eternal Kiss

By

Diana Castilleja

* * * *

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja



* * * *

TEASE PUBLISHING

North Carolina

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The Eternal Kiss

A Tease Publishing Book

Copyright© 2008 Diana Castilleja

ISBN: 978-1-934678-90-9

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Tease Publishing LLC

www.teasepublishingllc.com

PO BOX 234

Swansboro, North Carolina 28584-0234

Tease and the T logo is ã Tease Publishing LLC. All rights reserved.

Chapter One

Titania gripped the knob of her closed dressing room door and took one more cursory look around before meeting her band onstage. Without warning, an undulating wave of anger and hatred slammed into her, and she staggered backward with a cried squeal of alarm.

Her first terrified thought was that someone had discovered her, and she yanked in her mental barriers to block the waves of emotion. She forced air in and out of her lungs. Bowing her head, she let her eyes drift closed as the onslaught continued without mercy. Sparks scattered in front of her vision as she stilled, completely frozen, and fought for control. She concentrated, forming a solid wall between herself and whoever was out there. She knew without a doubt it was a man, close, at the bar by the stage. It took work to be able to breathe normally, keeping the pressure of his emotions at bay.

He had come to kill; she knew that with a certainty that chilled her to the quick. His hatred pulsed, feeling thick around her. There was a tang of insolence in his hatred, a sense of omnipotence. She studied the waves, unraveling them, and found ... emptiness. A dark chasm where his soul had once been.

She shuddered with a convulsive shake, ripping her thoughts back to her own mind. Her eyes snapped open, her entire being feeling colder than she'd ever felt in her life. Her arms wrapped around her body, and she rubbed herself in

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

reaction. She took a deep breath, feeling relief blossom inside her when she focused and found herself still ensconced in her dressing room.

She had touched death and was still living.

She jumped a foot seconds later when a knock echoed through her door. "Tani! Hey, come on. The natives are getting restless."

"Coming," she shouted through the door. She swallowed down the quake that dared to grip her. She pictured the strongest walls, the thickest barriers she could imagine, adding a prayer for strength before she reached for the door again. It was going to be hard to do her show with him in the audience.

Laney, her backup singer, stood right outside when she found the strength to come out of her sanctuary.

"You feel him too, don't you?" Laney asked, taking one look at Titania's taut features, and then casting a furtive glance to the darkened stage.

"How could I miss him?" Titania shuddered again. "Cold, so cold." She stood staring at nothing, but feeling everything. Like a cold hand had found her, gripped her and wouldn't release her.

"Hey, if you can't get on the stage, don't make yourself sick over this." Laney looked backward over her shoulder and called out to her husband.

Houston put an arm around Laney immediately, taking in their drawn faces in a glance. "You two going to be all right?"

"I have to do something about this," Titania told them, feeling the man's intent and knowing she had no other choice.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

"You're kidding, right?" Laney's green eyes grew. "You'll pass out trying to fix this. I don't think you can reach this one. Even I can feel him, Titania," she breathed. "Easily."

"I have to try. Someone is going to die tonight. I know it. That's why he's here. I have to try," she repeated, imploring her friends for their support.

Houston passed a hand over his hair, watching Titania. His shoulders tightened in indecision. Both she and Laney were pale and wide-eyed, feeling the absolute desolation of the man in the crowd. Titania could tell even Houston sensed a touch of overflow from the guy lying in wait, and he had nothing but his natural instincts to go on. Houston's watchful gaze kept moving out to the darkened stage then flickering back over the girls with decided concern. That was all the sign she needed to know Houston knew he was out there too.

"All right," he murmured with hesitant approval. "Do your thing. I know you would without our blessing simply because he needs it."

Titania's eyes unfocused as a shiver tore over her frame with little warning. "He's not the only one. Someone else ... He just got here. So much hate," she whispered, her voice sounding far away, even to her own ears. Her vision shot up to them, a new chill sliding up her spine. "Whatever happens tonight, you two stay safe."

Laney gripped Titania's arm. "What are you talking about? You've never given us a warning."

"I've never felt this before." Titania's head swiveled in slow motion to the darkened stage. "It's only between them," she said with a small touch of relief. She swung back around, her

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

gaze unrelenting. No matter what her night brought, she'd make sure her friends weren't caught in the middle between the two men whom she could feel so easily. "I mean it. When this is over, get everyone out of here. We'll meet at the hotel tomorrow afternoon."

"Is the party here, or onstage?" David, their drummer, joked as he sauntered up to the trio. He caught Titania's expression and stuttered to a stop next to them. "Oh, Lord. How bad is it?"

"It's bad," Houston said. "Two sets, no encores."

"Gotcha." He made a pistol out of his fingers, clicking his tongue at Houston. "Don't worry, Tani. We got your back. We also know you can't help yourself either," he told her in an understanding, brotherly voice.

"Thanks, guys." She took a steadying breath. Her arms fell to her sides, having forgotten they were wrapped around her body. "I'll be fine. There's always someone out there. He's just very angry tonight."

Houston leaned over and kissed her forehead. "And you're an angel in disguise. Just be careful," he warned her, his brown gaze assessing with his warning. She nodded, knowing how far she could push after years of being in the public's eye.

Her smile was weak but heartfelt as the men flanked the women to take their places on the pitch black stage. Justin was already onstage, swinging his guitar onto his shoulder. He nodded once as David spoke to him, climbing onto the dais where his drums were.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Titania took a long, deep breath. She heard Houston start the count and felt herself relax, felt the first chords reach her as his music always could. The welcoming cheer made her smile. Houston was incredible on the guitar, a born talent.

Before she could have second thoughts, she began to sing and did what came naturally, her gift flowing from her in waves, and prayed she could save the one who had been targeted.

* * * *

Diego sat astride his motorcycle, taking a deep breath, appraising the night. The damp mist had finally stopped falling, but the air was thick and heavy with moisture. From where he sat, the rush of conversation was easy to hear. People were anxious to be inside the club he was in front of, to hear the woman who would be singing.

Diego was there because he was positive Brakka was already inside, hunting. Diego shook his head. He was just asking to get his ass kicked. He had come into Diego's territory and stayed. Big mistake.

He silenced the mechanical monster, letting his leg slide easily over the leather. He should have reconsidered the motorcycle, but it suited his mood. Black as midnight with the rumble of a hungry lion. His smile was cold. It fit—perfectly.

Diego approached the microphone wearing doorman who thought to stop him with a strong hand on his chest. He was a good-sized bouncer, but Diego still towered over him. He could have entered completely unseen if he had wished it, but the flux of power would have been noticeable. He preferred to

keep Brakka unaware he had tracked him to the bar. "Sir, there's a line. Please wait like everyone else," he said, sounding bored, assured of his persuasive ability. On anyone else, it probably would have worked.

Diego tilted his head down. "Remove your hand." Menace vibrated in the air, the words spoken low. Stunned brown eyes found pale gray. The hand fell away as if burned.

"Yes, s-sir. V.I.P. I understand." The bouncer reached for the door. "Enjoy your evening."

Diego strode through, unconcerned for the slam of humanity inside, having already slaked his rising hungers. People stepped aside, making way for the solid wall of menace walking into their midst. He shook out the length of his leather coat, water spraying outward. A single man spun, then thought better of saying anything when his gaze fell on the source of the indoor rain. He dropped his eyes to the floor as Diego passed, the challenge locked in his throat. Diego's stride never changed.

He glided through the crowd, making space at the bar to wait, his broad shoulders creating an unfriendly barrier to the world. He watched the people on the crowded dance floor, the throb of music vibrating walls and floor alike. He tuned it down. Diego shook his head when the bartender approached him a moment later. He was not there for a drink. If he was lucky, he would not be there long at all.

Diego searched the dim interior and found the telltale scent. Pungent, earthy, the stench of old blood like a cloud around his prey of the evening as Diego pinpointed his target. His lips lifted cruelly. Diego still had not been discovered.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Brakka was too busy wooing a victim. He always had believed himself to be a lady's man.

Brakka's arrogance had grown over the centuries, Diego mused with his gaze roving patiently over the crowd. Diego refused to do anything within the club, unwilling to jeopardize the people inside. He had a feeling Brakka was aware of that, probably even naming it a weakness, but Diego did not care. Nothing that Brakka thought about him mattered, not anymore.

For a moment, he allowed himself to remember what it had been like when the two warriors had been friends so long ago. Now there was only a need for vengeance for the one who had stolen his soul and his life. Now, just his name brought the bitter bile of betrayal to Diego's tongue.

For a man who did not desire food, could not remember the taste of it, the rawness of betrayal was twice as revolting. It was like a hot acid. It ate at him constantly.

Brakka had been his best friend—once. Fists tightened as hatred seethed again. Brakka had done this to him. Plunged the knife of bloodlust so deep into Diego's soul, he would never be free. The only reason he refused to walk into the morning light was because Brakka deserved to die—again. He had only lived this long to pay back the favor, to serve justice cold to the man who had created him, or die trying.

When they had landed in the Americas, Brakka had changed. Diego had witnessed the changes, had been sickened by the way Brakka learned to enjoy the pain of others, loved to hear their screams for mercy. He never granted it. He grew cruel, violent, sooner killing than giving

peace or relief. His behavior sickened Diego to this day because that was not the man he had trained with and fought with for nearly a quarter of a century. Was not the same man he remembered growing up with in the villas of Southern Spain.

Diego still remembered his disbelief when Brakka had offered a tireless arm when a single lash was called for. His stomach rebelled with the memory of the horses that were destroyed because of his friend's heavy hand. He shook his head. No, Brakka was definitely not a friend. He was the one responsible for destroying Diego's life.

This memory was as sharp as a sword blade and just as cold. The night had been dark, cloudy and starless. Bonfires had been set at the perimeters where guards were doing their watches while DeSoto prepared his advances in his quarters. Diego had gone to make a last check with his own men, selected to guard the precious horses they had brought overseas. The local Indians had been close and troublesome. It was the last night Diego would spend ignorant of the evil prowling those jungle-filled lands, the last real night he would live as a human. And as they say, it had all gone downhill from there.

He had been attacked, silently and with a ferociousness that had caught him completely unguarded. Brakka's strength was unbelievable, pinning him to the ground in hardly more than a span of seconds. Diego had demanded to know where Brakka had been, missing for the last two days, when an icy chill had stolen over him.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Sharpened fangs had elongated, filling Diego's vision, silencing his roar of rage in an instant as Brakka had buried those teeth into his jugular, ripping a burning gash to gulp at his blood in a frenzy. He had drunk his fill like a dying man in the Sahara, but he had not killed Diego. He had offered salvation, and Diego had grabbed at it, unaware of the price. Diego had never forgiven him for it either.

There was no shame in Brakka for what he had done, only an increasing need for violence, to feed and kill. Diego had realized as the night grew deeper, he could not return to camp. His friend had branded him a deserter in seconds. He had weakly stumbled after Brakka into the jungle, to hidden caves, and was appalled at the lifeless, decaying bodies. Women, men, children. The roiling stench of death had overpowered the earthen dampness that radiated through the jungle. Brakka had only sneered when Diego lost everything in his stomach twice.

There was nothing in the least remorseful about Brakka's actions that night. Brakka had been given a gift and a chance to choose one to join the ranks, to prove himself among the Brethren. He had chosen Diego.

Diego had managed to keep his disgust hidden, knowing Brakka had expected gratitude, except the nightmare had grown over the following nights. Brakka had completed the conversion, irrevocably bonding them together, but they were not friends, not anymore, not by a long shot. By the time Diego had realized what had happened, learned the little that Brakka knew with his own recent change, his life was over as he knew it.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Brakka had challenged him, cursed him, demanded things from Diego, but Diego had refused to kill. He would not take an innocent life to feed an appetite that was as abnormal as it was disgusting to his mind. Two nights after his most adamant refusal, Brakka had disappeared. Diego had been on his own, doomed to the life he now lived. Or did not live, he ridiculed himself.

Over the decades that had grown into centuries, Diego had learned to survive, had learned a lot, in fact. He had witnessed fables and fantasies come to life. Great metal airplanes that flew across the sky endlessly with people inside. Carriages to cars, making the stable of prized horseflesh he had once owned obsolete. The advent of medical science, modern music, technology so small it fit in the end of a pen. The ability to speak in multiple languages across the world without ever leaving home by simply typing on a keyboard to people. The scope of it still amazed him some days.

Today was not one of them.

Loneliness clawed at him unnaturally. It beat at him almost as constantly, as viciously, as the hunger. A heaviness, an unfathomable, bottomless ache proving irrevocably what he was.

He had considered giving up. He was completely alone in a cruel world. He knew if he even tried, the humans he used to stay alive would as soon tear him apart and put him under a microscope than talk to him. His last friend—this time he sneered at the thought—had created him. There had been no love waiting for him in Spain. His family was gone. He had no

life, no joy. His only contact with humans was to control them, and as he aged, that had become surprisingly easier. Evidently, the powers Brakka had called fledgling at his turning had grown with his aging. Diego was sure for many, the abilities he had been granted in the beginning would have been reason enough to accept this travesty of a life. *I should have read the small print.*

He knew he was not like the others of the Brethren, as they were collectively called, the few of whom he had met in a high state of caution while training with Brakka. They did not trust him, and he refused to trust others. Most avoided him completely, but that was fine with him. Diego discovered he could not agree with the Brethren's attitude toward their food supply.

It was simple for them; death was easy, just a way to feed. The body, the person, meant nothing. The Brethren enjoyed playing with their victims, torturing them, or inciting fear and chaos with their victims through their deaths.

Diego refused to travel that paved road to true damnation, condemning the soul of an innocent life just so he could live one more night. He also swore to never pass on his own curse. Once it sank in that he could live without killing, he swore he never would. He refused to ensnare a mind, watch as they offered themselves under his control, and purposely steal a life.

That was true slaughter in his mind, and Diego was not a murderer. That one sin was reserved for Brakka's judgment.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Brakka had misjudged his appetites when he attacked and made his offer. Diego had managed to keep his soul when others had lost it easily and willingly to the hot taste of blood.

The stage before him fell into utter blackness, a thick blanket of nothing, silencing his spiraling thoughts. A cheer erupted as a guitar began to hum from the abyss. Diego located Brakka again, almost absently seeing his engrossed behavior with his evening's conquest. Diego rolled his eyes. What a playboy.

A guitar broke through the crowd's murmur, a riff of sound that brought a roar of greeting from the packed mass on the floor, surrounding the wide stage. The stage was still as dark as the murkiest night when her voice floated out to him.

Her voice wound over his ear, entrapping him in its exotic tone. His gaze snapped from Brakka to shadows that meant nothing to him and found *her*. The woman whose voice rang true, purity unleashed.

On a beat, the lights hit her, and Diego lost his breath. His reaction was beyond intense. It felt like being kicked in the middle so hard he almost doubled over. Except it was not a physical pain, but so powerful a reaction to her, she literally stole the air from his body. Her arms opened wide, embracing the crowd, the night, her voice flowing, falling, finding, and filling every crevice, every ear.

Stunned at his own reactions, he knew his night had changed. He still kept an eye on Brakka. There was no way he would escape, but the woman, she was something else entirely. There was life in her music, in the sound of the song as she lifted it over and through the crowd. She threw her

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

arms wide once more and lifted her voice higher, further. The crowd went crazy, cheering.

He heard half the club sigh when she finished a particularly torchy, heated song, a seductress of passion, gliding slowly across the stage. Her eyes beckoned, her voice entranced. She was magical, was his only thought. There were over a thousand people inside hanging on her every note as proof.

She was a light of constant energy, sharing handshakes with her fans, sharing in their joy, smiling to include each person as if it was a private concert.

His admiration grew at her ability to find the notes, to lift them over the people, to share her joy, her happiness, her hope and faith with each person. She was putting all of herself into the music. He could feel it, feel her in a way he had never experienced, before or after his dark life had begun.

Diego studied the beauty onstage a little closer. Her voice carried easily between the walls, amplified but not blaring. He watched as wave after wave floated outward from the stage, sifting, drifting over the people.

He followed it with a shocked gaze, amazed at what he was forced to acknowledge in the air that normal eyes would never see. She was not just singing; she was sharing. She was broadcasting emotion from her body to the crowd, uplifting hope, love, faith. A strength he had never felt poured from her as he recognized the glow of the golden notes rising to the ceiling, falling to the crowd.

The songs were not religious, the music was not gospel. Diego had already sought God, trying to be released from his

curse. God was not to blame, and he had not been freed either for his prayers, so he had let it go. This woman's music sounded as normal to the ear as any he knew he had heard in recent decades.

It was the woman who was incredible. He dared a delicate mind merge, and caught a sharp breath at the amount of energy she spent to do this show, to share of herself. It was draining on her, but she would never quit. To her, the sharing, the music, was her life. His light touch made his discoveries cursory. She knew her talents set her apart, that she would be in danger if she was ever discovered, yet she refused to let the ignorance of others rule her. She was brave as well as endlessly compassionate.

This woman was different, very different from the majority of humans he encountered. Her mind was complex, with barriers, blocks and numerous links he could not even begin to understand. She was, in short, remarkable for a human woman.

She was also strikingly beautiful, wearing dark jeans and a cream-colored tank top, dressed as casually as the crowd to make herself one with them. She had waist length ebony hair, shining in the stage lights as if it held the very stars of the sky. Something new invaded his blood as he studied her. Suddenly the loneliness he had been battling for so long did not feel so ruthless. *Who is she?* The question echoed repeatedly through his thoughts.

Diego cocked his head, listening, wanting to hear more. He made himself comfortable, crossing his arms over his chest as he propped himself against the bar.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

It was only a few minutes later when he felt them both. A warning, like a touch against his skin, and a guttural threat. Brakka was moving through the crowd, having discovered Diego, the trap sprung. It surprised Diego it had taken Brakka that long to realize he was there, but accepted the discovery as inevitable. Brakka would not have slipped past him regardless. Diego's gaze shot to the stage for a split second and found hers, wide and fearful. Dark blue eyes flashed in the stage lights, and in an instant, he knew it had been her intention to keep this from happening.

He did not know how to tell her the confrontation was unavoidable and had been played out many times in the past. He followed Brakka through the mass and out the doors after one final glimpse of her—watching him.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Two

Titania wavered onstage. *No!* The scream echoed silently, bouncing off her mind and soul. She couldn't let this happen. How could she stop them? She forced the notes through her throat, made herself concentrate on the music, the only thing keeping her on the stage.

As the last notes of her first set vanished, she took a quick bow and yanked her headset free. She threw it on the nearby table, almost sprinting for the rear exit of the club. She followed the trail of hatred almost blindly, not knowing if anyone followed her or not. Her heart pounded harder than any stage fright could cause by the time she reached the heavy rear door.

She had to stop this! She'd nearly come undone onstage twice, feeling the absolute cold of the hatred. The one who came in later had been nonplussed about it, patient. Accepting. Didn't he realize he was going to die? Didn't he know he was in danger?

The door slammed against the outside wall when she charged into the back alley parking lot. She whirled on a heel, ignoring the damp night air. Her lungs burned as the raging weight increased as the nauseating feeling of the coldness invaded her. Barriers crumbled like sandcastles in the surf. Tears clouded her vision, and sparks began to flare when the onslaught of emotions blindsided her.

"No!" she shouted, flinging herself at the back of the man closest to her. He barely staggered under her attack.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Her hand slid down his arm, slick and sticky at the same time. She clung like a monkey, a single arm latched around his neck, her entire weight centered behind his shoulders. She almost shriveled into a withered pile on the spot. She'd hit the right one.

"What the hell?" he snarled from beneath her. He whirled, trying to dislodge her, but she held on with every muscle she had. A strong hand gripped at her hair and yanked hard, trying to pull her away. She swallowed the shriek of pain, holding on tighter.

"What is the matter, Brakka? Have you not learned how to handle your women?" came a cool taunt.

"Get this bitch off of me!"

She clawed at anything within reach. He shouted out in pain when her nails found skin. She took a deep breath, ready to scream her heart out when she felt the man beneath her go stock still.

"Brakka," came that same calm voice. "I suggest you leave. We will finish this another night."

She forced her watering eyes open, managing to make out a thin, sharp point pressed into Brakka's throat. Her breathing was haggard in her ears.

"This is not over," the one called Brakka warned, his voice cold and graveled, the threat of retribution unmistakable. She blinked when she found herself crumpled on the damp ground. The man she had jumped had vanished.

"Are you all right?" A gentle hand lifted her chin. "You are either incredibly stupid or the bravest woman I have ever met."

"Stupid, trust me," she gasped. "I couldn't let him..." She collapsed further on a sob. "Oh, God."

Kneeling in front of her, he pulled her against him. "You are fine."

She pulled back sharply, her gaze clearing immediately. "You're bleeding! He hurt you. He was going to kill you." Her hands lifted to press against several slices in his chest.

"I will be fine. Unfortunately, whenever we meet, neither seems to win."

"This has happened before?" She stared up at his strong features, his eyes as bright as crystals in the darkness.

"Many, many times," he intoned. He held out a hand. His fingers were warm on her skin when he brought her to her feet. "Tell me your name, *cara*."

She gulped in damp night air. "Titania."

"Beautiful," he breathed, his hand lifting to brush back her mangled hair. "Thank you for saving my life."

She couldn't seem to repel the shudders that slid down her arms to fall down her legs. She still shook, elements of the anger and hatred riding over taut nerves. "You knew, didn't you?"

"I always know when Brakka is nearby." His head snapped up. "I need to go. Your friends are coming."

"But you're hurt!" She didn't even know how he remained standing.

He put a firm hand on her shoulder, pushing her back toward the building. "Go, Titania. I will be fine."

Her gaze swept up and down his body, unconvinced. There were numerous seeping wounds along his torso and a long,

garish slice down his arm. At least it looked like the bleeding was slowing on most of them.

His voice lowered, became something intimate between the two of them. "I could never lie to you, Titania. I will be fine."

"You're in a gang, aren't you? A drug lord. Great. Now I'm going to wake up in bed dead some afternoon."

He laughed a deep sound. "No to all of that."

"Tani! Where the hell are you?" Two heads swung around at Houston's anxious shouts.

She turned to face the tall man again and found he was gone. She stood alone, her sweeping gaze finding not even a hint that he had been there. She staggered back a step, her hand rising to stifle the cry that bubbled up in her throat. He had disappeared! Just like Brakka had vanished.

"I didn't even get his name," she muttered, beginning to shake uncontrollably, saying anything to keep herself grounded, to hear her own voice.

She jumped when his voice whispered over her. *Diego, cara.*

"Stop that!" she hissed. Her legs buckled, planting her on damp ground, her head pillowed on crossed arms. Now her imagination was talking to her—in his voice!

"Tani, damn it, are you back here?" Houston sounded very anxious now. She looked at her surroundings and realized she was in the darkest shadows of the building. Stupid didn't even begin to describe what she had done.

"Back here," she called, swallowing when her voice cracked and trembled.

She heard their running steps right before Laney screamed. Both landed on their knees next to her. "Ambulance," Houston choked out. "You're covered in blood."

"It's not mine," she quickly reassured them, fighting to sound stronger than she felt. The chatter of her teeth didn't put up a believable front. "I'm fine."

Houston pulled her into his arms, looking back over his shoulder. "David, go tell them we're canceling the rest of the show. We'll do a makeup later in the month if we have time."

She heard David's concerned tone in answer, then his jogging feet as he went back inside.

"What the hell happened, Tani? We thought you went to your room to rest." Houston hugged her close. She could hear the rapid tattoo of his heart beneath her ear.

"I'm sorry. I had to stop them."

"Them? Where are they?" Houston demanded. "Christ, Tani! Look at yourself. You're a wreck."

"Houston, lay off. She's still shaking," Laney warned him. She put a comforting hand on Titania's arm.

"Brakka ran. Diego was here until just before you rounded the corner."

"Did you stop for tea to get to know each other or something?" His anger and fear were barely concealed in the whip of sarcasm. Houston searched the surrounding darkness, but it was just the three of them.

She described her attempt to stop them, finishing with, "Diego told me his name when he said thank you. He left when we heard you. He was bleeding. He needed care."

He nodded once, saying, "Let's get to the hotel. You need to get cleaned up." Houston stood, lifting Titania to her feet. Laney took her other side, wrapping her close. Houston let out a sigh. "Next time you want to take on someone, let me know. You scared ten years off of me. Your mother will kill me if anything happens to you."

"I'm fine," she reiterated. She offered them a wobbly smile. "See?"

"Faker," he accused, but he didn't argue anymore.

Titania let Houston and Laney coddle her, getting her unseen into her hotel room. She almost fainted when she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror, covered and streaked with blood. *No wonder Houston lost it.*

She pushed back her length of hair, grimacing at the soggy dirt and grime. "Shower," she told her reflection. She stripped and sagged under the hot water. She began to shake once more as the night crashed into her again.

She needed to get the overflow of signals out of her system. The constant torment onstage, having her emotional barriers punished. The strangled incapability to help. There was even the strong ebb and flow of Diego's loneliness, twisted and warped because Brakka had been so overwhelming.

Who were they? Tears fell unheeded. The hottest water she could stand coursed over her. Sobs ripped through her body. The aftermath of enduring such strong emotions for so long racked her. She'd never been exposed for so long to someone so ... evil. So empty.

Cara, please, do not cry.

She screamed, leaping so hard, so fast in the shower, she crashed against the wall.

"How are you talking to me?" Her voice shook with a fear she'd never tasted.

I can feel your distress.

"How?" she squeaked, her teeth chattering again.

I have touched your mind. It was a simple explanation, and it terrified Titania.

"You touched me? Oh God," she whimpered. "I thought I imagined your..." She licked her lips. "...Your voice." She peeked out the curtain with shaking fingers, but the small bathroom appeared empty, the door closed tight.

She stopped the water, her eyes roving constantly as she yanked a towel from the hanging rod to wrap herself in.

"Where are you?" she tried hesitantly.

I am near the club.

She gulped. "And you can still talk to me?" She felt herself chill. She scooped the curtain back and plopped down on the tub edge, her legs too weak to hold her.

I could not ignore your pain. You are suffering because of me. You helped me.

She heard the touch of wonderment in his tone, and felt a little less threatened by it. "I had to," she admitted very quietly.

And I am in your debt. You will now and always be under my protection.

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

It is not important this evening. Rest, Titania.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Her head fell limp. She was exhausted. She discovered she was trembling in waves when she managed to get her feet beneath her once more. Cautiously, she opened the door to her suite, searching each corner, only to find an empty room.

She dropped the towel and threw on a T-shirt to sleep in. She knew it was only her, but she never felt completely alone, as if someone waited just behind her. There wasn't a threatening feeling to it, but it was a foreign sensation. She didn't understand it.

"Diego?"

Yes? His voice shimmered intimately between them.

A soft gasp of surprise slipped past her lips. "All I have to do is think of you, talk to you, and you can hear me?"

Yes.

"You're a telepath, aren't you?"

No.

"Oh," she breathed. Her brow drew down, and she palmed her brush, the familiar weight sinking into her stunned mind. She could figure this out. She knew there were people like her out there. She was a prime example. She pushed her fears aside.

"What are you?" She dragged her hand through the length of her hair, straightening the tresses from their snarled mass.

That is best left for some other night. You have had a rough evening already.

She studied the way he talked to her. Even though it was incredibly different, he didn't frighten her. The more she heard him, the less frightened she became by the subtle touch of his voice. She could sense the strength he had, a

definite controlled power. He was gifted in a way she could hardly guess at.

She pulled a distracted hand through her hair. "Diego, why are you so lonely?" she asked a few moments later, her curiosity rising, remembering the desolation she had felt from him earlier in the evening. He was a very different kind of man.

Are you always this curious? There was a sound of humor to his reply.

"Unfortunately," she told him. "I felt you the same way I did Brakka, only on a different level." She shook her head, catching her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were sparkling back at her. "This isn't normal," she muttered.

She smiled, aware she heard laughter. Rich, easy laughter. *Whoever gave you the explanation for normal obviously never knew you or me. Rest, Titania. I need to take care of my wounds, and I want to know you are safe and asleep before I leave you completely.*

She gasped, instantly disturbed he was seeing to her comforts before his own, which were far worse. "You haven't treated your arm? And you've been talking to me? Go, now. I mean it," she ordered, silently warmed by the intimate suggestion that he was watching over her.

However, her reflection frowned back at her when she heard his voice. He was still taking care of her first. *You have warmed me with your company, cara. I will find you again, soon. Promise me you will rest.*

She rolled her eyes. "If it will get you to take care of yourself, I'll promise anything. Now go!"

His laughter was warm again. *Goodnight, cara.*

"Goodnight, Diego," she whispered, her eyes drifting closed for just a moment. There was almost an actual feeling, or really a lack of it, and she knew he was gone.

She ran the brush through her hair a few more times, thinking. Who was Diego? How gifted was he? How was he able to talk to her from a distance?

Why did Brakka hate him so much? She shook her head lightly, unable to even guess. Diego felt different, but she was beginning to think he and Brakka had the same abilities. There was a certain emptiness in both of them. Brakka had touched death many times, his soul destroyed for it.

She pursed her lips, her thoughts tumbling faster. Diego had an emptiness, true, but she didn't feel threatened by him. There was something about him, though. A cold something. Something dangerous. Maybe even more dangerous than Brakka because it was so well hidden, so controlled that it had taken her this long to discover it. She shivered once, wondering how dangerous he may be after all.

A huge yawn stole over her, and she giggled, releasing more of the evening's tension and strain out of her system. She didn't have nights like this often, if ever. She couldn't recall anyone ever affecting her as deeply as Brakka, or the need to help come over her so strongly either.

Cara? You are not in bed. His admonishing tone drifted into her thoughts, and she jumped on the small bench. He felt very close, somehow.

"I'm going," she shot back. "Right now." She tossed her head in defiance. "Don't go getting all bossy on me, buster. I

have enough people who take my care too personally as it is," she grumbled.

Do not make me worry, and there will be no problems, he told her complacently. She huffed in answer.

* * * *

Inside the body of the owl, Diego fought the laughter, wings ruffling instead while he watched Titania show her feisty side. She was becoming increasingly comfortable with him. He settled more onto the window sill, waiting while she crawled into bed. He projected a quick command, pushing her deep into sleep faster. She would not suffer because of him, no nightmares, and no dreams of blood or pain.

He shook his head, confused and dumbfounded at her bravery. Brakka could have killed her, but her only thought had been of saving him, a complete stranger. Someone much stronger, far older than she could have even guessed at.

She was doing something to him. Her unselfish act, her giving nature invaded him in ways he had never expected from another person. The need it created was not to feed, but something so unfamiliar, so necessary he regarded it, her, very carefully. In all his dark years, he had never met one like her. The ease with which he could talk to her was indefinable, as refreshing as a spring rain. He had not held a true conversation with a person in years.

It did not help that he was beginning to look at her as a desirable woman, as a man would. Something he had not felt in centuries was growing. It had struck in the club; his initial reaction had been explosive. Now, an indescribable ache had

surged in its place, into a burning need in the hours since he had first heard her voice.

He had tasted her fear, felt her work her way through it. Her mind amazed him, working in incredible patterns, breaking down the issues at hand. He could let her believe he was telepathic, but he did not want to lie to her. Pale eyes stared unblinking at the body lying so unaware in the bed, ignorant that he sat only a few yards away.

What was it about her? Who was this woman? What was she to him? She was under his protection now, something he had never given to another living soul. It did not matter that he and Brakka had been battling for longer than she had been alive. She had put herself between them, risking her own life. He could do no less than offer her his.

Assured she would rest without repercussions from her night, he fell away from the building, wings spreading to catch the breeze. In truth, he had not gone far after he had left her side. Now, he had to go back to the club and retrieve his bike. Regardless that she trusted her friends, he did not, and he had been no more than a word away if she had needed him.

He had slipped in and out of her mind all evening after he had left her to her friends, and he was continuously amazed at her. Her mind was a maze of intriguing puzzles. She gave no thought to the differences of others. Saw no ugliness in his differences, felt no fear of his presence. Perhaps that was why she could accept the touch of his mind so quickly. She knew he was different and simply embraced it. He also recognized

the deep stamp of loneliness on her soul. Her very existence intrigued him like no other in his memory.

For the first time, after the long centuries of his life, he did not feel alone. After sharing just a few words with her when he had spoken to no one in years, he felt at peace.

He dropped from the sky, dissolving into the shadows. The club was still packed with people milling around the front as he reclaimed his motorcycle. He knew Brakka was still in the area. It felt like an insidious darkness moving through the night when any of the Brethren were near, and unfortunately, the bond they shared was like instant messaging. If one of them died, the other would know immediately.

He shook his head, bringing his bike to roaring life. He knew by tomorrow there would be at least one murder to read about. He had done his best to fit in, which was hard to do when he lived for centuries. Then again, he very rarely stumbled upon any of the Brethren. Diego avoided their cities of habitation, preferring the solitude of his mountain home and the occasional trips to the surrounding towns to satisfy his hungers. Brakka was just a bad penny appearing now, a decade since their last fight. The time between did not really matter. Eventually, Brakka would pay for what he had done, for the abomination he had created, for destroying Diego.

Surprisingly though, the last thoughts Diego experienced before he closed his eyes to the rising light were not of his hatred, his quest to avenge himself, but of a courageous woman with eyes the color of the cobalt, midnight sky.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Three

Three nights later, Titania sat at her dressing room table, touching up her makeup, wondering if she was losing her mind. If it hadn't been for the fact she'd seen her bloody and ruined clothes from the night she threw herself into the middle of the fight, she would have sworn everything afterwards had been a dream. Diego. The talking and hearing him in her thoughts, because she hadn't heard from him since.

She had found someone like her, different, gifted, or imagined him. Laney was gifted. She had a very strong sixth sense for perversion, for true, dark evil. Titania could read emotion by absorbing it, as well as broadcast her own. She did have a low telekinetic ability, but hardly ever used it unless she was alone. She made enough headlines with her empathic ability, so many fans gushing about their experiences at her concerts. Titania did her best to lay low, but it wasn't easy. Houston was their protector. It didn't hurt that Houston and Laney were made for each other, she thought with a smile for the pair, but it easily disappeared. If Diego was like them, why had he vanished?

She hadn't felt his mental touch since the night she had met him. Maybe she had imagined him after all. Her powder brush moved absently across her skin. She knew he'd been hurt. There had been so much blood. She tossed the brush to the tabletop rather than let the building shiver run its course.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

If it were possible, she felt even lonelier now. She loved her friends. Houston was the best kind of big brother and best friend a girl could hope for. Laney and she had connected right from the first audition for the backup singer opening. She smiled, remembering Houston's amorous chase of the tall blonde with the dazzling green eyes. David and Justin were like goofy cousins, sardonic, playful, ribbing on each other. But still ... She sighed. Why was he sticking in her thoughts?

She remembered his long mane of wild, black hair, curled and thick, which reached well past his shoulders. He had a broad forehead, sharp features with wide cheekbones, and lean, almost aristocratic lips. And the brightest gray eyes she'd ever encountered, amazingly close to colorless, lightning gray. She had no trouble remembering his broad shoulders, along with his solid body, thick and muscular from when he'd held her for those brief moments, her mind still awash with emotions and signals that were overloading her senses.

He towered over her when he had stood with her. Usually, she stayed away from men altogether. Their intentions were usually so obvious, so easy to read. Their lust could make her stomach heave, but it hadn't been like that with Diego at all. He had been extremely gentle, in fact.

She fell back against her chair, her arms going around her middle, staring at nothing. Why couldn't she forget him?

Do you really want to?

She squeaked, snapping up straight. "Diego?"

Yes, cara.

Her tongue darted out to her bottom lip. "I didn't imagine you."

His voice poured over her like a caress. *No, Titania. I am very real. I want to hear you sing. Would you sing for me tonight?*

She blushed. "I would love to." She really liked the way he said her name, too. He softened the hard stroke of the T's into a sensuous sound.

She turned at a knock on her door. "Five minutes," came the muffled warning. She answered, knowing Houston would be coming next to get her.

Do not worry, cara. I will be watching over you tonight.

She lifted her chin. "I'm not worried." She heard his male laughter drift away. As predicted, Houston tapped then popped the door open.

"You ready?"

"When you are."

He slid in, resting against the door. He stuffed his hands into the rear pockets of his leather pants. "How're you feeling?"

"I'm fine. Just like I've told you for the last three days."

"No more running off in the middle of a concert?"

Her eyes dropped, hearing the chastisement. "No, no more taking off." He was more than just her friend and band member. Ages ago, her mother, in her "wisdom", had appointed him as her guardian and keeper. He loved doing the job, too. It wasn't like she was an adult or anything now, she miffed at herself. She dropped the mental argument. It was no use. She lifted her eyes to look at him, finding his

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

gaze, and raised her right hand. "And I solemnly swear to not throw myself at strange men ever again."

His light brown eyes sparkled in humor. "All right then. Let's go knock 'em dead."

She laughed, rising up on her toes to kiss his cheek. "You're the best."

He arched a brow. "Could you say that again when Laney's around?"

She laughed, shaking her head, and followed him out into the hallway to go to the stage.

* * * *

Diego felt his blood heat, hearing her voice again. Three long nights, he fought the temptation to see her, to hear her, but the need had not gone away, nor lessened. Watching her walk out onto a dark stage in a full length silk creation of white spiked his needs all over again. What was he supposed to do with a woman?

He snorted. That craving had not disappeared because of the distance and time her tour put between them. His need to protect was still with him, stronger, a deep necessity. Unable to confirm her safety for himself had driven him slowly insane. Needs and wants were swirling through him, clawing at him. She was reawakening emotions and thoughts, which were as dead as him.

Houston's guitar hummed, the sound almost eerie, stilling the conversations within the concrete walls. Her magical voice floated from the darkness of the stage. Even prepared, the

beauty of it stole his air, sucked the oxygen from the depths of his body.

The drums slammed in unison with the first chords and lights exploded, bathing the stage, and he was swept away by her. She reached out, enfolding every heart and soul into her web of faith, hope and love.

He leaned unseen against the wall, completely willing to fall into that web. When he felt the wave reach out to him specifically, his eyes drifted shut with the pure, joyous melody.

How can she do this? He felt her tentative effort, but he knew she sang for him.

Hearing her voice, her passion in each word, her compassion in every note, something shifted inside him. That unrecognizable need she created gained definition. His eyes snapped open, pale gray eyes piercing in the subdued lighting.

He slowed his breathing, listened to the tempo of his beating heart, maintaining control as he considered this new possibility. *Could it be? What did it mean?* His arms fell to his sides as he stood straight, his gaze zeroed in on the beauty onstage.

He was death. How could he feel like this? How could he want? And why her?

He breathed one word and felt it all the way to his soul. "Mine." The second he spoke the word, he knew it was true. Possessiveness slammed into him, stealing his breath for a different reason.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

He remembered sensations and emotions he had dismissed the night she had thrown herself at Brakka to protect him. Was this why he had not used her immediately to cure his wounds? The urge had been there, but subdued, until he had found the next person, then his hunger had been ravenous. He had not even considered the differences until now. Like the texture of her hair gliding like silk through his fingers when he had never noticed something so unimportant. The color of her eyes. Needing to offer comfort when she battled the demons of the evening in her hotel room. Craving her.

When he had needed no one, needed nothing other than to survive, to avenge himself, this woman was creating indescribable needs within him. Hungers. Heat, and he knew it was because of her. Titania. The only one. Sultry, seductive.

Mine. It burned like a brand in his thoughts now that it had been spoken. Tonight, she was even more alluring, more beautiful, more *everything*. He bit down hard, hiding the proof of his needs, of his lust behind tight lips. The craving swamped him. Heat raced through his veins. He was burning up, and all he had heard was her voice.

He breathed a sigh of relief when she broke for her first set, leaving the stage to change. Watching her, feeling her, made his entire body ache. He did not understand it, or what to do about it.

Diego followed with the silent speed of his kind, finding her backstage. He watched shamelessly as she changed with the ease of practice, and with extra hands to help. He bit back the

unexpected growl at seeing those hands touch her, lift her flowing hair, help her slip from one gown to another. Those hands were touching his woman. Fists tightened unconsciously. A possessiveness he did not understand was sinking into him, tearing into his equilibrium. She was getting to him so fast he did not even know how to fight back.

Pale eyes narrowed; a fiery heat glowed in their depths. Her head snapped up, and she looked right into the corner where he stood. The beat in her neck pulsed, drew his eye, forced his hunger upward. Something hot surged through him, ached, yearned. Her gaze widened as if sensing the threat. The most incredible eyes, staring.

He reached out, a single finger sliding down the warmth of her cheek, discovering her again. Smooth skin. She felt like satin, just as soft as he remembered. Her breathing hitched, blood beneath his touch pulsing in an erratic rhythm, both completely absorbed, oblivious in that moment to the world around them. His fingers itched to curve around her throat, to pull her to him. His lips burned to touch hers. For the first time, he craved not her life, but the taste, the sweetness of nectar.

"Tani, Titania." A hand shook her gently. "Honey, you're done."

She blinked enormous eyes. She looked over her shoulder, gave a weak smile. "Thanks, Laura. I was thinking ... of something." Her help left her, and she took a deep breath, filling her chest, lifting her shoulders. Her head fell forward, a sweep of hair blocking her expressive face.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Diego moved closer still and inhaled along her neck, unable to resist the temptation she was. She smelled like pure spring rain. His heart raced, and blood pounded against his ears. Desire, hot and living, was growing, roaring louder than any hunger. It demanded ... Her.

She froze like a doe in bright lights, as if she could feel him, her body trembling, aware of the hunter but unable to run. He could find the beginnings of fear in her thoughts, but he did not care any longer. Lightning struck. Electricity filled his blood. Heat like he had never experienced raced through him. He thought he would die right there.

"Diego, you're scaring me," she whispered. Her body was rigid, fighting the reactive shakes that traveled up and down her form.

He stepped back immediately. *You know it is me?* he asked her.

A dark brow shot up, blue eyes flashing at him. "Who else could it be? I don't know anyone else who can talk to me like you do. I can feel you." Her gaze searched the corners of the room, trying to discover his hiding place.

You have no reason to fear me, cara. I could never hurt you. I swore you my protection.

"Meaning?" Her gaze was indefinable, staring into the space he occupied, unaware she had found him.

Meaning, no matter what happens, I will always put your safety before my own. Your life before my own. That even means protecting you from me, he said with a self-deprecating sound. *Forgive me.* His blood hummed just from being in the same room with her.

Her soft lips curved into a luscious smile, and the want to taste spiked again. "You're forgiven. You were a little overwhelming there for a minute. It felt like you were actually here with me, but I know it's not possible."

