



THE  
BITE  
OF SILENCE

MARY HUGHES

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*Spartans do it with discipline.*

Times Square on New Year's Eve. A million partiers chanting the final seconds. This year, it's a countdown to death.

My name is Twyla Tafel and I've uncovered an insane plot to unleash berserk vampires on those unsuspecting revelers. I have to stop it, armed only with my great admin skills, my useless art degree—and Nikos, a severely hot vampire who I'd love to photograph as a Spartan king roaring his muscular challenge at the Persians.

But Nikos has issues, if you know what I mean. Roadblocks in his psyche that say *stop* when all I want is *go-go-go*. See "severely hot", above.

Although if I finally break through Nikos's reserve, I may get more than I bargained for. He's seriously big, seriously built, and more than just a tad dominant. Still, it's time to push my limits and find out who I really am, so I'm willing to try...I think. I'm sure. I'm mostly sure. Until he starts stalking me with those sable bedroom eyes and long, sharp fangs—!

Warning: Contains 50% high-voltage sex by volume. 10g seriously hot Greek vampire, 4g curvy, competent heroine, 7g explosive action and gritty language. Made on equipment used to process snarky comments. Some light bondage may occur during handling.

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# The Bite of Silence

*Mary Hughes*

# Dedication

To Deborah Nemeth, who sculpts both words and authors like Michelangelo (though some of us are more of a Warhol).

To Natalie Winters, whose artistry makes the covers come alive.

To Gregg, my inspiration, partner, and source of cinnamon rolls.

To You, Reader, whose imagination breathes life into these simple words on a page, the greatest art of all.

# Chapter One

It's a little-known fact that when vampires fly, they hog the window seats.

I saw Nikos the instant I boarded the plane. Well, who could miss those immense shoulders and hewn cheekbones, that aggressive jaw?

He'd cut his dark hair ruthlessly short since I'd last seen him—heaven forbid it display any softness with its curls. He had the kind of remorselessly perfect features that could withstand even the unforgiving scrutiny of a high-resolution camera lens. A perfect, sculpted body too, although that wasn't my medium. I'd have loved to photograph him as King Leonidas, fatally wounded but still roaring as he charged, unyielding, into battle.

Nikos sat in 3F, first window seat on the right, and you're probably way ahead of me when I say I suspected he was a vampire. Although *sat* isn't quite the right word. He dominated the entire space, not only his seat but the empty one next to it, his large body relaxed but impeccably groomed in a tailored charcoal suit, snow white shirt and crimson silk tie. He was absorbed in his netbook and didn't see me.

I checked my ticket but I already knew it was 32D, my bra size. At the time I thought that was lucky. Should have known better.

I wanted to join him in the worst way—despite the kind of reception I knew I'd get. The first time I'd met him, in November, I'd practically throttled my friend Nixie to get an introduction to the gorgeous Colossus of Rhodes standing astride his half of the room. He'd said one word—a drawled “*Giasou*” sounding sexy as hell but which I found out later was only hello—given me a curt nod and walked away. Nixie called him Spartacus in a suit. To my mind that was too civilized. He was massive, muscular and *severely* reserved.

Every time I'd made an overture he'd dismissed me with a few well-chosen words. It only sank my fascination deeper. I was reduced to needling him whenever I saw him, just to get a reaction.

A quick scan showed no one was boarding behind me. The flight, Chicago to New York, was half empty. Well. Here was a two-hour opportunity marked 3E. I slid in and opened my mouth to make a smartass crack.

Without looking he said, “Don't.”

My mouth dropped open. “You can't know who I am.”

The corner of his lips twitched. “Don't, Twyla.” He still hadn't looked.

I *humphed* back into the seat. “I don’t know how you do that. The whole identity-without-looking thing.”

“Good peripheral vision.” He still hadn’t acknowledged my existence, damn him. At least not with his eyes. He had the sexiest eyes, velvet brown framed by glossy obsidian lashes and brows. Brooding bedroom eyes. I really wanted him to look at me.

“Aren’t you going to ask what I’m doing here?” *Look at me. Come on. Just once.*

He exhaled audibly, in another man a heavy sigh, and closed his netbook. Without a word he hit me with his full attention.