Her head turned at a persistent tapping on her door. "Five minutes," came through the door.

"Thank you," she called over her shoulder. She turned to face the room again, her eyes still trying to uncover his secret to his hiding ability. "Will I see you later?"

I believe it is possible, he told her, his mouth lifting. He knew it was a fact. He also knew he would not be able to leave her after this concert. Somehow, she had gotten right underneath his skin.

"Tani! Come on, girl." Houston swung the door in, his blond head appearing. "You're holding up the show." A fierce frown formed on his brow. "Has someone been in here?"

Titania shook her head. Her hands clasped in front of her. "No."

"I smell leather. Male." Houston's gaze raked the room. "You're sure? No one?"

"Positive," she assured him.

His gaze was flat. "I swear, if this keeps up, I'm hiring you that bodyguard. First that fight, now this. Someone unauthorized in your room." He forced her to look at him, his expression relentless. "Are you still getting love letters from that fan? The one from Arkansas?"

"I haven't checked. Probably." Diego saw her shiver, her eyes dropping in wary distaste. "Houston, he's in another state. It's not like you let anyone near enough anyway."

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

"But I'm not always around." He tipped her head up by the chin. "Tani, I love you like my own sisters, but sometimes you are the biggest pain in the butt. You have got to start taking your safety seriously. You are famous, you noodle head."

"Stuff it in your ear, Houston. I'm me." She planted her fists on her hips, glaring up at him.

The sounds from the stage drew everyone's attention. "We'll discuss this later. We have to pay the bills."

Diego walked on silent feet next to her, whispering in her ear, "Do not worry, *cara*. I will keep you safe."

She rolled her eyes. "Great. Another damn person to keep me in bubble wrap." She didn't realize in her agitation that he had actually spoken into her ear.

Houston's gaze turned to the stage, braced for the intro. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing."

Houston nodded as he ran onstage with the other band members to the welcoming cheers of the crowd, Titania already prepped with her headset in place to take her cue. She entered the stage with long strides, her gown slit to give her good movement, the sway of the dark blue silk mesmerizing in the shifting stage lights. Diego did not even bother to leave the side curtains.

* * * *

The limo ride was short from the coliseum to the hotel, with Laney curled into Houston's shoulder, and David and Justin talking with their heads together about going out the next night. Titania was tired. She didn't even have the energy

to keep her bag on her shoulder. It lay on the floorboards behind her feet. The concert had been draining, but so many people had needed it.

Like the couple in the third row working on saving their marriage, or the woman who had walked away from her boyfriend, crying nearly throughout the concert, confused and burdened. There had been the couple to her right who had traveled to see her. She'd seen them at several concerts, and she recognized them almost immediately. They gave her faith and belief in love. They came in love and left the same way.

A soft sigh slipped out before she could think about stopping it while she stared blankly out the tinted window. A tired hand rubbed over her eyes.

Laney put a hand to her arm. "You okay, Tani?"

She nodded. "Long show. I'll be fine."

Laney smiled in understanding. "I've always thought you were incredible. You work so hard to help others."

Titania blushed. "Stop."

She is right, cara. You pushed yourself tonight.

Titania pursed her lips, stopping her easy response. She couldn't talk to him with a car full of people.

Doors opened and everyone slid out, a line trailing for the hotel. She froze just inside the hotel entryway.

"Crap. I forgot my bag in the limo." When Houston tried to say something, she frowned and pointed to the elevators.

"I'm a big girl, Houston. I can get my own bag."

Laney tugged. "She's right. Some days, you go overboard." Houston frowned at them both, but she was already turning around and marching back out the doors.

She gasped and started running after the limo. "Wait!" But she was too late. She watched the car turn onto the street. "Crap. Double crap," she muttered.

She tapped her foot, her hands on her hips. Now she would have to wait until morning and call them. Maybe he would see it and bring it back, but she doubted it. The driver wouldn't know who had left the small designer tote. She tossed her hair behind her in agitation and spun on her heel.

"Hi, sugar. Need help?"

She froze. Her eyes slid closed as she considered her options. Talking or ignoring. She chose ignoring.

Pretending she didn't hear the man, she started walking to the hotel doors. Why hadn't she realized how far away they were?

"Hey, Titania." A persistent hand gripped her upper arm. "Wait a minute."

She let the air in her body out slowly. It was dead quiet out there. Not a soul in sight. The world was deserted at three in the morning. Belatedly, she realized she had chased the limo all the way to the street.

She slowly turned to face the man. *Damn it*, she cursed again. He would have to be tall. "Can I help you?"

A lewd grin appeared, matching the heat in his gaze. "I'm thinking we can help each other."

"Not likely." She looked pointedly at his hand on her arm. "Let me go. Please."

"Now, you don't want to be like that. I came all the way from Arkansas. Don't you remember me? Thomas?" He tried to soften his grin. It only made her stomach sour that much

faster. "I had no idea I'd be lucky enough to catch you after the show," he nearly crowed.

"Thomas? The June show?" Her stomach nearly rebelled, remembering how he had tried to paw and grab at her at the after show get together. He had won backstage passes and always seemed to be right there, wherever she turned. He had been sending her fan mail and love letters since. She guessed this answered Houston's question from earlier in the evening.

His posture relaxed, leaning back playfully. "You do remember. How about a bite to eat?"

"I'm sorry, Thomas. I've gotten your letters and the emails. I don't date. I just don't. I'm sorry you felt you had to follow me." *Where the hell is everybody?*

He pushed her deeper into the shadows, toward the rear of the hotel where the dumpsters were, his hand clamped onto her arm. She could just make out the outline of a car parked in the darker shadows. He leaned down to whisper in a breathy voice that reeked of bourbon and coke. "It's going to be fine, honey. I'm going to take good care of you. We have all night if we want it."

Alarm flashed through her. Something repugnant and perverse was accumulating, and it was coming from Thomas.

She planted her feet. "Look. Whoever you are, just go. I don't want to—"

He slapped a hand over her mouth. "What you wanted doesn't matter anymore, honey." His lips became a harsh line, his eyes glittering, drunk and bloodshot. "I tried to do this the nice way in June, and you shot me down. Honey, I

don't get shot down twice." His fingers tightened, gripping her mouth. "Understand?"

She nodded. He patted her cheek. "Good girl."

She lifted her hands to his chest, gazing up at him with what she hoped were seductive eyes. She'd never used them before. "Just one thing," she purred, waiting, praying. Thomas's hand loosened on her arm.

"What, honey?" He shook under her palms with anticipation.

"This!" She jerked her leg as hard as she could and found home base. Unfortunately, she didn't take out the plate. He grunted in pain, but it was enough to make him fall away from her. She spun and tore off like a shot. Fifty yards, tops. She had to make it, her fear-filled legs pumping like pistons.

She never heard him. She was running, then was tackled, driven into asphalt and gravel with a murderous, spouting madman on her. He flipped her like a burger, every bone in her body hurting. She saw the hand rise, almost in slow motion, felt the sharp flare of blistering contact, and knew she was toast.

"Bitch!" he shrieked. "You shouldn't have done that," was the only warning he gave her. He lowered his head and clamped onto her shoulder. She screamed, and his fist connected to her chin, silencing her. "Scream, baby. I love your voice."

He spit wildly, he was so excited. Titania did everything she could to not vomit with him straddled over her waist. With every move she made, pain lanced through her body. He pinned her arms under his knees, locking her down.

Pavement gouged her skin, her elbows digging so hard, sparks floated in her vision. Her eyes widened, and she knew she was dead when the glint of a knife registered in her blurring vision.

The sound of her shirt ripping in two reached her ringing ears. "You never should have turned me down," he told her. His eyes glared at her for a split second as the knife rose over her.

Suddenly a roar erupted, an unholy sound of anger that echoed and raged. It could have been a lion out of control, it sounded so harsh. A fast wind rose out of nowhere, and a hand clamped around Thomas's throat. His weight just disappeared. Her eyes closed, a sound she didn't want to identify filling her head. Bile rose sharply. She did not want to think about it.

She fought to roll over. She had to get away, from whomever, everyone. She managed to reach her side and threw up. She wiped the back of her shaking hand over her mouth and spit.

Without warning, strong arms encircled her, and she struggled against the uncompromising strength. Her fists pummeled at solid muscle. She had to get away.

"Shh, *cara*. You are safe." Relief was so strong at the sound of his voice, she went limp, burying her face into the leather of his coat. "He will not hurt you again."

She was trembling, overwhelmed. She moaned as he cradled her. Somehow he got her to her room without being seen.

"What were you doing outside alone?" he demanded gruffly. He laid her down on the bed, and she rolled away from him, her body convulsing in shock. Everything hurt. "Cara?" His hand was gentle, stroking her hair.

"Don't. I know. Houston is going to kill me," she said, her voice quaking. Her words were tremulous. "I left something in the limo. I tried to catch it. I had no idea someone was waiting, watching." A sob tore through her.

"I am not angry with you, *cara*. How could I be? I promised to protect you. I did not."

"Diego," she whimpered, sobs coming hard and fast. He gathered her shaking body into his arms and let her cry.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Four

Diego held her close, waiting for her breathing to grow normal again. Rage still rolled over him in waves. Someone had laid hands on her. Someone had hurt her.

He had believed she would be safe with her friends, going to her hotel room. He had hunted. There had been no remorse for the death of her attacker. He had asked for it, harming one under his care.

He rocked her slowly, sitting on the edge of the bed with her body held protectively against his. He realized when he had first tasted her fear, he would move the mountains themselves to keep her safe. The realization was staggering. No one had ever meant so much to him.

"Every time I see you, you are a mess," he told her, trying to keep his tone light. His hand never stopped drifting down her hair. Her arms tightened around his waist. "Let me run you a bath. I need to see how badly you have been hurt."

She shook her head, a slow, aching motion. "Everything hurts, Diego. I need to go to the hospital." He could feel her trying to ascertain what hurt the most. Shocks still rippled up and down her body.

"Let me help you. Let me do this for you." Her hair was smooth beneath his cheek where he pressed against her. His eyes closed as her scent filled him. He took it in, deep, needing to hold her scent in his body. "Relax, *cara*."

She sighed once, and he let her stretch out. A slow hiss escaped before he could stop it. "*Dios mio.*" Her face was a colorful array of bruises. Rage enveloped him again.

He turned on a sharp heel, forcing the rage down, starting the water for her bath in the huge tub. He grabbed the robe from the door, returning to her side.

"Come on, *cara.*" He lifted her easily in his arms and stripped her with sure hands. She barely blinked. "You are in shock, honey. It will be all right."

When her shirt fell from her shoulders, his body froze in fury, and a red haze filled his thoughts. "Did he do that?" His voice shook with the rush of hatred for the man who had hurt her. She turned her chin numbly, staring at the rash of teeth marks and blood on her shoulder.

His arm slipped around her, holding her steady. He bowed his head and touched the scored gash with his lips. She shivered and moaned. "Easy, *cara.* This will help."

His touch was gentle, light, his lips tenderly caressing the wound. He laved at the harsh mark with a tender stroke and felt the floor shift when he found the taste of her on his tongue.

He froze, his eyes drifting closed, purposely hiding the heat of his needs. His heart raced like a wild animal. She tried to wrench from his arms, her fear palpable once more. He tamped down his needs with an iron will. "Shh, *cara.*"

"It's too much," she cried, sounding as frightened as he knew she was.

"I keep forgetting how easily you can feel those around you. You are a remarkable woman, Titania." He had not

moved, his arms locked around her, but he lifted his head to search her gaze. "I will not deny this, but I will never hurt you." Her lashes fluttered. "Let me finish so you can rest."

Her head fell forward with a thump. "I don't know what you think you can do. It hurts just to breathe." Her words were so quiet, if he had been anyone else, he would not have heard her.

His smile was lopsided. "Not nearly enough to forgive my own lapse, but enough to remove the pain." He felt her give in, the shock numbing into exhaustion.

He returned his attention to her shoulder, forcing restraint when the taste of her filled him again. Satisfied with his efforts, he examined her face and knew he could only do so much with the time he had before sunrise. Her arms were scraped and bruised. He shook his head at the extent of her injuries.

When she dropped the robe, his gaze landed on a dark bruise forming on her rib cage and the shadows on her thighs from the tackle she had endured. "Careful, *cara*. The water is hot, but it will help your aches."

She didn't respond, sinking into the water with a low, mewling sound; her eyes closed as the heat shocked her. "Relax, *cara*. This will feel different, but it will help. I will do what I can tonight."

Her eyes were closed, her head pillowed against the tub. "Do what?"

"I am going to heal you. I hope," he added under his breath.

"That doesn't sound very optimistic."

"I have never tried this on another. I have never tried to focus outward."

"Just how gifted are you?" she asked with a touch of awe and respect.

"Shh, *cara*. Let me concentrate." He pushed his thoughts away, forcing a singular point of concentration. It was an easy task when he healed himself. This was new territory for him.

Once he discovered the pathway, the actions became as similar as healing himself. Energy flowed, a current that touched on the worst of her bruises, the inside of her shoulder, ensuring infection would not develop from the bite. The energy flowed to her ribs, lightening the strain the soreness created, then did the same for her legs.

Before he lost the last of his strength, he examined her jaw, doing what he could to loosen the muscles so her pain would be tolerable. He knew with the continued pulses of her pain, it would not be nearly enough.

He let out a long breath when he retook his body. She was asleep in the water. He lifted her out, unconcerned with getting wet, and wrapped her back in the robe. She felt so light within his hold, everything dark inside of him seemed to unravel when he held her so close.

He tucked her into the bed, covering her with the blanket to her chin. "Sleep, *cara*. I will find you tomorrow and try to do more."

Her hand found his on the blankets. "Stay. Just a few minutes." He sank to sit on the bed. Her brow furrowed. "What is wrong?" Her eyes were still closed.

"Nothing." He brushed her damp hair back. The thick length twisted between his fingers, slid smoothly, and he relished the feeling.

"I can feel your guilt, Diego," she said. She twined her fingers through his. "Don't. This is my fault. I'm always blowing off Houston's warnings."

"You are not responsible for another person's actions, Titania."

"No, but I should've been more careful. That man has been after me for months." She made a soft pout. It drew his gaze to her lips. "Houston's right. I am a pain in the butt," she said, her lips softening at the same time she opened her eyes. She had the most beautiful eyes. Enigmatic blue orbs of the bottomless ocean and night sky. "Thank you. You did save me. I guess we're even now."

His thumb moved over the hand in his hold, her skin satiny beneath his stroking touch. "Why are you sad?"

"Because we're even. I guess I won't be seeing you again." Her blue eyes darkened.

"Do not worry about that right now. You need to rest." And he needed to leave, or he was going to kiss that pouting mouth of hers.

The touch of her fingers on his chin shook him. "Your eyes, they're beautiful. So pale gray, like winter clouds, but brighter. Lightning strikes." Her murmured voice slid over him like a sheet of silk, smooth and seductive.

His hand covered hers where she cradled his cheek, and he could not resist, could not find the strength to any longer. He

watched her, waiting for fear, apprehension, anything to stop him. It never came as he dipped his head to hers.

Her lips were so soft, so warm, he burst into flame at her touch. She was the sweetest breath of life he had ever tasted. Heat flared, roared to life between them.

He snapped up, his heart racing. Every fiber, every nerve ached, needed. He had never felt this.

She sat up slowly, clutching the robe when the blanket fell to her lap. Her hand lifted to her lips. "What was that?" Her eyes were wide, staring at him. They glittered with a sapphire magic.

His voice vanished. He plunged his hand into her hair, holding her. He slanted his lips to hers and felt the fire again. Heat, hungry desire swamped him. He seduced her mouth, caressed and sipped.

Diego was going to explode into heat where he sat. Satin skin, rich, fragrant hair, soft lips. He wanted more. He demanded entry into her moist heat and growled when she opened for him, hearing her whimpers. Her hand had found his hair, held him as tightly. Passion eclipsed all other thoughts. He enfolded her into his embrace, pulling her into his chest. Wanting her warmth, needing her physical touch.

He kissed the corner of her delicious mouth, traveling with tender brushes to her temple, hearing the erratic pounding of her heart. The sweet call of blood, rushing hotly through her body. Her scent invaded his every cell, and where she touched, he felt her caresses through every pore.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

His tongue moved, and he found the tip of his fang. Burning lust overrode reason. "Give yourself to me. Only to me," he breathed. "Just a taste."

Titania's skin was so soft beneath his touch, his hungers beating at him, yet his strong arms remained gentle. She made a faint, kittenish sound deep in her throat, and his body tightened. His lips moved over burning skin, feeling the pulse of her under his seeking caresses.

He breathed her name. The hand she held the robe with rose over his shoulders, and he shook beneath her palm. He had to have a taste, just a taste. To know her, her every thought, her every wish, hope and desire.

He slid gently down the length of her silken neck, tasting her with flicks of his tongue, sipping at the sensuous, sculpted beauty of her. He inhaled, found the scent that belonged only to her. Spring rain and heat. A seductress in his arms. Blood raged through his body, through hers.

"Say yes," he whispered, his breath hot against her neck. He laved his tongue against her and felt her pulse leap in answer. Her body tensed with awakening sensations. The scrape of his teeth brought her breathing to a standstill. He needed her to give this to him. He realized he needed her to take his next breath, but he would not take unless she gave. He suckled gently at her pulse, bringing her own hungers to a crying pitch. "Just a taste, *cara*. Say yes."

"Yes," she moaned mindlessly on a shuddering sigh. Her arms were looped around his neck, and his fangs sank deep. She arched and whimpered. Electricity shot from her; white lightning ripped through him. His arms tightened more, lost in

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

the sweetness of her. His gut clenched, winding tighter, as if an inferno engulfed him. Light sparked, blinding in its intensity as she flowed into him. Addictive heat. Sweet fulfillment. Ecstasy. He drank, absorbing her into his very bones.

He swirled his tongue over the pinpricks of his mark, careful to remove the sign of his passions. His body filled with lava, heat running through every vein. Flames danced before his vision.

He lifted her chin, brushing his lips to hers. He found her gaze and claimed her thoughts. "Just a taste, *cara*. I have to keep you safe." Nothing else was as important as that very fact at that moment.

His hand speared her hair, holding her steady as he opened a small gash with a taloned claw on his chest, his shirt and leather jacket spread wide with a thought. He bent, whispered a secret, dark command.

He held her, a precious gift as the rich, hot fluid dripped, his body clenching again when he felt her lips on him. "Just a few drops, *cara*. I do not want to hurt you." He closed his eyes, feeling everything she did. The stroke of her tongue, the wisp of her lips. Every touch so deep inside himself, he had no idea how he would ever get her out of his system.

He clamped the wound, lifting her up to his seeking mouth, hot and insistent once more. The wound was healed and his shirt closed by the time he released her from his enthrallment.

The weight of the rising sun beat at him. He needed to leave, and it was killing him to do it.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

He laid her back down, covering her again. "Go to sleep, Titania. You must rest. I will find you. Always."

She whimpered once in disagreement, but he held her thoughts captive, commanding her to sleep. She needed more care and rest. He needed to escape the sun's path.

With a final kiss to her warm skin, he vanished.

* * * *

Tani rolled over, feeling the layers of sleep leave her. She blinked and groaned when certain points made their sore reports. Her ribs felt tight, and when she yawned, her jaw ached.

She rolled onto her back. It had all been real. Thomas, his attack. Diego. Her eyes closed. What had he done? Was he a healer?

Diego had said he'd never tried that outside of healing himself, but she knew she should have gone to the hospital. She knew she didn't want to look in the mirror. That was a definite.

Her hand dragged down her face, a moan of discomfort rising quickly. "Ow," she muttered, moving her jaw back and forth.

A knock on her door startled her. "Tani, are you ever going to wake up?"

She unlocked the door without getting up. Laney and Houston came in, took one look at her, and rushed to the bed.

"Jesus," Houston snarled. "What the hell happened?" His hand was firm but tender on her chin, turning her this way and that.

She looked down, avoiding him, plucking at the blanket. "I, um, had a bit of a problem last night."

"Why didn't you get me? What happened?" His anxious brown eyes scoured her body above the blanket, scowling at the marks still on her skin.

She hung her head. "I knew I should have listened to you," she said, her voice low. "I was attacked. The man from Arkansas had the hotel staked out."

Laney gasped. "You're kidding?"

Titania rested her chin on her raised knees, hugging them close. Her ribs protested, but only a little. "I don't think he expected it to be so easy, and I walked right into it."

"Where is he now? How did you get to your room?" Houston turned her again. "It looks like you've had treatment. These are fading already. How'd you do that?"

She licked her lips. "I didn't. Diego did it. He rescued me. I remember seeing a knife, and then Thomas was gone." She shivered, remembering the crunching sounds that happened after.

Laney's green eyes grew huge. "That news break! Oh my God! That was the same man." She faced Titania. "They found his body behind the hotel. I'm so sorry, honey."

"My fault. I should have listened. I couldn't catch the limo, either. What time is it? I need to call and have them recover my bag."

"It's after seven, and the limo company called this morning. The desk has your tote." Laney sat next to her on the bed, Houston on the other side.

She sat straight. "After seven! That can't be right. I never sleep this late." She ran a hand through her hair.

"You needed it," he told her, his brown gaze flat. "This Diego, he's the same one you saved? At the last concert?" Houston asked, a wary sound to his words.

She looked away again. How could she tell him Diego could talk to her? She couldn't meet his gaze, couldn't tell him the truth, not all of it. "He helped me last night. I don't know what he did, but it's because of him I'm not in the hospital." She knew that for a fact. She wasn't ready to go into the details she wasn't sure she could even begin to explain. She let them come to their own conclusions.

"Then I owe him," he said quietly.

"We both do," Laney added.

"I want to shower and stretch. I still hurt." She wasn't sure if Diego would be coming back like he had promised, either. She had no idea how she was supposed to feel about it if he did.

Laney sat on the edge of the bed with Houston, smoothing the blankets. She glanced up then dropped her gaze, not meeting Tani's for long. "He, um, didn't ... you know ... hurt you, did he? Maybe you should go to the hospital anyway. Get checked out?"

She reached for Laney's fingers, squeezing them. "I'm all right," she informed them quietly. "He didn't get to do

anything more than scare me." At Houston's deep frown, she added, "He didn't do anything I can't talk about, Houston."

"All right, then," he conceded grudgingly. "See you later?"

Titania pulled her robe tight. "Yeah. Let me get cleaned up." She watched their concerned faces until they left, then she sighed a long sound of relief. She climbed from the bed and padded into the bathroom. She made a small squeak, seeing herself for the first time. She was a walking train wreck. The bruising was still apparent on her jaw, and her eye had a lovely shade of fading purple.

Diego was a miracle worker. If that was what she looked like now, without his help, her eye would have been swollen shut. She would have been living in misery. She dropped the robe, inspecting the rest of her body.

She knew how hard she had hit the ground, how hard Thomas had struck her. There was no doubt she owed Diego for his help. Really, for her life.

The steamy water felt good on battered muscles, relaxing some of the waking soreness from them. She braided her hair after she finished in the shower, stripping the water out of the long length. She would've cut it long ago if it wasn't her most renowned and appealing factor.

That depends on who you ask. Although, I do happen to like it myself. She heard the slow drawl of his words and jumped.

She yanked a towel to her then laughed at her foolishness, wrapping herself up with a calmer hand. "You have got to stop sneaking up on me like that."

But I am not even there.

"Well, what are you doing walking around in my thoughts anyway?" she huffed, smirking at her reflection.

Making sure you are safe and well this rising. You are still in discomfort. I will be there shortly.

"I appreciate this, Diego. I owe you," she told him, humbled by his kindness.

His voice was a warming caress. *No, cara. I owe you.* And then he was gone.

She threw on clothes and was looking for her sandals when she heard a knock on her door. She walked up to it, her gaze absent, when she just stopped. It wasn't Houston. "Who is it?" she called, throwing up walls at the first rush of anger. Sweat broke out on her skin, and emotions rolled over her in waves, easily breaking through her casual barriers.

She didn't have time to reinforce them before a buzzing began to ring in her ears. For some reason, she had to open that door. A voice, a low mesmerizing sound, twisted her thoughts. Telling her to open the door and invite him in. The voice told her it was time to accept her punishment for interfering.

She watched in horror as her hand lifted. Another wave of anger hit her, followed by a shriek of triumph.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Five

Diego shot into the sky, breathing in the night air and testing his surroundings, listening to what the wind had to tell him. He was alone, surrounded by the craggy depths of the ravine he had found. He was far from town, though not at home. He could not be far from her.

It was a clear night, the sun's rays obliterated by the growing multitude of stars overhead. The night had never looked as colorful, as magical, as it did knowing he had Titania in his life.

Leaves shined with an emerald brilliance, the darker veins cutting them into mosaic patterns cast by nature. The moon bathed the world in its milky glow. Everything had a stronger essence of wonder. Scents were sweeter, and the air felt fresher. She had given this to him.

What he had done to deserve a woman of her beauty, of her compassion, he would never understand. He knew after last night, after tasting not only her innocence—her kiss—but the sweet ambrosia of her blood, he would never let her go. She had destroyed the growing loneliness in him.

After touching her, assuring himself she was indeed safe and well, he hunted, moving in the direction of the hotel.

He hid in the shadows, holding his prey enthralled, when the first waves of distress reached him. Fear and confusion were clouding her thinking. He released the man with less than gentle concern. His eyes blazed with red flames as he

tried to touch her and found a block, a hum of enthrallment that he recognized only too well.

Titania! Step away from the door. He felt her confusion deepen.

Her voice was fragile, strained. *Diego?*

He answered as he vanished from the alley, moving with an urgency he had never tasted. *Fight it, Titania! Do not open that door. Do not let him in.*

He had no idea how Brakka had found her. Diego should have known Brakka would never forgive or forget a slight like she had dealt him. He had been forced to run because a woman, a human woman, had caught him off his guard.

I have to. Her voice whispered into his mind. He could feel tears of helplessness growing in her.

Do not! He made the command imperious. A low, snarling sound rose from deep in his chest. He found Brakka's mind, a dark maze of malicious intent. *Brakka! Leave now. You will not harm this woman.*

The laughter he heard echoed low with pure evil. *She is someone to you?* Brakka goaded him. *Perfect,* Brakka purred into Diego's mind. *It will be delicious to hear her screams in payment for her interference.*

Diego moved like the devil himself, reforming directly in front of her as the door bowed inward, threatening to shatter under the weight of the darkness on the other side. Her hand floated less than an inch from the handle, unable to withstand the pressure of Brakka's commands. He grabbed her by the shoulders and threw her to land on the bed, ignoring the

shallow scream she cried. His hot gaze fell to the door and the creature on the other side.

"Your fight is with me, Brakka. You are not welcome. You do not have permission to enter this room." Diego's voice was as cold as winter ice.

A slow hissing sound of hatred snaked around the door. "I will find her again. You have shared with her." Vehement and ugly, the words crept to him followed by mocking laughter. "You have doomed her!" came the thrown taunt.

Diego's ruthless gaze never left the door, waiting. He felt Brakka's withdrawal and rolled his shoulders, allowing the tension to drain. He turned to face Titania huddled in the depths of the bed, her arms wrapped around her legs, trying to look smaller.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded stiffly. "H-how did you get in here? How did you just appear like that?" It took two tries, but she made the words come out.

He kept his voice neutral. He did not want to shock her further. "I have certain abilities, like you do." He walked across the room, her eyes following him warily, and it tore him apart. He never wanted her to fear him. "Your telekinesis, for example."

She licked her lips where they quivered delicately. "How did you know? I only do that if I'm alone."

"It is the same. I only use them if needed. I do not advertise, either." He did not say that, while slipping in and out of her mind, he had seen her ability and felt her energy when she used it.

Her frightened gaze swept to the door. "Brakka. He was here for me, wasn't he?"

A hard hand slashed through his hair, but he did not avoid the question. "Yes."

"Because I stopped the fight?" Her voice was uncertain.

"Because you took away his opportunity to kill me."

Her gaze glowed a blue fire. "He *was* there to kill you. I knew it."

It warmed him to hear the protective note in her tone again. "He has tried. Just as I have. It is hard to kill one who once trained with you."

Her eyes found his, deep and confused. "Trained with you?"

"A long time ago. It does not matter now." He sank to the corner of the bed, giving her plenty of space. She was still pale, but was slowly working her way to an explanation. It was too soon for his truth, if ever. He sought to distract her further. "How are you feeling?" His gaze studied her pale cheeks, the bruising still prominent on her satin skin. He tried not to think too much of how satiny she felt. How perfect, or of how much he wanted to kiss her again.

"Better. What you did last night..." She scooted to sit on the edge of the bed with him, near the opposite corner. Her movements were no longer wary, but still showed a slight hesitation, her gaze slipping to him then beyond. "I don't know how or what you did, but thank you. I know you are why I slept here and not in a hospital bed."

"Would you let me treat you again? I did not have time last night to do a thorough job."

"Do I have to lay naked in the tub again?" Her head bowed, and he caught her blush, her feelings of embarrassment.

"No. Lay out here and let me see what I can do." He stood, but her next question was quiet and not ignorable.

"He meant it, didn't he? He'll never give up." She hadn't moved from where she sat, her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

"I promised to protect you, from everyone."

"You can't always be with me," she stated. He could feel her fear, wondering what she had stumbled into by breaking into the fight. While he frightened her at times, Brakka terrified her. "I guess Houston is right. I'll have to hire a bodyguard."

A bodyguard would be a play toy for Brakka, was his first thought. There was no one he would trust to keep her safe. Not any longer. "No." His expression became unmerciful. No one else would have the right to protect this woman.

Her head snapped up. "What do you mean 'no'? I can't walk around when someone like that is after me. I have to tell Houston."

"I meant no, you do not have to hire one. I will take the position. With one provision. I cannot be with you during the day. You must stay with Houston." He wondered with a short thought how that was going to work. He was positive Houston would not take his inclusion well. He was a very territorial male, just as Diego was, and Titania was under Houston's care. He doubted Houston knew how to share.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

"I know you have your own life, Diego. I can't ask you to do this."

"You are not asking. I am offering. Now lay still. Your jaw is still bruised at the bone."

She fell back to the bed with an annoyed groan, her arms slack at her sides. "I knew you were going to be one of those overprotective types. You and Houston need to form a club."

"I protect everyone under my care, which now includes you. Now lie still." He fought back the laugh, listening to her petulant, overdone whining, making blistering comments under her breath. He was not an insufferable, overbearing anything, he thought to himself. "That includes being silent," he told her, biting the inside of his cheek.

She let out another long groan, but fell silent, and he went to work. This time he was able to be more thorough, taking his time, moving carefully from bruise to bone, ensuring he touched on everything that needed attention. She lay perfectly still and thankfully silent. She made concentration hard enough without speaking. When she was being stubborn or feisty, it was near impossible to do anything other than take pleasure in her joy in life.

He sagged to his knees when he rejoined with his body. Titania sat up, gasping when she saw him, grabbing for him.

"Diego!"

He rested his head on his outstretched arms, holding onto the edge of the bed. "I read somewhere, a line, 'reentry is a bitch'," he muttered. "I think I understand that better now."

"You're so pale," she said, her voice quivering with worry. "You shouldn't have done so much. I was already half

healed." She brushed his hair back, her hands tender in her concern.

He dragged air into his lungs. "Now you are fully healed. I will be fine. I just need a moment to rest."

"You are incredible," she said, awe lacing her tone. She lifted a hand to her jaw, her eyes growing wider still. "It's gone! I don't feel anything. I don't care how gifted you are. You are amazing."

He blinked, feeling her acceptance sink into him. She made him feel so much. His gaze fell to her mouth. That sweet, luscious, bowed mouth, and craved her sweetness again. Wanted to be bathed in her glory. His heart jumped, raced, thumped behind his ribs with an increasing rhythm. Need clawed at him. Her eyes glittered with a depth that called to him. The pulse at her neck beat, her lips parted, an invitation.

What he was thinking, what he wanted was not possible. He knew that, but it did not stop the feelings from rising, either. He had to taste her again, feel the heat of her skin. He was powerless against the magnitude of those wants. He leaned closer, the soft heat of her breathing causing his heart to trip and to hammer against his ribs.

"Damn, what happened to the door? Tani!" came the worried shout right before a pounding on the door broke the charged silence, snapping them apart. "Are you in there?"

She swallowed, taking a deep breath. "Yes, David. I'm fine." She never lost Diego's gaze, shouting toward the door.

"Have you seen this door? It looks like a cat used it to sharpen its claws. A huge freakin' cat. Man, Houston's going to wig out when he sees this."

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

"I guess he's looking for me," she told Diego. "I better go. Once David tells him about the door..." She shivered once, her gaze beseeching. "How am I supposed to explain Brakka? Or why he's after me? He's not like us." Diego blinked. That, more than anything, told Diego she had accepted him as human, gifted. It was a delusion he was not ready to destroy.

He was not sure how he could explain Brakka, either. It would reveal far too much. His expression was patient when he told her, "Tell Houston what you can. I will be here when you return. Call to me if you leave. I will not let you leave without me again." He made it a dictate. She would never be alone, unprotected again. Day or night.

"How can you drop everything to do this?"

"I had nothing to drop," he told her simply. He stood and stretched to his full height, once more the warrior.

His palm cradled her chin, drawing her to her feet. The long braid of her hair swept along her back, and the urge to dig his fingers through it, to feel its weight in his hands, was staggering. She was temptation of unbelievable proportions.

"Holy hell!"

"That would be Justin," Titania said, a wry lift to her lips, her chin tilting toward the door. "I won't be long."

"I will be with you even if you do not see me, *cara*."

"I know." Her acceptance blazed in her blue diamond depths.

He had to drop his hand before he dragged her into his arms. He watched the sway of her hips as she sauntered to the door, greeting the stunned faces of her two band members. She gaped for a brief moment at the door, hiding

her reaction with a waved hand in dismissal. "I'll explain it one time, when I tell Houston," she told them.

"Wow, it's got to be a story."

He saw her flick a single worried glance into the room, knowing she saw nothing. She slipped her bottom lip in between her teeth, rolling it. He could feel her fear resurfacing, not from his growing hungers for her touch, but from the evidence of how determined Brakka could be. The door was charred and shredded. It had been solid oak, prided by the hotel. They had been done individually for the suites.

Do not worry. He is gone, and I am with you.

Her mouth popped open, but she caught herself in time. She spoke to David. "Come on. This is going to really upset Houston."

"Who'd you piss off?" Justin asked, taking up one side while David walked on the other. Her mouth clamped shut. When she said she was not going talk, she meant it. Diego trailed them silently. Diego realized all the members of her group must know of Titania's gifts and protected her accordingly. It did not appease his own worries any. Any number of them would not stop Brakka.

They went down the hall to another door, and Houston opened to their knock. He stood staring at her for several seconds before letting the group in.

"Your bruises!" Laney cried, her tone incredulous.

Titania rolled a shoulder. "I'm fine."

Houston stiffened. "Leather," he said, a snarled warning, his gaze roving around the room.

"What are you cursing about now?" Laney asked, taking a chair while the guys sat on the bed and Titania took the second chair in the suite.

"Nothing." But his expression remained wary. "What happened now?"

Titania didn't evade. "I have another problem. The fight I broke up the other night, the loser wants to kill me."

Houston exploded, just as Diego had expected he would. He spun, his gaze furious, finding Titania and nailing her down to the chair. "What did you say?"

She crossed her arms and glared at him. "Don't. I had to stop it. If you yell at me now, I will walk out and not talk to you for a week."

"You sure have become a beacon for trouble," David teased. Justin poked him in the ribs with an elbow. "Well, it's true. You gotta see the door. Man, Houston, it looks like someone tried to peel it."

"He was at your room!" Houston thundered. Titania shot David a quelling look for his offered opinion of the condition of her room door. Houston barged out into the hall, marching to her room. Diego saw her roll her eyes in exasperation at his anger. David held up his hands when Titania shoved him out of her way.

"You better stay here, David," Laney advised with a knowing stare at the pair when he started to follow. Diego noticed Justin watched them leave, not attempting to follow. "You know you don't want to be between them when they start."

David sank back to the bed, and Diego followed after a trotting Titania.

"Hell," Houston breathed. Diego winced, seeing the charred and raked door up close. "They better not try to make us pay for this," he muttered. Diego slid in past them under the door.

Titania opened the door, Houston only a pace behind her. Houston planted his palm on her stomach, slamming her back to the wall, a startled squawk gasping out of her lungs. Houston's lips lifted in a silent snarl. "Someone's been in here." His gaze raked the room for the intruder.

Diego reacted, protective rage obscuring reason. In less than a second, he was visible, lethal. He launched at Houston, pinning him to the wall, his arm shoved against Houston's throat. "Touch her like that again, and I will not just stop you," Diego threatened, his voice low, vibrating with suppressed fury. "I will kill you."

Houston snarled angrily even as Diego jammed his arm harder against his captive's windpipe. Brown eyes narrowed heatedly at pale grey, Houston's fingers digging unnoticed into the arm that pinned him.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Six

Titania watched in horror, her knuckles shoved into her mouth to stop the scream fighting to break free. Her heart pounded, burning in fear, but it quickly changed to anger when Diego continued to hold Houston immobile to the wall.

"Diego! Stop it. Let him go." She was shocked to find her voice steady.

Diego slowly released Houston, sending one last warning glare as he did so. Houston ran a hand over his throat, swallowing once.

"Who the hell is he?" Houston snapped, his gaze as hot as ever. "And how the hell did he get into your room?"

"I flew," Diego replied in a flippant tone.

Houston's gaze narrowed. "I bet you did."

"Would you two quit!" Titania glared at the both of them. "Houston, I told you, he saved me from Thomas."

"I'm hiring you that damn bodyguard. This is freakin' ridiculous," Houston said. Titania saw Houston's eyes narrow on Diego's long jacket. "Leather. You!" Diego stood motionless at the accusation. Houston tensed, fists forming, and Titania threw herself between them.

"Stop it! Right now." She saw Houston's gaze grow heated, only guessing at what was circling through Diego's head.

You know perfectly well. I will not let anyone harm you. Friend or foe.

Well, just quit, she snapped back with force, unaware she had done so. "Diego, you know Houston wouldn't hurt me."

She glared at him, his solid frame not moving. He looked relaxed. As relaxed as a cougar with a sore paw.

When neither man moved, she purposely put a hand on each chest. "If you two don't quit this posturing, so help me..."

"*Cara*, I do not posture," Diego purred. He lifted a hand to cover hers on his chest, and she felt a wave of comfort flow over her. Titania felt a vibration of disapproval under her fingers pressed into Houston's chest.

"What's going on in here?" Laney asked, rounding the corner. "I could hear you down the hall." Houston took two steps back and braced an arm around Laney, pinning her to his side, shielding her. His eyes never left Diego's.

To Titania, it looked like battle lines had been drawn.

"How did he get in here just now? The room was empty," Houston asked, a sharp demand in the words.

She sought Diego's gaze, and he nodded once. She turned to say, "He's gifted. Like us."

"Not like us," Houston told her coldly. "You've really done it this time, Tani." She saw some of the heat leave Houston's expression when he shook his blond head. "Christ, Tani," he said, shoving his free hand through his hair.

"Well, you think I need a bodyguard. He did help me once already," she tossed out to uphold her end of the argument. Houston's fierce refusal was apparent in the tight hold of his shoulders, the grim slash of his mouth.

"Him? Are you kidding?" Houston stared at her then narrowed his eyes back at Diego.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

"I am capable," he drawled in answer to Houston's dark looks. "And no one would ever touch her again." It was a promise, a threat of retribution should Houston ever dare to hurt her, either. No one else would get the chance.

Houston chose to ignore the other man. "Tani, come on. You don't know this guy, anything about him. Let me get you a professional."

"Don't bother," she replied, ignoring his cajoling tone. "You want me to have a guard dog. I found one. Don't get all pissy because you don't like him." She crossed her arms, lifting her chin in defiance.

Houston raked a hand down his face. "Fine," he relented after several tense seconds. "But the first time he screws up, he's gone."

Houston looked over her head, a deadly stare in his brown eyes, and Titania just barely caught a toothy snarl from Diego. Great, she thought. Too much testosterone was not a good thing. Real soon, she was going to have to find out how two men could take such an instant dislike to each other.

Two nights later, Titania was ready to pull her hair out. Houston and Diego circled each other like two junkyard dogs. Houston kept a football field between Diego and Laney, and whenever she tried to talk to Diego, Houston yanked her away on some emergency. And since Houston was suspicious, so were David and Justin. If anything, David had grown even more protective. In short, she was ready to scream in her frustration.

She stared at the passing highway stripes through the tinted bus window, thankful to be alone for the moment. The

dark night hours were soothing, calming her. She pulled up her legs, wrapping her arms around them. Laney had convinced Houston to take a private drive with just the two of them in Houston's Ferrari. David and Justin were up front, driving the bus to their next show, which was just fine with her. Everyone was behaving as if she had lost her mind.

So what if Diego was different? He didn't have to be with her every single second. She understood that. What could happen to her in a moving bus, anyway? She rolled her eyes in blatant disrespect, remembering Houston's warnings before Laney managed to drag him away.

Houston didn't trust Diego at all, especially since he wouldn't be traveling with them every single minute. But he would be with her when she needed him. Wasn't that the most important thing?

How could she describe Diego's abilities? She wasn't sure she could. His abilities were unfathomable. He had to be the most gifted person she'd ever run across, his strength unbelievable. He was even a little frightening at times. So what if he could just appear? She mentally shrugged. Houston probably just hadn't seen him at first and couldn't stomach admitting to it. It really didn't matter. Houston didn't trust him. Somehow, the fact that he had saved her life didn't hold any water now, either.

That really irritated Titania. Ungrateful jerks, she silently cursed. *If I had been in the hospital for a week, then everything would have been fine*, she thought with sarcastic heat. She watched the winking stars in the sea of the night sky. *I appreciate it.*

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

I am very glad to know you do.

"Diego," she whispered and her eyes popped open with his sudden reappearance. She felt her heart leap at his voice. She hadn't realized until she heard him again that she had missed his unusual contacts. She searched the inner sanctum of the bus, but she was still alone. "Where are you?"

In San Francisco.

"Already?" She sat up, stunned.

I had to ensure your arrival would be secure.

She felt a hesitation in his answer. "What is it?"

Something does not feel right. It is not Brakka. But something ... I will search more. Do not worry over it.

"I never worry," she said with a defiant tilt of her chin.

I did not mean to imply that you would, cara. His voice warmed her, slid over her like hot honey. Her breathing grew ragged. How could he do that to her? And he wasn't even there!

I could be, he said, his voice shimmering into her thoughts.

"No. No, that's okay." His haunting, masculine laughter reached her, reverberated between her ears. Her entire body hummed. Her forehead fell to her lifted knees. "Go away, Diego."

As you wish. When he was gone, she felt completely isolated. Bereft.

What was happening to her? How could this man be affecting her so deeply when no one ever had before? It was a good thing he hadn't kissed her again, either. She lost all her senses when he did that. It felt like her entire body was

on fire when he did. She shook herself. Hard. "Don't think about it," she admonished herself.

It wasn't fair he had lips like that. It just wasn't. They had to be a package deal with those eyes. She melted whenever she looked at them, and his gaze could see right through her. She knew he could. Piercing, bright. Bold. Just like the man.

She sighed. Then her eyes shot open. Just how strong were his abilities? How strong was he period? He could talk to her so effortlessly, and she had witnessed his physical strength, lifting Houston like a bag of cotton balls. Houston stood six foot four if he was an inch. Diego was as tall with a muscular, defined strength. He exuded strength without being huge. It was subtle. He brought to mind the strength of the Roman and Greek sculptures. His shoulders were the most remarkable, commanding and broad.

She rubbed her chin on a raised knee. Was she being too lax? Was she taking his help for granted? Did Diego have a reason, a plan? Was Houston right to be distrustful? He'd never acted like this before. Houston liked everyone.

She tried to remember how it had felt when he had treated her. It was fuzzy, the whole night, the attack and what had followed a hazy memory in her mind. Had he done that? Had he manipulated her thoughts somehow? Could he do that? She swallowed, once, slowly, as she made herself try to remember. It frightened her to realize no matter how hard she tried to remember the details, she couldn't. How many times had he been in the same room with her after all, then? She sat back, pushing herself further into the cushions of the bench, her arms tightening.

I am stronger than you will ever know. Quit trying to scare yourself. You are getting upset over nothing. You will never be in danger from me.

How do you know what I am thinking about? she asked before she could restrain the impulse, feeling out the pathway and following it outward.

I have discovered when it comes to you, it is best to be prepared, he said in a slight, humored taunt. *You are becoming very adept. I am impressed.* She heard a note of pride in his voice.

She gasped, her limbs hugging her legs tighter. *I'm not speaking! How am I doing this? How am I talking like this?*

She felt fingers curl around her throat in delicious torment, making her blood pump through her body with a molten ache. *Something I have been considering for several days as well. I must be rubbing off on you,* he joked warmly, and she felt his calm reassurance. *You were not even aware the first time it happened. You took me by surprise, and as always, stole the air from my soul.*

How can I feel you? she whispered cautiously in her mind. She knew it had to be him. Her hand lifted, covering the sensation, unconsciously holding it closer.

That, cara, is all me. She had the sense of a male grin, pleased with himself.

Stop patting yourself on the back. "Men," she groaned. Her hand dropped.

No, honey. Only one man.

That was when she began to believe she was in deeper than she had ever imagined.

When she arrived at the hotel, Diego waited for her, standing tall and forbidding in the drive. With his black leather trench coat, Titania thought he looked like he could be the mob all by himself. There was something very lethal about him. People walking around the hotel gave him a wide berth. None of it mattered, his attention focused on the bus and the three occupants.

"Where are Houston and Laney?" she asked, hopping down to his side. David and Justin paired up behind her and Diego.

"They left for dinner." He glanced down at her. "You need to eat." His stride matched her shorter ones.

"I'm not hungry," she said. Her brow furrowed. "Actually, I haven't felt hungry in days. I hope I'm not getting sick. That would just make my life so perfect right now."

Titania was aware that several women and many more men noticed her entrance, and if only David and Justin had been with her, she would've had to fight off at least a few autograph seekers. With Diego, no one dared approach. Intimidating. That was the word, she mused.

There was silence until the elevator. *You will try to eat something this evening.*

I am not a baby, she argued back, not thinking about the intimacy of the mental path as her heat rose, but it was definitely easier when she couldn't talk outright. *I'm fine*. She gave him a sugary smile. A dark brow arched in answer.

Little liar. You are tired this evening. You need to eat.
She sighed.

"Tani? You feeling all right?" David asked, putting a hand on her hip. She didn't resist when he pulled her closer for a hug.

"I'm fine," she replied, returning the hug, her arms looping comfortably around his shoulders. "Just stressed out. I had no idea saving this one was going to give me so much trouble."

David laughed, brushing back her trademark black hair. "Who could stop you? Houston calls you an angel in disguise, and he's right," he told her easily. She really had no idea how beautiful she was, how entrancing she could be when she smiled. Lately she glowed, seemed to be even more beautiful than he'd ever thought her to be. David loved Titania like a sister, but when she looked at him with those beguiling eyes of hers, sometimes he wondered if she would ever think of him as something more. He knew how sensitive she was to emotions and intentions so he always held those thoughts close, kept them hidden behind his fun laugh, the one she knew and trusted.

His laughter died a fast death when he glanced up and found Diego's stare. Even in the dimness of the elevator, he could feel the weight of her new bodyguard's gaze. Houston didn't trust this guy at all. David had faith in Houston's judgment. Now he was positive Houston knew what he was talking about. This man was walking death. Cold seeped into him. Instinctively, he wanted to pull Titania closer, to protect her as if danger was eminent.

"David?" Her voice dragged his gaze back to her own questioning blue eyes. "You paled. Are you feeling all right? I was just wondering if I was catching a bug."

He blinked, coming back to where they all were. He placed Titania back firmly, and instantly the cold weight disappeared. He swallowed, his laugh shaky. "No. I'm fine. Just wandered off there a minute. Hey, here's our floor." He focused on the doors to distract himself.

David watched Diego place a hand on her lower back, his actions intent and immediately protective as he guided her to her room. David and Justin always roomed together, as Houston did with Laney. It had never bothered David before that Titania slept alone.

David understood that no one with a cell of sense would harm her with her bodyguard around. But as he watched the door close, a final stare reaching him from the dark, brooding expression of the other man, David wondered who was going to protect her from Diego.

"Does he always touch you like that?" Diego stood just within the door as Titania reached for her suitcase.

"Who?" She started rifling through clothes. "Oh, David? Yeah, I guess so. Why? He's like a brother. We're family."

Diego clamped his mouth shut. Possessive heat still burned through his veins. David had almost died on that elevator, and Diego was sure he knew it.

"We have a room for you," she said, pulling out a change of clothes.

"I will not be needing it, but thank you."

She jerked up. "You can't stay here!" A telltale rush made her pulse leap. Her lips parted as her breathing increased to a shallow pant. His body hardened in reaction. Not a flicker of his response showed in his expression.

"I will be with you during all hours of the night. Brakka is a threat, as is the one I detected when I first arrived. I could not locate the source. You are not safe here. When I am not available, you must stay with Houston." There was no room for argument.

Her fists rose to her hips, her chin tilting at him, her eyes flashing in challenge. "You're real good at making the rules, aren't you?"

"When it involves your safety, yes. That is what I am here for," he pointed out.

"Well, look. I want to shower, so make yourself scarce." She frowned when he didn't move.

His gaze drank her in, her defiant stance, her glowing beauty. He met her frown with one of his own, finding hunger beating at her, beating at him. "You will eat when you are finished."

"Stop ordering me, and we'll see," she retorted. "I told you, I'm not hungry."

He strode across the room, his long strides demolishing the space between them. His tone was intense when he told her, "Maybe I am not making this clear enough. I am not ordering. I am ensuring your survival. Even now, I can feel the fatigue in you. You have no idea whatsoever of what Brakka is. You believe he and I are alike, and that is very close. If you are weak, he can control your mind easier. You have felt him once already, fought against him. You know I am telling you the truth." Blue eyes flashed with the sapphire fire he was coming to expect from her. "There will be no compromise."

"Then you're fired," she came back. "I don't need another person trying to put me on a shelf."

His hand cupped her chin, his thumb stroking the soft skin in his palm. "*Cara*, listen to my words, not the dictate. You are not safe. I have to keep you safe." His tone gentled, his heart slamming hard with her in his hold once more. "And make no mistake, Brakka has decided to come after you. He does not stop until his goals are reached." He stepped closer, feeling her body's heat through his clothing. "I am the only one who can stop Brakka. Not Houston, not David, and not some token paid guard. I know him. I trained with him, and he is relentless."

"How do you know him so well? He hates you." She had stopped retreating, finally listening. "The night of the fight, he was so cold, so angry. I knew the second he discovered you. Hatred almost overwhelmed me." Her eyes studied him; he could almost feel their caressing touch. He sat in the back of her thoughts, feeling her work her way through her anger, her hatred of being controlled. He should have known. She had been protected not only by her family because of her gifts and talents, but by her friends for her entire life. She would resent one more person curtailing her joy in life.

Diego sighed. He slid his hand around her neck, her skin warm, her pulse beating strongly into his palm. "Brakka was my best friend. He did not hate me until I refused to follow in his footsteps. We grew up together, fought together, trained together. We are not related, but now we are bonded by blood, and I did not take the path he has chosen." He reached for her, needing her in his hands to complete him. "I did not

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

lose my soul. He has. He hates me for that alone. I hate him for destroying me."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Seven

"Destroying you?" Her voice was soft, and it sank into his blood again. Just one of those things she could do. "Like a company? Did he ruin you financially?"

He shook his head, wishing it were so simple. He did not care about money. "No." He edged closer, pulling her into his arms. He needed her to be there. He needed to feel her period. "He did something far, far worse." His voice had deadened, the remembered ache, the pain of his betrayal of a sacred friendship burning so deeply, he tasted the bitterness on his tongue.

"I'm sorry, Diego." Titania wrapped her arms around his waist and he held on, his chin resting on the top of her head, her silken tresses warming him. He accepted her compassion greedily. "I can feel your pain," she said, her face pressed into his chest. "You loved him like a brother."

"Once."

She let out a tremulous breath. "And you have absolute faith he will come for me?"

His chest ached with the knowledge that he was right. "I am certain his reasons have doubled now. Retribution for your interruption and..." He tucked a finger beneath her chin, lifting her luminous gaze to his. "Because you have become important to me."

He meant it only as a brush of skin, his lips to hers, an exclamation of his growing feelings for her, but the instant his

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

lips found hers, all reasoning deserted him. She was sweet and hot, soft and seductive to his senses.

The earth moved beneath his feet, rocked him to his soul, and he held her tighter to keep himself from flying off into space. Her body matched perfectly to his, meeting his planes and hard angles with the curves and valleys of a woman's body. An unknown urge screamed in his head and pounded at his temples. To claim her. To make her completely his. To be able to protect her, regardless of time or distance.

He shoved the thought far away. He would never pass on his curse. He would not condemn this woman of compassion to a life of death. Instead of dwelling on the impossible, he shifted his weight, bringing her flush against him. He pushed a hand through the thick weight of her hair, savoring every electric sensation on his skin.

He tasted her lips, nibbling at the corner of her mouth, feeling her breath against his skin, sipping at her lips until she gave in, and he burned.

He moaned, a low sound of hunger when he found the moist sweetness of her. Molten heat coursed through his veins while hunger devoured him as he consumed her. White hot lightning arced between them.

Diego's mouth glided from her nectar-filled lips to the underside of her jaw. The sweet scent of her filled his mind, bombarded him with raging hunger. She moved closer, and he could feel every lush, rounded inch of her. She was trim with firm muscles beneath smooth skin. Full breasts pushed against him, and desire flared brighter.

He nipped gently at her ear, and she moaned, a sighing sound that fed his own passions to a higher heat. His incisors exploded at the sound. He breathed her name, fearing for his sanity.

Distantly, he heard the sound of clothing hitting the floor. Then her hands were running up and down his back, slipping beneath the edges of his coat to find his ribs. Hunger flared anew, raged, burned.

He found the delicate skin beneath her ear and swirled a scorching path down her neck. He ignited with her in his arms. He found her pulse unerringly, the sound of rushing blood, feeling the beating of her heart beneath his lips. His teeth scraped back and forth, seducing her. He could hear the pounding of her heart, hard, enticing. "Titania," he groaned, unable and unwilling to fight it. "Please. I need this. I need you."

She arched into him, and he was lost, his teeth sinking deep. Everything that he was took her in, drank in need, in insatiable hunger.

Heat enveloped him; he became the blaze of his hungers. It had happened. He had officially lost all control with her. Her hands tugged at clothing, and he pressed into her questing palms, groaning with a primal hunger when she touched his enflamed skin for the first time. He lost all sense of time, of place. Cells soaked up her offering. Feeding earlier had not prevented this, meant nothing when he had her in his arms.

His heart slammed into his ribs, harsh and heavy against his ears. He inhaled sharply when her fingers danced across sensitive skin, blazing a trail of need in her wake.

He laved his tongue across her pulse, his last thread of sanity stretched to the breaking point. He claimed her mouth once more, his tongue thrusting, pinning her body to his. He was going up in flames.

"Diego," she whimpered into his mouth. A gasp. A plea, and he forced his sanity to return with a strength honed from years of control.

Her cheeks were flush, and her body hungered for his touch, for release, but she was overwhelmed. He pressed his forehead to hers, breathing heavily.

Titania's eyes widened, the blue bottomless, her fingers lifting to his mouth. Her mouth was kiss swollen, ripe and delectable for more. He ripped his gaze from the temptation. "No more of that. I'll melt. I swear I will." Her hand retreated from inside his jacket, and he missed her heated touch instantly, ached to have her touch him again. His arms held her close, gentle bands of strength. "No one should have a mouth like that."

"You like my mouth?" He felt oddly pleased that she would.

She leaned back fractionally. "You just can't keep doing that. I can't think. Your kisses are lethal. No one should be able to do that." She gazed up at him, confused, aroused and uncertain.

His hand drifted from the heavy folds of her hair to rest over her pulse. It beat strongly, wildly into his palm. "I will try for restraint when I am with you." It was the most he could promise. He was still hungry for her touch, desiring what he knew he should not want.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

"You do that. I mean it." She stepped away, a feminine retreat for space. She lifted her hair up and back, an innocent, sensual movement that made his blood a living thing in his veins. She had no idea how sensual a creature she was.

For just a second, he could forgive David's earlier thoughts. She was beautiful, her eyes enthralling and her smile seductive as a siren's call. Innocence shined from her, her eyes alight with her compassionate nature.

He moved through her mind effortlessly now and could feel thirst building. He had been greedy in his passions. He walked to the mini bar and found bottled water. He removed the cap, handed it to her. "Drink. Then take your shower."

Her eyes flashed blue fire. "Don't start with the bossy stuff again," she warned, but she took the water without a grain of refusal.

He offered her a small, goading smile. "Please, take your shower so you can eat, or I will be in there myself with you." She whirled and disappeared into the bathroom before he could start laughing at her.

He deliberately investigated the room to distract himself from the woman on the other side of the door, when the bathroom door cracked open. He laughed outright when her clothes zipped from the room followed by a slam of the door.

* * * *

Titania slumped under the pounding water. That man should be outlawed. His lips, his eyes. All of him. He just should be! How did one man kiss like that? She'd had a few

passionate kisses, but nothing that had left her blistering with heat. It felt like an inferno had taken up residence within her.

What she didn't understand was why she didn't feel threatened by him. Diego was the most overwhelming, overpowering, sexiest man she'd ever met, and she'd met plenty. Musicians, producers, songwriters. Even some of Hollywood's biggest drawing names. She'd been singing professionally since the week after graduation, but no one had ever treated her so gentle, so respectfully, so tenderly, or—she hated to think it—so passionately. She slid partially down the wall, a limp noodle.

She was surprised at how thirsty she felt, downing half the bottle before she had gotten into the shower. She found the bottle on the counter and drained it. Maybe that was why she hadn't been hungry. Maybe she was dehydrated.

She tossed the bottle. "Two points," she murmured with satisfaction when it sank into the trash can. She retracted the shower curtain then began lathering her hair, thinking over what Diego had said—before that incredible kiss.

He knew Brakka well, if what he had told her was the truth. One thing she could almost swear to was Diego's integrity. The man lived by his honor. She could only take his word that Brakka would search for her. Her brow drew together. Brakka had found her once already. There wasn't any reason to not believe him, and Diego was right even if she hadn't agreed outright with him before. Brakka was extremely powerful. It made her wonder again just what kind of a person Brakka was. His mind manipulation was staggering. She knew she couldn't stop him.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Her shoulders slumped further with the truth. She couldn't fire Diego. She needed him, but somehow she needed to try to keep her hands, and if possible her lips, away from him. She couldn't think straight with him around. She couldn't think, period, of anything but him most of the time.

What was with her lately? She never got obsessed over a man. Men did not catch her attention. Men did not interest her. She lived her life, loved to sing to the crowds regardless of size. She didn't have the time for a man now, anyway. After San Francisco, they were going to go to the east coast for the second leg of her tour. She had shows to do, obligations. Whatever this was couldn't happen. She let out a tired sigh.

The last thing she had expected was the comforting warmth of arms holding her, cradling her. She breathed his name, and her heart somersaulted.

I knew you were getting tired. Come out and eat.

Don't go thinking I'm always going to comply, Diego. But she twisted her hair and wrapped a towel around her body.

I have no fear of that. This was punctuated with a suffering sigh, and she smiled.

She dressed, drying her hair, winding it into a knot on top of her head. When she entered the suite, Diego had taken his coat and draped it over a chair, and her heart flipped again. The man had shoulders. Fantastic shoulders.

He stood partially turned away, but if she didn't know any better, she would swear a ghost of a smile hovered over his chiseled lips.

You better not be in my head.

Silence was her answer. She crossed her arms and tapped her foot.

An eyebrow rose slowly when he turned to look at her. "Something wrong?" His voice was sinful, and he knew it.

"You're a rat. A six foot something rat."

"Six six."

"Are you serious?" Her gaze went from the top of his head to his black leather boots. He liked black, and damn, he looked good in it, too.

"I can shrink if you like," he told her, an absolutely wicked gleam in his gaze.

She backed off. "No. I don't want to know."

He glanced over toward the phone. "You better order soon. The kitchen closes in an hour." She rolled her eyes. "Honey, do not fight me on something this small." His gaze turned to mercury. Flat. "You know if I really want you to, you cannot fight me."

"You admit you can control my thoughts? Control me?" She wasn't sure if she should be terrified or shocked to actually hear him say it.

"Why should I deny it? You already have experienced far more from being in my presence than any other person alive. I told you I could never lie to you. What would it serve? You must trust me, or I cannot keep you safe. It is as simple and as complicated as that."

She half turned, avoiding his gaze now. "Have you been controlling my thoughts? Have you done it before?"

There was absolute honesty in his tone. "I softened the memory of your attack. The night you risked your pretty little

neck to stop Brakka, I helped to relieve you of nightmares. Beyond that, no."

She looked up and caught his watchful gaze. "Diego, just what are you?"

"Different."

"Are you even human?"

He shrugged. "Mostly. Order your dinner." And just like that, she knew he wouldn't answer any more questions. She realized he was quite good at avoiding her questions altogether.

After staring at the menu with nothing appealing to her, she ordered a salad and hoped she'd have an appetite when it arrived. "There," she said, replacing the phone. "Satisfied?"

"It is a start."

She peeked at him from the corner of her eye. She stretched out on the bed, stuffing pillows to relax against, and he claimed one of the chairs. "You know, sometimes, I hear an accent. You make my name sound so exotic, something foreign." He leaned back, threading his hands behind his head. His expression was mildly surprised, and his light eyes glimmered at her. "Really? I would think after all this time it would be long gone. I am from Spain. Andalusia originally."

She wiggled her toes. Catching him laughing at her, she stopped. "Did you live there long?"

"Yes. I have been back and forth."

"Do you speak more than Spanish then?"

"Several languages."

"Really?" she asked with a touch of excitement. "You speak French?"

"Fluently." His grin was coming back.

"I use to talk in French around Houston just to drive him nuts. Now there's an overbearing control freak."

His shoulders shook for a second. "Only because he has your interests to be responsible for." His grin turned into a full blown smirk, his pale eyes dancing in mischief. "After knowing you, I almost pity him."

She threw a pillow at him that he easily dodged. "Not funny."

White teeth flashed. "Yes it was. Hilarious."

She needed more than pillows to throw at him. Maybe a brick or two.

"Not nice," he chided her, hiding his laughter.

She glared at him. "Get. Out. Of. My. Head." She crossed her arms.

"Not on your life, *cara*." A brisk knock a few minutes later brought him to his feet to answer the door.

"Eat, honey. I know you need it." And just like that, she wasn't angry. That tone of voice undid her every time. He was doing something to her that she just didn't understand. She was melting even without his kiss.

She turned up to him with a weak smile. "All right. I'll try."

"Thank you."

She wrinkled her nose, staring at the bowl of greens.

"Maybe I am getting sick." She looked up with imploring eyes.

"Diego, I don't know if I can do this." She pushed a fist against her stomach even as it substantiated the argument.

He watched her closely for several seconds. "I think I saw a juice in the refrigerator." He found one and offered it to her. "Sip this, then try the salad."

"Do you think I'm getting sick?" She sipped gingerly at the juice, grateful when it stayed down. With that in her stomach, she managed a few bites of the salad. She pushed it away before she managed a respectable dent.

"I do not think so," he said, distracted.

When she looked up, he seemed lost in thought. "Diego. Don't you want to go to bed? Tomorrow's going to be a long night."

When he replied, his tone sounded absent. "You sleep. I will stay watch." He stopped talking, facing her fully. "Titania, I meant what I said. I cannot be with you during the day, but Brakka cannot harm you then, either. Just promise me you will stay with Houston until I am able."

"Why, Diego?" she asked cautiously. "Why can't you be with me? Do you have a job? A wife? I don't understand how you could drop everything, how you managed to get here before us."

His tight mouth softened. "I am not married, *cara*. As for the other, I control my life." When she refused to drop his gaze, he asked her, "Are you sure you want to know, *cara*? Do you really want these answers tonight?" His gaze was watchful, his tone even. He hadn't moved at all since she'd broken into his thoughts, but he exuded tension. A strength of will that was beginning to overwhelm her. She swallowed.

"No, Diego. If you don't want to tell me, then it isn't necessary tonight." He nodded his head in answer. "But," she

told him, capturing his attention fully. "I want you to promise me you will tell me the truth. All of it."

His gaze became shadowed, almost bleak. "You may not like the answers."

"That's for me to decide, Diego. Right now, I'm putting my life in your hands. I want to trust you." She stood before him, her hand resting on his arms where they were held across his chest. "You need to trust me, too."

His thumb rose, caressed her bottom lip, a slow swipe that made her breath hitch. Her heart skipped then raced until he stopped. His eyes, those pale gray eyes, were watching her intently.

When he spoke, his words were deep, resonating from the depths of his soul. "I do trust you, Titania. More and more each day. You are the only one I have shown myself to in centuries. If I could trust myself to anyone, it would be you."

She blinked. "Did you say centuries?"

His mouth tightened, his gaze sweeping away. "Go to bed, *cara*. I will be gone when you wake. Wait for Houston to escort you. That is an order."

"You can't distract me that easily." She tugged at his arm. "You said centuries, didn't you?"

"A slip. I meant years." He put a hand to her shoulder. "Go to bed."

She resisted. "Promise me."

His fingers flexed, and she felt indecision racing through him. "I will tell you, but not tonight," he relented. He gentled his tone again. "Go to bed, *cara*. It is growing late."

"I'm not used to sleeping with people in the room."

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

"You will not even know I am here," he replied. He brushed a few drying wisps of hair away from her face and gave her a warm smile.

Somehow, she wasn't so certain of that. Diego wasn't exactly the kind of person that could be ignored, or forgotten.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eight

"He did it," she mused, staring out into the sunny room. She was alone. She had completely forgotten he was there and slept the day away. Glancing at the clock, it was after four. "Time to get to work."

She padded into the bathroom to clean up, and was almost finished when she heard a knock at her door.

She closed her eyes, remembering Diego's warnings, and found only Houston. She opened the door from the bathroom while she wound her hair up into a knot.

"You ready?" he called.

"Just about." She was humming softly when Houston's broad body filled the doorway. She met his gaze in the mirror. "What's up?"

"So where's your great bodyguard?" Derision dripped from his words as he leaned against the frame and crossed his arms.

"He'll be here tonight. He told me last night he can't be around during the day, but he said I wasn't in danger from Brakka during the day, either." She shrugged then explained, "He knows this Brakka. They grew up together. After what happened at the last stop, I have to believe Diego may be right about this."

Houston cleared his throat. He seemed to be watching her responses carefully in the mirror's reflection. "Did he tell you about himself?"

"A little." She set her brush down. "He's wary, cautious."

"I believe it," Houston retorted. "Well, let's get to the stadium."

"Houston?" She couldn't face him. She loved Houston like her own, but for a reason she didn't understand, she felt divided between him and Diego. "Do you really hate Diego? Why can't you trust him?"

Houston's brown gaze flared then chilled to an ice brown. "I hate the fact that he will use you. You don't know it, Tani, but he's dangerous. Deadly. He could kill you, even take pleasure in it, without a thought or an ounce of remorse." His hand sliced the air in punctuation.

She turned on a heel, shocked to hear Houston talking like this. His expression was harsh, matching the bitter cold of his gaze.

"He is deadly," she agreed evenly. "I knew that from the beginning, but I can't believe—"

"Trust me on this, Tani. I know the kind of man he is, although I never thought I'd meet one like him. He's a cold-blooded killer. You can't ever let yourself forget it, either." His words were deadpan.

"He has given me his word." Her voice was quiet. She felt Houston's range of hate and distrust for Diego growing, and she couldn't explain why.

"You better hope he knows how to keep it," was all he said in answer.

* * * *

Diego drew his first breath of the evening. He was alone. No, he corrected the thought instantly. He was by himself,

but no longer alone. He shot into the sky, the gray-pinks turning violet blue. *Cara, you are well?* He could sense she waited in her dressing room, preparing for the night's performance. The night breezes blew around him, and he shifted, soaring toward the stadium where Titania was performing that night.

I am.

The hum of her voice made his blood boil. He had no idea how much longer he would be able to hold himself in restraint. *Take care. I will join you soon.*

He felt her sweet smile and almost fell from the sky. Hammers were slamming into his skull. The burning she created in him, in his blood, piled on top of his rising hunger. It did not matter how deeply he fed, he could not find satisfaction. His craving for her was becoming all consuming.

His jaw tightened as he left his prey comfortably against a building, checking for a pulse. His only option was to protect her from Brakka and leave her to her life at his earliest possibility. He could not, would not condemn her.

The night before, he had spent the darkest hours just watching her sleep. He dreamed every dream, envisioned every touch, every caress, every sigh. That morning, the beating of the rising sun had been a relief, a reprieve from his own desires. Before he did the unthinkable, broke his promise and laid his claim on her. Before he stole her life from her.

Diego was thankful she had not grown so adept with her ability that she could reside in his own mind. His desires were staggering and would likely frighten her.

What makes you think I don't?

He swallowed, barely maintaining control to stay aloft in the breeze. *Cara?*

She laughed, a sweet, light sound, reminiscent of the softest bells. *Diego, I know you have, um, certain wants. I'm not that innocent,* she teased him. He knew he felt her eyes rolling in punctuation, laughing at him. *I told you, I believe in you. I know you would never intentionally harm me. If I know nothing else about you, I do know that.* Her voice was melodious, and he knew without effort she was already onstage. *Now, hurry up and get here. You're very distracting, and one of these days you're going to have to tell me why it feels like you're flying. That is a really cool feeling.*

His gaze fell to the stadium, and he shifted once more, streaking in through shadows until he stood just off the stage. *I am here, cara. Sing. For everyone.*

He spotted her walking with a seductive stride down a metal staircase that wound up the stage. When she performed in arenas and concert halls, she always wore long evening gowns, preferring the classic look to accentuate her harmonious, flowing style of music. That, and he knew she thought she was short. Barefoot, she hardly came to his chest. The gowns accented her body beautifully, elongating her, heels and all, and as always, she stole his breath. He had never known such a beautiful woman.

Her beauty shined outward. Pure. Innocent. *His.* He shook his head in quick denial, but deep inside, he knew it would happen. It was such a fruitless fight. Even if he only had her lifetime to spend with her, he would never let her go. His

words from the night before came back to him. It truly was as simple and as complicated as that.

He had to protect her from Brakka. Their war would never be over until one of them was killed. A sick feeling swamped him. Titania would never be safe so long as Brakka lived. He could never let his guard down. Not for an instant.

Air slowly filled his lungs. No one would hurt her again. Sharp eyes stared out at the crowd, beginning to realize the enormous danger she placed herself in regardless. Diego was not going to overlook anything this time.

He knew her efforts were considerably less than the show where he had first encountered her. She was still doing what she naturally did, but the force behind it was gentler, as if she held a restraint on it. Was she worried about discovery? Everyone from scientists to the occult would love to know how she did what she could do.

He should have expected it, when well into her second set, he felt the disturbance. He recovered quickly, tuning himself to the sensation. A thickness in the air itself. A blankness. It meant only one thing.

One of the Brethren was in attendance looking for an easy meal with mayhem for dessert. There were nearly forty thousand there tonight, packed in tight. Easy marks for a lazy hunt. Unsuspecting.

Diego soared up from his spot, scanning the interior of the stadium, until he located the source. Near the restrooms, and whoever it was, was quick. He had already lured a victim to him.

Diego burst from the stage, shooting in the direction of the feeling, sending out warnings to security, directing them without hesitation, hoping they could disrupt the scenario before the vampire's victim was killed. He knew by the hot, sweet scent of blood in the air, the vampire had already laid his mark.

What is it? Titania demanded, feeling his abrupt departure.

Trouble in the halls. I have already called for help. He felt her mental angst when he slammed up the walls to keep her away from the truth. She believed he was gifted, exponentially. Different. He would prefer for her to remain ignorant for both their sakes. He would do whatever it took to protect her, even if he had to protect her from himself. He just no longer knew how long that was going to be possible.

Diego heard the concerned and angry exclamations next when the guards reached the injured woman, could hear their frantic and confused voices as they called for paramedics. Diego examined the terrified woman with a quick glance as he flew past and found that she would live. He had caught the cursed one in the act before he could do any real damage to the young woman. The guards had already managed to stifle the blood flow from the vampire's hideous punctures.

His expression hardened. One had dared to intrude on his woman's night, had threatened the very roof she was under. Fury like nothing he'd ever felt became a living entity in his soul. Something black and deadly formed, grew with lethal intent. He found the distinct odor of new and old blood, marked it, following it through the ventilation system of the stadium, until he poured out into the early fall night. There

was a distinct scent of saltwater from the breeze blowing in from the bay. It did little to disturb the heavy odor of blood. His only disappointment was that this was not Brakka.

He dissolved into mist, the expected attack useless as the dark one tried to spear him from behind when he emerged onto the roof. Diego heard the enraged snarl as he faced his attacker, taking form quickly.

"How dare you?" he spat at Diego, dark eyes blazing with anger. "This is my territory."

"Not for tonight. I claim it." Diego's voice was low, mesmerizing, and the other vampire shook his head to dislodge the hypnotic commands in the words.

A low snarl rumbled from his chest. "Do not dare use your tricks on me!" he hissed.

"They are not tricks. You cannot win this fight." Diego circled him patiently, claws growing in anticipation. Muscles flexed. "You are but a babe, are you not?"

"I am Trevayne and you will treat me with respect!" Trevayne's voice vibrated with malicious intent.

"Why? You have made a poor choice for your hunting grounds this evening. It is my right to protect my territory. I claim it. Leave." Diego dodged Trevayne's first attack with ease, sidestepping a ripping, clawed thrust, scoring four furrows along Trevayne's ribs. Trevayne howled with rage.

"Who are you to make such a demand on me? You are no one."

Diego almost laughed at the audacity. "I am Diego. Remember my name." Diego stared him in the eye, unafraid of the coldness. It mirrored his own, except Diego had

learned how to control it, how to feed it without the red stain of death. The one before him had not learned much at all. He was young, barely a century. He had just been lucky enough to find a feeding territory unchallenged. Amazing, considering it was San Francisco.

"I do not care who you are," Trevayne snapped.

"You will," was the only warning Diego gave him. He leaped with a blinding rush of speed, his hands finding their mark, snapping his neck with a single twist. He landed behind Trevayne on silent feet.

The grotesque picture was nauseating, but Diego had battled too many times with the Brethren since his turning and before as a seasoned warrior, a guardsman and swordsman, to let it show on his face. Trevayne's head hung limply as he howled in pain and fury, his eyes glaring and filled with infuriated sparks as he hissed. When he tried to speak a command in retribution, Diego silenced him with a single word. Age was not always bad, he thought with a wry, mental sigh.

"I warned you," Diego told Trevayne in a silken tone. Nothing about his stance changing. He was cool, confident. He knew his own ability. He also had the wisdom of age. Trevayne was impetuous, bloated with his own prowess. "Leave before I kill you for trespassing on my grounds." Trevayne's snarl deepened. "Anywhere I choose it to be," Diego told him with a narrowed gaze. "I do not want to kill you. Hunt elsewhere tonight. Come back tomorrow. For tonight, this is my territory."

Loose jaws snapped at him in furious rage. Diego waited, his entire body tensed, watching. He was not disappointed. The Brethren were vampires with a one-track-mind mentality.

Trevayne charged, a lop-sided attack because his loose head hung absurdly as he tried to shape shift to make a stronger attack. Claws as sharp as knives arced in a smooth, well practiced motion, bit, sliced through skin and bone as Trevayne flew passed. Blood spurted.

"I tried to let you go," Diego told him as Trevayne crumpled, his head hanging by tendons, all but completely separated. Pale skin began to disintegrate almost immediately with the undead life gone. Diego created a ball of blazing heat, something he did not like to do. It took energy and drew attention to himself if others of the Brethren were close by. He hoped Trevayne had been the only one in the area.

The flaring heat encircled the dead creature on the tarred rooftop, obliterating his entire form in seconds. Proof was not something Diego wanted to ever be accused of leaving. The Brethren had their rules, sloppy as they were. He had his own rules. If he was killed in battle, he could accept that. Death by discovery and dissection did not appeal to him in the least.

He shook his hair back, wiping a hand down his face, disgusted at the mess he had found. The roof was at least spotless again, no signs of Trevayne or what had happened anywhere. Diego did have to admit there were certain benefits to what he was. He could use his own abilities to take care of certain matters, like cleaning away blood spatters, he thought with a tight grimace.

Once the last vestiges were removed, he retraced his path cautiously through the maze of halls and vents, listening for any others, scanning thoroughly. He relaxed when it appeared Trevayne had indeed been hunting alone. There had been no alarm raised for the young woman's attack, either, hearing the ambulance taking her away. That could have been a real nightmare, he thought grimly. He had avoided just what Trevayne had hoped to accomplish: mass chaos and hysteria.

He reclaimed his position in the shadows. He could feel her depth of concern and a touch of fear, and sought to reassure her immediately.

Do not worry, cara. All is well.

What happened?

There was a problem. It has been resolved. Do not worry over it. Please sing, cara. You sound beautiful tonight.

She scowled at him briefly then resumed her stroll across the stage. He knew the reprieve would only last until the end of her concert. Hopefully, by then he would have an answer.

He applauded when she finished her encore and looked at her closely for the first time all evening when she approached. She was very pale, and even though she was happy, she teetered on outright exhaustion. He had never sensed it at all. She had purposely kept it from him. He found her guilt shadowing her thoughts while his intense gaze took in every single detail about her.

He looped an arm around her waist, holding her weight easily. "You did not eat again. If you say one word, I will carry you back in my arms."

"I can't eat. I try." Her voice was tired, thready, no longer filled with the energy that was Titania.

Diego's brow furrowed in deep worry. What was wrong? What was causing this? He could hear the others slowly making their way from the stage, following into the halls of the stadium.

"*Cara*," he admonished with a tender squeeze. "You have to take care of yourself. You work hard for hours. You have to eat."

Had he taken too much blood last night? Had his own insatiable hungers done this? He led her into her dressing room and promptly sat her down. He knelt before her and slipped off her shoes. She sighed in contentment.

"I'll keep you just for that," she groaned when his hands moved. "Heels are a nightmare."

His hands massaged her calves and her feet with sure, strong fingers. She had delicate, soft skin everywhere. He even liked the sexy little arch of her foot.

"How long has it been, exactly, since you last ate?" He asked it unconcerned, hiding his real fears.

She dropped her head back, breathing deeply. "I don't know. Since Thomas's attack? Maybe? Maybe he did something when he pummeled the crap out of my stomach."

Alarm slammed into him. *That happened days ago.* "No, honey. I made sure you were whole." Her answer twisted his gut tighter.

"What happened during the concert? I know I heard a scream in my mind." Her anxious tone was mellowed from his massage.

He tried to explain it so as to not upset her. "A woman was hurt. She was taken to the hospital and will be released."

Titania sat up with monumental effort. "Attacked? Like me? Is she all right?"

"She will be fine." He continued to rub her legs, hoping she would dismiss it. People had problems at concerts everywhere.

She rested a hand on his leather clad shoulder. "Diego. Tell me."

He sighed, leaning back on his haunches. Her gaze locked on him. "She was attacked and suffered an injury, but she will be fine."

"And her attacker?"

"He was dealt with," he replied, his tone emotionless. "He will not harm anyone again."

"Thank you, Diego."

"I protect you. Period."

She laughed a light, airy sound. "You sound so formal when you say it. I hope I'm not too much of a chore."

"A challenge, perhaps. Never a chore." His grin matched hers, but a hot hole began to slowly burn through his stomach, hidden behind the show of relaxed conversation.

Centuries had passed since his conversion. He had forgotten certain details. Like the inability to eat. He had been careful to only give her a few drops. He was certain of it. Thinking about it now, he was positive that was what had created the established mental path. Yet would it have been enough to harm her? To inhibit her own ability to eat?

Guilt seared him. What had he done? Had he doomed her after all? Was it possible? Could he have given her too much? With that thought struck a new one.

Had he done it on purpose?

Diego kept his head bowed in shame. He knew in his heart it was possible, to cure his loneliness with the vitality that she was, to remain forever enraptured in the beauty that was her. Feeling her against his skin, he was swept away by feelings of self-loathing and sensations that were overwhelming at that moment.

For a man who had lived by his honor and honed his control to the slightest detail, his greatest mistake of all could be, unknowingly to her, dying before his eyes.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Nine

Titania's lashes felt heavy. Her entire body felt leaden. How long had it been since she'd eaten? Had it really been that long? Her hours were so different and she rarely thought much about it. She was used to eating when she was hungry, but lately she hadn't been. No wonder she was exhausted. Diego was right. She needed to eat, regardless.

Either that or go see a doctor. She shook her head once, rolling it silently. No, no doctor. She hated needles. They always wanted to take blood. She hated that. She would like to keep the pints she had, thank you very much.

She groaned softly when Diego found a particularly tender spot on her foot. The man had just earned himself a raise. No one ever gave her a foot rub.

"God, that feels incredible," she managed. She lifted her head. He was bowed over her, thinking, absorbed. She touched his hair. "Diego, where are you?" Her fingers curled into his thick mane on their own as he looked up.

"Right here, *cara*."

Her stomach liquefied at the husky sound of his voice. "No, you were far away. Where were you?"

"Remembering." His lips lifted in a sexy way, a far away glint in his gaze. "A long time ago."

Her gaze drifted over his features. "I'm turning into a melted puddle of goo," she told him on a contented sigh.

"That was the aim," he replied, chuckling softly. His features relaxed, the harsh cut of his mouth disappearing.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Her hand drifted to his lips, touching them with a fingertip. She could admit it to herself, silently. She loved his mouth. Loved the way he could make her feel. Loved his kisses. The man had the sexiest mouth on the planet.

She watched as he parted those lips and gently pulled her finger into his mouth. Her breathing hitched, labored, feeling the damp heat, the moist swirl of his tongue over her skin. Lashes fluttered when he suckled on her finger, drawing her deeper.

"You taste like heaven," he whispered when he let her go. "Everywhere."

She groaned when the only thing she could think of was his kiss. She needed his kiss again.

"*Cara*," he said, his voice so rough, it slid down her spine like lava, dragging sparks in its wake. "*Cara*, you cannot look at me like that."

"Like what?" She found his gaze, bright winter-gray. She could swear she saw lightning deep inside those compelling eyes.

"So innocent, so sexy," he told her, rising before her. His hands were gentle, pulling her into his body. "You look at me, your eyes are so deep, and I know I have to kiss you again. Just tell me no, *cara*. Help me," he pleaded, lowering his lips to hers. "Because I know I cannot fight this. Not any longer." Need vibrated in the air around them.

Her hands trailed up his arms, found the ends of his hair and twisted it through her fingers. Titania didn't know if he held her up or if she was even standing on her own feet. It had ceased to matter. "Kiss me, Diego."

Heat coiled with the first tender brush of skin. His arms locked around her, immovable bands of iron. His lips were burning her. Maybe all of her. She had lost touch with anything beyond the feel of him and where he pressed into her.

The length of his long body formed to hers and every inch screamed for more. Molten heat was taking over her body as flames licked hungrily over her skin. His mouth held her as captive as his arms.

She whimpered once, and his tongue took over, mating, devouring. He nibbled and nipped at the softness of her lips. Stars exploded for her with each heated meeting of skin. His hands moved, cradling her as he possessed her, his hand finding the wealth of her hair, gripping it in tender fingers.

He found the corner of her mouth, paying special attention to the edge of her jaw. Her head fell back without reservation, her entire body igniting under his touch. Heat grew and spread. Need was rising. Something wild called to her, his whispered voice the beacon to her passion-filled mind.

Diego's mouth made a damp, heated trail, his teeth scraping, returning with his lips, causing shocks to run throughout her body. She moaned when the feel of his teeth on sensitive skin raked her nerves.

He groaned, whispering dark words of passion, Spanish love words that barely registered. He stroked her pulse with his tongue, and liquid heat filled her every pore. She shuddered as sensations bombarded her.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Diego stiffened in her arms, a low growl of anger rising from his chest, then he grew silent in a heartbeat. He changed position, cradling her. "We are about to have company," he explained, his voice tight, his body tighter. He pressed his cheek into her hair, his haggard breathing blowing through loose tendrils while she absorbed his body's heat.

"This can't keep happening," she whispered into his chest. Her body was on fire, needing. "I lose control whenever you kiss me. Your mouth should be outlawed."

His chuckle was low, very masculine. "I knew you liked my mouth." He guided her to sit again. "You need to change, *cara*, then eat."