Nikos didn’t use a lot of words but he didn’t need them. Not when he could express whole paragraphs with those compelling eyes.

This look said I was walking uncomfortably near some line. Nikos had a lot of lines, all hidden. If you shot a marble in on one side of his personality, instead of coming out the other it would bounce on secret internal walls and shoot out in some unpredictable way. I suspected some of those ways were deadly.

A frisson ran through me. Not fear exactly, but maybe heightened awareness. I covered it with words. “Well, if you *had* asked, I’d say I’m seeing Broadway shows.” I stuffed my carry-on between my feet. “And drinking too much liquor and dancing through at least two pairs of Kenneth Cole heels. And I’d say I’m going to celebrate New Year’s in Times Square by kissing as many hottie guys as I can find.”

His jaw tightened ever so slightly at that, though it may have been my hopeful imagination. Of course he didn’t say anything.

Up to me to carry the conversational ball. “So what are you doing here, Nikos?”

“Business.” He reopened his netbook.

Without thinking, I slapped it shut. His head came up so fast I only registered it after the fact. His eyes were sable daggers. Scary how something so drooling-gorgeous could be so incredibly deadly. I patted the netbook, withdrew my hand.

“Twyla.” He plucked a magazine from the rack and shoved it into my hands. “Read.”

Nikos-speak for *enough*. After the dagger-glare treatment any sane person would have dropped it. Obviously he did not know who he was dealing with. I set phasers on needle. “I’d rather look outside. Mind if I open the window shade?” *Whatcha gonna do now, Mr. Taciturn Vampire?* I reached over him for the tab. I didn’t think sunshine’d really make him fry, but I was counting on *some* sort of reaction.

He caught my wrist without even moving. And of course without looking. “Leave the shade alone.”

Ooh, four words in a row. I was on a roll. “It’ll keep me from bothering you.” I reached for the shade with my other hand.

He swept it out of the air with two fingers—of his same hand. Both my wrists were caught, one snared in forefinger and thumb, the other between palm and two fingers. Damn, the man had big hands.

Made me kinda shivery. “You’re on business? I thought you helped Julian Emerson manage those two teeny townhouses in Meiers Corners. What business would you have in New York? Unless you’re a lawyer too?”

“No.” He released me and went back to his netbook.

If our conversation were a ball, he’d not only dropped it, he’d punched a hole in it and squashed it flat. Luckily I had conversation for both of us. “I’m going to see my cousin. I did him a big favor and he invited me to visit him in return.” I waited for a response or an “uh-huh” or even a dark glare.

Futile, of course. Fine. Conversation enough for both of us would have to be literal. I pitched my voice low. “What favor, Twyla?” Resetting to me I answered, “I’m glad you asked, Nikos. As executive admin for the mayor of Meiers Corners, I’m a bit of a bureaucratic whiz, and I cut some red tape for him with an international company.” I dropped back to Nikos’s deep growl. “Uh-huh. Tell me more.”

A corner of his mouth twitched. The man—or a bit more—had burnt umber lips etched with the accuracy of a cursive italic nib. I wanted to kiss them in the worst way.

“Don’t,” he said again.

“I wasn’t going to make a snarky comment.”

“I know.” His lids closed slowly. “Don’t look at me like that.”

Ooh, six words. And he’d caught my heated interest. Maybe that even meant he was interested in return. I was making progress.

A shrill soprano drilled through my optimism. “You there! You black woman, what are you doing here? That’s *my* seat.”

The woman shooting eye-darts at me combined the worst attributes of a dentist and a diva. She was painful, impossible to ignore, and a lot of designers had died to cover her bony ass.

I pointed at the six empty seats across the aisle. “Can’t you—”

Diva Dentist whirled front. “Stewardess, I demand you deal with this woman. She doesn’t *belong* in first class.”

I knew it wasn’t me. I take care of my face and figure, dress well, do my nails.

So it was my skin.

I’m half-African, half-German and all-American. Prejudice is something I deal with. Some people can’t help it, being stuck in the last century, poor things. As my Grandma Ngozi said, “As a crab walks, so walk its children.” Grandma Tafel said, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” Since maybe only one percent of the population is unaware of the Emancipation Proclamation, I clamped my teeth against an acid response.