A knock on her door echoed in the room, and Houston popped in, Laney trailing after. Diego stood against the far wall, his arms crossed, and she was again in her chair. *How did he do that? Wasn't I just in his arms?* She ached in places that told her she had been, but she couldn't remember sitting down.

"Does he have to be with you constantly?" Houston demanded when he spotted Diego.

She scooped her hair away from her neck, still feeling flashes of heat from his kiss. The man should be outlawed, definitely. "We were talking, Houston. I was going to change when you knocked." She watched Houston. He kept Laney to his far side, an arm around her. Protectively. What was it about Diego that drove Houston up a wall?

"Well, he can wait outside while you change."

Her arms fell to her sides in exasperation. "Really? He can? Is it all right with you if I do change, Houston?" She stood from her chair, refusing to acknowledge the slight tremble in her legs. She locked her knees. "Because the last time I checked, I didn't need someone's permission to put on jeans!"

"Tani," he said, his eyes growing. She refused to acknowledge the wounded look.

"I'm tired, and I need to eat," she added. She didn't admit she wasn't hungry. "I'm tired of everyone acting like I'm three years old. Christ, I know I'm different. You never let me forget. Everyone wants to put me on a shelf, and I'm tired of it. David's been watching me hard for days. Justin looks at me like I've grown two heads. You won't even let Laney talk to me anymore." She blinked, feeling tears building. "Just get out. Go away. Take Laney out and be normal. Lord knows you can't with me."

"Tani, that isn't true," Houston started to say.

"It's not?" she shot back, feeling the irritation building. "You have known me for years Houston, but for days, you've been treating me like a second class citizen. I'm sorry, and you know what? I don't have a single clue why I'm apologizing." She crossed her arms, her gaze sapphire fire.

"You know why," he told her through a tight jaw. "So don't get all bitchy at me."

"So you can't trust my judgment either, and I thought you were my best friend."

He raked a hand through his hair. "You know I'm your best friend, but damn it, Tani." Houston's gaze was beseeching, a

shadow of his hurt still lurking in the brown depths. "You allowed him into your life. I promised your mother I would keep you safe, and you did this."

"I did something good for him, and he is helping protect me from the one I ticked off. Gee, why does that sound so bad?" Her lips curled in sarcastic derision, her arms holding her together.

"It's more than that, and you know it." Houston purposely looked over at the relaxed figure leaning against the wall. "I've never heard of one like him acting like this. Attachment isn't exactly your style."

Diego shrugged, having witnessed the entire argument. "I am different, but she is safe. With me and from me."

"Can you promise me that, Diego?" Houston faced him fully, confronting him.

Diego walked to stand right behind Titania, possessive, his body posture protective as he stood with her. He placed a firm but gentle hand at her waist, his arm hooked around her. She wanted to lean into his solid strength immediately. She forced her legs to hold her up. She was not a weak woman.

"She is the safest woman, or person..." Diego drawled with meaning, staring nearly eye to eye with Houston. "...In this room right now. She is in danger, and I intend to keep her safe. Brakka is not the only one interested in finding her. There is another in this city who has targeted your entire band."

Houston snorted. "How do you know that?"

"I discovered them when I first arrived, and felt the twisted intentions again during the concert, but I could not

locate the source. There were problems during the concert that had to be dealt with."

Laney shivered. "See? I told you," she said quietly. "I didn't imagine it." Titania was surprised to hear her sounding almost accusing. Houston had never belittled her talents.

Titania felt Diego's attention switch to Laney. She kept her gaze averted. "A woman was attacked," Titania explained. "Diego took care of the man responsible."

Houston looked straight at Diego. "Like you?"

Diego inhaled deeply. "Yes. He has been ... dispatched." Titania almost shuddered at the cold chill in his words.

"Look, I want to change, and I can't with an audience." Titania also wanted to sit down for a few minutes again.

Diego dipped his head, murmuring into her ear. "Breathe, *cara*. I will be right outside." *I will know if you need me*, he whispered through her mind, followed by a gentle caress of his thumb against her neck in comfort.

Houston waited, letting Diego walk out first, and she sank into her chair when the door closed again. This was getting more confusing by the moment. Even Laney was avoiding her now, but at least Houston and Diego had talked. She just didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

Her head sank back, while she tugged briefly on her bottom lip with her teeth in frustration. Why would Houston be convinced she was in danger from Diego? She knew Diego would not hurt her. She stared at the ceiling, her arms crossed limply across her middle. Why did Houston distrust Diego so much?

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Because he knows I can hurt you, deeply. He knows the type of man that I am, and he fears for you.

Just what kind of man are you? She let her eyes drift shut, gathering the energy to change.

I am ruthless, relentless. He called me a killer. He is correct. There was no regret in Diego's voice. It was a fact, nothing more. *I have killed, and I would do so again if it meant protecting you.*

She dragged herself from her chair, letting the gown fall into a puddle at her feet. She slipped it onto its hanger and found her jeans and a blouse. "I knew you were dangerous. I've known that since the night I broke up the fight. Does he really think I am that clueless?" She was annoyed again as she searched for her sandals.

No, honey. He knows what I am. That makes all the difference. His voice was low, soothing.

She froze, positive he had let something slip unintentionally. What was she missing? "What are you?" she asked cautiously.

A very lonely man who has selfishly laid claim to a beautiful woman of light and compassion.

"Why are you so lonely, Diego? I have felt it within you many times. Almost desolate." She leaned back in her chair, calling out, "I'm dressed." The door opened before her voice had disappeared in the air. As if he knew before she had spoken. She realized with a quirk of her mouth, he probably had.

Her breath caught at the stunning picture he made striding through her door. Long, black, leather coat, dark jeans. His

black boots. Even the curl of his hair, remembered so soft in her hands, made her heart leap.

"Why, Diego? Why do I sometimes feel your loneliness so strongly?" she asked again. He stood against the wall, frowning.

"You need to eat."

"And I have to wait for the others. We stay together. So tell me."

He rolled a shoulder, his arms crossing. "You understand what it is like to be the only one like yourself. To not talk with another about yourself. To know none would understand." She nodded. She did know. "I am the only one like me. I live by my own code of honor. I have never met another who has lived like me."

He said it simply, a stark truth, but she heard the agony of his solitude, the pain of being so constantly solitary. She could feel every moment he had spent alone. Dark lonely nights. An eternity.

She offered a hand. He came without hesitation, and she stood before him. "You're not alone anymore, Diego. I understand. I do know," she told him, her fingers holding his tightly.

"*Cara*, you are looking at me again." His voice wrapped around her, held her close though he only held her hand.

A giggle bubbled up. "I am? I didn't know." Fires ignited when he dared to smile back at her. She slapped a hand over his lips. "You have got to quit that."

"What?" It was muffled behind her palm, but she could feel his suppressed laughter.

"Smiling. I can't take it." She felt his smile grow, pressing into the center of her hand. "You're bad, Diego. Just plain bad."

"Never said I was good," he teased. Then to prove it, he swept his tongue across her palm and sparks raced up her arm. "Come on, honey. They can catch up. I need to see you eat."

For the first time, she caught a note of worry in his tone, but she shook her head. "I need to go to the hospital and see the woman who was hurt first. I shouldn't take long, but I have to do something." She felt his sigh, an acceptance.

"Then you will eat?"

She gave him an honest answer. "I will try. I think I am sick, or getting there or something."

His expression was brooding as he placed a gentle hand to her back and led her from her room to join the others.

Titania told the others of her plans to go by the hospital as the limo began to pull away. Street lights glowed through a damp fog, giving a murky, eerie feeling to the evening.

"Shouldn't you wait until tomorrow?" Laney asked. She never once glanced toward Diego.

Titania shook her head. "No, she'll be released by morning. If you want, go ahead and send the limo back. I'll keep Diego with me," she said.

Houston held Laney protectively under an arm on the seat across from her. She was getting a little tired of his distrustful gazes aimed at Diego. He had done nothing to prove he deserved this treatment from Houston. She just didn't

understand Houston some days. Diego stared quietly out the window, as if none of it concerned him.

"We'll go ahead. I'm beat even if he isn't," Laney said.

"I'll be fine, and I won't be long." Titania asked the driver to make the detour, having gotten the hospital information and the woman's name from security when they all had left the stadium.

The limo slid to a silent stop a few minutes later, Diego slipping out, guiding Titania. She bent over to talk to the other two. "I promise I won't be long. I know she's probably asleep. I can't let this go without saying something."

Houston gave her a gentler look. "I know, Tani. I'm sorry about tonight."

"Love you, too, you big dope. Go get some sleep." She smiled in return when he grinned, letting Diego close the door. She knew perfectly well he was going to eat, then maybe sleep. Houston couldn't live without his steaks.

"Ready?" she asked, looking up at her quiet sentinel. He nodded, and she started for the doors. "I am sorry about Houston. I don't understand why he's acting this way." She glanced up when Diego remained stoically silent.

He shrugged when he realized she wanted an answer. "He takes your protection very seriously. He considers himself the law when it comes to you and Laney. It is normal in his kind."

"His kind?" she muttered. "I don't want to even hazard a guess at what you meant by that." She walked to the nurse's station and asked for the room. The station nurse was uncertain at first until Titania explained who she was and why she had come to visit the young woman.

"I know it's against protocol, but I feel responsible for this. I just want to know that she is all right." When the nurse frowned, hesitated, she exuded a very small wave of compassion and saw the shine grow in the nurse's gaze.

"All right. I'll walk with you in case anyone asks. I doubt anyone will. This late at night, it's pretty quiet."

"Thank you. If she's asleep, I won't stay and I won't disturb her." She followed the quiet steps of the nurse up two flights and down a maze of halls.

The plaque on the door had "A. Sumpter" scribbled in removable marker. "Thank you," Titania whispered, and the nurse turned and left them. She pushed on the half closed door, seeing a monitor next to the standard mechanical bed. The room was lightly lit, sparse, whitewashed and very boring. She'd have flowers delivered first thing in the morning.

Titania noticed the woman's gaze reflected on the exterior window. "You're awake?" she whispered in case she was mistaken.

"Yes," came the woman's hoarse reply. A thick white bandage was wrapped around her throat, covering what Titania knew had been several stitches to repair the damage done.

She walked in, Diego staying nearer the door to not frighten the woman. There were times when he looked like a thug in leather and that long wild hair, which he tied back. "I am so sorry this happened to you, Annabelle. I wasn't expecting you to be awake."

"I can't fall asleep." Her dark brown eyes were filled with a private terror, a horror only she had seen. "He swore he would come back. I'm afraid. No one believes me."

"What happened?" Titania moved to stand closer to the bed so Annabelle could talk quietly. The obvious discomfort was in her voice.

"Vampire," she said so softly, paling to challenge the white starkness of the room, which Titania almost missed. But Annabelle's eyes were huge with the memory still fresh in her mind. "All I remember is hearing this beautiful voice in my head, and then I was being crushed, and pain. Hot, burning pain in my neck. I thought I was being attacked by a gang or something, the pain was so intense everywhere. But I saw it," she choked out. Tears leaked from her eyes. "I saw it lift its head and growl, like an animal. It threw me like I weighed nothing, and disappeared." She began to shiver and sob in the bed.

"Shh," she soothed back. "It's going to be all right. I know your attacker was caught and taken care of," she informed the scared woman. "No one can hurt you if you sleep."

"But he swore!" she tried to cry out. Her voice had a very dry, ragged quality. It tore like knives at Titania.

Titania's gaze flew to the monitor and broadcast feelings of peace and restfulness, hoping the young woman settled down. The monitor went crazy, reading her heart rate. It slowed rapidly once she pushed out toward Annabelle. Luckily, her heightened pulse didn't last long enough to set off an alarm.

"He won't. Not you, not ever." Titania didn't know how she knew that, but somehow she did. She looked up at Diego. She picked up the sensations from him. Whoever it had been, he was definitely gone.

I can remove her memory of the attack. She will have the injury, know she was attacked, but the terror of what she saw will be gone.

Titania's eyes widened. *You can do that? Would do that?* She knew he could manipulate memories and thoughts. She'd had no idea he could wipe out a memory. The suggestion startled her for more than one reason.

I believe so. I have found I can do almost anything if I concentrate. She will be receptive, unaware. She is ungifted; her natural barriers are weak to compulsion. I just need to find it within her. Are you against it?

Her fingers twisted together. *But shouldn't she be treated? There are no such things as vampires.*

Diego gave her a wan smile from the shadows of the doorway. *Let me help her.*

Titania turned to face the woman, her indecision brief. "Annabelle, I'm going to send you some beautiful flowers in the morning. I want you to rest now. When you wake up, you won't remember anything about any vampires. Would you like that?"

"Oh, please, yes," she moaned. "I don't want to ever think about it again." She shuddered again, once, very hard, her hand gripping the side of the bed.

There was silence, and she could feel Diego's body still with concentration. *It is done. She will rest for the night now.*

She nodded in answer. "Good night, Annabelle. Sleep now. You need to get better. I will pay for your bills so you have nothing to regret for going to my concert. I'm sorry those men attacked you. They are in jail now and far away from you." She told the story, implanting a foggy vision of a tale of how she could have been hurt at knife point. She hoped it stuck. She'd never tried to work that way.

"Thank you," came the drowsy reply from the bed. Within seconds, a deep breathing was all that could be heard in the room. Leaving with a silent Diego at her side, she made one more stop at the nurse's station, giving them information on where to send the bills. She ordered a bouquet of spring flowers to be sent in before Annabelle was released.

"That doesn't mean charge me for the air she breathes," she joked with the night nurse.

"How about just the water, then?" she shot back with a wink.

"Not even." But Titania shared the laugh until she reached the outside walk, then she just wanted to sit down. She was beginning to shake. Diego held her at the waist until she was comfortable against his chest on his lap. Her head fell into open, trembling hands.

"I don't know what you did in there, but thank you." Her voice was growing thick with tears for Annabelle's nightmare.

"I did no less than you. I think you may have done more." His fingers filled with the silken waterfall of her hair, comforting.

She wiped blatantly at welling eyes. "I can't believe that happened to the girl. Attacked! God, what is this world

coming to? And vampires?" she squeaked. "It had to be someone in a mask, trying to be sick or something. And here I thought I drew a good crowd." Her head sank deeper until Diego pulled her against his shoulder where she could wallow in her misery without falling from her perch.

She leaned back a moment later, breathing deeply to stop her tears. "Just what did happen to the guy who did this? You said he'd been taken care of. Is he in jail?"

He looked away, his jaw tight. "Are the details that important? The woman was saved before real damage had been done." He pressed a finger to her lips. "Not tonight, *cara*. I must see to your health first. I can feel your weakness. You are exhausted, and you have not eaten."

"When did you become my keeper?" she groaned, her head falling heavily against his solid shoulder.

"The night you saved my life, *cara*," was his honeyed reply. "The limo is here." He wrapped an arm around her waist and helped her to her feet. She took two steps and stumbled. She heard him curse under his breath, sweeping her up into his strong arms. Her lashes fell, hiding her embarrassment, her exhaustion claiming her.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Ten

Diego cursed roundly when the door hid them from the world. Her exhaustion was total. He knew sleep would help her, but it would not heal her. "*Cara mia.*" It was groaned on a long hiss of self-aimed damnation.

He buried his face into the sweet scents of her hair. Spring rain and heaven. He knew he had done this. Without thinking about the consequences. He had all evening to replay the night he had healed her, the night his heart became hers.

He had done the unthinkable. He had passed on his curse, his dark life, and he knew the only way to attempt to keep her alive was to finish the transformation. His eyes clamped shut as the weight of his folly drove home. Two blood red tears seeped from the corners of his eyes.

"Forgive me, *cara*. I cannot let you die," he whispered hoarsely, his throat sore, fighting the very air he breathed. "I would give my life for you."

He cradled her in his arms, stepping from the limo in front of the hotel and blurring their entrance from prying eyes, then carried her to her room. He stretched her out to lay on the bed with her. His hands were shaking as he brushed back her waves of hair. The decision was eating him alive, killing him, because he had already killed her.

"*Cara*. Titania, wake up."

She mewled softly, her lashes fluttering. "I'm tired, Diego." She curled into his shoulder, and his skin blazed and tightened under her weight.

"I know, honey." He stared at her pale features. Her sweet lips, soft skin. Her dark lashes curved over the paleness of her face like two dark crescents. "*Cara*, I can make you better, but you need to tell me you want me to do it."

She murmured into his chest. She was still asleep. He had no choice. She was slowly starving to death. He made the decision for her, feeling the weight of it crushing his chest like an anvil. He would be forever bound to her. She would always be at risk. She would hate him for it.

His mouth thinned. She would hate him soon enough, was his next thought. He threw the arguments from his mind, his lips tracking down the softness of her neck. She wouldn't need much to sustain her energy, but each sharing brought her further into his world.

Terror seized him.

He stopped, his hands framing her with a tenderness he had never envisioned. *Would she survive the conversion?* He had never heard of a woman taking on the dark gift. "*Dios*," he moaned, the one word torn from him.

The delicate firmness of her fingers lingered over the harsh slice of his mouth. He felt her understanding all the way to his toes. There was a feeling of acceptance coming from her, filling him, and he wanted to weep again.

He lifted her higher, crushing her against his body. "I will never let you go. You are mine."

Diego pulled himself up on the bed, rising to hold her in his lap, emotion raging at him. He kissed her cheek, nipping with his lips at the corner of her mouth. She moved toward him

naturally. Her arms wound over his neck, and her eyes gazed up at him, slumberous and sexy.

"You're kissing me again," she accused, half asleep and all siren.

"I have to." His hands rested at her hips, his fingers toying with the fabric of her blouse. "I have to," he breathed, claiming her mouth.

She gasped, her lips sweet and hot as he delved within her honeyed warmth. Her fingers dug into his hair, and she arched into him when he drifted from her mouth to the sloping temptation of her throat.

Her heart pounded beneath the fragile layer of skin that warmed beneath his lips. He could hear the hard beating, the scent of her reaching him. He scraped his teeth along her pulse, and his incisors exploded, the lust for her blood almost overpowering. He knew how addictive she would taste, spicy, calling to him.

He blinked, forcing a deep breath, calming the hunger. He would never hurt her. This was his woman. His hold cradled, protected. Always protected. Those thoughts helped ease the insistent roar of hunger.

He sucked on her skin, feeling her reactions, feeling her desires rage as high as his. She cried out when he found the hot taste of her, then undulated against him, bringing his own needs to a fever pitch. Her arms held him secure, and he could feel the pleasure she was experiencing. He savored her, every brush of skin, every heated drop of her essence.

His breathing was harsh when he finally closed the small wounds with a tender stroke of his tongue. He inhaled, filled

his lungs with her heat, his nose buried into the curve of her shoulder. "Heaven," he breathed against her heated skin, and she shivered.

His shirt and jacket were there, and then they were gone. He held her bare-chested, her body brushing against the firm wall of his chest until he thought he would detonate with the heat she was creating inside him. Air hissed through his teeth when she pushed against him, her full breasts teasing him.

He fought for control, slashing his chest. "Belong to me," he told her, his voice a sorcerer's seduction, velvet over iron, his will would not be denied. At the first touch of her lips, desire ripped through him, stronger than he had ever experienced. Flames danced before his eyes as her mouth suckled on his quivering chest.

His hand cupped her reverently, his gaze flowing over her bowed head. "Belong to me, *cara*. Need me." He threw his head back when lightning shot through his veins, a primal roar of possession fighting to break loose. Fire licked at his nerves, raced through his body. "Need me like I need you," he whispered on a dragged moan. He closed his eyes to feel her in his arms until she had taken enough.

Diego commanded her to stop, healing the wound and claiming her mouth at the same instant. He found the hot, coppery taste of his blood, sweeping his tongue to catch the exotic heat. Titania was on fire in his arms. "I will never let you go. Know that now. You are mine."

He groaned, an animalistic depth that rocked him when she slid her mouth down his neck. He arched into the damp heat of her mouth. "*Cara!*" His breath gusted from his body

when her hands slid down his chest, forming to his torso. His eyes shot wide, unseeing as stars erupted. He swallowed, fighting for reason.

Diego knew she was tired, weak. She needed rest. She was driving him insane, was his only thought. "*Cara*, Titania."

Reason slammed home when he realized he could not take what she offered until she knew the truth. What he had done.

What he was, and if she survived—terror returned with thoughts of failure—what she would soon become. Fear clenched his heart in a cold hand. She had to survive. Not even hunting Brakka would sustain him any longer without her in his life.

His hands were firm but gentle, gripping her shoulders when all he wanted to do was hold her close and never let her go. "Titania, rest for tonight. Please do this for me, honey." *Please*, he silently begged. She had managed to completely undermine his strongest and best intentions.

Her eyes, dark and filled with hungry passion, met his gaze, and he groaned again. She blinked, seemed to regain some sense of herself. A yawn completely ruined the moment. He welcomed it. It reinforced his argument for her to rest.

Her head thumped to his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I warned you not to kiss me." She lolled from side to side. She pressed a hand to her stomach. "I don't feel good."

His gaze locked on her, intent on her every reaction. "You need to rest, honey." One more sharing, and the transformation would begin. She was exhausted and overwrought tonight. She would sleep through the changes

already taking place. He thanked God for any small favor. It was not a fun experience.

She covered another persistent yawn. "I didn't eat. I promised you I would try." She snuggled into his body, and his arms tightened on their own.

"Later. Rest for now." He aided her slide down to the bed, her eyes fluttering as sleep claimed her once more. "Sleep deeply, honey. Do not wake until I come for you." She went blissfully deep under the compulsion without fighting it.

Diego stretched out with her, pillowing her head on his shoulder, his arms locked around her, staring blankly at the ceiling.

He kept himself partially resting in her mind, feeling for any twinges of discomfort, any stabs of pain. It did not matter if he had to lie like that all night. He would. There was no alternative. If she was going to have problems with the change, he wanted to know now. He needed to know she was not going to die.

She could hate him. She could threaten him. She could leave him. He would follow anywhere. Eternity was a long time to hold a grudge. He prayed it would not take eternity to earn her forgiveness.

She moaned, twisting, bringing up her legs, and he soothed the heat in her stomach. He had vague memories of the conversion when it had happened to him. The first night Brakka had attacked him, he had been so weak, and Brakka had been greedy until Diego was too dazed to do anything but accept what was happening. Diego had not thought of those

nights for nearly as long as he had lived by the blood of others.

It had happened, could not be reversed. Why think about it? He frowned now, realizing how much he had forgotten. Brakka had completed the exchanges in a more expedient fashion than Diego had with Titania, within two nights. Diego had been unaware of the catastrophe he had created with Titania. When all he had wanted was to keep her safe, he had failed miserably.

Guilt rode him hard now, his fist tightening with the surge of anger aimed at himself. He could not let her die. Not an option. Was this really any better? What kind of a life was he giving her? She would never see the sun again. Never eat. Outlive her entire family and her friends. She would be in constant peril, always in danger of discovery.

Her legs relaxed, and she let out a long breath. The heat in her stomach faded, but he did not let his guard down, not yet. Her hand inched across his chest, and he wrapped his fingers through hers. She nuzzled his still bare chest, and he allowed just a moment's happiness in her arms.

Diego studied her face. She would be beautiful standing in the moonlight. She stole his breath now. His mouth softened from its tight hold. He would give her anything to make her happy. If she could accept this, accept him.

He'd had no life before her. He could see that. Endless battles with Brakka. Long, solitary nights of silence. He would not go back to that life. It had not been a life worth living. Titania had changed all of that.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Her voice, her compassion, her unselfish nature. With his arms around her, he rested, a smile on his lips for the woman in his embrace. When the sun began to beat at him, making his limbs heavy, he resented its rising.

* * * *

Titania woke slowly, feeling a heavy weight holding her lids closed, like sandbags were holding them down. The pounding on her door was loud enough to rattle her teeth.

"Damn it! Tani. Where the hell are you?"

She swallowed, tried to speak, but couldn't. She just wanted to roll over and fall asleep again. The pounding started again. "Come on, Titania. Laney knows you're in there. Open this door!" *Or I'm going to break it in.* She heard him say it. She knew she did, except he was muttering behind a closed door.

Titania blinked and threw an arm over her eyes. Fading sunlight poured in through the slit in her curtains. Her eyes did not appreciate it. They felt dry and hot. The pounding started again, harder, anxious, persistent. She adjusted the curtains with a flick of her hand and sighed in relief when the room dimmed again. The door popped open with her next effort. She was getting a lot of practice with doors lately, she thought wryly.

"I told you she was in here," Laney said, glancing around the room while following Houston.

"Well, after the last few nights, I wanted to make sure."

"I'm fine," she got out through dry lips. "Did you have to wake me up to do it?"

Houston stared at her. "You're kidding, right? Even you don't sleep this late."

She rolled over, palming her hands under her cheek. "Why? What time is it?"

"Almost seven."

"God!" Titania groaned. "Please tell me you did not wake me up at seven in the morning. You're nuts."

"No. Tani. Try seven at night. You've been out cold all day. The phone didn't wake you up, and I've been beating the hell out of your door for ten minutes."

She wrinkled her nose, trying to surmise if he was joking or not. His sarcasm was a little thick.

"I'm sorry, Houston," she murmured, awake but barely. "I swear I never heard the phone." Her brow furrowed. "After we stopped at the hospital, we stayed up kind of late. I think I fell asleep on him." She giggled. "In fact, I know I did." Memories of his warm shoulder were returning.

Houston shook her. "Tani, what is with you?"

"Houston?" Laney interjected. "I think you're going overboard again. He obviously isn't here now."

"I know," he relented. "Tani, I promised Laney I'd take her out tonight. Are you going to be all right here by yourself?"

"Sure, is there a shelf somewhere?" she asked him flatly.

"Tani, that isn't fair." She felt his annoyance and wasn't surprised when he tried to argue. "I'm supposed to take care of you. Your mother—"

"Isn't here." She sat up, giving up on getting any more sleep. She brushed her hair back. "Look, Houston, I'm sorry, but you have to realize I'm not the sixteen year old, scared of

her own shadow, girl you met. I know how to protect myself. How to form barriers, and I hate the fact that since Diego has shown up, you've not only gotten more restrictive with me, but that you hate him."

"And you refuse to take precautions. You can't keep this up, Tani. Don't you realize that?"

She glared at him. "And what do you think I'm going to do? Wear a sandwich sign proclaiming my identity as I walk around town?" She lifted her knees and dropped her head. "Just go, Houston. I want to shower. I promise to behave." She was tired of fighting over this with him. He would never accept that she was a grown woman, rather than a helpless child.

His hand gentled, brushing at her hair before resting on her head. "Tani. I love you. You know I do. I'm not trying to restrict you, but think about this. You've had all sorts of trouble in the last two weeks. You've lost weight—don't tell me you haven't. I just want to make sure you stay in one piece, angel."

She muffled her voice into her blanket. "I know. I just need to be alone. Go ahead. Have fun. I'll be fine."

"She means it," Laney said, tugging at Houston's arm.

"Now you're cross examining me?" she asked tightly. First Houston, now Laney. What was she, five again?

"No!" Laney exclaimed. Laney sat on the bed next to her. "Tani. Regardless of Houston's opinion, I've seen Diego with you. The last thing he would allow is for something to happen to you." She found Titania's hand, holding it. "I'll admit, when

I first met him, he scared me. I thought you were in way over your head, but not now."

"What changed your mind?" she asked, ignoring Houston's scowl.

"The way he looks at you. The way he walks with you. Like you're the only thing on this planet that matters."

"I should be. That's what I pay him for. Why else would he act like that?"

Laney shrugged her shoulders.

"If you girls are done with this little gossip swap," Houston said.

"What is the deal, Houston?" She swept her gaze up to his, realized he was dressed in more than jeans, and Laney wore a nice gown. "Oh, hell. I'm sorry. I completely forgot. Happy anniversary." She gave him a sheepish smile.

"Forgiven. Now we are leaving." He looped Laney's hand into his own. "We'll see you later."

"I won't have hurt feelings if you don't," she offered. Houston winked broadly and closed the door again behind them.

Awake but not by choice, she took a leisurely shower, feeling restless. After sleeping all day, she felt energized after all but falling over last night. She was probably catching a bug after all, she guessed. She still wasn't hungry, and that was beginning to worry her more.

After her shower, she drank a bottle of water and made herself drink half a bottle of juice. The thought of food made her stomach hurt too much. She was getting sick, she

thought with a touch of disgust. Just great. Half a tour to finish, and she was coming down with God knew what.

Looking at her clock, she knew Diego would be arriving soon. With the hotel only a few blocks from the San Francisco Wharf, it was a lure in itself. She made a promise to not be out too long. She just needed a few minutes to feel normal again. She stuffed some money and her card key into the front pocket and left her room.

Light stabbed her eyes the second she walked outside. She blinked heavily, tears forming in streams. She didn't understand why they were so sensitive, and she normally didn't wear sunglasses. But out of necessity, a little booth with tourist trap written all over it was the first place she found. She played and posed, picking out a pair after several minutes. Her eyes were still sensitive, but at least she could walk with her eyes open now.

She strolled along the sidewalk and laughed to herself when no one even looked sideways at her. "Told them so," she muttered. "Like anyone would care. I'm not that big a deal." She purposely didn't meet any gazes, keeping to herself. A single tourist woman out enjoying the sunset.

She believed it until her feet hit the wharf. Someone was watching her. Their heavy gaze felt like a weighted blanket. That was when she remembered Diego's warning. Like *now* was a good time to remember it, when she was probably already in trouble. She shook her head, keeping her gaze lowered, hearing the berating Houston was going to give her over this. The feeling of being watched didn't go away as she walked, either.

She should know better by now than to purposely thumb her nose at Houston. Not watching where she walked, with her thoughts racing around Diego and Houston, she smacked right into a solid chest. She gasped, stepping back in mortification, her cheeks burning. "Oh! I'm so sorry! I wasn't watching where I was going."

"Neither was I," the man said. "My apologies to you." His piercing gaze narrowed. "Do I know you?"

Titania was quick to deny it. "No, I'm sure we've never met." She took another step back, swallowing once. The urge to slam up walls was powerful. There was too much going on around her on the wharf. The cacophony of sound and nuances made it too difficult to define where the threat came from. The sense of being watched was still there. She fought back the shiver.

"They say a friend is simply a stranger you haven't met yet," he said, a smile touching briefly on his lips. It didn't reach his hawk-like gaze. He held out his hand. "I am Tenorio. Albert Tenorio. My friends call me Ten."

"Tani." Her hand vanished in his larger palm. She purposely kept her thoughts blank. His touch made her skin crawl. He had been watching her. She was positive of it.

"Unusual name," he coaxed, relinquishing her hand slowly. She felt his deep curiosity and was thankful when he let her go. She didn't offer her full name. She rarely did in public. "I think I do know you," he said, tucking his chin into cupped fingers, staring at her.

She wanted to turn and walk away. When he spoke again, she knew she was out of luck. "Now I know!" he crowed softly. "Titania Alcott. The singer."

She let her gaze drop. "I try to stay low key to avoid getting mobbed. I like a normal life," she explained with a touch of warning.

"I can understand that. I'm well known in New York myself. Hard to walk around Manhattan anymore." He gestured to an empty railing to the side of the causeway walk. She could hear sea lions coming from the spot he was indicating. "Please, just a moment of your time. I would love an autograph if I'm not being too presumptuous."

She swallowed once more. He was, but she would never say it. Her mother had raised her better than that. She looked around at the throng of people in motion around her. They would be in plain sight and not too far from a glowing street lamp. "All right, but just a few minutes."

He turned, strolling casually. "I'd heard you were very kind."

He leaned against the rails, leaving space between them, and she breathed a little easier. "If you have something," she hinted, wanting to leave this man far behind and soon.

"I do," he said as if drawn from his thoughts. He patted a shirt pocket. "Ah, yes, here we go."

She accepted the business card and his pen. "Do I make it to you?"

"That would be generous of you." His smile was easy. She tried to dismiss the edge of danger that this man emanated. Maybe it was just his nature, not aimed at her. He was

probably just a very sharp-minded business shark. A big one. "Do you have a date in town?" he asked, striking a simple conversation.

"Last night. I'll be leaving soon." She scribbled out her name with a quick bit to Ten, as he liked to be called, she thought with a hidden grimace. He could think he was one, but not for her. She feared that was just what she had walked into. Literally.

His fingers wrapped over hers, holding hers when she offered the card back. "I understand you have an incredible following for your concerts." A frisson of warning slid over her spine. This was not a random encounter, and this man was not a fan. Her first reactions had been on the money. A gentle tug did not get her fingers back.

"So does Celine Dion," she replied, keeping her own expression and her thoughts blank.

He cupped her captured hand within both of his. "I believe you are even better. I have heard your music," he said, his tone dropping, his dark gaze boring into hers. She found herself drawn into them, unable to resist, his fingers holding her tighter, drawing her closer still. Pressure built in waves behind her eyes. It felt like she was floating toward something...

"Titania, there you are," came a deep tone. She snapped around, blinking, dazed, yet relief immediately filled her. However, Diego's expression was implacable when he focused right at the man holding her hand.

"Would you mind releasing her?" There was nothing in his voice or his expression that gave the threat away. It literally emanated from his entire being.

"My apologies," Ten was quick to say. He stood and offered his hand. "Albert Tenorio. Ten if you like."

"Diego, her bodyguard," he replied, ignoring the offered hand, staring unblinking into the other man's gaze. "If you will excuse us," he said. He curved a protective arm over her shoulders and led her away from the railing.

She followed without question, still feeling the other man's disturbing gaze on her back until they had walked a distance into the milling crowd.

He tugged her into the shadows of a shop. "Promise me. You will never, ever do that again." He engulfed her in his arms, burying his face into her hair. The musky scent of his leather jacket filled her senses. He always smelled so good.

"Give an autograph?" Her voice shook now that the threat was gone. Like now was a good time for her heart to panic.

He groaned. "No. I almost was not fast enough. That man, Tenorio, he knows what you are. He is the threat I felt."

"What?" she squeaked. She groaned when it hit her with force. "He was trying to hypnotize me."

"Yes, *cara*."

"Oh, God," she whimpered. She didn't argue when he tucked her into his solid chest. "I had no idea."

"Because you do not expect it, you do not purposely look for it. And not for it to happen to you."

"I should have known. I knew he didn't feel right."

She felt him smile into her hair. "It is not in you to think that way."

"But how did he know where ... I mean, I just wanted to take a walk."

"He is watching the hotel, honey. If you had been where I left you last night, I would have had a chance to warn you." She winced imperceptibly at the scolding.

"I know," she said, her tone apologetic. She tilted her head back, found his pale gaze. "How did you know where I was? I didn't tell anyone."

"*Cara*, I always know where you are," he breathed as his mouth captured hers. There was no restraint this time as desire flooded her, exploded from him. Her heart felt like it burst under the onslaught of his lips, of his tongue as he demanded her surrender, and she gave it easily, completely. Lips blazed a trail as flames licked into life on her skin. Her insides turned molten when his hands smoothed over her back, fisted into her loose hair. Desire grew into a heated ball of need that spread through her stomach and lower.

He groaned deeply, rising from her lips. He let his head fall back to the side of the building, his breathing harsh. "I am taking you back now. No arguments." His eyes were closed.

Titania's fingers glided from the curl of his rich hair to trail a path to his lips. She felt the air shudder through his great chest at her exploratory torture.

"*Cara*, you cannot do that." His voice vibrated, it was so low. Her heart jumped when he snagged the tip of her finger between perfect white teeth. She could hear a rapid heartbeat, amazed when she realized it was his.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

She drew her hand down his chest, splaying her fingers over that drumming heart. She knew she'd burn down to an ember if he didn't kiss her again.

She felt the sound as it grew beneath her palm. A growl. A roar. It didn't matter because his lips were finding hers again, and she was lost.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eleven

Diego's world exploded. His heart raced. His lungs ached. His body burned. Her kiss was the heaven he had always dreamed of, but knew he had been cursed from for eternity. He knew there was no chance of reprieve for them this night. No chance of interruption, of an irate, suspicious Houston to bring out a Herculean strength to avoid confrontation or discovery.

The need outweighed the reasons. His hunger had outgrown his apprehensions. He held beauty in his arms, unlike any other in his long lifetime.

He had fed deeply but quickly on his way to the wharf. That was why he had almost been too late. He dared not be around Titania while still suffering from his rising hunger. She was too close to converting as it was. He had not missed the addition of her sunglasses that evening.

There would have been no one who could control him then, either. He had no idea how he would have reacted to finding her in danger if he had still been feeling that hunger.

As it was, he had nearly killed Tenorio on sight for even touching his woman. Possessive rage. Jealousy like he'd never tasted had reared its ugly head and bitten down hard. Fear for her once he realized what Tenorio had planned, was going to do to her, engulfed him. To his Titania.

Yes, he admitted it, finally to himself. He had laid complete and total claim to her. She had been his since that first

meeting. Without right. Without her knowledge. Without hope. She was his, and he felt no remorse in that fact.

His breath whispered against her sweet, lush mouth. "Hang on." Within one heartbeat and the next, the wharf was gone and he strode down the hotel hall.

Diego knew as he carried her to her room that he should turn away, but his reasons were gone. She deserved the whole truth. He did not blink as he opened her door with a whispered command, securing the locks with hardly a thought, the warmth of her body still pressed against him. He was a living, breathing flame beneath her trusting touch.

Her lips were a soft petal pink, her skin flushed with desire, her heart beating wildly. He had forced himself to leave her side more than once although his hunger for this one woman had raged through him. It had not ceased since that first kiss.

She pressed herself into his hold when her feet touched solid ground beneath them, her curves molding to him deliciously. He loved the way her hair slid through his fingers, weaving them through the dark mass, absorbing the heat of her into his body.

His lips trailed along her jaw to settle near her ear, her scent filling his mind, his every nerve, until he crackled like a livewire with wanting her. He pressed his forehead to hers.

"Titania. Tell me now, tell me no, and I will leave." *Please*, he silently begged. He had left the last of his strength on the wharf. Even recriminations did not hold enough weight to stop him.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Her blue eyes were bright with an untapped passion when he lifted to search her face. Her features shined in the moonlight passing through the open curtains of the window. She stole his breath, she was so beautiful to him. His heart beat with a wild rhythm, all the while feelings he had forgotten tore through him: possessiveness, tenderness, enjoyment in another's voice, in their touch. His world was flying apart, shattering, and even as it frightened him, his desire to answer the call of her darkening gaze was not ignorable.

He was shocked to find his hands were shaking when he lifted them to cradle her face. His voice was gone, all the promises he wanted to make to alleviate fears, unsaid. He was lost in the darkened passion of her eyes.

Her lips were sweet when he lowered his to them, caressing, brushing with tenderness. An unknown urge to lay his mark, to announce his claim for her, was rising, becoming a heated brand on his thoughts. He knew she was innocent, but she accepted him. She trusted him. That stunned his brain, freezing him for a heartbeat.

How could she trust death? He had ruined her life! But even that was a fleeting thought when her hands lifted to slide over his body, eradicating thought completely. Diego delved between the sweet shape of her lips, feeling her wrap her arms around him. Her body fit perfectly with his. He knew it even still dressed as they were. Somehow, this one woman had been made for him.

He forced himself to move slowly, to savor every caress, every whispered breath. He slid his fingers down her arms,

felt her answering shiver, heard the racing of her own heart. His touch gentled more as he began to slide her shirt up, pulling it over her and away.

All he could do was stare. Soft, pale globes of flesh encased in red satin. "My favorite color," he breathed. "Beautiful, *cara*." He dipped his head and graced each with a slow moving kiss. Her arms found him, holding on tightly.

He braced an arm under her knees, finding her mouth as he lifted her. Like a precious treasure, he laid her down on the bed, simply looking at the beauty he had been granted. He stretched out with her, his fingers following the curve of her shoulder and down her body to trail away gently on her thigh.

He thrilled at her sigh of wonder, which turned into a heated moan when he lowered his head to tease the hard peak of one nipple between tender teeth. He maneuvered his hand behind her and removed her bra, letting it slide down her arms to be tossed away. He groaned, finding the lusciousness of her body exposed to him.

There were no words to describe what was happening inside him, what he felt. So he told her with his touch, his lips, his gaze. Lush, kiss-pinked lips curved in answer. She knew. Somewhere in the back of his passion-soaked mind, he knew she was in his thoughts, entrenched, as he was in hers. She would always know.

He kissed a trail from her jaw to the valley of her breasts, inhaling her fragrance like the garden she was to his senses. Soft, flushed skin, her lush hair, the call of her feminine scent. Diego absorbed it all. He would never be free from her.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

He laved long kisses on her breasts, their softness fitting perfectly into his touch. She writhed and moaned when he drew one hard tip into the damp heat of his mouth. Soft, keening sounds of passion were growing with each caress.

He pressed a palm against her center, and she tensed. "I need to see you. All of you." She relaxed as he nipped at her stomach, muscles jumping once when he found the recess of her belly button. His touch was as slow as he could make it, fighting the growing urgency to make her his. The need was a growing, burning thing, crawling through him.

Jeans slid away, the red strip of cloth that covered her center insignificant as they disappeared with a single pull. He swallowed as he gazed upon her, lying trusting beneath his touch.

"I do not deserve you." Her eyes glowed, sexy, dark and heady in the moon's glow through the hotel window.

Her hands gripped the bed sheets when he let his mouth move over her again, when he delicately probed her heat with his tongue. He was bathed in the feeling of her trust, the newness arcing over her with brilliant, electric color, without a taint of fear anywhere.

For the first time in centuries, during a life of loneliness and solitude that had known no bounds, he forgot he was cursed. Forgot everything as he sought her pleasure.

Her touch was tentative, but growing surer as her own passions rose with his and her own needs became unbearable, desiring. Clothes disappeared with a thought.

Lightning arced between them as he rose above her, his fingers tracing the delicate shape of her hips, of her breasts,

until he lay cradled between her thighs. He clenched his teeth as blinding ecstasy surged through him, her wet heat beckoning. He found her mouth then found his home as he possessed her. He swallowed her sharp cry, absorbing the pain. She was his.

His movements were slow, building her up again. Nails raked his back as passion flared through her, engulfed him. He tasted her skin with his tongue. Heat consumed them.

Hunger like he'd never felt knifed through him, clawed at him. A taste. Just a taste of her. He gritted his teeth, fought against it. He could not endanger her.

He thrust deeper, fighting the call, needing to feel her to keep him grounded as wave after wave of rapture flowed from her, bathed him in her joy. Sharp need sliced through his bliss. The pressure grew, a white hot hunger demanding fulfillment.

His lips flowed over the gentle slope of her jaw, his tongue bathing her in sensual heat. She arched immediately into the sensation, throwing her head back in invitation. She called to him. Deep. Primal.

He could smell the sweet call of blood, felt the raging way it pulsed through her body, heard the hard pulsating of her heart behind her ribs. Hot. Needy. Hungry. His lips glided down her throat, and she moaned in answer. She accepted his need as a part of him, and he couldn't deny himself any longer.

Reason was gone. There was only Titania. There was only need. He *needed* to taste, to savor. To claim. She shivered when he caressed her skin, his tongue laving sensually

against her pulse. She whimpered once in answer, in need. Incisors exploded into his mouth. For the first time in his dark life, when his teeth sank deep, he left his mark, branding her for eternity.

Ecstasy. Sweet divinity. His mind filled with radiant color. Lightning seared him, wrapped around him. Her taste was like no other. Hot, sweet, addictive. She poured into him, filled him, filled the aching, empty void of his soul as he devoured her. Pleasure like he'd never known coursed through his body, through his mind. His body thrust deeper still, filling her, feeling her release as her body moved with his.

He closed the narrow wounds with a tender caress, gripping her closer when she cried out, barely able to restrain the glory of the moment from exploding from his body. He shattered into a kaleidoscope of colors, yelling her name.

His breathing was ragged as he cradled her in his arms, pressing his face to her skin, bracing his weight off her slimmer body. A languorous feeling he had never experienced stole over him.

For the first time ever, his insatiable needs, his burning hunger was sated. His insides were not clawing apart with hunger. He felt completely at peace.

Aftershocks traveled up and down her delicate frame, soft moans, sliding from between kiss-swollen lips. His scent mingled with hers, the mixture of sex and first blood blended strongly on his senses, in the room.

Something had been different from the very beginning. He was powerless to fight destiny, but Brakka was out there. And others would look for her specifically now that she had been

claimed. He had essentially put a "do not touch, trespassers will be destroyed" sign on her. He knew she was not a stay inside kind of woman. That thought terrified him.

Guilt slammed into him anew. He had stolen so much from her. Her freedom, her career. She could not possibly continue with her life at risk for each appearance. She was going to hate him. There was no doubt.

Fingers trailed across his shoulder. "What is it?" Her voice was soft, husky with sated desire. He could not believe when he felt his body's reaction to it. After so long without a soul to match his, he was beginning to understand what a miracle she was to him.

He rose on his elbows, looking down at her beautiful face. His fingers automatically found the warm richness of her hair, spread like a thick, black blanket around them. "I will not let you go. Not now, not ever. It is bound to cause problems."

Dazzling eyes stared back into his. "Like Houston?"

He brushed a kiss across each lid. "He is only one. I knew when I found you, things were going to happen. I did not know how."

She studied him. "You're not telling me everything, are you?" Her fingers traced his mouth. He smiled, kissing each fingertip. She really liked his mouth.

He slid from her, keeping her cradled, his legs imprisoning her. "No. Not yet. I do not know how," he admitted. "But we will work through this." *I will always protect what is mine*, he silently vowed.

His eyes drifted closed, and the delicate touch of a hand roamed over his brow. "Whatever it is, it can't be as bad as I feel you worrying over."

He grasped her hand, shackled it in strong fingers, placing a kiss in the center of her palm. "Just promise me, when I cannot be with you, you go nowhere without at least Houston. I cannot be with you during the day." He tilted to look at her, a frown forming. "You purposely forgot today."

She blushed, ducking her face into his chest. "I know. Houston was at it again, and I guess I got tired of hearing it."

He touched her chin with his fingers, lifting her to his searching eyes. "Promise me, *cara*. Do not go off like that again. I have told you it is not safe."

"I know. I believe you."

"Now," he retorted flatly. "He is no longer responsible for your safety or anything else. When I cannot be with you, you must stay safe." His finger threaded through the expanse of hair cascading around her shoulders. Silken and heavy, just the weight of it in his hands made him hungry for her again. He rubbed a few strands across his lips, savoring the texture, inhaling the scent. "I cannot go back to the life I had." It was spoken before he could censor his thoughts.

"What life?" Desire coiled tighter. He stroked her body, feeling her come alive under his touch. Her eyes sparkled at him. "You're in the mob, aren't you? A criminal?"

He chuckled, bringing her supple body higher on his. "No, *cara*."

"You do have the look," she said, teasing him through lowered lashes. "All that black leather." She shivered when he nipped at her shoulder.

"My life was very dark. You give me laughter. I do not want to lose that."

She tensed then relaxed when he lifted her to straddle his hips. "You know, Diego, I still have my tour to finish. A relationship between us is not only crazy, but unethical. You are my group's employee."

"Honey, this is more than a relationship." His head went back with a snap when she rubbed against his body with her hot center. His voice was hoarse. "This is forever." *Eternity* shimmered in his thoughts. Whether it was his thought or hers, he did not care.

She gasped, poised over him. "Diego! Is this normal?" He felt every inch of her shudder in hungry need.

He lifted his hips to meet her. His jaw tightened, agonizing pleasure beating at him. "It had better be. I need you." He held her tenderly with his hands, and she enveloped him, her slick sheath taking him, her cries of passion meeting his.

Raging heat swamped him as she began to move, riding him in a slow, torturous rhythm.

Nothing had prepared him for her. He had never dreamed of such a woman in his life. Fingernails raked lightly down his chest, and a growl rose in answer. He would always want her, just like this. Passionate. Hungry. Needing him.

He felt a frisson of fear. What if she did not survive the change? His gaze swept up her body, caressing every inch

with his hungry eyes. She had to survive. There was no other option.

His hands rose, cradling flushed skin to palm a full breast. Her cries rose when he took one firm nipple between his lips, her arms clasping around his head.

She was so soft to his wandering touch, his tongue leaving a damp trail over her skin. He sat up, pulling her feet behind his back, and felt her reaction, her body shuddering in ecstasy, her head thrown back to his hot mouth. He slid up the column of her throat, nipping at the underside of her jaw. She writhed and moaned helplessly against the onslaught.

Diego inhaled, and the hot scent of her crashed into his senses. She whimpered low in her throat when he brushed his tongue over her pulse. "Mine," he breathed against the erratic beat of her blood. She clenched him tighter, and he was sure he had died.

His hold was tender while he sipped at her skin as his teeth broke through. He restrained his impulses, closing the puncture without gorging himself.

He held her head, finding her mouth and losing himself in her. Desire raged, filled him until he could not take her sweet punishment any longer.

He flipped them back onto the bed, hearing her cry of surprise change to one of red-hazed hunger. Throaty whimpers of passion sank into his blood. He felt her body winding tighter, felt the fireball building in her blood stream.

Diego watched her precious face as she exploded, imprinting her surge of ecstasy into his memory for all time.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

His heart thundered against his ribs, flames searing him inside and out when he followed her.

* * * *

Several miles northeast of San Francisco, down a long, rarely-used road, Tenorio waited by a phone. He picked it up on the first ring. He leaned back with a casual grace that belied his eagerness.

"Did you get her?"

"No, Ten. She hasn't been out of her room since her little walk."

"Any calls from her room?"

"Nothing on the tap."

"Just remember," Ten advised his man. "Whatever it takes. I want her." Fists tightened in anticipation.

"Not a problem. We'll get her. Oh, and the mini bar was a snap."

"Good," Ten purred. "The suggestion I planted will take over under any stress. If she uses the bar, even better. Her natural barriers will be weak." Ten actually felt a bit aroused at the thought. He shifted his weight. "I cannot wait to get to this one. She's so damn capable. She'll be a hot addition to the project."

"It's been a while since we've had one this pretty," the low voice said, laden with suggestion.

"Don't worry. All I need is her mind. You know the men get the rest." He pulled down on his bare chin. "I might just taste her myself. Either way, she's going to be an asset. Are the others ready?"

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

"And willing. The last test proved positive. The enhancement is working."

"Excellent," Tenorio said. "Call me if anything changes. I have to reply to the invitation from that cocky Senator. He's still hounding me to attend his damn cocktail party tomorrow night."

"Have a nice evening." The tone implied the function would be a chore.

Tenorio grunted in complete agreement, more excited by her planned capture than by the evening he would have to suffer through.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twelve

Titania woke up thirsty. Terribly thirsty. She cried out sharply, slapping a hand over her eyes when she cracked them. Sunlight flooded her room through the open curtains. It felt like a thousand hot knives were stabbing her from the inside. She commanded them closed, breathing heavily as the pain receded.

She lay there a moment, gathering the will to move. She felt lethargic, like she wasn't supposed to move or be awake. Maybe she hadn't gotten enough sleep last night. She turned to find the clock and groaned. Seven again. She was sleeping too much.

That did it. She was going to have to go to the doctor. She couldn't eat. She was sleeping like the dead. Sunlight was killing her. She was sick. She knew it. She burrowed deeper into the bed. Maybe she would feel better after a shower. She spent several minutes considering how much better before actually doing it, though.

After crawling from bed, she took a bottle of water from the mini bar and drank it dry. She stared at the empty bottle in her hand. Her stomach almost gave it back to her. "Definitely sick." But it helped ease her dry feeling after a few minutes.

She knotted her hair, starting the hot water. Her gaze caught her reflection, and she winced. "You look like hell, girl." Her skin was pale, and there were shadows under her eyes. Houston had been right. She had lost weight.

Her vision drifted up and found a mark on her neck. Her hand rose, almost cradled it in her palm. "That rat. He gave me a hickie." Steam started to infiltrate her fogged brain. "Shower. Get moving," she ordered herself.

All she had the energy for was to lean against the wall on her hands and let the water pummel her. Her body was sore in several places, but just thinking about how she had gotten that way made her smile.

Titania knew it was insane. There wasn't any way this was going to work out between her and Diego. All he had to do was look at her, and she went up in flames, and if he kissed her ... Her eyes closed as fire raced through her blood.

There was a light knocking on her door, and she turned off the water. She wrapped the robe around her with leaden hands then realized she had heard the door over the shower and through the closed bathroom door. And Houston had knocked. Not pounded as he was prone to do.

She shook her head, gradually working her way through the quicksand feeling she had awakened with. The knot of her hair came loose, and she let it tumble down her back with a flick of her fingers. She rubbed her eyes, actually opening the door herself. "Hey," she said.

He walked in two steps then halted. He turned to her very slowly. "Christ, Tani."

She let the door swing shut. "I know. I'm going to the doctor. You don't have to say it."

He shook his head, his gaze raking over her. "No. Not that, though you should. As soon as possible. You're still losing

weight." He leaned over and sniffed at her neck, snapping straight. She slapped a hand to her neck.

"What was that? I just got out of the shower. I know I don't stink."

"That bastard!" Houston snarled. "He marked you!" Houston's hands clenched as he loomed over her, rage turning his expression lethal.

"What are you talking about?" she squeaked, taking a step back. "He gave me a hickie. Big deal."

His hands shot out, gripped her by the shoulders. "Damn it, Tani! You don't get it!" he snarled at her through a tight jaw. He shook her once. "He's going to use you. He's a killer." He gave her a disgusted glare. "And worse, you slept with him."

Fire burned her cheeks. She tilted her chin in defiance. "And if I did? I am an adult. You going to run home and tell my mother?" she goaded. She must have been feeling better, her blood running hotter as her energy rose.

"Geez, Titania." She winced. He only used her full name on rare occasions, like now, when he was furious with her. "No, but I should. Why don't you want to listen to me on this? Let him be your bodyguard if you have to, but don't get messed up with him."

His intensity was unusual, and he had been very adamant since the beginning. "What aren't you telling me?" she asked him very quietly. "You keep warning me off of him, swearing I'm going to end up hurt or worse. What do you know about him?"

Houston avoided her gaze. "It's not my place to tell you," he told her after several dragged out seconds.

"Houston, I've trusted you with every secret I ever had. When I met you, I didn't even want to talk to you. I just wanted to sing. You and your guitar changed me in a lot of ways, but it did not give you the right to run my life. Just because you've appointed yourself as my guardian, at my age," she stressed, "I have the right to live."

His gaze found hers again, though his hands remained on her shoulders, he gentled his hold on her. "I know Tani. But why him?"

Diego's voice reached them from everywhere in the room. "Release her." There was no hurry to the request, but any who heard knew it was a demand.

"Diego. He is not going to hurt me." She really was reaching the point of exasperation with these two.

"I am aware of that, *cara*. However, I cannot help it when I awake to find a man in your room, to feel a little jealous." Houston's hands slid from her shoulders with a sufferable sigh. He ran a hand through his hair.

Houston didn't blink an eye when Diego materialized directly in front of Titania. "Why, Diego? Why Tani? She's hardly twenty-three. She has her whole life ahead of her."

He took his time answering, examining Titania. She trembled when his thumb brushed against her cheek. Power. She swallowed, feeling the full force of it in his pale eyes. He hadn't just woken up jealous. He had woken up enraged. Flames of anger still flickered in his eyes.

She slapped a hand over her eyes, wanting to deny the heat she could see. He pulled her hand down and placed a kiss in the palm.

"Do not, *cara*." She swallowed again, harder. The sun had set, and she could still see as if it was the middle of the day. She began to shake and wrapped her arms around her stomach.

"I am sick," she murmured. "I am really sick."

"No, *cara*." He stroked her again then faced Houston. "Let me put this in a way I believe you will understand," Diego told Houston succinctly. "I believe she is my mate."

Houston coughed, hard. "You're joking! You're of the Brethren."

Diego's muscles clenched, rippled beneath the dark leather that always smelled so good. "No, I am not. I do not claim any of them."

Houston's censure was loud and clear. "I didn't think any of you did. Diego, I can't let this happen. I can't let her get hurt." He grimaced, a frown growing. "Have you ever met her mother? I'm dead as it is."

Diego turned to her and tilted her chin up, robbing her of air, his gaze hot and needy. She began to throb deep inside just from the unveiled hunger in his gaze. "I hate to tell you this, but you cannot stop what is."

"But you're a—" Diego's head snapped up, his eyes flaming. "All right. I know." Houston's sigh was deep and heartfelt. "It's not like I run into your kind all the time."

"Likewise," Diego drawled without humor.

"What is he talking about?" Titania asked, leaning back to stare up at him.

"Later." Diego brushed a kiss to her hair. He faced Houston again. "Truce?" She sensed Diego was offering more, his body was too still, energy leashed, barely.

"Do I have a choice?" Houston groaned with a harsh edge. Diego shook his head. Time seemed to drag until she heard Houston's reply. "Truce, but it's killing me to even consider it. Why are you even acting like this? I've never heard of this happening."

"I am different," Diego replied.

Houston snorted. "No kidding."

Titania smacked Diego's shoulder with a fist. "Hey. Would someone explain this to me? What is going on here?"

"I'll leave you to it," Houston said, spinning on a heel. He stopped at the door, his voice low. "If anything happens to her, Diego, I'm coming after you."

"I take that responsibility."

She shuddered at the calm acceptance in his voice. Then she was alone with him. She took a small step back, realizing that she was alone with him, in her robe, and he had just admitted something huge to Houston.

"Just who are you, Diego? And who are the Brethren? You are part of a gang or something, aren't you?"

He removed his coat, sliding it over the back of a chair. "Do not fear me, honey. You already know more about me than any other person alive. You know there is nothing to fear." He reached for her hand. She hesitated for a brief

moment, but wound her fingers through his. He sat in a chair and pulled her onto his lap.

"My name is Diego Viteri. When I was cursed with this life, I was thirty-seven. I am not a part of a gang or an organization," he told her, his lips quirking when she gasped. "You forget, I can read your mind, honey. If you wanted to, you could read mine as well. With a little practice, it would become almost second nature."

His arms tightened comfortably as she tried to assimilate what he was telling her.

She held up a hand, and he paused, waited. "Houston knows what you are about to tell me, doesn't he?"

"He does. He has known since the beginning."

Her gaze searched him. "Why didn't he say something then? Why was he being so mean to me about you?"

"Because the second I claimed you, you became my responsibility. When you let me into your life openly, he could not confront me. I am the one who has to tell you. It is an unwritten code of honor between us, ones like us, anyway."

She shook her head, barely acknowledging the tug of his hand as he pulled her further against his body. He cradled her, his arms curving around her waist. "Curses? Code of honor? Claiming? You are so losing me, Diego. Just what is going on?"

He pressed his forehead to hers. "Can you promise me to keep an open mind on this? Just hear me out before you run screaming through the door."

She swung a foot loosely. "This has a lot to do with your ability. Like your bamfing and healing, doesn't it?"

His chuckle rolled from beneath her shoulder. "Bamfing?"

"Your ability to just pop in and out. Something started in Hollywood, but that's what they call it now." She tilted her chin up, searching his expression. Cool and collected as always. The tension was encased in the broad shape of his shoulders, the tightness of his body against hers. Her hand lifted to trace the shape of his mouth. "No one should be born with a mouth like that. It just isn't fair."

He snagged the tip of a finger between perfectly formed white teeth. He swept his tongue over her, and she shivered as shocks traveled over her body. He released her with a soft groan.

"Yes, it has everything to do with what you call my abilities." Torment filled his gaze. Finally, he sighed with acceptance. "I guess the easiest way is just to show you." He sat straight and opened his mouth.

She froze. Felt the blood drain from her face. "Are those...?" She sat staring, gaping blankly at the sharp incisors that two minutes ago hadn't been there.

He nodded. "And they are very real."

Her hand lifted again to her neck, right where it throbbed. "You didn't." She was appalled at how much her voice shook. She had never thought of herself as a coward. "Just tell me you didn't." When he didn't answer, she slid from his lap. She knew it without a doubt. He had. "You're a ... a vampire?" Her voice cracked, and she swallowed. She took another step away from him. "And Houston knew?" She fisted her hands, fighting to keep from shrieking her head off.

She felt her legs go weak when he nodded, but she didn't hit the floor. Somehow he had moved so quickly, so effortlessly he caught her in his arms. She blinked and found herself in his lap once more. "I should have thrown you out the first chance I had." She was shaking, and she couldn't stop.

"It would have saved us both. Now, it is too late. I will not let you go," he whispered into her hair. "I need you, Titania. Desperately, completely."

"Why? For food? Do you even hear me? I'm talking like I believe this nonsense." She jumped from his lap this time. "Something happened," she muttered. She gripped at the robe, tugging it tighter, needing to feel something normal. The thick terry cloth holding her together felt normal. "I was attacked. Knocked on the head. Had to be." Her hands lifted, fisted into her hair, pulling at it absently. "I'm sick. The beginnings of insanity."

He stood, found her wrists and drew them down, his arms locking around her waist. "You are not crazy. And no, I do not consider you food. I never have." His hands pushed up at her hair, sweeping it back, repairing what she had done. "But something happens to me when I am with you. The part of me that wants to be bad, that craves to feel the power of life and death, is controllable. Until now, it is a fight I have managed alone, and it has not always been an easy one. Now, all I need is your name, your voice, and I can take what I need and not feel the torment of my bleak existence like I have for centuries."

She gaped, feeling numb, finding his gaze above her. The real honesty of his fight was right there, bared for her to witness for herself, the glowing red of the insatiable hunger right out front. All the long nights, the temptation to take what he knew he could so easily. The ache of bitter loneliness, the torture of knowing what he was. Her bottom lip became trapped between her teeth.

"Centuries? There's that word again. Just how old are you?" Her hands pushed on his hard chest, trying to keep perspective. To keep space. It was impossible to think when he was holding her so tight.

"I did the math once. I believe this year, I would be four hundred and eighty-six. Give or take a few months."

"Oh boy," she breathed. "You are so robbing the cradle with me." She raked a hand through her hair, causing it to fall in disarray again.

"That is one of Houston's concerns." Relief was evident in his tone. "But you have to believe me. I would never hurt you, and I am not going to kill you. You are probably the safest person on the planet right now."

"Why would he think that?" A soft frown pulled her brows together.

"The Brethren are known for it. Killing their prey is commonplace. He is afraid I am toying with you."

"But you say you're different, not like them." Her hands lifted to his face, holding onto him to see into him. "How?"

"I will not kill to live. Self-defense, or to protect those I call my own, but not to live. Never to live. I believe I am the only

one who lives by that code of honor. The only one like me," he told her very quietly.

"Never?" She was trying hard to adjust her thinking. Vampires didn't exist. At least, they weren't supposed to.

"Not once. When I changed, I could not cope. My mind could not keep up with the changes; the necessity was abhorrent to me. That inability is what I believe has saved me from becoming what Houston fears I am. Even when I accepted the necessity, to survive, I could not kill for it. Vampires can be very deceiving, but not me with you. Except for the two times I told you of, I have not tried to warp your memories. I have not misled you."

She withdrew from his embrace. Instead of acknowledging the absence of his warmth, she pulled on the robe's knot. She needed space. What he was telling her was incredible and totally bizarre.

"So, you're a vampire." She wrapped an end of the robe's belt around her hand, back and forth. "And you live on blood."

"Yes."

She tried to not look at him. She knew she'd scream like a wild woman if she did. Why hadn't she put it together? Able to work only at night? His incredible strength? The cold, deadly part of his soul? She knew he had it, had touched it the night she had stopped Brakka.

"You can really fly, too, can't you?"

"Honey, you are purposely trying to scare yourself again."

"Just..." She licked her lips. "Can you?"

He sighed, standing once more. "Yes."

"Oh God." Her hands fisted into her hair then fell limply. "This is insane. You know that, don't you? I am not having this conversation. Vampires do not exist."

The flash of pain that emanated from Diego was staggering. She stepped back when he tried to reach for her. "Don't. Just, not now." She rubbed a weak hand over her eyes. "Oh. My. God. My eyes!" Accusation sparked in her gaze. "What did you do to me? Why the hell can I see!"

Diego stopped moving, every muscle intent on her. "See?"

She launched a fist at him, hitting him square in the chest. He didn't move. Not even a grunt of acknowledgement. "Yes. See. As in high noon. Except I can't stand the damn sun anymore. My eyes have been killing me for two damn days, and you did it. You did this to me." His tight jaw was all the answer she needed. "Get out. Leave. You are fired. I never want to see you again."

"You are not safe, *cara*," he reminded her.

"So you keep telling me. Where is Brakka? Why hasn't he found me again? I can handle this, him. The whole damn army if I have to. Just go."

Cara, whispered through her mind.

Hands clamped over her ears. "Do not do that anymore, either! Do not talk to me. Just leave. I am not asking again."

He bowed his head. *As you wish, cara*. She shrieked loudly, and he was gone. Sobs were starting, tears building. She frantically searched the room. Even his coat was gone.

The robe went flying, and she jumped into clothes. She had to get out of there. She had to get far away from him.

Her hand was shaking when she dragged it over her damp, shocked eyes.

A vampire! She snorted. Never even saw it coming. Cruel laughter tried to form. Houston was so going to love this, rubbing her face in it. She should have listened from the beginning instead of following her damn instincts.

She couldn't even tell him she was leaving. Houston would try to stop her and then kill Diego. She couldn't let either of them be hurt. Not because of her.

She pocketed all of her loose cash, grabbed a juice to sip on and called the desk for a cab. She could fly out of there. Go home. She could hide for a few days until she figured out what was wrong with her.

She still needed to see a doctor, but now that would have to wait. Escape. She had to get away.

How had she let things get so crazy? Why had she needed to stop that stupid fight? She stumbled once while going out the side doors where she had asked for the cab to wait for her. All she needed was for Houston to see her in the state she was in.

Her hand found a wall and she blinked, waiting for her vision to clear. She was sicker than she thought if she couldn't walk a straight line. She climbed into the cab and ordered it to the airport. Her head fell back with a weak thump, her eyes closing almost immediately.

A black cloud was dragging over her mind. She was dying. She knew she had waited too long to do anything about her health. Why hadn't she paid closer attention to it? She hadn't

really felt bad, but now it was sneaking up on her and sapping her strength. She felt weak all over.

The cab had only moved for a few minutes when she heard a curse bellowed from the front. The driver slammed on his brakes followed by the wrenching sound of the door she sat by.

"Have you lost your mind?" She recognized the snarled voice. She tried to open her eyes, but her vision was hazy. Hadn't she just fired him?

"Are you still a vampire?" She spoke through lips that felt too thick, a tongue that was too dry.

His body was shaking violently, his arms holding her close to his chest. "Yes."

"Then no." Nothing was computing properly. She was on her way to the airport. She was trying to get away from him. Wasn't she? Why was he holding her, marching up the street?

His arms tightened like vices, his stride jerking. He buried his nose in her hair, hissing a long sound of pain, then he collapsed to his knees. With a faint recognition, she heard the report of a gun silencer. "I will find you," were the last words he said when he toppled completely over, pillowing her body with his own.

Shapes were swimming, lights were melding, glaring back at her. It almost hurt just to breathe.

Titania heard footsteps running toward her. But she couldn't talk, couldn't ask for help. Every muscle had turned to stone.

"Is he dead?"

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Someone pulled her up, threw her over a shoulder. "Yeah, the bullet nearly went through. No pulse."

"Roll him in the gutter. The cops won't find him 'til morning."

Her head was shrieking at her. Dead? Diego? No! She silently screamed. Tears fell from her eyes as she passed out.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Thirteen

Diego groaned. A gentle hand rested on his shoulder. "Don't move. I'm almost done." His eyelids flickered. Laney. Which meant...

"Some bodyguard you are." *Houston*. Diego's shot in the dark had worked.

"I would like to see how good you look with a bullet in you." He clenched his teeth as Laney finished her ministrations.

"It's almost out, but you can't heal this by yourself. It took a chunk of something I don't want to name."

"No gymnastics, then?" His teeth clacked together when a finger dug deeper, but he forced himself to remain perfectly still.

"I wouldn't," she said back, sympathy in her words. He clenched a fist while her fingers probed, then they both sighed in relief when he heard the distinct metal clink of the bullet hitting pavement. She pressed a cloth to the open wound in his back.

"I have stopped the bleeding."

"Nice trick," she mused, seeing the blood trickle to nothing for herself. "Did you stop everything? I swear you were dead when we got here."

"I can shut down my heart at other times than to rest. It would have been inexcusable to bleed to death from a bullet."

"Come on, pal." Houston hooked a hand under an arm and helped Diego to move, to lean against a building. He looked

beyond Houston, seeing he had been brought into the shadows of the alley away from the street where he had been shot. "Want to tell me what happened so I can validate killing you?"

"I told her the truth." Diego's head sagged back, dragging in air, concentrating on the wound to make it bearable.

"And she lost it." Houston looked away, his expression saying it all. Diego still had ground to cover to be called a friend.

"I was shadowing her thoughts, though. Then something changed. I could not find the path. It was like all her thoughts began to scramble. I could not reach her directly, either."

Houston spun to face him, his mouth a slashed line of anger. "You have been sharing a mental connection with her?" Houston demanded.

"Yes, since the beginning." Diego did not avoid Houston's accusing glares when he raked a hand through his hair. Diego found a pebble and pitched it. It bounced for almost a block. "It was one of the reasons I could not stay away. I was too intrigued by it, by her." He tried to find her, even then, and found open space.

"I told her over and over," Houston snapped.

"So did I," Diego sighed.

"You know, for two men..." Laney coughed into her hand to hide her sarcasm. "Neither of you have a clue. The more you order her, she's going to fight it. She knows she's different. She would appreciate it if all of us quit shoving it down her throat, using it as an excuse to control her."

"I can't let her run rampant," Houston said, throwing out an arm. "Look who she brought home the last time." He gave Diego a caustic stare.

Laney rested a hand on Houston's arm. "Did you ever think maybe she was supposed to?"

"Wha-?" Houston almost fell on his butt from his crouch. "Laney, how could you say that? You know what he is."

Her smile turned angelic, and Diego could have kissed her himself. He forced his expression to remain unmoved instead. He never would have believed to have one of them on his side. The picture of Houston tearing out his throat was not exactly the way to friendship, either. "Remember what happened when I met you?" Her green eyes sparkled in memory. "I never planned on making that audition. I was going to audition for that commercial. I thought it would get me into Hollywood."

Houston wore a silly grin for a split second. He rubbed a hand over his cheek. "Yeah, how could I forget? You walked onstage with that kitten and all hell broke loose."

Laney shrugged, her eyes dancing. "How was I supposed to know it didn't belong to the studio and that you hate cats?"

Houston fell silent for a minute, everything he felt for his wife burning in his light brown eyes. He sighed once, making a decision. He shifted, focusing on Diego. "I'm not letting you forget this, Diego."

Diego took a deep breath, testing his lung capacity. His left lower lung was sore where the bullet had nicked him, but he could live through the pain. He pushed it to the back of his mind.

"I will get her back. I promise you that." Diego used his hands to brace himself, then steadied himself against the wall. Standing, he stretched and winced. "No gymnastics," he warned himself.

He took a deep breath, registered the time of night, the arc of the wind, even how close his best chance of prey was. Diego asked, "I am just curious in this, but why does she not know your secret? Does not seem fair if you ask me."

"I didn't ask you." Houston offered Laney a hand, curving her protectively under his broad shoulder. "It just never came up, honestly, and she would never ask. When I met her, she was skinny, all eyes, and scared to talk to anyone, fearing she'd overload. The only outlet she had was her singing. And man, when you hear her sing..."

Diego smiled, clapping a hand on Houston's shoulder. "You feel blessed."

"Yeah. That's it." He turned, walking with Diego toward the street. "Eventually she opened up, and I met her folks. I think her dad was hoping I'd ask, but I don't love her like that. She feels the same way." Houston shot Laney a look. "Meeting the parents. Now that I want to see."

She punched his arm lightly, biting her lip to keep from laughing, hiding an all too apparent, guilty look from Diego. He was beginning to feel a touch of acceptance in Titania's life from their teasing, at least from Laney.

Diego stopped them in the shadows just off the street. "For all the years you offered her your friendship, and more, I thank you." He gave Houston a gallant little bow.

Houston accepted the thank you with an offered hand of friendship that Diego clasped. "You were someone important before this happened, weren't you?"

Diego glanced away. "Once. Yes. A commander, second to DeSoto." He faced the couple. "I need to replenish." He purposely avoided using the word "feed" out of consideration. "I have an address from the two who have been watching the hotel." He fell silent when Houston cursed again. Diego's brow arched. "I guess she has not found it necessary to share this information with you?"

"She has been giving me the silent treatment unless I look for her first," Houston told him with disgust.

Diego did not say that was because he had been with her almost nonstop. Some things were better left unsaid. He took another deep breath and felt the weight over his heart. Titania was missing, and every atom of his being shrieked at him to find her. The fires of retribution were clawing at him.

He closed his eyes, gathering his energy. "I need to go." He gave Houston the address. It was pointless to tell him not to come. "When you arrive, stay silent. I will find you."

He heard Laney's gasp as he dissolved then shot off into the sky to find what he needed. He would need to be at full strength to bring back Titania. Diego knew Tenorio meant business. He continued to search for her, but found nothing but empty space where usually her light laughter resided.

* * * *

Titania tried to roll over. She moved her arms again and came up short. Her shoulders ached. She let out a long

breath. She was breathing. That was good. Her head was killing her. That was bad. The headache had to be the absolute worst in history. When she tried to open her eyes, light sliced her brain in half. Her lids snapped shut on a yelp of pain.

She lay still for several minutes, trying to figure out where she was. She moved her hands again, and this time the weight of the manacles registered. She found the cold iron of one, traced it carefully with her fingers. She was shackled? She tugged and got nowhere.

She breathed and listened. She could hear her own heart, her breathing. And nothing else. She dared to open her eyes again and managed to make slits out of them. Tears streamed from them, but she forced herself to concentrate beyond the discomfort.

She was in a room, a stark, metal, gray room. She was stretched out on an examiner's table, cold steel, one bright light directly overhead. She shifted her weight. Her feet didn't move.

She tried to find her feet. They were tied down too? She focused. And screamed. Her clothes had been split down the middle. She was as naked as naked could be.

Panic swelled, obliterating the pain of the piercing light. She yanked frantically on the wrist cuffs. Iron links held her. She couldn't possibly break them.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She needed to concentrate. She needed to find a way out of this, whatever this was.

Cara? He sounded so far away.

Diego! Help me.

I am on my way. Tell me what you see.

She managed to make out the flat metal walls, no windows, a single, windowless, metal door. *Oh God! What do they want?* There was a rack of surgical implements waiting on a table nearby, several white sheets. Beakers, tongs. She felt a scream welling up again. She was in a lab!

Stay with me, honey. His voice was calm, soothing, and she reached out for him with a grasping mind.

Titania swung her head around when she heard the door open. Her eyes burned with the increased light from the outside hallway. She could make out two men. One looked like he wore a tux.

"Good evening, Titania. I see you are awake."

She tried to place the voice. She couldn't see enough. Fear made her shake. "Let me go," she pleaded. A hand drifted between her breasts in answer, and she tried to jerk away. Tears burned her eyes in humiliation.

Fingers pinched her jaw, yanking her back. "Look at me, Titania." When she resisted, the fingers tightened. "Look at me and obey." She swallowed, hating herself when she felt herself doing it.

"Listen to my voice," he said close to her ear, a hypnotic rhythm in his tone. "You will stop screaming. You will take your injection like a good girl."

She barely had time to fight the hypnotic commands before she felt the vise of a strap around her arm. Someone plunged a needle into her arm. She tried to jerk herself free, and the fingers were on her jaw again. "Do that again, and I

will twist your breast to hear your scream." The needle and fingers were gone, and she wanted to ball herself up and cry.

Diego? she whimpered in her mind. Shards of pain exploded with the attempt, and she withdrew quickly.

"Sleep, Titania. I'm sorry I cannot attend to you this evening."

"Let me go," she begged again, sobs building as tears leaked from her burning eyes.

"Soon you will be asking for what I have planned for you," the man told her. "Sleep. I will see you in the morning."

She felt herself going numb. She cried out for Diego one more time, the pain so excruciating, she knew she was dying. She had no strength to fight back when the blank darkness took her over again.

"Do you think she's going to be trouble, Ten?"

Tenorio studied his captive with cold eyes. "For about ten minutes. She'll crack. They always do."

"But she was resisting you," the man behind him said worriedly. "No one ever has before. The dose we gave her was more than double."

Ten waved a hand. "Just proves I was very, very right about her. She's capable beyond even what I had imagined. Studying her for the last three years gave me all the information I will need. We will extract her genetic code, as we did with the others. Production of the strands has been moving well. And our test subjects have been receptive." A cell phone rang. Ten pulled it out of his pants pocket with a dark look. His look darkened as he spoke. "Fine. Tell the Senator I had to step out. I'll be there in fifteen minutes." He

snapped the phone closed with a snarl on his lips. "Can't even go to the bathroom without him looking for you," Ten griped.

The other man stared at her one long minute. "The tranquilizer will hold? She shouldn't have woken up after only an hour."

"She may not have drunk enough of the juice," Ten replied unconcerned, spinning on a heel, leaving out the door. "Don't worry. She's out for the duration." Tenorio shot his man a scathing look. "And she's tied and harmless. A woman."

The other man stood straight at the reprimand, closing the door with a firm hand while Ten took the long hallway back up to the main house.

* * * *

Red flames shot from Diego's eyes. He had felt her, heard her, the pain of her terror stripping his last civil thought from his mind. The bitter tang of her fear had coated his tongue, left a foul stench in his nostrils.

Even the hole in his back had ceased to matter. Nothing mattered but her.

They had taken her. They would pay. All of them. He had no room for compassion in his heart. His compassion had been stripped from his arms and was trapped somewhere in that large house.

Diego stood just outside the perimeter wall of the lavish, mansion-styled home in the northeast woods far from San Francisco. He had counted close to fifty men on guard, some relaxed, others patrolling. It did not matter. They all would die.

He watched with hateful eyes as a car pulled from the garage, the gates opening to let it out, leaving down the long, winding road. *Tenorio*. The name was a hissed curse. Nails grew to claws, the taste for blood, for revenge, for death demanding fulfillment.

Titania. His eyes closed, and he inhaled deeply, found the strength to let the car go. He had to find her. She was his only priority. Tenorio was a walking dead man who had no idea judgment had been delivered.

On his next breath, he found Houston's wild scent. Stalking.

"Not tonight, my friend," Diego told him softly. "No one is getting out alive." When Houston stood at his side, he explained in brief the little Titania had been able to describe in her moments of lucidity before he had lost her again. "They are running experiments. He wants to create an army of clones with abilities. This cannot be allowed."

Houston's expression was somber. "You can get to her?"

"I will." Conviction left no room for failure. "Down the road, there is a copse that covers the roadside. Wait for me there. I do not want you to be implicated when this begins."

Houston looked up, side to side. "He has cameras."

"And I am a ghost," Diego replied, shimmering into a cloud of mist, hardly visible to the naked eye.

"Bring her home, Diego." Houston's gaze followed the trail over the wall.

Diego flew with easy speed right up to the house. Finding an open window, he entered without difficulty. This house was never a home. Peace did not rest here at night.

He slid passed a guard on the landing, who whirled, his face pale, grabbing his gun at the ice cold wind that raced over him. Diego ignored him. He was already dropping to the ground, gasping for breath. But Diego found what he looked for in the man's depraved mind. The secret hallway and room where they were holding his heart. His soul.

Fangs grew as man after man collapsed to the ground. Some died of asphyxiation. Others died of aneurysms. Diego did not care. They all had a part in her abduction.

He paused in the last hallway, tapping the man on the shoulder. When he turned, Diego silenced him, claiming his mind with a thrusting force. The man stilled, aware but unable to stop him, tilting to let Diego feed. Hunger raged through him, the red haze of death clouding Diego's thoughts. The man's heart pounded fear-laced adrenaline through his blood. Diego drank deeper. It would be so easy to take every drop. He deserved to die.

Titania. Her whispered name reached him through the killing frenzy. Diego stopped abruptly, the man falling to the ground unceremoniously, letting him wither and die from blood loss. He strode over the prone body, waving a hand at the concealed hallway door. It blew apart at his command. Shouts were beginning to echo throughout the house. The fallen men were being discovered.

A snarl lifted his lips as he deliberately moved through the angled corridor toward the lab where they had chained her. Like an animal. The door before him exploded without his stride breaking. The two men guarding the front room leaped from their chairs, reached for guns.

Diego paused in the shattered doorway and watched dispassionately as the two men flew backward, slamming with paralyzing force against the wall. He stalked up to them, slit the throat of one with a long claw, then captured the gaze of the other.

"You will die a horrible death. You dared harm the one I love." Diego's voice was unemotional, but an ice cold wind seemed to fill the room with amazing speed, seeping into the dying man's skin. Immediately the man began to cough, to gasp for air. The entire time Diego held his gaze, letting the man know he was dying. And he could do nothing to stop it.

The man's gaze widened as air became short. He began to claw at his throat, ripping at the shirt he wore. Nothing helped. Diego kept his gaze locked. The man's lips turned blue, his eyes glazing over.

Without warning, an auxiliary door slid closed behind him, the lock snicking into place from an outside command. Diego looked over his shoulder and growled at the camera tucked into the corner, letting his rage eclipse everything. The camera shattered, electrical sparks filling the room. Papers ignited.

Diego left the dying man on the floor, reaching for the metal door that Titania had seen. The lock gave way easily under his hand, and he pushed it inward.

His heart slammed to an absolute standstill. Fury. Hatred. It consumed him. A violent roar of rage, animalistic and endless, poured from his lungs, echoed off the lower walls and reached the men above. Several men crossed themselves. One fell to his knees and began to pray. He had

found more than six of his comrades already dead within the house. And no security alarm had been sounded. Not a slip of warning to tell the habitants of the intruder.

Diego was at the door then he was at her side. He touched each manacle, and they fell away, smoldering. His gaze took in her state of undress, and whirling, he spotted the two cameras. They disintegrated instantly. Sparks fell from the electrical wiring. Several sheets began to smoke, flares leaping to life.

He yanked off his jacket to tenderly pull her into his arms and wrap her in it. "*Cara*," he whispered, emotions so strong—anger, fear, pain—making his voice hoarse.

He cursed again when he saw the needle track on her arm. Her head lolled back. Her heart staggered weakly. Realization happened quickly. He sniffed her arm and snarled again. She moaned as he cradled her in his arms. "You are safe, honey," he told her. She didn't respond, and his heart clenched.

Sounds were invading his anger, reaching him from the exterior hallway. Several men, the heavy rush of adrenaline preceding them. He knew their thoughts. Knew Tenorio's plans. Knew many of the men had already fantasized about the woman in his hold, only waiting for Tenorio to finish with her before he handed her over for the men's enjoyment.

Cold fury coiled around him as he bypassed the charging men, confused when they found the lab deserted when they knew he had been there just seconds before. The door slammed behind him with an echoing death knell, and he locked it securely.

They would suffer in death as they had wanted her to suffer in life.

Diego scanned the floors overhead, found more men in the rooms. He took a few precious seconds to concentrate on one room in particular. The computer room, where all the research and security information was processed and stored. Screams echoed as explosion after explosion sounded, rocking the house to the foundation. Fires erupted as he passed by furnishings. Drapes, carpeting, wood bookcases, it was all ablaze in a matter of seconds.

The front door bowed out then shattered into the front yard. Diego passed through it without a backward glance. Faintly, he heard shouts to the rear of the house, and a malicious smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

Not five seconds later, fireballs mushroomed over the roof of the house in a succession. Cars and the few storage tanks of fuel. Confusion reigned as men lost their way, unable to breathe in the thick, toxic smoke. Beams cracked and fell, pinning several. Not one would find his way to the clear air of the grounds.

When the fire department unearthed the lab, they would find a slaughter. Six men roasted—roisserie style. Panicked, the men had tried to fight their way out of the secured lab. The explosions had created long, dangerous fingers of metal from the steel walls. Not a single man would escape their jagged ends in the dark, smoke-filled interior.

Diego buried his nose into her hair and just drank in her scent. Slowly, the killing frenzy left him. He called her name, a repeated litany, as much to find her voice and bring her

back to him, as to calm his own furious rage. Silence was his answer. Fear plagued him. Her heart was still working too hard, too slowly. Ice began to seep into his own blood.

It took only a few moments to locate Houston hidden in the trees, his black Ferrari all but invisible in the night's shadows. He found Laney's scent coming from the car, thankful none had been hurt.

He landed on silent feet. Houston leaned against his fender with a worried frown digging into his expression. Relief was immediate until he saw Titania's condition.

Houston's hand shook when he brushed back her hair. "What did they do to her?"

"She has been drugged. She is not taking it well. I have to take her home."

"Home?" Houston met his gaze.

"I have a cabin in Oregon. Meet us there when you are able."