To my surprise Nikos defended me. “Color is skin deep. *Rudeness* goes to the core.” He leveled Diva Dentist with a flat stare that had *me* shitting ice, and I was only on the periphery. Diva fell back.

A flight attendant stepped between us and stuck a hand toward me. “Your ticket?”

Given enough time I could make any bureaucratic tangle come out my way. But why was I fighting? To sit with a man—not man—who would say all of ten words to me for the entire trip?

Of course, he wouldn't have to speak to kiss me.

*Wishful thinking, Twyla.* I rose, gathered my carry-on and started toward the back. Nikos followed. I did a double-take. "Seeing me to my seat? Or do you have to go potty?"

"Sorry about that."

"Oh. I deal." But it was nice he cared.

"Where's your seat—" His voice dropped into a low growl. His sculpted features hardened to granite. His eyes blazed persimmon fire and his lips thinned as if the words he was pressing back were actual physical knives. I followed his gaze, turned to see the man in 32F.

Watching us both was a golden supermodel.

Blond hair curled boyishly around a lean, tanned face. Cobalt blue eyes twinkled with merriment. Rich amaranth lips, almost feminine in their lushness, parted in an amused smile to reveal titanium white teeth. His toned figure showed to perfection in golf shirt and linen pants. A little lightweight for winter, though. Maybe younger than the thirty he looked, still caught in style over substance.

"Well, hello." Modelboy patted the seat next to him. "My name is Klaus. Join me, lovely lady."

*Lovely lady.* I was going to New York looking for excitement. Klaus promised some real fun. He might even talk with me.

On the one hand, Nikos was the guy I lusted after. And since he lived in Meiers Corners, lust *could* turn into a long-term affair—not that I thought I'd get Happily Ever After. I wasn't real big into overachievement.

On the other hand, even though Nikos made my booty burn he avoided me like tofu salad. Thanks to Diva Dentist, I couldn't sit by him. And the way he reacted to Klaus, no way Nikos was going to sit here. We could have both moved but *I* wasn't going to suggest it.

The loudspeaker rasped on. "Please take your seats." Time to pick or pass, as Grandma Tafel would say. So. Modelboy in the hand vs. Spartan in the bush. Maybe I wasn't going to get HEA, but I was damned sure going to get me some Happily For Now. I slid into 32E.

As I stuffed my bag under the seat in front, I caught sight of Nikos's clenching fingers. Damn, the man had fine hands. And he was upset—good. So was I. I know that wasn't fair but this was *my* vacation. When the flight attendant came to personally tell him to take his seat, I lifted my chin, pasted a smile on my face and waved buh-bye.

After a few more finger-clenches, Nikos spun and strode away. Modelboy stuck out his tongue at Nikos's broad departing back.

Then Klaus turned to me, took my chin with the tips of his slender fingers. "What is your name, lovely lady?"

The sensation of his skin sliding against mine was delightful. “Twyla.” I wasn’t entirely surprised when my voice came out a purr. Modelboy’s lime-leather scent really revved my engine, although I suspected it was Nikos who’d actually cranked it in the first place.

“And why are you visiting New York, beautiful Twyla?” His thumb stroked my jaw.

I closed my eyes to enjoy the warmth, the friction. “Who says I’m visiting? Maybe it’s home.”

“Your accent says otherwise.” The plane started moving. “You have lovely skin. Cinnamon cream. And such a long, delightful neck.” His fingers trickled down my throat. “Your accent is Midwest. Middle-class suburban.”

“You so sure yourself, honey-chile,” I murmured back. I’d grown up dealing with a lot of people’s misconceptions, and I’d made it my goal to master every one. “I’ze jus’ a gal from Jawja.”

“Really? Well, I know the ultimate test.” He kissed me.

His mouth slid over mine like cool silk. His tongue brushed my lips, delved into the crease. I tasted mint and the promise of heat. Pursing my lips into soft pillows, I let him taste me in return.

Klaus didn’t lose any time taking me up on my invitation, his mouth parting, pressing more intimately against mine. The plane built up speed on the runway. My heart sped up with it.

He licked the seam of my mouth with increasing urgency. The instant I opened, his tongue darted in with a rush of heat. We took off, and the plane lifted too. Klaus sure fired up fast. I liked that in a man.