Houston ran a hand over his cheek. "I guess this means the tour is over."

"It has to be. Tenorio escaped. That was him in the Mercedes. I have to eliminate him. He will always hunt her. He will discover she escaped when no one else did." As if to emphasize his point, several explosions went off miles up the road, flames licking at the inky, smoke-filled sky.

"And Brakka?"

Diego brought Titania closer to his chest. "A pest. Nothing more." He was less than concerned about him at the moment. Diego looked once more at the drawn, pale face of the woman in his arms. He could not meet her best friend's gaze,

knowing his next words could very well be his own death sentence. "Houston, she will need time to adjust." His low voice was rough.

Houston's hand froze on the door, his head falling with a whoosh of air fleeing his lungs. "She isn't sick, is she?"

Diego drew a breath, his voice hoarse with the agony of what must be done. "No. I wanted to keep her safe since the beginning, and I failed. The night she was attacked, I was not fast enough. I had no connection with her. I needed that to keep her safe." Diego went for broke. "Once the process begins, it cannot be stopped."

Houston's next words ached. "She could die."

"She *will* die if I do not complete it." Diego matched him ache for ache. He knew the chances, the risks.

Houston's eyes blazed. "You better hope she is alive and well when we get there."

"If she is not, then killing me would be a relief in itself." With that, he launched into the air, coursing toward his home.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Fourteen

Diego bled agonized, pain-filled breaths. His heart was crying. Titania was dying in his arms. It was well after midnight by the time he walked through his own front door. It closed with an audible slap, his anger and fear still riding him hard.

Her breathing was slow, her heart working but erratic. Tenorio had overdosed her. In her weakened state, it was having a catastrophic effect on her. Diego silently cursed the man, but restrained the full power of his fury for their meeting. Diego would find Tenerio, and then the man would know true terror, true power.

As he lay Titania on his bed, he focused his entire being on her survival. She had to live. It became a decree. He was incensed by the condition of her clothing and removed them from her body with loving hands, dressing her in one of his long silk shirts instead with a thought.

He sat on the edge of the bed then pulled her into his lap. He whispered to her. She remained unaware. He drew her scent into his lungs, found the silken weight of her hair and threaded it through his fingers. Strength. When he needed it, he was trembling.

"Forgive me, love."

He kissed her lips and damned himself. He drifted to her cheek and cursed what he was. He found the warmth of her neck and damned Brakka.

Her pulse lay beneath his lips, the sickening odor of drugs mixed with her own scent. The drugs would not harm him, but without help, she would die. And a doctor could do nothing for her now. Recriminations were useless with hell only a kiss away.

He scraped his teeth over her pulse, encouraging his incisors to do this. His arms were tender, his hold loving when his teeth broke through her skin.

Diego's eyes drifted closed, her taste so rich to him. He whispered in his mind, wanting to reach her. Needing her like no other. *Please, cara. Come back to me. I need you. Do not leave me alone again.*

He drank from her, listening with each breath. His. Hers. Her heart labored more with the blood loss. He swept his tongue over his mark, healing the pinpricks.

"*Cara*, listen to me. You must live." He thrust his mind into hers, claiming her without hesitation. The drugs had already started to infiltrate her system, damaging her. He needed to complete the change. She needed to go through the transition to strip the toxins from her system. Without at least this chance, if the drug remained in her system, she would be dead by the next rising.

He cradled the back of her head in his palm. He sliced a wound in his chest, cleansed blood dripping. "Titania," he breathed, letting his life flow into her. She gagged, and he changed position, working her throat until she convulsively swallowed.

There was no hurry to his actions. Remorse no longer had a place within his heart. He had done this. He had no choice

but to see it through to the end. And if she hated him for it, she could, but he would never leave her alone again. He could not.

His actions had bound her to him irrevocably. If she died, he could only pray Houston took mercy and made his death quick.

She swallowed more, and he curled protectively around her. His eyes were closed, his palm curved possessively over her throat, encouraging her sips, when the unaided wisp of her lips penetrated his manic thoughts. He brushed her hair away from her features, seeing a faint pink start to color her cheeks. "Take me as I am, *cara*," he whispered into her ear. He groaned when her mouth moved over him naturally.

After several minutes of agonized torture, he slid a finger under her chin, tilting her to his lips. He swept his tongue across her mouth then delved between her soft lips. "Stay with me. Stay with me long enough to forgive me."

Her lashes fluttered. "Diego?"

He blinked, the weight of damp tears bearing down on him fast. "Yes, love. You are safe."

"Where am I?" Her eyes were glassy, and she squinted, trying to focus. "Why do I feel so weird?"

"You are at my home." He pressed his cheek to her head. "Tenorio drugged you. He did not know about your health. He overdosed you."

"I can't move. I don't feel like myself." Her voice was thready, a touch of fear beginning to vibrate through her words. Chaos flooded her thoughts.

"It was the drug. It will pass soon."

He watched her closely for the first signs. Her lashes fluttered closed once more, her breathing easier. He brushed a thumb across her brow when she frowned.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, a soft exhaled breath.

His gaze widened. "For?"

"Making you leave. Getting in trouble again." She inhaled once, a sharp drag of air. "For everything."

"*Cara*." It was torn from his chest. He had destroyed her life, her future. "I do not deserve you." He rocked her until the first spasm struck.

Muscles clenched, tightened, her body pulling in on itself. Her eyes snapped open. "What's happening?"

"Breathe, *cara*. It will pass. Breathe."

Her head jerked, and her gaze found his. The terror in those blue eyes knifed him through the heart. "Help me," she cried, fear lacing her voice.

"I did, *cara*. The only way I knew how."

She moaned, her eyes closing once again as heat grabbed her. Her skin burned to the touch. She convulsed, wrapping her arms over her stomach. "Diego!"

He held her closer as a violent tremor ripped through her. Her head whipped back, her body arching as a scream split the quiet of the room. Red-tinted tears fell from his eyes unheeded as he held her, watched her body change with the blood he had given her.

She slammed back down into his hold, twisting and writhing in agony. Her eyes were open, unseeing, glazed with pain. He knew the pain she was going through and would have given anything to take back what he had done.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

The suffering, the agony, seemed endless as wave after wave rode over her. Her hands clawed at him, pushed him away at turns. She trembled, and Diego felt as another contortion built. She stiffened, arched, bucked, a silent scream unheard even as it tore through his mind.

A ripple shot up her body, and he slid from the bed, kneeling on the ground. He held her carefully, tenderly as she expelled the wastes of her human body. The convulsions grew into violent heaves, and her body became soaked in sweat. Shock after shock racked her trim body until he feared she would shatter in his arms.

As the last wave faded, her breathing evened out and he expelled a grateful breath. He was shaking when he lifted her limp and exhausted body to his chest and carried her to the shower. He rinsed her lovingly, erasing the proof of her ordeal from her skin, washing the dirt and sweat from her hair.

It was very late by the time he had her dry and comfortable in bed. But a frown of worry still shadowed his pale eyes.

She had survived the conversion, but the reality of her existence would have to be faced when she awakened. If she woke. He was still daring untried territory, bringing her into his world. The phrase "anything can happen" was an understatement of gigantic proportions.

He changed from his soaked clothes and lay with her, her body pulled into the curve of his. He lay in the darkness of the room, silently listening to her breathing, the beating of her heart as the minutes dragged by, until the weight of the

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

morning sun made his arms and legs, then his body heavy. It was the longest night of his life.

* * * *

Titania sucked in air, disoriented. She didn't dare move. The last memories she had were painful, wrenching agonies burning her insides until she had only wanted to die. She took another breath. Nothing hurt. Nothing burned. She was alive! That was always a good way to wake up. *Then what the hell happened?* She could recall snatches of memory. Very little made sense.

She continued to breathe, listening. She knew she wasn't alone. Diego was there. How did she know that so quickly? So easily? Her brow furrowed. She never woke up with him in the room. How long had she slept this time?

Somewhere in her mind, she knew the sun had set. It was one of those facts of life. She just knew it had. Sounds and scents were beginning to infiltrate her waking discoveries. The intoxicating leather and spice that was Diego was prominent. She could make out several scented candles from different locations in the room. Her breathing dragged, hitched hard when she realized she could make them out individually. Her sense of smell had become unbelievably acute.

She could find her heartbeat, going strong. She swallowed hard. She could hear Diego's heart clearly. Could hear the rush of blood through his body, through hers. Something was building in her, a ... craving? But she wasn't hungry. In fact, she had never felt less hungry for food in her life.

She felt as Diego's fingers sifted through her hair, a tender caress. Except his hand was shaking.

"How are you feeling?" He continued lifting his fingers through her hair.

"Not too bad." She dared to open her eyes and found herself immersed in the pale winter gray of his gaze looming over her, watching. Worried, strained, cautious. But a slow, happy smile was rising on his mouth. "What happened?" she asked.

His eyes were dark pools, a collage of thoughts hidden behind them. "How much do you remember?"

She kept his gaze. "I remember you telling me you were a vampire. I guess that hasn't changed."

His chest staggered, his lashes dropping for a brief second. "No. It has not."

She closed her eyes. "One thing at a time." She licked her lips. "All right. I remember leaving the hotel..." Her voice drifted as her hazy memory began to come back to her, little snippets. "I thought I was in a lab." Her gaze snapped to his when his hand in her hair stilled for a heartbeat. "I was! I remember waking up, and I was handcuffed." Her hands lifted automatically, but there was no sign of the shackles. She found the warmth of his bare chest beneath her palms. Her gaze flicked down to the tight slab of his stomach, and a single breath shot through her. Pajama bottoms. She was in his bed? Or was he in hers?

"How did I get out?"

He lifted one of her hands from his chest, kissing the tips of her fingers. "I got you out. However, Tenorio escaped."

Her gaze narrowed as he continued to study her fingers. "What aren't you telling me?"

His sigh was warm on her skin. "A lot, I am afraid. Houston is shutting down the tour. Tenorio was the only one out of his household of guards who escaped. He lost two renowned scientists last night in the fire. He will not take this lying down, losing you."

"Okay," she said slowly. She'd come back to that in a minute. "What else?"

He seemed to be very intent on what he was doing with her hand. "He drugged you. It was a terminal amount." He continued to rub her fingers between his.

She dug her free hand into his hair, forcing his gaze to hers. "Diego, what do you mean 'terminal amount'?"

"It means," he told her, his gaze wary, watchful. "Had I not completed converting you, you would be dead right now."

Her skin felt cold, clammy. "Converting me?" Her hand fell away from him. She tugged her fingers from his. "I don't understand."

He sat up on the large bed. "I saved you the only way I knew how." He stared blankly at the wall, away from her. "Your blood was too compromised to take you to a doctor. You would have died in a hospital."

She clutched his arm, shook him hard. "Diego! Damn it. What did you do?" Fear clawed at her. She didn't want to hear him say it! It was not possible!

He bowed his head, his voice laden with guilt. "I had to, *cara*. I know you cannot understand." When he looked at her again, emotions and needs were bright in his pale eyes. "I

could not go back to the life I led. I could not be alone again. I will protect you, provide for you. I know you will need time to adjust. I did, and I remember how difficult it could be."

She reared up in bed, backpedaling into the headboard, pressing her knuckles into her teeth to not scream. She yanked her knees up into her chest. "No. This isn't happening! Do you hear me, Diego? I am not going to sit here and believe I have to drink blood. Vampires do not exist!"

She threw back the blanket and leaped from the bed. She cleared the room in a single jump. "What the...?" she cried, frozen. She slapped her hands over her ears to keep the sound from deafening her.

"*Cara*, give it some time. You are alive. Tenorio wanted to break your will then hand you to his legion of guards. Whatever was left would have been dissected and probed for the sake of scientific, personal gain."

She heard him slide easily away from the bed, and then he stood behind her. She could feel the body heat radiating from him in waves. "It truly is not a horrible life. Come with me tonight. Let me show you what I have given you."

She whirled on him, her gaze sapphire fire. "Did Brakka pitch the sale for you?" She poked him in the chest. "I did not want this! Damn it, Diego. I cannot, will not, live on blood."

"Then do not."

She stumbled backward a step. "What?"

He shrugged. "Then do not. Give me one night. Let me love you for this one night and when the sun rises, I will meet the dawn with you." He gave her a wry smile. "I do believe, however, it is a very painful way to end everything."

She raked a hand through her hair. "Yeah, pain. I'm all into that. Last night will last a while, thank you."

He snaked out a hand and captured the one at her side, threading his fingers with hers. He tugged gently, and she resisted. "Diego," she groaned. "You have no idea what you've done."

His mouth slashed with self-aimed anger. "In that, you are very wrong. I realized it long ago, but I had no way to undo what had been done. I believed when I bonded with you, the amount was harmless. Evidently, the amount is irrelevant. It had begun." He pulled, and she tripped into his chest. His arm wrapped around her, keeping her pinned against the hard wall of his body.

"I know everything I have stolen from you. Every single thing. And I hate myself for each and every one. I never intended for this to happen, or for it to go so far." He lifted her face, captured her gaze. "But, Titania, you were going to die. Your inability to eat was starving you to death. I did not know it when I did this, but I killed you the night I saved you."

His anguish, his anger and self-loathing were so evident, so strong, tears coated her eyes. Trembling fingers lifted to rest against his lips. Her chest ached, the weight of his emotions were so strong.

"Did you hear me?" he growled, his arm like iron. "I killed you! I stole your life, your freedom, your family. I dare not let you complete your tour. You are a marked woman. And I have yet to discover how the Brethren will react. To my knowledge, a woman has never been converted." His

forehead fell to the top of her head, harsh gasps slamming in and out of his chest.

"My family?" she whispered. She pushed until she could see into his eyes. "I can never see my family again? Houston? Anyone?" Hot tears clung to her lashes.

He brushed them away tenderly. "Honey, I would never keep you from your family, but you have to remember, you will not age. You could never forget that you have certain limitations. But there are definite advantages to what we are as well. It is not always an equal trade," he warned her. "As for Houston and Laney, they have accepted me, I hope," he told her on a shaky breath. "They are due here in a few days."

She stepped back, but squeezed his fingers, letting him know she just needed space. "So let me get this straight. I am now like you. I can only live on blood." She made a yuck-face. "I can't be in the sun, if my vampire knowledge is accurate."

"It is."

"What about mirrors? Vampires never have any. I need to know I look all right."

Diego pointed into the bathroom. "There is one right there, but you are beautiful any time of the night."

She walked into the bathroom, Diego trailing after. She made a moue at her reflection, tugging at her hair. "Something about this ... I know I've heard it," she mused, trying to get her hair to look halfway normal. A distraction. Her eyes brightened in the mirror. "Vampires don't have

reflections! Now I remember. Vampires aren't supposed to be able to see themselves."

"We are not?" His brow rose with a quizzical twist.

"No, something about their true sordid life being revealed," she replied, running her fingers through her hair trying to straighten it.

"Then how am I, and you, visible?"

She chewed on her bottom lip lightly. "I don't know."

He lifted a hand, and a brush appeared. He began to work through the mess that resembled her hair.

"Cute trick."

His mouth lifted. "I have a few." He made short work of her hair, braiding it into a long, thick twist.

"How did you do that?" she asked, turning to see his handiwork. He had even added a scrunchie at the end to keep it from unraveling.

"I had sisters."

"I am, was, an only child." She swallowed when her voice caught. He turned her by her shoulders.

"*Cara*. You are still the woman everyone knows you to be."

"Except now I have teeth..." She ran her tongue across her incisors. "Something to rival my German Shepard back home."

He bit his lips together to keep from laughing at her. "You will find them when you need them. You should feed this evening, but I will not force it on you if you truly do not wish to. I will keep my promise to you. When the sun rises, we will do as you choose."

She gazed up at him. "Even if I do choose it, why would you?"

He spoke with stark honesty. "Because I could not live another night without you in my life. I would not want to live a bleak life again. You found me when I was feeling the worst of my solitary life. It felt as though I was living in isolation. You have given me something more wonderful, more beautiful than even a thousand sunrises could bring to me."

"You mean that, don't you?" she asked, tracing the harsh lines away from his mouth.

"Completely." He imprisoned her hand at his mouth and pressed a kiss to the center of her palm. Her insides turned into something hot and hungry at the damp heat of his mouth on her skin. "Come with me. Let me share my world. One night. I want to love you under the stars."

He dipped his head and found her lips. She gasped when her world exploded. He moaned, a savage intensity sweeping her up, his arms fitting her against him.

Flames erupted along her skin, a fiery need for his touch, his kiss so strong, he left her gasping for air.

"Honey, I do not think we are going to make it outside." His breathing was harsh, his voice ragged with hunger as his lips caressed her temple. "I almost lost you. I need you. Right now."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Fifteen

Diego swung her up into his embrace effortlessly. He stopped two steps later when she started laughing.

"Could you at least make it seem like it's an effort to throw me around like that?" Her dark blue eyes were sparkling at him, the air leaving his body for the thousandth time that night in thankfulness.

He lowered his lips to touch her sweet mouth. "Anything, *cara*." He grunted in effort with his next three steps, his lips curving to delirious proportions when her laughter rolled freely though the room. A sound he would cherish forever.

"All right," she said between gulps of air. "Just stop. I can't breathe."

"Then allow me," he said, a devilish hint to the offer. His mouth claimed hers aggressively, and the laughter changed to something hot and living between them. Her arms wound around his neck, and he knelt on the bed with his precious treasure.

Heat stroked him from the inside when her fingers danced across his back, tugging at the ends of his hair. He laid her down with tender care, his hands caressing and finding each hollow, each curve. His blood boiled when she arched into his touch, making the soft mewling sound in her throat that drove him wild.

He stripped the silk shirt she had slept in from her body with impatient hands and stared in adoring worship. She was

even more beautiful now with the accentuating magic of the dark gift.

Her hair shone like a raven's wing, with the warm candlelight reflecting in the soft tresses like the stars he wanted to share with her. He drew her braid over her shoulder, laying it between her breasts. Her skin glowed, pale and perfect, her dark eyes framed by thick, black lashes. The sight of her lying in sweet, passionate repose stole his air.

"Beautiful," he told her, unable to not let her know.

Her fingers rose to his mouth. "I see it in your eyes." Her eyes sparkled again. "And I can read your mind better now."

"Then I better have something to think about." He dropped to nuzzle at her neck, and she writhed under his warm breath and sipping lips. He splayed his palm possessively over her stomach as he caressed her skin.

Fire licked at him, racing over her. It amazed him again how much he wanted her. She really did not understand the miracle she was to him.

He knew one night would not satisfy, could not sate his needs, but he had made his promise, and not lightly. There were so many things that he wanted to show her. The world was a nighttime wonder. Everything she had given him just for being in his life, he could return twofold.

Diego understood the difficulty she was experiencing, accepting the changes that had taken place. He had not dared let her into that part of his mind, his history. Now he could not take his decision back. And if all he had was tonight, then so be it. It was her choice. He had destroyed everything else.

He would not condemn her to a life she could not accept or even tolerate just to appease his selfish desires.

Her hand skimmed over his shoulder to wrap into his hair. She pulled him closer, and he lay down with her, his full length eclipsing her.

He could not help himself. He leaned forward and found the hardened peak of one, sucking gently. She arched and let out a shriek, her arms capturing his head and holding him in her pleasure. Hunger flared, seared him as he caressed and laved at that hard nub.

Kiss me.

He rose instantly to those luscious lips, answering the plea in her voice, in his thoughts. Her desire ignited his to a new level, a hunger for her completion, for her body, searing his brain.

Diego drew her bottom lip into his mouth, swirling his tongue over the sensitive skin inside, and his body clenched at her whimpers. He thrust within, his tongue meeting hers, mating, stroking at the sweet temptation of her mouth.

He found the corner of her lips, caressing it tenderly as he glided along her jaw, her head tipped back to his hungry exploration. His heart thundered as he tasted her, sipped at the delicate texture beneath her ear.

He inhaled her sweet essence, the steady beat of her blood through her body. He snapped his head back sharply, blinking.

"What's wrong?" Titania asked, staring up at him, frozen, immediately catching his confusion.

"Nothing. I think." He lowered to her neck, right over his claiming mark, and inhaled. His fangs exploded with a raging hunger, striking him hard and deep. He whipped his head away before she could see the flames in his gaze, the telltale fangs.

Her hand fell to her neck. "Intense," she said, watching him carefully.

"It will pass."

"Is it because you need to eat?" she asked. Caution tinged her words.

He almost smiled at her wild thoughts. He remained faced away from her instead. "I am not thinking of snacking, *cara*."

"What happened?" She cradled his chin with her fingertips, applying a subtle pressure, turning him.

Dark lashes hid his worst thoughts. "It is stronger, sweeter." He drew a deep breath and released it slowly. "I can control this."

"Would it be bad? Because I am now like you?"

"Honestly, I do not know."

Big, blue eyes shimmered up at him, her mouth growing supple. She tilted her head, exposing her throat. "I trust you."

He sucked in air, stunned at her gift. "*Cara*, I do not know if it will harm you."

She blinked up at him. "Why would you feel so strongly for it then? Has it been like this before?"

He thought back and had to shake his head. "No. Not like this." *Never like this.*

Fingers danced across his chin, trailed down his own neck, and muscles clenched from his jaw to his toes. "Diego, I feel it, too. I want to share with you. I want to know how it feels for you. I want to know it is only me you feel this way for."

He buried his face into her shoulder. "Titania. It is only you. Do you not know that?"

She tilted once more. "Then show me."

Diego did not know if he should pray or cry in gratitude. Titania was the most unselfish being in his entire world. This was from her, to him. Simply because he wanted it.

"I love you." The words burst forth, his heart pounding against his ribs, ready to break free. "If I have only this night, I love you, Titania."

She lifted a luminous, wondrous gaze up to him, her ocean blue eyes filling with damp tears. "If you had more than tonight, would you still?"

"Yes," he whispered with conviction, without hesitation. "Eternity would not even be long enough."

Fingers graced his mouth, brushed his lips, and he felt her like a jolt to his spine. "I love you, too."

He found her mouth in answer, savoring every nuance of her soul.

He took his time, deliberately seducing her nerve by nerve. Her heat enveloped him, bringing his desires higher. There was not one thing that was going to ruin tonight for them.

Diego sipped at flushed skin, sucked gently at her pulse, and she jumped, arching with a keening cry into his chest. He was aching and full. His pajamas were gone in a flash. He

covered her body, hissed softly at the torture of her taking him, inch by slow inch. Ecstasy flared outward.

He swept his tongue over the erratic beating at her neck. He needed this. "Forgive me now if I am wrong."

She shook her head. *Feels too right*, she gasped back into his mind.

With a final thought to what could be wrong about it, he plunged twice, consuming her heartbeat at the same time he claimed her body.

Lightning struck. Electricity arced wildly. Stars exploded on the insides of his eyelids. Heaven. He had found his.

Little, gasping noises were coming out of her chest. She had flung an arm over his head, pinning him to her, her pleasure as deep, as high as his own.

He swept the wounds closed, watching her closely, but her hips were moving again, urging him, and he had to obey.

He almost screamed himself when he felt her lips on his chest, ecstasy all consuming. He moved above her, in her and she slid over his heated skin, her tongue dancing and tasting until he thought he had lost his mind in passionate bliss.

Diego cradled her in his arms, holding her close, and for just a moment, his heart pounded ferociously when he felt her nipping at his neck.

"*Cara*," he groaned, and realized he knew exactly what she had meant. It felt so right. A hand formed to the back of her head, held her as close as he dared without scaring her. "Do it, *cara*. Please, I am going to incinerate."

Hot, molten lava raged through him when he felt the scrape of her teeth, testing, searching, analyzing her own hungers and needs.

A deep shout was torn from his throat when he felt the sharp pressure of her teeth, the piercing of skin. Everything detonated. His heart, his mind, his body. He went up like a fireball, an eruption of fulfilled desire so bright he had to close his eyes. He could not contain the absolute joy of the moment, his body quaking as aftershocks traveled up and down her body. He trembled when she rolled her tongue over hot skin.

He lifted himself enough to look down into her expression. He could touch her thoughts, but he wanted her to say it. Wanted to see it in her eyes.

Her voice was slow, sexy, a drawling sound that raced through his body, struck nerves like flint. Kiss-swollen lips curved, knowing. "I'll tell you tomorrow night. I can't move. The sun can wait another day. I'm still trying to figure out how I did that, and why I'm not screaming in shock."

"I love you, Titania." Then he kissed the smile from her mouth. A slow, thorough kiss to make her boneless, mindless for him.

It's working. She sighed into his mouth.

"Come outside with me," he said, lifting from her. "I want to show you everything."

"I don't have any clothes."

"You could go naked. In fact, I think I would prefer it," he told her with a perfectly straight face.

She smacked a fist into his shoulder, burrowing into him to hide her laughter. "You are so bad."

"I thought we had already established that." He found the dip of her shoulder and swept his tongue across it. "Unless you would like to stay here. I could find some way to spend the hours."

She stretched out, her arms over her head, and his breath caught in his chest. She looked like a goddess, pale skin warmed with his kisses. "Don't you have to, you know, eat? I know you're hungry." Dark blue eyes searched his.

His voice vibrated. "Very." Her gasp was loud when his mouth trailed the valley between her breasts.

* * * *

She was laughing, and Diego could not look away. She radiated joy. She had just learned her first talent—to procure clothing, and she was laughing like a child in a toy shop, or a woman in her favorite boutique.

"This is so cool!" She whirled, showing off the skirt she had envisioned. "I can do this with anything?"

"Nearly. Natural fibers are the easiest, like cotton and silk."

"No more dry cleaning bills! Yippee!" She spun and laughed again. When she teetered, Diego leaped, catching her breathless and dizzy. She pressed into him naturally, his arms cradling her closely.

She felt so good in his arms. Like she was supposed to be there. He kissed her simply because he had to, tilting her chin to brush her lips.

"And here I thought you just had a thing for black denim and leather," she teased him. Her eyes were dancing when he lifted from her sweet lips.

"Actually, I do. I would have to say I am a little spoiled." He nodded toward the bed. "I like my comforts." She blushed when her gaze fell to the satin sheets of his king-sized bed. That was definitely comfortable.

"You know, I just realized. Where's your coffin?"

"My what?" he asked, laughing.

"Don't you have a coffin somewhere?" He laughed harder when she peeked around his arms.

"No. I do not have a coffin."

"Vampires always have a coffin," she stated.

"Not this one. You have a lot of experience with vampire lifestyles?" he asked, his hands falling to lock behind her back. He knew she was only teasing, but just the thought of her with another sent his blood coursing hotly.

"Nothing up to date, apparently." She sniffed. "So where are we, then?"

He felt his grin stretching. "You are in my home. Above us is a standard cabin with human amenities. We are roughly thirty feet below ground."

"So you don't have to sleep in a coffin?" She pressed her cheek to his chest. Her tone grew curious, serious. She was bravely trying to work her way into his world. Love stole into his heart again.

"No, *cara*. And neither do you. However, if it is necessary, we can take refuge in the earth."

She shivered. "I don't like worms. And did I mention I absolutely detest spiders?"

He chuckled, hugging her close. "Do not worry, *cara*. You should not have to face that this evening." He dropped another kiss to her cheek. "Come with me."

He twined her fingers through his, leading her with a tender hold. He opened the doorway to the outside stairs, waving a hand through the air.

"What was that?" She took a step behind him.

"An alarm. One of those things you can never forget. You are vulnerable during the day."

"Diego, I will never remember all of this," she said, tugging on her bottom lip. Her steps were hesitant. "I don't think I can do this."

He turned to her, cupped her chin. "*Cara*. I do not expect you to. I have had centuries to learn. I will protect you." He could find the turmoil easily in her thoughts. Fear, uncertainty. He stroked a thumb to her soft skin. His heart pinched when he discovered her next worry.

He purposely cradled her in his palms, bringing her gaze to his. "*Cara*, you could never be a failure, either. You are young of years and young in this life. If you choose, I give you myself. Completely. I swore myself to you. No other. And I could never want for another, either. Why would I when I have perfection?"

Tears glistened in her eyes. "Diego." Her lips trembled, and he kissed them, then he kissed each lid, sipping at her tears.

"Give yourself a chance. I was terrified when the change took my life. I had no guidance. I learned even though I was injured many, many times for my ignorance. Brakka was only a few days changed himself when he attacked me. Give yourself into my keeping for eternity."

Lashes covered her eyes, and a heavy weight bore down on him. "I can promise you tonight, Diego. I just don't know if I can do this." Her tone changed, an insecure, frightened whisper. "I don't know if I can do what I did to another person."

Revulsion poured from her, and he swept her into his embrace. "I understand, *cara*." He released his breath then began to walk back up the stairs, Titania only a pace behind him.

He found the locking mechanism, ordering the command to remove the ward before releasing the dead bolt. It snapped out, and the door swung outward. He scanned quickly for any signs of intrusion and found nothing had disturbed the house during the day. There were protections throughout the house and outside. Diego had learned well over the years to keep himself protected.

The air was clear and crisp when they stepped out to the porch. "Take a deep breath and hold it." She did, and he felt her amazement, her curiosity beginning to take over.

"Wow!" she gasped. "There is so much out here. And it smells so fresh. No fake pine here."

"None. What else do you find?"

Her eyes drifted closed. "There're flowers, and deer." She blinked abruptly. "How did I know that?"

"You scented the animal and deduced it to be deer. If you listen, you can hear even more. Everything will be brighter, smells will be more defined, and all of your senses are more acute now. You can learn to use that to your advantage."

"Is that why I can see so well? It's like it's not even nighttime, everything is so sharp."

"It is." He clasped her hand, drawing her near as he strode down the steps.

"Is that also why I know you need to, um, feed?"

"Yes, *Cara*. You feel it in me as I do in you. There are towns in three directions from here."

"Then shouldn't you go?" She glanced up at him, but quickly dropped her gaze again.

"I will not leave you unprotected. One night is unimportant."

She stopped in her tracks. "That is not true! Do not try lying to me. I know you need to eat."

"And you will come with me?" He phrased it as a dare. One step closer to her accepting. He did not want her to face the dawn. He did not want to have only a night, or even two. He wanted eternity.

She tilted her chin, an action he had seen many times. "There you go again, not taking care of yourself. Obviously you need me to make sure you do." She swung her head, and her braid whipped around in exclamation. "All right. How do we get there? Fly?"

He smiled inside, hearing her try to be brave, but avoided letting it show on his expression. "Harley."

Her mouth fell open. "Who is Harley?"

He couldn't help himself and began to laugh outright at her. "Not a who." Tugging her under his arm, they walked around the side of his house to an enclosed garage. He unlocked the door and slipped inside, then pulled the protective cover from his bike. He half folded it to wait on a side shelf.

"Let me introduce you. This is Harley."

"A bike?" she squeaked.

"One of several I have owned."

He saw her sweep her gaze over the garage. "Can't we take the car?"

He began to reach for the side door. "You are right. We should fly."

"No!" She swallowed. "All right. Harley it is."

He opened the automatic door and pushed the bike out. "Come on, honey. Your bad boy wants to play."

"Just what the hell have I gotten into this time," she muttered.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Sixteen

Titania asked herself that same question every few seconds for what felt like hours, but she knew it couldn't have been more than twenty minutes as Diego took them to town.

The bike was as intimidating as he was. She'd never been on one, and she held on for dear life. The litany of the question kept her from being too frightened of moving so fast with asphalt inches from her feet.

Relax, cara. I would not allow anything to happen. I would smite even an insect for daring to threaten you.

She frowned at his back. *Stop it! Now you're just making fun of me.* Rich laughter flooded her thoughts, and she pictured sticking her tongue out at him. She felt unrestrained laughter beneath her clutched grasp and smiled.

That is better, cara. We will be there soon.

Where are we going?

There are several nightclubs in town. It will be busy.

She refrained from saying anything about that. The night wind gripped at her clothes, the edge of her skirt riding high in the wind. *Should've worn jeans.* She blinked and found the skirt gone, replaced by her favorite style of jean. She pressed her cheek into his back. *Thank you.*

You are very welcome. I told you I would provide for you.

She closed her eyes and let the rumble of the bike soothe her instead of being rattled by it. She believed he would protect her, would provide for her. But she wasn't sure she could make it as a vampire. Or was it vampiress? Could she

suck on a strange person's neck? The question gave her the shivers.

She pressed her forehead into his back, rocking from side to side. What was she going to do? Her tour was cancelled, which meant the band had been split and the crew sent home. Houston would make sure everyone was paid. She needed to call home and let her parents know there had been a sudden cancellation.

She snapped up. "Oh no!" she cried.

What is it, cara?

Titania felt his body tense as his gaze lifted, searching. *I just realized, I have absolutely no idea what I'm going to tell my parents. Mom is going to go insane with worry. They follow the headlines of my concerts religiously. They have to know something has happened by now.* She snuggled up tighter to his back, needing his comforting presence.

It is likely.

I can't let them worry. What time is it? I have to call them. I imagine close to midnight.

She groaned. *I'll call tomorrow, I guess. It's too late now. Where do your parents live?*

Texas.

A Texas woman. I should have known, he teased her. She smiled, feeling his only desire was to lessen her worries. Her hands tightened once more, and she sighed, snuggled into his back for the rest of the ride.

The city streets were busy, crowds waiting to get into nightclubs, the throb of music vibrating through open doorways. Neon lights flashed, street lights giving a spotlight

affect. Different smells assaulted her as Diego coasted down the street to stop in front of one. The overpowering stench of humanity was unbelievable. Perfumes, sweat, alcohol. She could find each and every distinct smell.

She shook her head. "This will take some getting used to," she mumbled.

Instantly, his hand cradled her jaw, a thumb moving with delicious ease over her skin. "Thank you for trying."

She covered his hand with hers. "I'll be fine. Let's get you taken care of."

He held her hand, and she slid from the bike. Her heart was racing. And with a frightened jolt, she realized she could hear other hearts, other people breathing. Could find the scent of blood the closer she got to the front door.

She dragged her feet the closer they got. Diego leaned to talk to the doorman of a darkened entrance, softer music coming from inside. He rubbed a soothing hand down her arm.

It will be all right, cara.

She doubted it would ever be all right again. When she walked by the doorman, the heavy scent of blood assaulted her, rocked her equilibrium, and she slapped a hand over her mouth.

She felt her teeth drop! She implored Diego with her eyes, but he continued moving. Everywhere she turned, people were clinging to each other, swaying on the dance floor. Hearts were beating, blood was rushing. Hunger began to eat at her stomach. She crowded closer to him.

He swept her up immediately, burying her in his embrace. "Breathe, *cara*. It will pass."

"Every time you say that, something horrendous happens." But she sank into his arms regardless. Nothing could hurt her there. Nothing of this new, terrifying life could reach her when she was in his arms. "I can't do this," she whimpered.

"I am not asking you to. Just dance with me, *cara*. You promised me tonight."

"I know." He held her closer, apparently in no hurry to do more, and she began to relax. She listened around her absently, the muted words of whispered conversations, soft laughter, gentle persuasion. Gradually, the burn in her stomach receded to a manageable ache. Even the constant hum of pulsating blood became controllable. The hunger was there, but she could think and breathe now.

It will become easier to manage with time. Warm breaths blew over her ear.

"Diego," she moaned, leaning back. "I am trying, but this is so crazy."

He touched his mouth to hers, and flames rose. "I love you more for even trying, *cara*. I know you are scared." His breath was warm, his mouth too sinful. She reached up and kissed him back.

She swayed with him as he moved them around the dance floor. She noticed his gaze was constantly moving, investigating the environment. She slipped into his thoughts and found what he was doing. Marking prey and checking for threats.

She tapped his shoulder. "I don't want to sound petty, and I know I don't own you, but could you not go to any women?"

"Feeling proprietary?" He grinned down at her.

"Unbelievably, yes. I think I could even be jealous about this." It was a rather irksome realization at that.

He sat her down at a table in the corner in deep shadows. "Do not worry, honey. I have all the woman I want."

She watched in curious silence as he approached first one man and then another, shaking hands, smiling, laughing, talking to them quietly in the shadows. And when it appeared their heads were merely close to listen to each other, she knew otherwise. The deceptive picture was very believable.

Could she do that? She shuddered. She knew she couldn't. There was no way she could do this. She could not drink blood from an absolute stranger. It was like blindly kissing someone. She couldn't do that either.

Could you from someone you love? She heard him like a velvet caress in her mind.

She ducked her head. *We already know that. You weren't even going to suggest it. I can't seem to help myself around you.*

And that is bad? She felt his soft laughter. She rolled her eyes at him. She was aware he knew it too.

"Titania Alcott! I don't believe it." Her head snapped up, finding two men looking at her, standing over her table. "We heard you had shut down for an illness. You look absolutely fantastic." Both smiled with worshipful smiles.

"I have been sick," she said, unable to escape. They were blocking the table. She felt the change in the air, something

dangerous, predatory. Both men looked over their shoulders warily.

"Would you dance? If you are well enough?" one asked hopefully, his heart in his gaze when he turned back to her. She flipped her braid over her shoulder, and both men moved closer.

Without warning, Diego was there, his hand on her shoulder. "I am sorry. She cannot. She has been very ill." A flash of white teeth broke the plains of his blank expression. "I am sure you understand."

They both took a quick step back, stunned to find him there when he hadn't been a moment before. "Uh, yeah. Sorry."

"Yeah. Didn't mean to bother you." They slunk away without even asking for an autograph. She sighed in relief, which turned to frustration.

"Diego, they were fans."

"With rot in their brains." He sat next to her, his arm possessively wrapped around her waist, blocking her from view with his larger frame. "They both wanted to see you with your hair loose."

She punched his arm. "So do you," she accused.

"As is my right. You are my woman."

"Diego, I can't ignore everything I've done for the last six years."

"Will it matter in six hours, honey?" His tone was even, but the slice was deep. "Sunrise is at six forty-two."

She leaned back, the urge to strangle him growing. "You did that on purpose!"

"What?"

"Don't play innocent on me. We both know I can't do this. Just the thought of what you did gives me the shakes. Do not turn my choice back around on me."

"All I did was remind you. You cannot feed, but then again, if you do not wait for the sunrise, if you sleep with me for one more day, you can call your parents. Think of some way to alleviate their fears."

A slow sound hissed through her teeth. "I need to do that at least." She had absolutely no idea what she would tell them, how she could explain what had happened over the last twenty-four hours.

His hand curved around her throat, his thumb caressing her pulse. "Then allow me to care for you. You need to feed tonight." He drifted closer, pulling her to meet his lips. "Let it happen, honey. Do not fight it. I need this as much as you do," he whispered, a sorcerer's seduction.

His lips tangled with hers, brushing and caressing gently. He pulled on her chair until she was nestled between his muscular thighs, his hands on her waist. He kissed the corner of her mouth, sipping at her jaw. When he found her lips, his kiss was thorough, a constant, blazing heat flowing between them. She was breathless by the time he let her go.

Everything faded away. The crowd, the music, until it was just the two of them immersed in sensations. He shifted, tilted until it was his jaw under her lips, and she felt a hard vibration of need course through his body.

She flicked out her tongue and heard his breathing slam to a standstill. She did it again, amazed that she could affect

him so deeply. A wanton urge made her push her hand into his hair, holding him for her slow exploration. His fingers gripped tighter at her waist, and he didn't pull away. She smiled when he pushed harder into her hand, into her traveling lips instead.

The scent of blood was strong, heated, coursing with sexual desire. His entire body was solid rock, going up in flames, the same as hers. His taste was spice and hot sex, and she discovered she wanted more. A lot more.

A sigh quaked from his chest, and she shivered in anticipation. She wove a damp trail across his pulse, and he groaned, a deep sound that made her heart pound. She sucked gently at the heated spot, and he nearly jumped from his chair.

"*Cara*, please." His hands held her as though his life depended upon it.

Teeth sank through the barrier of skin before she realized she had made the decision. The rush of hot blood hit her, filled her, drowning her hungers with his taste. She knew she should be appalled, should be running in shocked horror.

Instead, she rubbed against him, her breasts aching and throbbing. She felt heat and craved his touch, his solid body claiming hers. Arms of steel held her pressed into his body, low rumbles of pleasure escaping, until she licked the spot clean with her tongue.

His head fell to her shoulder, his heart racing, his blood raging. "You are never, ever allowed to touch another male."

She lifted him, holding him by just the tip of her finger. "I think we have no fear of that happening," she replied, a twinkle of humor to her gaze.

He tipped his head, pressed his lips to her ear. "I want to spend the rest of the night making love to you under the stars." She moaned, a low, crying sound, when he tortured the delicate skin of her neck with his tongue.

When he finally leaned away, she was unable to think of anything but exactly that. Diego curved his arm around her, protecting her from the crowd, leading her from the club.

* * * *

Awareness came to her abruptly. A heartbeat, a drawn breath. She was better prepared, but it was still unnerving. Diego's solid shoulder pillowed her head, and his hand was trailing a path up and down her body. His lips brushed a warm kiss to her temple.

"How are you feeling?"

She nuzzled his shoulder. "Fine. Thank you for warning me about this morning. I would have freaked out."

"For a week, I was certain I was dying each morning. I never wanted you to experience that." He kissed her again. "Have I ever told you I think you are incredibly brave?"

She lifted up, resting her chin on the back of her hand on his chest. "No. Why?"

He started playing with her hair. She suspected he liked it more than he had originally alluded to.

Of course I do. His fingers continued on their merry way. "I witnessed your efforts at several of your concerts. You

dared stop Brakka when I knew he was there and why. You are still here, with me, after everything."

"I'm not sure for how long." She couldn't meet his gaze when she said that, either. She couldn't bring herself to make a promise she wasn't sure she could keep.

"You do realize, to end this, you will have to die. It cannot be undone. Believe me, I have tried."

"What's the alternative? I don't have a life anymore. I can't sing like I want to."

"Stay with me. Make my life happy. I will do my best to fulfill your every desire." He pulled up her loose fingers and began to nibble at them. "Have you ever traveled?"

"All over the states."

"We could travel the world. Easily."

The corner of her mouth lifted. "There you go again, pitching the sale." He froze under her, his attention instantly focused. Then she felt it. A disturbance.

"Houston has arrived," he explained a second later. "We need to dress."

"I can feel his worry. Laney's too." Their concern echoed throughout the house.

"Houston saw you before I brought you here. They do not know you survived."

"I had no idea," she cried, jumping from the bed, twisting her hair up into a knot. Her movements were hurried, nearing frantic. "I would have called them. I can't believe I didn't think of them at all yesterday."