My ears popped and I backed off slightly, took in the model-perfect face before me. Klaus’s eyes blazed cobalt from beneath heavy lids. Oh, yeah, he was aroused all right.

I wondered how Nikos’s sable brown eyes would look heavy lidded with desire.

Damn. Not going there. I glanced at the window to see how high we’d gotten but the shade was drawn. I reached for it.

“Twyla.” Klaus laid a long-fingered hand on my forearm. “Have you been initiated into the mile-high club?”

“Not...not yet.” My voice was suddenly breathy. The whole point of this trip was to push some limits but I didn’t generally sleep around. Was I ready for this?

Grandma Ngozi would say, “History was not made by quiet women.” Come to think of it, Grandma Tafel would say that too. And besides, I had deliberately not worn panties because I was looking for excitement. It didn’t get much more exciting than this.

I gave Klaus a slow smile. “But I’m hoping to remedy that.”

His answering smile was sensual. “Here’s what we’ll do. You go to the bathroom on the right.”

As he spoke his hand cupped my breast, thumb teasing the nipple. It was a little fast, but I went with it. *Carpe tittum*, or seize the tit, right? Good thing, because the sensations built quickly into hot need. I slid a hand down his stomach in return, feeling all those lovely ridges. “Okay. I go into the bathroom. And wait for your knock? Two short, one long?” My fingers slipped under his waistband.

“One long. *Very* long.” His belly rippled as he breathed faster. “Just leave the door unlocked. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Ooh, behind.” I imagined Modelboy grabbing my hips with his strong slim fingers, taking me in one *very long* slick stroke. Pictured me hanging onto the sink, tilting my butt up for his driving goodness. I threw off my seatbelt and jumped to my feet so fast I hit my head on the overhead rack. “Ow.”

“Careful.” His sensual lips tilted into a half-smile so lush that his mouth looked like a big cerise peony. Maybe I’d sit on the throne and those lips could bloom on my pussy.

Of course, if it were Nikos doing it, it wouldn’t be flower power, it’d be all-out war. His big, hot mouth gobbling—I grabbed a seatback at the sudden need knifing me.

Klaus’s nostrils flared. He came fluidly to his feet. “Hurry.”

Yeah, I was ready for this. Ignoring the lit seatbelt sign I staggered back into the small cubicle. The roar of the plane, already loud in the tail, heightened into a rushing that filled my ears. My mood cooled. I wondered if this was such a good idea.

Too late. The door cracked open.

And slammed shut. A smack was followed by scuffling. By female feet running, and a squeak. A woman said, “Gentlemen, please! The captain has *not* taken the seatbelt sign off. Return to your seats at once.”

“I’m going to the bathroom.” Klaus.

“No. You. Are. Not.” To my utter shock the deep growl answering him was *Nikos*. His clipped words told me he was furious.

“She’s not yours, Greek boy.”

“Nor yours, Aryan.”

Hands clapped for attention. “Gentlemen. I insist you take your seats, now.”

Silence.

I waited, all arousal gone, for signs that it was okay to come out. I waited until the soft ding and the captain’s soothing voice told me it was safe to take off my seat belt. For me it would probably have been safer to put it on.

I crept out of the bathroom and crawled back to my seat. Klaus faced the shaded window. As I slid into 36D, leaving the space of a seat between us, I felt eyes on me, hot and angry. I jerked around.

In 36B, heavy arms crossed over jutting chest, taking up the space of two seats, was Nikos. He watched us like a chaperone the rest of the trip. No, like a babysitter.

He didn’t say one word but his eyes said plenty. Ice-cold anger. Rebuke. Disappointment in me. Damn, that man—probably not man—could communicate more condemnation in a single glare than most people could with a whip and a chair. Although thinking of Nikos with a whip, in nothing but black

leather—his nostrils flared and he cleared his throat, quite pointedly. I tugged a magazine from the seatback and occupied myself flipping pages.

When we landed, Nikos still didn't say any words. But his lethal glare at Klaus, the way he yanked my carry-on out before we'd come to a full and complete stop, the way he tugged me one-handed out of my seat when I unbuckled my belt, shouted possession. Odd, considering he usually ignored me. But it also gave me a primitive thrill.