"*Cara*." He reached out, found a hand. "Do not. Yesterday was hard on you. How do you like to say it? One thing at a

time?" He curved a palm around her neck and tugged her to his mouth. "Relax. I left a note in case they should arrive tonight. They are actually a day early. But I knew Houston would be worried and Laney worse."

She stopped struggling, taking a deep breath. "You are good to me."

He arched a brow expectantly "Even when I am being bad?"

She curled into his chest. "Yes. Most definitely."

It only took a few minutes to dress and for Diego to open the sleeping chamber. She raced up the stairs, could hear their voices, low, worried, the rumple of paper.

"They're here somewhere," Houston said from the kitchen.

"We are here," Diego said, getting their attention. Titania didn't hesitate, but launched herself right at Houston.

"Oh, God! Tani!" She swam in his adoring affection, tears falling rapidly from both of them.

"I am so sorry I didn't call."

"Hush." Houston's voice was hoarse. "God, Tani. I thought we lost you." He set her down, his hands holding her steady. "Let me look at you." Houston leaned over after a slow appraisal and gave her a quick kiss on her forehead. "Perfect as always." Titania blushed.

Laney was next, hugging her for several minutes. She was crying so hard, she couldn't even speak. Both of them had to take a few minutes to find their voices, dry a flood of tears.

Diego walked up to stand behind her, his palm possessive on her hip. Staking his claim. She didn't even care anymore.

"You have to tell me what is going on. The tour? Have Mom and Dad been worried? Do they even know?"

"Everything is settling down," Houston said, claiming a bar stool, pulling Laney into his body. He wrapped his arms around her waist, leaning his chin on her shoulder. "Yes, we had to break the tour contract. I'll get into that in a minute. Your parents have been worried since the news leaked you were sick, hiding out in your hotel room since the San Fran concert. I told them you have had something of the romantic type happen, and they were thrilled. Your mom was anyway. The rest is up to you." He gave her a serious look. "Can I listen in when you tell them?"

She lifted the note paper with a studied look, wadded it into a ball and threw it at him.

"I take it that's a no?" She crossed her arms. "All right." He made a suffering sound. Houston's gaze became piercing, looking up over her shoulder at Diego. "I guess you had to do the exchange?"

"It was completed, and she survived." Diego's hold warmed and snuggled her closer.

"Which just means I don't get to hurt you this trip. I still reserve the right."

What is he talking about?

If you had not survived, I would have welcomed Houston's punishment.

She would discuss that with him later. "What happened with the tour?"

"The tour has been cancelled, and your return has been listed as very unlikely. No one on the tour knows exactly why

we cancelled except that you were injured in an attempted kidnapping, which explains why you and Diego disappeared at the same time. Which gets me to the next point. Albert Tenorio made a press release about the fire at his house. He claimed it was a terrorist organization attacking his scientific work. He has announced everything will be done to capture and destroy the parties involved."

"And I was the last party there," she said, her mouth turning down. "And since I didn't die in the fire..."

"I took it the same way. And he means it. He's already enlisting backers to find those involved."

"Meaning he's going to be hunting for me." She felt her face pale significantly.

"Nothing can harm you here, *cara*. I would not allow it anywhere."

"This is a good place to hide, that's for sure," Houston said. "If Laney had missed that last turn, I would've been kissing a pine goodnight."

Diego shrugged. "I very rarely use the car. I do not have a problem with the bike."

"You drive?" Laney asked, surprised.

"He's got a mean looking Harley," Titania said, a bubble of laughter growing from being with her friends, for being alive. "I think I actually like it."

"So, are you two going to get married now? Might as well make the family weird all the way around." Laney waited expectantly.

"Married?" Titania squeaked. "I don't know." She still wasn't sure she could hack it as a vampire, and Laney wanted her to marry him!

"I have not had the opportunity to pose the question," Diego slid in smoothly.

Laney frowned in dejection. "Oh, but I guess you can't get married in a church. She would have looked beautiful decked out."

"Why not?" Diego said.

"Holy ground. Vampires can't walk on sacred soil," Titania explained automatically, still circling around the marriage thing.

"We cannot?"

She looked over her shoulder, hearing the note of laughter in his voice. "Let me guess. You're different."

"I would have to say it is so. When I was given this life, I wandered for years until I heard of a particularly strong religious following. I attended a midnight mass nightly for months, praying. I did not dare touch the holy water—even I had heard stories by that time, but I can attend a church."

"Why are you so different?" Titania mused.

"How is he different?" Laney asked, her gaze sharp. "I never felt anything evil in him. Not like with the other one." She shuddered delicately. "He can walk in churches, and he found you when technically vampires don't experience love. It doesn't make sense."

"And he has a reflection. We both do."

Laney gasped. Even Houston looked at them closer. "You are both definitely different."

"I have always wondered if anyone, anywhere could be like me. I had no way to know. The only Brethren I ever met were the true vampire of today's world. Not much talking was ever done."

"I can see that," Houston said with a deliberate nod. "You do have that affect on people." He oomphed when Laney jabbed him in the ribs.

"Forgive me, but I must step out for a few minutes," Diego said a moment later, grinning lightly at the teasing. Titania was never more relieved than to hear them bantering back and forth like that.

I wondered how you were going to do this. I can feel your hunger.

I believe Houston capable enough to protect you. He has had many years of practice trying to keep you under some semblance of control.

Control? We need to work on your vocabulary.

How is I love you?

She melted on the spot at the caressing sound. *Go. Be quick, and please come back in one piece. I will personally see you staked if you leave me alone like this now.*

Such harsh language, cara. His voice whispered through her mind, a gentle laugh, a possessive edge. *I can only do as you ask.*

Diego lifted one of her hands to his lips as Houston spoke. "No, go ahead. We bought groceries on the way, and I'm starving. I doubted you would be prepared."

"Unfortunately, you are correct," Diego replied, holding her hand close, his thumb caressing her with strokes that were

turning her insides to liquid heat. "Make use of anything you need. I will not be long."

She walked out with him, tucked under his arm, to the porch. Once beyond the door, he swept her into a wild embrace of heat and hunger that had nothing to do with feeding. She blinked, dazed when he finally released her lips.

"Stay inside. I will take care of your needs when I return." He brushed a quick kiss across her temple. "And try to limit how many hugs you share with Houston. That was very difficult to watch."

"Jealous?"

"Incredibly. I am discovering I really cannot share, when I had feared Houston would have a greater problem with this. What a predicament you have put me in. You have friends and parents. Though I believe I can work around that."

She thumped him on the chest. "You better learn how to."

"Yes, *cara*," he said, grinning. And she knew he had said that just to get a rise out of her. *I love you* floated on the breeze, and he was gone.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Seventeen

"All right. He's gone. Are you really all right?" Laney's gaze searched hers, worried. "Just because he doesn't feel bad," she said, shaking her head slowly.

Titania took a stool next to them. "No. I'm fine." She raked a hand through her hair, pulling the knot loose. "Yesterday was rough. I'm doing better today. I just don't know how long I can do this." She lowered her gaze. "I don't know if I can be a vampire."

"You seem to be doing okay," Laney offered tentatively.

Houston gave her a sympathetic look over his shoulder from where he stood, preparing steaks on the black, flat top stove. "Tani, you scared the shit out of all of us. And even if you have doubts, you are alive. I saw you when he took you from that house." Houston let his hands fall to his sides. "You were going to die. I know that without a doubt."

He turned back to the stove, his voice subdued. "Believe me, when I pictured you meeting someone, I wasn't expecting this. But I have to believe he would do anything for you because he has. So he's a vampire. Like Laney said, we'll just make the whole family weird."

Titania rubbed the heels of her hands into her eyes. "But is it worth it? I can't sing anymore. Tenorio is hunting me, Brakka would like to skewer me. God, how do I find so much trouble?" she moaned.

"You have a natural talent for it," Houston offered, smiling.

She looked around her feet. "Where's that damn ball of paper at?"

Laney put a light hand on Titania's arm. "But is it bad enough to end everything? He loves you. I know if you go, he'll go with you. I can feel his conviction to be with you regardless. That is a pretty strong emotion if you ask me."

Titania crossed her arms and thunked her head onto them, leaning over the bar. "That's just it. I'm a coward. I never would have considered suicide before this, but that's what it would be."

"Give it a chance," Laney offered sagely. "Looking at you, no one would know."

Cara, do not forget to call your parents.

Thank you.

She slid from her seat. "Look, you guys eat. I have to call Mom and try to explain the cancellation."

They both nodded, and she went down the hall to a room that could have been called a den. She paused in the doorway, surprised to see an up-to-date computer along with a huge sound system in the corner. On opposing walls were two tall bookcases filled to the ceiling with books.

She spotted the phone on the desk. She dialed and waited pensively, sitting down in his chair. She sank into the plush leather. The man wasn't kidding. He was spoiled. She sighed in relief when the phone was answered after several heart stopping seconds. Secretly, she realized she was frightened no one would.

"Hi, Mom."

"Titania!" She had to yank the phone from her ear. It was a high, squealed shriek who could have only been her mother. "Frank, get in here! It's Tani! Honey, where are you? What happened? What happened to the tour? We've been so worried." Her mother began to choke up.

"I know. I'm sorry. I haven't been well enough to call." Her mother shrieked again. *Oops, wrong thing to say.* "Breathe, Mom, and I'll tell you what I can." Her mother had always been prone to drama.

She gave her a bland description of her abduction, leaving out the problems she had with the shot overdose. "Diego is a bodyguard I hired a few weeks ago, and he found me. I've been recuperating outside of the media's reach at his house." Somewhere during her explanation, she had heard her father pick up the second phone.

"Why didn't he take you to a doctor?" was her father's immediate demand.

"Because he didn't want to let the abduction get into the news," she said slowly, hating to lie.

"Are you all right with him, alone?" her mother asked.

"I'm fine. In fact, Laney and Houston arrived this evening. I think they'll be staying for a while."

"Thank heavens," her mother said. "Is he the one Houston hinted at?"

"Yes, Mother." She palmed her forehead, leaning on an elbow. Tears burned at her eyes. She managed a few more minutes of questions and answers before they let her off the phone. She burst into tears, the phone missing its cradle when it slid from her fingers.

"*Cara*." Strong arms lifted her, pulled her into his embrace. "What is wrong?"

"I realized I can't tell them! I'm going to see them die," she wailed.

Diego stroked her back. "Honey, children succeed their parents naturally. You have not lost them." He tucked her into his shoulder, his arms wrapping around her. "It may be best if you do not tell them everything. They may not, most likely, understand."

She rubbed her cheek against the skin-warmed silk of his shirt. "I know. I'm just feeling overwhelmed."

"You did remarkably well with Houston and Laney. I am very proud of you." He rubbed his chin into her hair. "Time, *cara*. That is all you need."

"I guess I need to accept this, then. There really is no going back." Melancholy colored her voice.

"No, *cara*. I know you have lost many things. I hope to show you just how much you have gained. In truth, you are a miracle to me to have survived. When I brought you home, all I had was hope you would live through the conversion. I have never cursed another soul with this life, and I did not know if being a woman would be an issue."

She sighed, closing her eyes, just letting him hold her. The steady beat of his heart beneath her ear resounded through her. This time when the hunger hit, she didn't fight it. She studied it, examined the way her body reacted, the way her body craved.

She found the scent of his skin when she took a deep breath. She moved restlessly against him, hunger beating at

her more insistently. He tilted her to his mouth, sipping gently. Her arms lifted, caressed his broad shoulders, threaded through the thick, loose curls of his hair.

A low, vibrating growl grew in his chest when she nipped at heated skin. A hand weaved loosely into her hair, encouraging her. She realized how sensual the act of sharing was, how aroused she was, as was he.

She wanted this. She knew it, admitted it. When her incisors lengthened, she didn't startle at the knowledge. She could smell the strong scent of his blood and unbuttoned his shirt. His chest quivered under her tentative fingers.

She stroked a warm, damp path across his chest, and his hand fisted into her hair. "*Cara*." The growl was deeper, hungrier, needing. Teeth scraped across the artery over his heart, and he stiffened, a slow hiss escaping through a tight jaw.

Lightning arced when she pierced through, the first rush of life a euphoric, heady, spiced fire that raced through her veins. Flames licked over her skin. She felt the changes as she took in what he offered, could feel her body grow warm, feel strong again.

He shuddered when she dragged her tongue over the small wounds.

"I think I'm getting the hang of this," she said, looking up at him, a slow, sexy smile on her mouth. Diego swooped down and claimed her lips, swiping his tongue hungrily between them.

He was breathing hard when he lifted, saying, "If that is a sign of your acceptance, I am in a world of trouble." Her

laugh was throaty, carefree, and she began to think maybe she could do this.

Laney smiled when they came into the kitchen arm in arm. "That sounded good."

"I think I've decided to deal with it and move on," Titania replied. She could work through her doubts one at a time.

Laney's expression was relieved. She reached for Titania's hand and squeezed once. "Thank God. So now what?"

"I don't know, honestly. With the tour ended, I just don't know."

"You are welcome to stay here," Diego told them. "There are two upper bedrooms, both furnished. You have your choice. A word of warning, though. Once the chamber is locked, it is deadly to enter during the day. I have several safeguards that I use."

"Warning noted," Houston said with a nod. "It might be a good idea to hide out for a while, see where Tenorio is going to take this, and how far. He lost millions in that fire." He clasped his hands on the bar top, empty plates pushed to the side. "His research, fifty-seven men, and two scientists, both biogenetic engineers. They don't grow on trees. From the reports, there really wasn't much left even for the arson investigators to sift through."

"What about the lab? Surely someone questioned a hidden lab?" She still felt cold, thinking about waking up in that God-awful place.

"It was destroyed in the fire. So was all his paperwork, his computer bank. Everything."

Diego grew thoughtful. "I wonder where his base of operations is? If he had a lab at his home, a highly secured home, he must have another location, someplace where he can do more extensive research. Even as large as it was, it could not house the amount of men he is planning on working with. He has been experimenting with reproducing the genetic codes of people like Titania, then splicing the DNA into clone-based strands." At Laney's dropped mouth, he added in a dry voice, "Sometimes it pays to know what others are thinking."

"But how could what I do be used like that?" Titania wondered.

"You are a natural telekinetic. The emotional broadcast could be used to instill fear, uncertainty, defeat. Without the telekinesis, that alone could undermine a large force. You sing to forty thousand without a thought. Imagine creating a wave of fear to a force that size. A small country could be overtaken in a day."

"Or a large one," Houston mused. "I can see how it could be done."

Thank you. If I never said it, thank you. And she meant it, deeply.

You are quite welcome, cara, he replied with an easy caress in her mind. He slipped his arm upward, his palm curving around the back of her neck, his thumb stroking sensually at her pulse.

"Would you like to take a walk, *cara*? The moon is almost full." He bent lower, his warm breath tantalizing the skin near her ear.

Titania looked at Houston then Laney. She spoke up. "We'll be fine. We'll catch a movie then go to bed."

"You're sure? You just got here."

Laney waved them off, gathering the dishes they had used for their dinner. "And we'll be here tomorrow. He's right," she said, looking through the window. "The moon is almost full. It's gorgeous. Go have a date or something." She shot Titania a wink then started running the water.

She shrugged and followed Diego outside. "If I didn't know any better, I would swear she really wanted us out of there."

"I would have to agree, but whether it was for our privacy or theirs, I could not say." Diego's eyes were sparkling in the moonlight. She still thought he had the most unbelievable eyes.

Titania laughed. She looked up at the man who had captured her heart. "Diego, what if you weren't the only one like you?"

"How do you mean?" He twined her fingers through his, walking along a narrow animal track leading from the house.

"If we could find others like you, would you want to? I think the way you have lived has a lot to do with it."

He glanced at her, his expression considering. "How do you see that?"

"Well, you told me you never took a life to live. That must mean something. Everyone knows vampires are wholly evil, living on depravity, yet you never did, and Laney knew it the same as I." He swept her up, lifted her over a small stream, actually floating over it. Her eyes were huge when he touched down on the other side.

"Could you warn me when you are about to do something like that?"

He gave her a sheepish smile, placing her back on the ground beside him. "Sorry, *cara*. I was thinking about what you said. I will try to remember." He started walking again.

Within minutes, the trees began to thin, a wide meadow opening up before her. She gasped in appreciation. An expanse of green carpet with softly rolling hills and valleys spread before her. The flowers were asleep, but she could still find their heady fragrance filling the nighttime air.

"Is that your only theory?"

"Huh? Oh, no." She followed his lead easily. "There's your reflection, the church. What about silver? Can you touch silver? It's supposed to have a debilitating affect on vampires."

"That one I do not know. I own none." He was looking at her with that sinful grin again. A slow burn was building.

She frowned. "Quit trying to distract me. I hate the idea that you've been alone for so long." She put a fist on her hip.

"Honey," he said, lifting a palm to cradle her chin, his touch feather light. "I am not alone now. That is all that matters to me."

"But what if it's possible? What if others are out there? What you know could save them, could keep them from becoming what Brakka is."

He tilted his head, searching her expression. "You are serious? You would wish to actively search for others?"

"Well," she glanced down. "I guess it does sound crazy. But you have been alone for so long. I will do my best to

figure this out, but think of the ones who could be like you and don't have someone like me? How lonely their lives are?"

"It was a living hell," he said lowly.

She spread her palms across his chest. "I have seen your memories. Long, endless nights. Not a word spoken. It tears me apart."

He gathered her into his chest. "You are a compassionate woman." His eyes flowed over her face, as gentle as a caress. "And I have a feeling you are going to be the largest challenge to my peace of mind."

"Does that mean we will try?"

"It will be dangerous. Vampires are territorial," he replied, hesitant.

"You're not doing too badly with Houston around," she pointed out with a quirked brow.

"I thought you did not know," he said, a slow question to it.

"I don't know, exactly, but I know he is different. Like me, like Laney. Powers attract." Her eyes widened. "Oh my God! That has to be it."

"What, *cara*?" His smile widened with her excitement.

"Did you have any ability, anything, before Brakka changed you?" She was almost jumping with excitement.

Broad shoulders rolled. "I could not say. It was so long ago. Now everything is second nature."

She refused to let his reticence dampen her spirits. "I bet that is it. You must have been born with a gift, something to help combat the darker, persuasive force of being a vampire."

"Do you realize how rare it would be to find that combination in another? And the decision would have to be made to live honorably, if that is what made this possible. I do not believe there is a margin for error in this."

"Well, there's the both of us."

"And it took me almost five hundred years to find you." He pressed his forehead to hers. "*Cara...*"

Her excitement ebbed with an acknowledged sigh. "You're probably right. I was just thinking. You never gave this life to another, excepting me. It does make sense if you think about it. Power attracts." She folded against his chest, his arms holding her close.

He sighed once. "After I know you are safe. Not before."

"Which means?" she asked hopefully.

"When Brakka and Tenorio have been eliminated. I refuse to let you save lonely vampires with them still looking for you. One catastrophe at a time, please." He tilted her to catch her gaze. "Have you thought about what you will do with these lost souls if you find any? I will not share you." He caught her closer to make his point.

"Not really. I don't know of any others like myself."

Diego began to nibble on exposed skin. Flames rose in his wake. "Then perhaps you should reconsider. Vampires are very dangerous. The Brethren do not congregate out of friendship. It would be very difficult to pursue such an endeavor without having to deal with those I would rather not let near you."

"All right," she allowed. "I will rethink this." Lashes drifted closed when his hands moved beneath her blouse. Sweet heat

spread when he cupped a breast in his hand. Desire spiked as he rubbed his thumb over a peaked nipple. "Diego?"

"Hmm?" he breathed, nipping at soft skin along her shoulder.

"Is this kind of wanting normal?" Her hands had tugged his shirt from his jeans, fingers dancing across warm skin. "I can't seem to stop thinking about you like this." Her head rocked back when he glided down the front of her throat to the hollow, his tongue doing delicious things to the nerves there.

"*Cara*, I want you like this every minute I am awake." Desire made his voice low, rich, and it wound over her ears. His mouth curved. "Well, not like this. More like this," he told her in a wicked voice. The next instant her clothes were gone and she was lying on a bed of grass with him next to her, kissing and lapping at heated skin.

"That is so not fair," she cried. "How did you do that?"

"Would this help?" he purred. His clothes were gone.

A sensuous smile found its way to her mouth. "That at least evens the score." Light laughter was obliterated when his damp tongue found the taut point of her breast.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eighteen

"I want to know how you fly," Titania said, a contented smile on her lips. She rested on his shoulder, watching the stars overhead. Moon glow bathed the meadow, creating soft shadows, and blue-black depths romantically enshrouded the woods surrounding them. Fingers tugged easily through the length of her hair while she drew lazy patterns across his stomach. "You don't turn into a bat, do you?" She lifted partially over him, seeing his eyes blink, then laughter erupted from him.

"Do I look like a bat?"

"Well, no." She sat up, pictured a blanket and smiled when it appeared around her shoulders. She ran a finger over the stitching. "I can't believe I did that," she said in awe.

Diego lifted up an elbow, grinning at her joy. "What would you like to try first? I would say you could be able to do as much as myself. You are proving to be quite open to this."

"How long did it take you to learn?" She propped her elbows on bent knees.

"A long time, but I had no one to direct me."

Titania thought. "I think I would like to fly. How do you do it?"

"I take the form of an owl in most cases."

Her eyes rounded into blue pools. "You can actually become that small? An owl?"

"Honey, I can become as small as a mouse."

"And it doesn't hurt?" Her fingers touched him. He still felt like Diego.

He began to laugh at her expressions. "No, *cara*. It does not." He enveloped her hand in his and stood, pulling her with him. "Let me show you."

She stood in silent wonder as wings and feathers took the place of arms, drawing into his body as it compacted. Legs shortened, and taloned claws formed. She swallowed as his head changed shape, a beak taking the place of that sinful mouth. He stared up at her with pale, unblinking eyes.

She stood, shocked speechless. The bird hopped once and, with a mighty thrust, became airborne. He circled twice then landed on a branch in a nearby tree.

Fly with me, cara. It was a seduction, his voice honeyed and sweet.

"I don't know if I can do that." She discovered her mouth was bone dry.

You made the blanket. Concentrate. I will be here.

She let her eyelids close. She could do this, she told herself. If she could live on blood, she could do anything. She had to believe that.

She took a steadying breath, concentrated on how an owl looked, the soft, downy feathers, the small body, imagined what it would feel like to fly over the treetops.

She felt the contortions begin and fought down the fear. Her eyes popped open, focused on the owl in the trees, keeping herself grounded in what she was attempting. It didn't hurt, exactly, but it felt downright strange.

She stretched out one arm, now a wing, and stared at the length of feathers. *I did it? Diego! I did it!*

He hopped down, met her on the ground. *Yes, you did. And might I say, I have never seen a more stunning owl in my life.* The words whispered through her mind with a lascivious leer, and she wanted to laugh.

Wings popped out, and she ruffled her feathers at him. Laughter floated between them.

Stay close, cara.

Let's see if I can even get off the ground, she told him. He tensed before her and, with a wide flap of strong wings, was flying again. She studied the animal briefly, the feeling of the muscles, and flapped her wings experimentally. Her legs seemed to buckle naturally, and with a push and a flap, she was airborne.

She shocked herself so badly, she almost fell right back to the ground.

Titania!

Wings beat through the surprise, her heart pounding. *I'm fine. We all have to learn to walk. Or in this case, fly.* She soared, finding a breeze at the treetops. She began to find a calm, to enjoy the feeling.

You are doing wonderfully. His pride made her warm all over. He neared, flying over her.

Titania was enraptured, seeing the forest floor through the eyes of the owl. Wind sliced over her body, and scents and sounds were accented, accumulating at an incredible rate. *This is amazing! I can see the cabin from up here!*

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

She dipped, her heart racing with the feeling of freedom. Diego paced her effortlessly. She weaved through a few branches, feeling laughter bubble up inside her. It was like the first time she had ever ridden her horse at a full, wild run. Her first kiss. The feel of the wind in her face on a cold morning. Exhilaration swamped her.

Cara, came Diego's chiding tones, trying to bring her back to earth.

She did what came naturally. She thumbed her nose at him and became a bullet, racing, soaring, her wings maneuvering her soundlessly through the treetops, too carefree, wanting to enjoy every single breathtaking minute. Leaves fluttered as she swept passed.

They played tag, rolling between the trees, swooping down until the grass swayed with their passing. The sky opened up for her, each burst of speed taking her places she'd never dreamed.

She heard his sharp warning just as she broke through the trees, zipping back out into the meadow. The eagle's triumphant cry was her only warning when the large bird fell from the sky, large talons flexed for its attack, dark, beady eyes burning into her, red with hatred.

She whirled, racing toward the nearest tree. *Diego!* The other bird missed by millimeters as she twisted to escape, the harsh wind of flapping wings echoing through her ears. Its screech was high and furious, somersaulting to find her again.

Titania spotted a thick branch and aimed for it. She tried to clutch at it and missed, falling to the ground in a jumbled heap. She landed hard, losing the shape of the owl when she

knocked the wind out of herself and regained her own body in her panic. She screamed, hearing the beating of wings behind her, trying to scramble to her feet.

The sound of colliding bodies was awful when Diego crashed into the eagle. Feathers rained as they plunged from the sky. Titania stared frozen with fear as the two birds took their human shapes.

Brakka! Terror coiled within her as she watched the two men stalk each other. Why hadn't she been more careful?

This is not your fault, cara. I was lax, enjoying your excitement. There was nothing in his expression to show his concern for her, but she felt it in every word.

Don't worry about me, Diego. Concentrate. She stuffed her knuckles into her mouth to keep quiet.

"I warned you, Brakka. She is not to be harmed."

"She will die!" he snarled. "And will watch as I destroy you!"

She gurgled on a scream when Brakka struck hard and fast. Ugly, gashing furrows began to bleed from Diego's side. He didn't stagger as blood welled up. He swept his palm down his side, his hand coming away red, but the bleeding slowed.

Brakka's lips lifted, exposing long, garish fangs. "You are getting slow, Diego."

"And you are too arrogant." Diego's expression hardened. "You will not escape this time. It is time this is over."

Brakka's clawed hands curled. "It is. I will enjoy your woman before I kill her!"

Diego smiled, a chilling, mocking threat. "I doubt that. You are nothing."

Brakka threw back his head and bellowed in rage. Sleeping animals fled from the treetops at the explosion of hatred. In the next instant, a huge wolf lunged at Diego, foam dropping from snapping jaws. But the place where Diego had been standing was empty. He had simply vanished.

Frantically, she searched for Diego. She didn't dare move. She was afraid she would draw Brakka's attention to her hiding place in the shadows of the trees. Fear made it hard to breathe, her heart constricted inside her chest.

The attack came from nowhere. Brakka snarled and snapped at the empty spot, then a huge black wolf charged from the tree line. He launched himself at Brakka, landing squarely against his shoulder, rolling him over several times.

Growls reverberated through the night, a flurry of fur, claws and teeth. Blood matted down black coats in shining splotches of darkness. She was scared to blink. They were both so dark, so fast, it was hard to distinguish one from the other. The fight seemed to go on forever, neither man tiring. Claws grew, struck.

The snap of jaws was loud in the still night air, low growls of anger sounding from both animals. They rose up, charged simultaneously. Teeth rended flesh. She winced, fearing for Diego. They circled, each charge hard and deadly.

With fresh blood drawn on both sides, she realized the match was too equal, both men trained warriors of a time long passed. Relentless, unwavering. They knew each other's moves before the blow was struck. They blocked and parried and attacked with equal grace and force. Could she do something to help Diego? Could she do something to lean the

fight in his favor? She did the only thing she could think of that could even possibly help. She began to sing.

Her voice was weak, her throat dry, but she refused to let that stop her. Brakka could not escape. She pushed that thought from her mind. She could not envision death. She needed to give Diego a chance, her belief, her support in his own creed and code of honor. He could not die. She focused on him, her voice growing, the notes enveloping the meadow in a beautiful wave of sound. She poured her strength into Diego, into the darkness, her arms opening wide, embracing the night.

As if from a dream, she saw the two heaving forms stop, break apart. Brakka snarled loudly, shaking his lupine head, changing to his human form in a distracted fashion.

Sending all of the love and belief she held in her to Diego, she walked forward, unafraid. She would give anything to keep him alive. In that moment, she knew what it meant to have fallen in love. If she died in that moment, she had loved deeply and completely. Moonlight engulfed her, glowed on her pearly skin, and her voice grew stronger. Brakka stood still, entranced, staring, stunned, his dark eyes flaming with hatred and lust. She could see through Diego's eyes the vision she created. A goddess offering the moonlight. A creature of nature.

Diego regained his form, claws slicing through skin and bone as he did so, Brakka caught off guard in that instant for the first and last time. Brakka's headless body crumpled to the ground, disintegrating immediately. Skin, bone, blood,

everything became a fine dust. Silence was deafening in the meadow.

Diego swayed on his feet. "Diego!" She ran to him, wrapped her arms around him, and became engulfed in his extreme exhaustion. Brakka had inflicted hundreds of little seeping wounds, draining his strength.

He wrapped his arms around her waist. "I am fine. However, you are naked," he managed, his voice raspy.

She looked down. *I am?* She shook her head. Unimportant. "You need to rest. You need blood."

His forehead pressed into her shoulder. "In a moment." His breathing was harsh and labored.

"I always knew you needed someone to care for you," she muttered. Jeans and a blouse appeared on her. "Quit that! You are weak enough as it is."

"A man hates being told they are weak, *cara*," he informed her in a disgusted, manly tone. Then he ruined it by stumbling when he stood straight.

She looped one of his arms over her shoulders, keeping her body pressed into his. "Point me toward home." He turned, his steps slow and sluggish. She studied the worst of his gashes and found several had stopped bleeding.

Titania frowned when they reached the stream. "Great. How am I supposed to get us across this?" It wasn't very deep, but was at least a couple yards wide.

"I can manage."

Big blue eyes shot up to his. "Diego. I can't let you."

"Too bad," was all he said, sweeping her up against his chest. "I am not dead, *cara*. Only a little sore."

"A little sore?" she cried, floating across the water again. "You are covered from chin to hip in cuts and gashes." She pressed her hands to several on his chest.

"And I will rest as soon as we are home. I promise, honey," he said. He brushed a kiss to her temple. "You scared me, *cara*. Let me hold you."

Every nerve burned with his intensity. "I scared you? You fight, I sing, and I scared you?"

"You purposely drew his attention. What made you think of such a thing?"

Her hand lifted to touch his cheek. "I couldn't stand the thought of losing you."

"*Cara*." His voice was hoarse. He stopped on the bank and claimed her mouth. Fire erupted. Every fear he had experienced flooded her through his kiss. Fear of losing her, of Brakka being faster. She found in his thoughts he had learned to never underestimate the other vampire.

Pride. There was pride in her bravery, in her absolute, unshakeable belief in him.

"Never put yourself in such a position again, *cara*." Her fingers dug into the thickness of his hair. He pressed little kisses to her face.

"Stop being macho all the time, and I'll think about it."

He groaned. "I was right to pity Houston." When he held her closer, she didn't protest.

When they arrived, the house was silent. "They have gone to bed," Diego told her.

"Are they all right?"

"They are safe here." She still kept his arm locked around her shoulders. He was walking steadier, but she knew he was tired.

His hand found the niche in the paneling to open the concealed door in the wall. When they reached the bed chamber, he fell onto the bed with a deep groan. "Just lay with me, *cara*. Let me feel you next to me."

She curled into his body easily. She stroked the lines from his face. He rolled to his side and buried his face in her neck.

"You know he was not the man you grew up with. That man died the night he lost his soul to the change." Her voice was soothing, her hand stroking his arm, feeling his anguish. There had been no choice in Brakka's destruction, but she could feel the loss tearing through him. "He would have killed you had he been given the chance."

"He would have killed you had he beaten me." A hard tremor shook his body. "That terrified me more than his loss." He was silent for several long moments, her hand drifting over his body in slow, easy strokes. "Never leave me, *cara*."

The entreaty was so quiet, so torn, she had to blink to keep the tears from falling. Never in her life had she expected someone to need her so desperately, so completely.

She held him for hours, his arms wrapped around her, until the weight of the morning sun sank her into oblivion.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Nineteen

"Tenorio made the first move," Houston advised them when they rose the following evening. At Diego and Titania's questioning looks, he informed them, "David is missing."

Titania felt like she'd been struck. "No!"

"He arrived home, but no one has seen him since."

Houston's expression was grim, and Laney's eyes were red.

"Is anyone else suspect?" Diego asked.

Houston shook his head. "There's no proof of anything. He's just gone. But I know him. David doesn't take off."

"Where's Justin? And the main crew?" Titania immediately needed to know.

"Justin was warned. He left for his aunt's in Mississippi. I didn't contact everybody. It would have been mass hysteria."

"He is right, *cara*. Only those who could be directly used against you will be threatened. Trying to warn everybody would not be wise."

She slid onto a barstool. "Do vampires get headaches?" she asked, rubbing her temple. Diego began to knead her shoulders and she let out a short sigh. "When did he disappear?"

"We think late last night."

She looked at the others. "We have to find him. I will not let Tenorio do this to us. He almost killed me. I refuse to let him hurt my friends."

"Any ideas on where he might be?" Houston looked at her, then at Diego. "Because I don't have a one."

"He's probably still in San Francisco," Laney said. "He has connections all over town. The night he took Tani, he was at the Senator's mansion for an evening garden party. That party and the guests were all over the papers."

Titania looked over her shoulder. Diego was pale. Last night had drained him, and he still needed to feed. She returned her attention to her two best friends.

Diego told them, "Meet us in Chinatown by tomorrow night. We will leave tonight. We may find something before morning. He will be found."

"All right." Houston shared a look with Laney. "What about Brakka?" Diego's hands never left her shoulders, his fingers a warm weight on her. He barely winced at the question, but she felt it. "This could get messy."

"It already is," she told him, her lips tightening into a thin line when she slipped from the stool. "Brakka is dead. Chinatown. Tomorrow night."

Laney's gaze sharpened, flew up to Diego. His expression was implacable, harsh. The truth of the battle and its price was in the cold slash of his mouth.

"We'll be there," Houston said, his arm wrapping around Laney.

Titania followed Diego into the inky darkness, her hand firmly in his.

"Keep yourself linked with me, *cara*."

"How are we going to get there?"

"Do you think you can bamf?" he asked her, using her own description.

"Are you serious?" Her fingers tightened on his automatically.

"It is not as hard you may think. Picture where you want to be."

"Which is?"

"We need to investigate the lab."

"But I never saw any of it," she told him. "Just the little I saw before I was incoherent again."

His hand weaved through her hair. "Link with me, follow my lead. I will not lose you."

"You better not," she warned him. She closed her eyes and merged with him, seeing the house before the fire. The white of the walls, the large trees surrounding it. The tall solid rockwork fence.

She followed his lead, focusing on a group of trees out of range of the house itself. The sensation was wrenching, shocking. Almost as if she was being pulled from her body.

One moment her feet were on his front porch, the next she stood on a graveled road shoulder with pebbles under her feet and the smell of the mountains and woods gone. The stench of old smoke, sodden wood and charred everything hung like a heavy pall in the air.

The darkness surrounding them was still. Even the insects were silent. He lifted a hand and stroked a thumb across her skin. "You do not have to come. I will not make you enter the lab again if you do not wish it."

"I'm fine. I really don't remember much."

He nodded and began to change his shape. She followed suit, taking the owl's form once more. She stayed close

without a single complaint as he flew toward the blackened ruins.

The lab had been underground in the original home structure, and now a gaping hole provided the opening. The two birds coasted into the interior, Diego taking shape when he told her it was safe to do so. She neared him automatically.

The lab was a disaster. The metal shards that had protruded from the wall had been pushed out of the way, but that was the only restorative measure that had been taken. Not much had survived the fire. Cabinets were overturned, strewn files and paperwork sat forgotten in small puddles of water, and beaker glass was scattered throughout. The stench of old blood was still on the air, fading.

She watched as Diego began to sift through the surviving papers, dropping file after file. He went to toss one then paused.

"What is it?" She stood over his shoulder, peering at the picture on top of the paperwork. She was blonde with a winsome smile. She looked all of nineteen.

"This woman. I saw her in the thoughts of the men." His mouth pulled down. "I do not think we can do anything for her now."

She settled her hand on his shoulder. "She was like me, wasn't she?"

He flipped a couple of pages. "It says she had a pyrotechnic ability."

"A fire starter?" She stared at the pile of files, scorched and water ruined. She crouched, laid a hand on several. "Are

all of these test subjects?" She pushed them around, seeing names on the folders as she did so. She wanted to cry for all the women and men who had died or been hurt because of Tenorio's plans.

"I would have to say so." They both looked at the pile. There were more than a dozen and several more that he had not retrieved.

"How did he find so many? Are any of them even still alive?" Her voice cracked as she began to open file after file. Most were women in their twenties, plus a couple of men. All of them had backgrounds that covered years, thorough research that gave credence to their supposed abilities. Pictures, eyewitness accounts, little snippets of information that only someone who had seen could detail so well. Her stomach began to hurt as she continued to read the names. "Where is my file?"

Diego sorted through what was there. "It is not here. He could have it with him."

"I need to take these with us," she said, scooping the remaining files together. "Even if they aren't alive, do you have any idea what this kind of information could do to those who are still alive? Who have to live with what they can do?"

He stilled her hurried movements with a gentle hand, brushing an understanding kiss to her lips. "I know, *cara*."

"Maybe some of them are still alive," she said hopefully

"It is possible. This is not his main study lab." He reached forward, pulled out a thick envelope from the back of the cabinet. His grin turned triumphant when he opened it and

found the letterhead and notes inside. "And now we know right where it is."

He froze the same instant she tilted her head. *Did you hear that?*

I did.

Is it coming this way?

Diego frowned. *Whoever it is stopped at the entrance.* He handed her the file to add to the stack and vanished. She tried to listen for him, but couldn't hear anything. When she merged with him, there was nothing to see. She withdrew immediately when she feared she could distract him. He reappeared only moments later. "I did not find anyone, but I found his scent. I will know him if we see him."

"Isn't that weird? Was it a guard or something?"

"He was of the Brethren."

"Oh." Her stomach shrank a little. She wasn't ready to face one just yet, not after Brakka. She stacked the files into her arms. "Ready when you are."

He wrapped his arms around her, and with her mind grasping his image, they vanished.

* * * *

Files surrounded her on the picnic table, her head held in a steady palm to her temple. The little wildlife park was quiet, the sounds of San Francisco far away. Crickets and cicadas sang in the trees, and the occasional wolf song reached her on the breeze. But it wouldn't have mattered if she had been in Symphony Hall, because none of it was going to disturb

her. She read each file, committed each name, each picture to memory.

Tabitha Mason, twenty, from Madison, Illinois. Pyrotechnics. She was the one Diego had recognized. There was Charlene 'Charlie' Godwood, twenty-one, from Harris, Arkansas. She was an energy conduit. Titania shook her head. The girl was a walking lightning bolt according to her records.

There were so many others, telekinetic like her, or sentient. There were two telepaths in the group, too. All Titania could do was pray that if they still lived, they could be helped. But she feared Diego may have been right. Several of the files had ceased to have new information or new dated material added to them months ago.

She felt him then, a warmth that flowed over her before his arms encircled her. "*Cara*. Do not be sad." His skin was warmed from his recent feeding, and she couldn't resist curling into him.

"It's hard not to be. So many. And they're probably dead. And this monster has David."

"David is not gifted, is he?"

"No. That is what scares me. There is absolutely nothing to keep Tenorio from killing him."

"We have to believe he will not, *cara*." He lowered his head to hers, but his lips were stiff. *Do not move, cara*.

What is it?

The one. He is here.

He followed us? She fought to keep from trembling. *I never felt him.*

Nor I. He is either very arrogant, or purposely giving away his location upwind wanting to take us off our guard.

He strategically rolled her around his body, turning toward the threat. "I know you are here. Show yourself." Titania felt his body harden, his intensity multiply.

"I greet thee, Brethren." The voice was low, respectful.

Diego frowned. "I greet none of the Brethren. Who are you?"

"My name is Nathan. I mean you no harm."

"Why did you follow us?" Command resonated in Diego's words.

A shape began to form across the span of greenery, well away from Diego's reach. Titania peeked around his arm. The stranger was blond and blue-eyed, standing at around six feet tall in a standard black T-shirt and blue jeans. He was leaner and less broad than Diego, and he held his hands out in peace.

"Because when I encountered you at the burned house, I thought it would be better to watch to see if approaching you would be the same as the last three I have met." Nathan leaned back against a tree, showing he meant no danger to them by crossing his arms. "Even now I have to do some things several times to learn properly," he chastised himself.

"You are recently changed."

"Less than a year." Something in Nathan's voice dropped, drew Titania further beyond Diego's protective arm to look. "I haven't been home, I lost my fiancé, and every one of the Brethren I have met ... Well, let's just say, they haven't made a good argument for staying alive."

"Who created you?"

"Damned if I know." Nathan snorted. "All I know is one minute I was hanging out with my girl, the next I think I'm getting mugged." Nathan's gaze turned bleak. "Except he didn't steal my wallet. At least Denise didn't get caught," he said more to himself. Titania could feel the waves of loss, of anger and depression that he battled against, in the air.

Diego raked a hand through his hair. "Why did you follow us, then?"

Nathan lifted a shoulder. "Two reasons. First, you didn't try to rub me into the ground the minute you heard me. Second, her."

Diego shoved her back behind him immediately.

Nathan's hands shot out. "Look, I'm not going to do anything. If I had the balls, I'd ask you to kill me and get this joke over with. But she's the reason I knew you had to be different. I've never met a..." He gave Diego a look. "What do you call a woman vampire anyway?"

Diego frowned at him. "She is my mate. My wife."

Nathan's brow scrunched up. "Man. I had no idea. They need to rewrite those Dracula movies." He shook his head in wonder. He looked up again. "She's not like a slave or something, then? She's like us?"

"Why do you want to know?"

Nathan kicked at the dirt, his only release of disgusted anger. "Because I don't know what the hell I'm doing, that's why. Am I supposed to make more like us? And why the hell would I want to? I've never killed a person in my life. Hell, I

was twenty-three when that bastard did this to me. I sure as hell don't want to do this to someone."

He paced short, agitated, angry steps when Titania spoke quietly from behind Diego. "I am only twenty-three."

Cara, came the warning.

She ignored him. "And I've only been like this for three nights."

Nathan stopped short. "Three nights? Are you serious?" She gave him a smile and a nod from behind Diego's crooked elbow. He pushed her behind him again with a firm hand.

"Have you been feeding?"

Nathan made a sick sound. "Of course. I almost pruned up before I figured out how to deal with it. I thought I was going to die the first time. But for some reason, the whole concept worked."

"Have you killed to live?" Diego's voice was low, demanding compliance.

Nathan paced again, too absorbed in his misery to notice the compulsion. He shuddered at the question. "No. I've been too terrified to do much of anything except stay quiet and alive." He shot Diego a stricken look. "Am I supposed to kill? Oh, God. Please don't tell me those stupid movies have that part right."

Titania curled into Diego's side, refusing to hide any longer. Nathan was not a threat. Just very confused and alone. "No, Nathan. They are wrong. Very, very wrong." Nathan collapsed in front of the tree he had been pacing near. He dropped his head to his bent knees.

He means it, Diego. He's lost.

I know, cara. But what am I supposed to do with him?

She scowled up at him. *Help him.*

Diego rolled his eyes and sighed. "There goes my peace of mind. Did you see it? It just ran away out of fear."

She thumped him on the chest with a curled fist, laughing. "Stop it! Nathan, we can help you."

His head popped up. "You can? Is there a way to reverse this crap?"

"No." It was a dually spoken answer.

"Oh." Nathan's blue eyes darkened with his heartbreak.

"So I've really lost Denise? I can't see my parents? All of it?"

"Have you spoken with your parents since this happened?" Titania asked quietly.

Nathan stood again, brushing his hands over his jeans in agitated swipes. "No. Denise was freaked out. They all think I died when no one ever found a body."

"Oh, Nathan," she said, her heart in her throat. Diego held her a little closer, her intake of emotions building.

Cara, concentrate. I can feel you trembling.

She smiled up at Diego, a weak attempt at best. She cleared her throat. "Nathan. It might not all be lost. But I know this much. You cannot go back to what was."

Nathan stuffed his hands into his pockets. "So what's the point? Why not just wait for the sunrise or whatever it is that we do when we die?"

"I cannot answer that. You are the only other I have met aside from myself who holds a certain level of respect for the life that sustains us. And I have been looking for answers for far, far longer." He looked down at Titania. *You are pale, cara.*

And we have company. I'll live.

"I never thought I'd say this," Nathan said, looking at them. "But would it be too much just to call you friend?"

"No," Titania spoke up before Diego could draw breath. "We would like that."

Diego clamped his hand on her hip, silencing her from saying more. "Forgive us, though. This evening we have something that needs to be attended to."

"Sure, sure." Nathan stepped back to leave. "I'm sorry."
Diego!

She felt his sigh again. "Nathan? I am Diego, and this is Titania. You may be counted among our friends."

Nathan's gaze warmed. "Thank you. I mean it. I was scared I was the only one, too. The last three I met were so gruesome. I couldn't even talk to one of them, he was so intent on..." Nathan's gaze dropped like a stone, unable to put it into words. Titania's heart clenched a little harder for him, feeling his turmoil, his sense of loss, a finality.

"Hunting?" Diego offered.

"Sure. That works. He wanted to slice me to bits, so I got out of there."

"Do you have a safe lair?"

Nathan shrugged. "I guess so. I rarely stay at the same inn twice."

Diego cracked a smile. "Smart. Go into the ravine from here. About three miles north of the ravine head is a safe place." He held up his hand when Nathan's mouth popped open. "No, do not tell me where. Never, ever give away your

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

sleeping place. Vampires and humans both can kill you. Never forget that."

Nathan nodded. "I think I can remember that rule very easily. Thank you." And like he had never been, he was gone.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twenty

Titania's heart dropped, looking over the compound. There was a large house with two separate buildings. The tight security along with the ten foot brick wall, cameras and roaming canine patrols, destroyed the peaceful picture of the Grecian architecture to the three-story home.

"I guess he's not going to let it happen twice," she said. "Is David in there?"

"I believe so. There is something about that building." He pointed to the one on the rear right. "It feels larger than it looks."

"Maybe something underground like the other one?"

He nodded. "I can find several people inside."

She closed her eyes and tried to search. There were echoes of feelings emanating from all around them. Titania tuned her focus toward the building, tunneling the emotions into a point to follow.

She moaned when she found the first wave of pain. She felt Diego's hand, but gritted her teeth and pushed harder. She almost fell from her perch in the tree limbs when the cry for help reached her. Someone inside was reaching out for her.

Who are you? She concentrated, grasping for the single voice.

Lily. God, please help us. The voice was scared, thin, exhausted and in so much pain, blood tinged sweat was

forming on Titania's brow. Her pain beat at Titania, feeling it directly from the mental path.

Lily's profile folder had been in the stack they had taken from the lab. She pictured the redhead immediately, keeping the tenuous pathway open.

We are. We are here to help. Can you tell me where you are?

The feeling of relief was wrenching. *I'm in a cell. I can't see very much. They don't let us out.*

Titania shuddered then felt Diego, the hand still holding her, comforting, and knew he could hear Lily.

How many of you are there?

Lily's voice reached out to her from the depths of her despair. *There are at least three of us. I don't know. They brought a guy in last night. I don't know if he's still here.*

Titania's heart slammed hard. She took a deep breath. She had to believe David was still alive.

Are you guarded?

Yes. There's always at least one.

Titania frowned. How were they going to get them out? Four was more difficult than one.

"Do not worry, *cara*. We will get them all." She nodded, believing in the conviction in his voice.

Lily. We need a diversion, and we have help coming. Can you and the others hold out one more day?

There was a long silence. It began to worry her until Lily reached out for her. Her voice was growing more tired. *We will. Please don't leave us here.*

We won't, Lily. I am Titania. Keep my name and your thoughts guarded. Tenorio wants me too.

I will.

Titania wiped a hand across her eyes and found herself shaking when the pathway disappeared. "She's a very strong telepath. At least she's alive." She clutched at Diego's arm. "She said there were others. David could still be in there."

"Stay here, *cara*. I want to get closer. I think I have an idea for that diversion. I will try to see how many there are and if David is there."

"Be careful."

He leaned over and brushed a kiss to her lips. His shape changed, and he flew from the branches, gliding effortlessly to the roof of the building. This time she stayed a shadow in his mind, feeling as he slipped inside.

Diego moved silently through the single floor house. Titania could follow his every step. *She is correct. There are two guards upstairs. They are alert.* She remained quiet, letting him search the home. It looked like it once had been a carriage house that had been converted. It was the conversion and what was done within those walls that bothered her.

Cara, David is alive, but he is hurt, weak.

She refrained from making any sounds, stuffing her knuckles into her mouth instead. *How many are there?*

I found four, five total with David. It will be difficult, but not impossible. That in itself gave her hope. *They are weak; two have been tortured. One is in bad shape. I do not know if she will live.*

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Look at her.

She found the blonde in his thoughts and gasped at the scars on her skin. *That's Tabitha. Oh, God.* She fought the revulsion at her condition. Her hair was matted and dirty, and her face was severely bruised in a myriad of colors. Her arms and legs were covered with thin, slicing scars and cuts that were in various stages of healing. She was chained by the ankle to her bed. Even through Diego's path, she could sense the young girl's pain, the deep-seated aches from severe beatings. How could someone do that to another person? *Can you do anything for her?*

I can try. I can only do so much without showing my presence. She sent Diego her strength and deep love for helping her at all, then felt the shift as he left his shape. When he regained his body, he shimmered into a fine mist to remain undetectable. *She will rest better tonight. She needs medical attention.*

Why would they do that to her?

It is in her memories. She has fought back. But her spirit is nearly gone. She will not last much longer in this environment.

We have to get them out tomorrow.

We will, cara. We will.

* * * *

Diego helped the woman as much as he could, hearing her breathing ease and feeling her muscle spasms lessen. She was incredibly gifted, had been pushed beyond her endurance, yet the young woman had stayed strong. But she

was losing the battle. Diego knew from her memories and those of the men in the first fire, she had been abused in more than one way. He could not say if she would ever be healed from her ordeal.

He slid through each cell, checking on each inhabitant. He found Lily resting easier with a flare of hope on the horizon. David was chained in the cell next to hers. He had not given Titania a visual of him. His condition would have torn her apart.

David hung chained by his wrists to a wall bracket, his shirt gone. Welts rose on his chest and back. He was slipping in and out of consciousness. Evidently, his most recent round of torture had ended just a short time ago. Blood still seeped from the welts on his chest.

Diego lifted David's head and, looking into his eyes, claimed his thoughts, searching his memories to discover what had transpired since his abduction. He was proud of David's loyalty, to learn he had told them nothing to substantiate Tenorio's study of Titania. There was little Diego could do about the torture. It was too strong with too much pain attached to it. Bruises were growing beneath the welts. When one method had gotten them nowhere, they had increased the level of pain. Diego helped diminish the pain in David's body even as he pushed away the first signs of overworking his own abilities.

When David's head sagged once more, he managed a light, resting sleep rather than a pain-wracked semi-consciousness. Diego knew he could not be comfortable, but

he dared not release him. "Stay with us, David. Just stay strong one more day."

The last two cells held women also. Both were asleep. For that he was thankful. Their pain was not so deep that Titania would be registering it through him. He had tried to block some of it from her, but it was her natural talent. Pain was a very strong sensation and created all level of emotions. It was no wonder she tapped into Lily so easily. Lily had been mistreated almost as badly as Tabitha had been.

His lips lifted in a surge of retribution. He would enjoy taking his anger out on Tenorio. He had planned this for Titania. He had planned her abuses, her tortures, to crush her spirit and will, to be able to run tests on her without a fight. Tabitha was nearly at that point. The magnitude curdled Diego's blood.

With a completed examination of the people being held, he studied the walls, the cells themselves and the doorway out. There were too many to try to rescue tonight, alone, and once the cells were open, he was positive the alarms would be set off.

They needed an escape and a getaway plan. He hated to admit it, but this time, he needed Houston.

Diego rejoined Titania in the trees, hidden from sight. "We will definitely need a diversion. I am not sure all of them can move under their own power." Her blue eyes rounded with pain. He cupped her chin, wanting to remove the echoes from her thoughts. "Do not worry, *cara*. We will get them all. David is strong. I did what I could to help the others."

"Thank you. For doing anything."

He swiped his thumb across her bottom lip. Her pain-filled gaze cleared slowly, soft breathing growing heavier as he simply held her with his palm. His own body's reaction was electric. It did not matter how often he loved this woman, he would always want her. Need her touch, her heated kiss, her passion in his life.

He dipped his head, found the sweet, delicious edge of her mouth. He traced her bottom lip with his tongue, felt the leap of her heart, heard the thunder of it against her ribs. His echoed hers. His blood began to race, to heat with her supple mouth caressing him back.

"We need to return to the park, *cara*. There is not much time until sunrise. I want to hold you myself and know you are still safe." After witnessing Tenorio's evil firsthand, he needed to know she was all right and by his side.

He knew the instant she realized what that statement meant. He could see the fear in her mind, could feel the torment. That she could still let him down. He brushed the back of his hand to her cheek. "*Cara*. I would allow you no harm, ever."

"But, Diego," she said, her scared thoughts plain in her dark gaze. "In the ground?"

"It is difficult at first, but not insurmountable." He would not belittle her fears. He had hated it at first with a deep fear. It had taken time to learn to embrace the comfort of the cool earth when the sun stole his last breath. "You will be unaware just as you were at my home."

"I wasn't buried alive at your house!" Her hand covered his, her fingers surrounding his in a death grip. "There was a bed. Not dirt. A roof. Not bugs and who knows what."

"Bugs do not disturb our rest, *cara*. Not because we do not know, but because they do not. I will be with you, *cara*. I would not leave you to face your first night alone."

She jumped from her perch, landing without making a sound, stalking into the trees. "I am not going to sleep in the ground, Diego. I can't. Don't you understand?" She had stopped a few feet away, her arms over her middle. "I am willing to do a lot of things. But I can't do that. It would feel like I'm being buried alive." Her head had fallen forward, the silken sweep of her hair obscuring her features. But he still knew what she was thinking.

He walked to stand before her, tilting her up to search her gaze. She dropped her eyes quickly, unable to look at him. "*Cara*, you are adapting at an impressive rate. I could not be prouder of you."

Her look was pleading when she finally met his gaze. "Can't we go to the cabin? Bamf? We know where we need to be for tomorrow."

"*Cara*." He enfolded her into his arms. "We have to be close. David is counting on us, as are Lily and the others. Believe me, if I thought we could, we would. Houston will be meeting us first thing after sundown tomorrow. We both need to be prepared." His arms remained around her, keeping her close.

"Meaning be where you can feed." Her voice was muffled, pressed as she was into his chest.

"Yes, *cara*." He rubbed his chin lightly into the thickness of her hair. "*Cara*, do you trust me? Can you trust me enough to do this?"

"Diego. You know I do. But this?" She rocked back and forth, her heart racing for a completely different reason.

He dropped his head, finding the sweet scent of her in her hair, drawing her deep into his lungs. His voice was smooth when he told her, "Let me love you for now, Titania. We will worry about the sunrise when it arrives." He drifted his lips over her satin skin, nibbling and caressing with tender care.

"Diego, you are trying to distract me again." She moved her chin a little as she said it, giving him room to move his warm mouth. "You're cheating."

"Is it working?" His hands began to thread through her hair, tugging gently, pulling her lips upward, totally unrepentant. He brushed against them once.

"It would seem that way." Her hands had loosened from between them, sliding with feathered heat over his ribs. "I really don't know if I can do it, Diego."

His mouth hovered just over hers, hearing the increased tempo of her heart, feeling the heated rush of blood through her body. "Let me worry about later. I need you." He nibbled at the corners of her mouth, finding her feminine scent growing. Heat flared. Undeniable hunger built between them.

One moment they were hidden in the dark shadows of the wooded lot next to Tenorio's private compound, the next he had Titania sitting on the edge of a picnic table, her legs curved to wrap around his waist. His mouth claimed hers, capturing her cry of surprise. Diego found the honeyed

warmth of her, his tongue dueling with hers as his passion rose.

She whimpered, causing his pressure to spike, and her hands gripped at his hair, holding him to her when he rumbled in answer, a low vibration that rocked them both. He filled his hands with her hair, capturing her in his strong arms as his mouth plundered.

He could not resist the sweet temptation of her silken skin, his mouth sliding down her sensual warmth to her shoulder. He scraped his teeth over the beating of her heart, and she threw back her head, making a mewling sound in the back of her throat. His temperature soared a thousand degrees, and he sank his teeth deep.

Fires raged. Heat ate at him from the inside, daring to consume him, to consume her. None had ever tasted so sweet, so hot, so addictive. Her arms clung, held him tighter, passion flaring between them in sharp arcs of energy.

She pushed into him, demanding. Needing. He closed the marks with an aggressive slash of his tongue. He wanted her as hot, as needy as he was. He needed her to need as deeply. At the demanding touch of her on his heated flesh, he knew she was completely under passion's spell.

Diego felt her hands, felt the sweet torment of her fingernails raking down his chest and forced restraint to keep from stripping the clothes away. Her fingers burned his skin with each stroke as she pulled buttons free and shoved the material away. Her palms splayed wide, and his heart thundered against his ribs, echoing loudly behind his ears.

He floated on a cloud of ecstasy when she nibbled his mouth, moving lower to his chin and neck, her tongue swirling in decadent, damp seduction. His head snapped back, a low hiss of pleasure escaping when she found his pulse. Suction on the sensitive point made his skin blaze, his blood boil.

Thought ceased when her teeth broke his skin. Lightning erupted. The clothes were gone, and he possessed her as she took him over the edge of endurance.

He held her close, plunging into her with a sharp stroke, felt as her body responded, welcomed him. Shuddered in his embrace in immediate release.

Her tongue swept over his pulse, and his heart nearly burst in sensation. He guided her backward to the top of the picnic table, his body surging into hers with powerful strokes. Her cries lifted above them, filled the night sky. He gripped her hips, holding her tighter, taking her higher. Filling her deeper, her body taking him with each stroke, holding him.

The world stopped spinning for a split second, and Diego felt her come apart. Felt her body shudder, her breath slam out of her on a shattering cry.

Diego's head reared back. Lights exploded as his body detonated with cataclysmic force. A roar of possession rushed from his lungs. A sound of claiming. Of ecstasy.

Diego leaned over, gasping to breathe, pressing a gentle kiss in the valley between her beautiful breasts. Her skin glowed like warmed alabaster in the silvery moonlight bathing them. "You are the greatest gift I could have ever wished for, Titania."

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

A single arm lifted, cradled him, and he rested, pillowed by the lush softness of her body, her heart pounding beneath his cheek with her love.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twenty-One

"That was so not fair," she accused him. His laugh was a low sound from deep in his chest.

"Forgive me, *cara*. I really could not help myself."

She smacked his shoulder, pushing him away. The loss of his body's heat caused a shiver to travel over her skin. She dressed once again, raking a hand through her tumbled hair. The night was fading, the sunrise less than an hour away.

She sat on the bench of the picnic table, pulling her legs up to her chin. Silvery leaves danced and shuffled in the soft night breeze blowing through the trees. Diego sat behind her, pulling her into his chest, wrapping his arms around her.

"*Cara*, I know you are scared." His chin rested on her shoulder, his breath warming her ear. "I am here for you."

She allowed him to hold her closer. "Why do we have to stay here?" Fear made her voice high. Just the thought of being several feet underground sent shudders down her spine.

He caressed her arms with his thumbs. "Because the cabin is too far away." Her eyes closed when he nuzzled her. "I know it is frightening. But I would never allow anything to happen to you."

"I will try, Diego."

"That is all I can ask. I have faith in you, *cara*."

"At least one of us does," she muttered.

"I need to set the safeguards," he told her, rising. She watched him as he walked around the perimeter, chanting

and weaving symbols. It helped to take her mind off of the soon-to-be-rising sun.

"How did you learn all of this?"

"When I was turned, searching for a way to reverse this, I found several old tomes of lore and spells. Some of them were useable, others not."

"Like witchcraft?"

Diego shrugged. "I imagine it is so. The Brethren do not share knowledge like this. I had to find it on my own. Once I discovered it and found out how to make the spells work, I broadened my knowledge. There are several things that, being what we are, we can do by thinking of it, but this is something more."

"How do you know?" She tilted her chin, her knees still lifted, watching him.

His hand paused in midair. "I never really thought about it." He resumed his work. "I believe the amount of power involved is higher than I had been granted in the beginning. I cannot recall much from so long ago, but each century the energy seemed easier to manage, felt stronger."

"Did you have any knowledge before your turning? Did you study any magic?"

He was quick to answer. "No. Magic then was the black art. Heresy."

A slight grin formed, watching his evasive head shake. "But you were interested in it."

"Maybe when I was a young boy," he replied noncommittally.

Her legs dropped as her earlier thoughts came back to her. "Did you know any spells then?" His mouth tightened, and she told him, "You know, no one really cares that much about magic. So tell me the truth."

He dropped his hands, finishing his last guard, his expression tight. "I had a few scrolls. But it does not prove a thing."

Titania slid from her spot. "No. You're looking at this wrong. I was thinking along the lines of your ability to keep your soul. You had to be born with a talent. Maybe you have a natural magic ability."

Diego snorted. "Because I had an interest in the black arts?"

"They are not black anymore. Now it's just magic." She wrapped her arms around his waist. "Show me something."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. What can you do?"

He pressed his hand to the back of his neck. "I can create an energy ball." His gaze was wary, undecided.

"Really! Like a fire ball? That's cool." Her brow wrinkled. "I don't think I can do that. Show me. Let's see if it's a 'you' ability."

He stepped back. "All right." He laid his hands out flat. Concentration was etched into his face as a small blue orb began to build in his palms.

"Can you make it bigger?" Her eyes widened as the orb floated, glowed a silvery blue.

He nodded. "I will keep it small for now. I do not like to do this often. The Brethren can feel pulses of energy."

She reached out, could feel the heat, but it didn't burn her. He drew his hands together, and the orb winked out.

"That is incredible. And you've had so long to study." She turned back to her bench, but he stopped her.

"*Cara*," he said, wrapping her up again in his arms. "Quit thinking you are not enough. You are exactly what I could have wished for." His arms were warm. "I have an idea."

He waved a hand, and a huge hole gaped open beneath the bower of trees. Her heart tripped. "Already?" It was a low squeak.

"Wait, *cara*. What is your favorite color?"

"Um, blue, I guess. Why?"

"Watch." He curled her into his chest as his focus went into the bottom of the hole. Blue sheets, pillows and a blanket appeared. "You will feel the material instead of the ground. When you breathe your last, you will be only in my arms."

She wanted to cry at his gesture. "That is the sweetest thing, Diego." The blanket flipped back, ready for them.

"It is time, *cara*. Can you feel the weight of the morning? It will be light soon."

She looked to the east and could feel the sun, could feel the first rays warming the edge of the horizon. But when she looked back into the hole, she didn't see a waiting bed, she saw a grave. When she tried to take a step back, Diego held her steady.

"Diego, I can't." She shook her head, pulling herself harder from his strong embrace.

"Shh, Titania. Remember, you will be unaware, and I will ensure you are free before you draw your first breath."

She thumped her forehead into his chest, the morning beating on her harder. "You can do that?" Her body was growing heavy, and it was getting harder to think. Time was running out.

"I would do anything to make you happy." He curled his body over hers. "I will hold you as I have since the moment I met you. Close to my heart."

Tears edged her eyes. "Why do you have to say such nice things?" She wanted to cry out in frustration.

He didn't answer, but held her tenderly as he floated them down to the waiting bed.

"I hate spiders, Diego. I really do." It was a weak protest, her limbs already dead weight.

"They will not come near. I promise you." He pulled her up onto his shoulder, his embrace tender, his words understanding. The first sensations of earth covering their legs filtered into her thoughts, and she wanted to scream to be let out. Air rasped through her body as fear raked over her. Nails clawed as she fought against the sleep that was inescapable.

Diego pulled the blanket higher, tucked it around her. Her last moment of clarity was met with the heavy, cool weight of earth cocooning them in. And the knowledge she was being buried alive.

* * * *

Titania inhaled on a jerked breath. She pushed up sharply, whipping her head around to look at where she was, waiting for the feeling of crushing weight to sink into her. Trees

surrounded her instead, and the sky was wide open overhead. Relief flooded her. She fell back with a sigh, landing on a solid shoulder resting on pillows, staring up at the darkening horizon, the last rays of day disappearing beyond the trees.

They were lying on cool earth, the hole nowhere to be seen, nothing giving a hint to its existence from the night before. She snuggled under the cotton blanket, pulling herself closer to the warmth of Diego's body.

"That was dirty, Diego," she told him.

"Oh?"

"Yes, you knew once it got too late, there wouldn't be much I could do about it."

"But you did not wake below ground, just as I promised."

His hand traveled in languid sweeps up and down her arm. Typically how she woke up every night, come to think of it.

She rose up on one hand, staring down at him. "How did you do it? You always wake up before me."

"I can wake a few minutes sooner because I have a stronger tolerance to the sun. Which is a good thing." His hand cradled her cheek. "I never want to see or feel you suffer as you did last night. If we should ever have to spend the sunlight hours beneath ground again, I will ensure you do not have to suffer for it."

His lips were warm and hungry when he touched hers, stealing the air from her lungs. His lips were curved in a sexy smile when he let her go.

She shook her head at him. "So not fair," she repeated. "But I forgive you, Diego. I understand."

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Diego stood and stretched, lean muscle and dark hair glistening in the starlight. "Come, *cara*. It is time." She nodded once.

It took only a few quick minutes to clean their signs of occupation from the picnic site. Diego checked the files taken from Tenorio's lab he had camouflaged, ensuring they were untouched, covering them once more. With an outstretched hand, he folded Titania into his chest.

They vanished from where they had stood to reappear in a darkened alley off of Grant Street. Sounds and smells of open restaurants and people assaulted Titania. She took a single breath, closing her eyes. She released it slowly, feeling Diego holding her until she was able to concentrate beyond the slam of humanity. Beyond the heady pulse of life walking just out of her reach.

"Easy, *cara*." His hands were moving up and down her back.

"I'm fine." She stood straight, needing to prove to herself she could do this. She could walk and talk and act human. Her diet had changed, but she hadn't. She found his hand. "Let's go find them."

They strode past store fronts and restaurants to the end of the block where Houston and Laney were waiting. She refused to think about the hunger beginning to gnaw at her.

I will take care of you, cara. You will be safer with Houston while I hunt.

"Houston," Diego greeted.

"Did you have any luck?" Houston asked as they drew near. They huddled together just beyond a dimmed storefront, out of the path of pedestrians.

"We did. We found where David was taken. There are others."

Laney paled, and Houston swept her closer. "Others?" Her voice was raw.

"Tenorio had other test subjects, men and women. We found their files at the burned out lab. Four of the women are there." Titania didn't complain when Diego pulled her closer as well, keeping the group tight, everyone talking in low voices.

"That does complicate things," Houston muttered, raking a hand through his hair. "Any suggestions?"

Diego nodding, explaining, "He has wooded lots on all sides of his property. The building they are being held in is a refurbished storage building with a basement with holding cells. The cells are guarded and electronically triggered to alarms. His security is aware unlike the men before."

Houston let out a whistle. "He doesn't play, does he?"

Diego shook his head, his expression stone. "No. Two of the women, I fear, will need help being removed, as well as David. And then they will need to be hidden and given medical attention. There is a good chance there are more somewhere."

"How are we going to get five out of there?" Houston's gaze roved around the street, unhurried, thinking. Unobtrusively, he swept Laney further behind him. Before

Titania could ask, Diego had shifted, turned, and she found herself blocked behind their two large bodies as well.

"What is it?" she asked, her fingers clutching at Diego's leather coat.

"There is a man watching us from the other block," Houston replied.

"Do you think he recognized me?" Titania asked. She had basically disappeared in a puff of smoke from the public eye. An eyewitness sighting of her would be good money for a tabloid.

"I don't know. Just stay put for once." She frowned at the order, but she didn't argue. She gripped Laney's fingers briefly when she reached out, in comfort or reassurance, it didn't matter.

She felt when Diego relaxed beneath her fingers. "It is all right, *cara*. It is Nathan."

"Nathan? Who's he?" Houston asked.

"A friend," Titania answered, partially moving to stand with Diego. Nathan cautiously approached them, keeping a wary eye on Houston.

He glanced to Diego. "I'm glad I found you two." Nathan kept his hands loose at his sides, even though he looked ready to run at the slightest sneeze.

"Why?" Diego asked.

"I found this." Nathan pulled a page clipping from his pocket, handing it to Diego. He took a mincing step further away from Houston. "They were printed in all the inner city rags."

"What is it?" Laney asked, trying to peek around Houston's arms and shoulders, which were keeping her completely apart from Nathan.

Diego read the clipping. "Tenorio is hunting. He is looking for any information on his 'niece' abducted from her home. The description is Titania's. It says the last sighting was here, in San Francisco."

"He's offering big bucks," Nathan pointed out. "Everyone who wants the money will be trying to spot her."

"Why do you think this applies to us?" Diego asked, a subtle demand, his gaze knifing through Nathan.

Nathan blanched, if possible, but stood his ground. "I recognized her, man. I'm not an idiot. I know who Titania is. Denise loved her music."

"How did you know she was connected to this?" Diego held the paper between his fingers.

Nathan's vision fell like lead, his hands plunging into his pockets. "I followed you last night."

Diego's hand snapped out and wrapped around Nathan's throat, dragging him further away from the street. "Why?" he snarled.

Nathan's gaze rounded. "Look, man. I only stayed for a minute." He clutched at the hand around his throat, then let his hands drop when he was ineffective. "I was curious. I was scared. I still am. I didn't know how much I could trust you."

"Diego, let him go. Please," Titania said, placing a light touch to his arm.

"He deserves to die."

"Why? Because he's having as hard a time as I am? Let him go." Titania pulled on his arm until he let Nathan go. Nathan swallowed and rubbed his throat.

"I'm sorry, all right? I didn't hang around, but I recognized the crib. Everyone in the bay area knows who Albert Tenorio is. And when I saw this, I knew it had to be for her. Mr. Tenorio doesn't have any relatives."

"That's all right, Nathan. Thank you for wanting to warn us," Titania said, ignoring the undercurrent running through the males.

He started to offer her a smile, but it died on his mouth when Diego snarled again.

"Stop it! You're just mad that you didn't know he was there."

"How is that?" Diego asked, a silken threat, his gaze flashing in the shadows of the doorway where they stood.

"I just didn't hang around. Hell, with all those damn guns, I didn't want to test this immortality crap."

Diego snorted. "They hurt, but bullets will not kill you."

"I am sorry," Nathan offered again with a repentant expression to match his tone. "I hope this makes up for not trusting you. I won't bother you again unless you look for me." He turned to walk up the street.

Titania tugged on Diego's sleeve. "We could use an extra set of hands."

Diego frowned, glanced at Houston who only shrugged in confusion. "Hell," he muttered. Diego went after Nathan.

Stay with Houston. Nathan and I will hunt and meet you.

"Great, I'm still being passed around like a damn child." She glared down the block, but both men were gone. "Well, come on. I know where he wants to meet us."

"Is he another...?" Laney asked. Her eyes were a little rounded now that Nathan had left them.

"Yes." Titania waved a hand. "Come on. I can give you an idea of the compound on the way."

Houston drove outside the city limits as Titania described what they were up against, the injuries of the other women and David. "He's got a ton of men and enough cameras to make his own production company."

"This won't be easy," Houston said.

"No, but I will not leave those women behind. I can't," she added in a quieter tone. "I was almost one of them."

"I know, Tani." He caught her gaze in the rearview. "I wouldn't ask you to, either."

Her smile felt brittle. "Thanks." She reached out for Diego, closing her eyes, letting her head drift to the leather rear seat in Houston's car. He was already on his way to join them.

Houston parked over a mile from the compound, killing the engine, blanketing them in complete darkness. Diego and Nathan appeared a few feet away from the vehicle, joining them.

"We flew over the compound on the way," Diego began. "Tenorio isn't there." There was a strong note of frustration in his voice. "The situation is as it was last night."

"Does anyone have a plan yet?"

The silence was long. Nathan cleared his throat. "I do, if you want to hear it."

The group huddled closer, Diego automatically pulling Titania closer when Nathan began to explain what he had thought of after flying over the buildings.

"How is that going to work?" Laney asked with a worried frown.

"I was an electronics major. I know how to jump electrical pulses. You can at least get into the cells without them knowing about it."

"And the cameras?" Houston asked.

"The same thing. They'll feed a loop view."

"You can do this because you're a vampire?" Laney asked.

Nathan grinned, laughed a shaky sound. "Hell no. I have to get into the computer room and reprogram the computers. I can get in because I'm a vampire," he finished with a shrug. "It's amazing how quickly you can clear a room when it drops by twenty degrees."

Titania's brow rose at that, but Diego said, "How long will you need to do this?"

"About ten minutes ought to do it."

"We still only have room for one in the back of the car," Houston pointed out.

"You will have to take two, if they are still physically able. We will remove them first. You need to be gone before we disappear with the other three."

"The cabin?" Laney asked.

"It is the best option. No one knows of it." Diego shifted, taking a deep breath. "There will be rain before the night is over. That will help us."

"What about Tenorio?" Houston looked over his shoulder in the direction of the compound.

"He will be found." Diego's tone had gone deathly cold. Titania shivered. "It is time."

"One diversion coming up," Nathan said as he shifted to a barn owl.

"Can he be trusted?" Houston asked as soon as Nathan was gone.

"I believe so." Diego found Titania's hand with his own. "Wait here and leave as soon as we return. We will meet you at the cabin."

"Be careful. Both of you," Laney said.

* * * *

Wispy clouds were beginning to drift in from the ocean, a sign of the rain Diego had foretold. Titania sat in the bower of the trees where she and Diego had hidden before, her lips caught between her teeth.

"Can we do this, Diego? There're so many men. And how are we going to move so many?"

"You are stronger, *cara*. You will not have any difficulty carrying one of the women. Lily is quite delicate," he told her absently, watching the patterns of the patrols beneath them.

Titania took a steadying breath, found her focus. *Lily? Can you hear me?*

*Titania! Oh, thank God. The sob of relief was deep.
Is everyone able to be moved?*

I think so. Tabitha is weak. I don't know how she's held out for so long. The voice in Titania's head was scared, hopeful, and very worried for the other woman.

We will help everyone. Stay calm no matter what happens. It's going to get wild in a few minutes.

We're ready.

Titania firmed her lips, watching as Diego was, waiting. A shrill alarm began to sound from the far side of the compound, drawing several groups of guards away from the carriage house.

"There is diversion number one," Diego said. A second alarm began at the top of the mansion. "He is good, forcing them to more than one point. It will thin them out regardless of what we are doing." Diego waited a few more seconds then, with a quick kiss to Titania's lips, changed his shape. She did the same, following closely on his heels.

Stay close, cara.

He stilled on the roof, slipping into a vent as a cloud of mist. *Well, if he can do it,* she muttered to herself and concentrated. It was a good thing mist couldn't make sound. At some point, she would get use to the gifts that had been given to her by becoming a vampire.

She watched as one by one the four guards on the first floor collapsed. Diego reformed before her eyes, his expression grim, seeing his handiwork. "They are not dead, but they deserve to be."

Tani stood with him. "Are there more?"

Diego shook his head. "Two of them were below when the alarms sounded. Let us get David and the others out while we can. Hopefully, Nathan has released the alarms on the cells."

He turned and led the way into the basement of the small building. Titania had to cover her mouth to not cry out. "This is awful!" She raced to David still hanging limply in his bonds, wrenching frantically on the cell door until it popped open.

"Oh, God! David," she moaned.

Diego made small work of his bonds, and David collapsed into a pile at their feet. He was alive, but barely.

"I will see to Tabitha and Lily." She nodded, lifting David to his feet. Diego had been telling the truth. Her strength had multiplied unbelievably.

A scream brought her hopping out of the cell, supporting David. "Diego!" she cried, seeing him slam backward into the wall, held with an invisible hand.

"Lily! Help me!" The woman's cry was tortured, desperate.

"Tabitha? Listen to my voice," Tani said. "We are here to help you. Do you understand me?" There was no answer.

"Lily? Are you bound?"

"No."

"Your cell should be unlocked. All of them should be. Help Tabitha. She's delirious. We need Diego to get all of you out of here."

A furtive hand closed around a metal bar. The cell opened slowly. "Oh my God! You did it!"

"Quickly, Lily. Distract her. We don't have a whole lot of time." Titania kept a locked arm around David's waist.

Titania watched as the redhead lurched to Tabitha's bedside and began crooning to her, brushing her hair back. The other two cells popped open, the remaining two women eyeing the scene in shock.

"Come on! Get out of here!" Titania's sharp cry broke them out of their spells, her chin pointing toward the stairs.

"Upstairs! We need to get everyone out before they realize you're gone."

They rushed out of the room.

"What about Tabitha?" Lily looked over her shoulder, desperation in her eyes.

"If she'll release Diego, he can carry her. We need to go. Now!"

Lily nodded sharply and began talking with hushed haste to Tabitha. When the manacle shattered, Titania knew Diego was free. Lily gasped, watching it fall to the ground.

"Can you walk?" he asked, nearing the two women again.

"I can, but she won't let you touch her. I can't carry her." Lily paled visibly, shock and exhaustion taking their combined toll.

"I can take David. Titania will carry Tabitha. We have to find the others and lead them to the pick up."

As one, they turned upward again. "More alarms. Nathan is buying us more time." Diego swept David into his arms.

Titania stood over Tabitha's prone form. "Hold on, Tabitha. Lily is coming with us. Everyone is getting out of this nightmare."

It was awkward at first because of Tabitha's height, but with Diego leading the way up the stairs, they wound their way out of the basement.

It was chaos outside, the compound lit brightly by search lights and men running in all directions, trying to find the reason for the malfunctioning sirens and alarms.

"There's Nathan," Diego said almost immediately, holding the two women around the waist, frightened but obedient.

"They almost ran into the house. I couldn't let them."

Diego nodded once. "Stay close. I can camouflage us until we reach the woods." His tone was curt, expecting to be followed. Lily moaned.

"It's all right, Lily," Titania soothed. She looked up once, her gaze dazed. Thunder shook the sky a few miles away. Tabitha shivered in Titania's arms. "Hold on," she whispered, offering a warm wave of hope to her charge.

The trek was slow, until one by one they disappeared into the wooded lot. When they reached Houston, the two who were physically able climbed into the Ferrari without a single protest. Houston left with a quick word. "Don't take too long," he said to Diego and Titania.

Diego faced the others. "We need to get these three to safety." He turned a heated look toward the house. "Tenorio cannot escape again."

"Diego, we have to get Tabitha out of here. She's in shock, and in pain." She was still shivering, regardless of how much Titania tried to help her.

The Hanged Man: The Eternal Kiss
by Diana Castilleja

Diego nodded, saying sharply, "Nathan, I am about to take you to my home. If at any time you betray me, be warned, you forfeit your life. Do you understand?"

Nathan nodded once, his expression no less grim. "I understand. I accept your rule."

"You didn't have much of a choice," Titania muttered.

Cara, can you reach Tabitha enough to soften her mental images?

She nodded, accepting there was no other way to transport the three who had been tortured the most. With a sharp nod at Nathan who pulled Lily's dazed expression to his own, they disappeared from the hidden recess of the woods. Fat rain drops began to fall, obliterating their steps in the undergrowth.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Epilogue

Titania stopped reading, marking the page for the next person to pick up and start again. She watched the body on the bed with concern. So much had happened, not just to Tabitha, but to all of them. She, herself, had not escaped unscathed either.

So much of her life had changed; watching the sleeping girl only seemed to emphasize that fact. Like Tabitha, the life she'd known was gone. Forever. She hadn't allowed herself to dwell on the changes too deeply, but sitting in the quiet of the room, watching the young girl sleep night after night, drove it home. All she had known had changed.

She curled the book into her chest, her arms wrapped protectively around it. Simultaneously, she felt the warmth of strong arms comforting her from a distance, and her eyes drifted shut, feeling the way he could wrap her into his thoughts and his embrace, regardless of the distance. His caress was warm on her mind, and she knew he would be returning soon.

Titania had faith that she could and would adjust to her new life. Diego was teaching her so much; his patience probably deserved an honor all by itself. She smiled, a small secret lift thinking about all the little things he let her try, even when she knew he likely shouldn't. He let her challenge herself, to try to learn. He would do anything to keep her happy, and she loved him for even thinking it mattered to her. Just being with him, knowing he was there when she

awoke and that he would be there for each sunset was enough to make her happy.

She knew they were still in danger. He may not say it, but Diego knew, which meant she knew too. And it wasn't just Tenorio who was causing him to worry. He'd been doing a good job of shielding her from the worst of his fears, but she was a fast learner when it came to learning what she was capable of. And his fears were now hers. It made her worry; there were more than just herself and Diego to protect now. She had faith in him, and in their growing family. They, including Tabitha, would survive this.

Titania stood from her chair next to Tabitha's bed. It had been two weeks, and the young woman had shown very little life since they had been rescued. All the girls were helping out, taking shifts with Tabitha, familiar voices talking to her, reading, trying to bring her back to the world. A world that had badly mistreated her and had given her no reason to want to be with them. Her body was healing, but very little else was.

She ignored the monitor and the IV that was attached to the young woman. She had never asked how Nathan and Diego had procured them or the steady infusion of vitamins and liquid they had stocked in the refrigerator. It now held as much food as medical supplies for their guests. There were some things she just didn't want to know about.

Titania sighed and brushed the blonde hair, cleaned and trimmed now, away from Tabitha's face. She didn't look up when a body filled the bedroom doorway.

"How is she?" Nathan didn't come in, staying in the door, but his gaze was no less worried. They had all been there to hear Lily and David's accounts of their time spent with Albert Tenorio.

"No change," Tani whispered. And she'd been trying to reach her every night. Nathan stepped aside when Diego appeared, letting him move before him in the doorway. She knew the agony of Tabitha's nightmare was visible in her eyes when she found his gaze, watching her back.

"She may never recover," Diego said, his tone even, but it still broke her heart to hear him say it.

"We can't turn her over to a hospital. Tenorio will hunt for all of them." She automatically wound her fingers through the still hand lying on top of the covers, giving strength, uncaring if it was acknowledged or not.

"None of them are going anywhere until we know they are safe. Tenorio has left California for now." He slid a look toward Nathan who seemed to signal in agreement. "It is only a short respite for him. In the meantime, we will care for the women and see that David heals as well."

"The girls are for that. They're in no hurry to rush back out into the world." She saw Diego nod with Nathan.

Tani was amazed the two men had formed a friendship, knowing Diego's many years of solitude and distrust of the Brethren. She hadn't had the time to question Nathan, but he was different in the same ways Diego was.

She swallowed the smile when Laney's words came back to her. Her family was definitely getting weird. None of their guests, including David, knew about the differences between

herself, Diego and Nathan. They had set up the shifts to help camouflage their inability to be with them during the day. Houston and Laney helped to keep it secret as well, being there to field any problems. So far, no one had even cared, or had the energy to question their rescuers.

Nathan passed one last look over the woman in the bed then turned to go back into the front of the cabin. She heard him speak quietly to Houston and the front door closed. "He will not be gone long," Diego murmured as he neared the bed.

"I know, but I still worry, especially with no one knowing where Tenorio is. At least he's comfortable here with us."

"I believe they all are." He walked up to join her, and she saw him pass a look over Tabitha in the bed. "Amy and Kathy have been the least traumatized, and knowing what they suffered..." He paused and shook his head slowly. "I honestly do not know how Tabitha managed to stay alive."

Titania swallowed the lump in her throat. "I don't know either. I just know I'm not letting her give up."

She squeezed the hand curled into her own palm, sharing her conviction, feeding her energy to Tabitha. *We'll help you through this, Tabitha, but you have to come back.*

Diego's lowered voice rumbled through her mind. *Come, cara. It is time for us tonight.* Her heart sped up at the light touch, the caressing sound.

After a final squeeze to the motionless hand in hers, she took a step. And froze. She snapped her attention to their intertwined hands, hers and Tabitha's, then moved to her face.

"Diego," she whispered, her voice shaking, almost breaking with happiness. "She's awake. She's holding my hand!"

She felt as Diego stilled, all his concentration focused on the woman in the bed. His usually harsh-lined mouth softened when he captured Titania's anxious gaze. "She is returning to us."

Titania kneeled at the bed, a surge of hope making her hand tremble when she lifted it to Tabitha's forehead. That small show of life from a woman who had no reason to live, showed Titania how much she did have to live for. And she was going to see that she did. For all of them.

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this eBook by going back to your bookshelf at www.fictionwise.com.