Klaus rose and, ignoring Nikos, offered me his arm. "Share a ride with me, pretty lady?"

Before I could speak Nikos tucked me into his side. "No."

Klaus and Nikos locked eyes. Klaus wavered slightly. Maybe Nikos was drawing lines again. Whatever Klaus saw made him step back, jaw working. "You may try to claim her. But you cannot stop her from choosing elsewhere."

There were times I felt trivial. This was one. "Hey. I'm right here."

"I see you, beautiful." Klaus touched slim fingertips to my cheek. "It's this barbarian—"

Nikos growled. He palmed my head away from Klaus, tucking it between truly spectacular pectorals, the silk of his tie whispering against my cheek.

Klaus made a primitive sound. "She's not—"

"She *is*." Nikos's rumble vibrated my whole head. Before I could even try to figure out what that exchange meant, hot fingers tilted my head back. I saw Nikos's face, all severe beauty, zooming in—

He kissed me.

There was nothing tentative or gentle about Nikos's kiss. His mouth took mine in full, virile possession. His tongue drove between my teeth, forcing me to open. Thrusting masculine fire filled me. I had time to think *sweet Lord, this is passion* when he jerked and pushed me away.

I stumbled for balance, grabbed the nearest seatback. My thudding heart fanned arousal into anger. "What was that macho bullshit?"

Nikos seized my elbow, hustled me past a stunned Klaus down the mostly deserted aisle. While the boys had been doing their little dominance dance, the plane had emptied. Nikos dragged me out, down the ramp, his heavy tread making it shudder. "Twyla. You're *not* riding with *him*."

"That's my say, isn't it?" Despite my anger I was amazed. Six whole words. Must be really overcome with emotion. "It's up to me if I want to go with Klaus."

"You don't know what he is." His jaw worked. "You *can't* know."

"For pity's sake. *What* Klaus is? Is he a male prostitute or something? Because, gotta tell you Nikos, a hot time is exactly what I'm looking for." In the waiting area now, I tried to shake loose but Nikos's fingers held like steel. "So unless you're gonna follow up on that admittedly hot kiss, I'm picking Modelboy." I started to stomp back.

And swung around like a bola when he didn't let go. Looked like I'd have to be a bit trickier. I fainted forward. When he moved with me, I twisted back. The element of surprise would pop me loose...his grip shifted, held.

Damn. No time to be subtle. Strong as Nikos was, subtle would get me loose late next year.

I pivoted and kicked him in the danglies.

He blocked. Instead of privates I kicked solid bone and muscle. His reaction was so fast, so smooth, I knew he was trained even better than I was. In fact I got the distinct impression he could have caught my leg and done *me* some damage rather than the other way around.

Which meant using a super-secret girl-move. I grabbed his ear to lever his head down and smacked a big smoochie square on his lips. While he was momentarily distracted I twisted out of his grip and ran.

He caught me in two steps, seized me by my shoulders and spun me to him. He bent so we were nose to nose. "Violent thing, aren't you?"

"No." My breath was coming in gasps, and not because of the fighting. A lot of male muscle surrounded me, and a perfect burnt umber mouth moved scant inches from mine. "It's just that you aren't built for negotiating." I licked my lips. "Not real chatty."

People streamed around us, intent on their destination. If anything shouted I wasn't in the Midwest it was the rapid rush of texture. I registered it all as a blur around the focal point of Nikos's uncompromising face.

This male had been painted with a palette of strong colors. Jet hair. Ochre skin with undertones of midnight, shading at rugged cheekbones and lips to mahogany and burnt umber (a misleading name, since it evokes images of blackened toast instead of a rich, rose-infused brown). Eyes the seal brown of soft sable brushes focused on my mouth.

Which was throbbing. My lips, hell, my whole body was throbbing. Under the hot scrutiny of those bedroom eyes my heart started pounding so hard my ears rang.

"All right." The sound of his voice was a faraway hiss. But the feel of his rumble against my breast, the blazing promise in his eyes shook my bones.

"All right?" I echoed. I didn't know what the question was.

"Hot time. Limo." His tongue slid provocatively from between his lips. Made a yum-yum motion while his eyes told me exactly where he'd yum-yum.

I choked. "Limo. Right." I took off for the front door.

He caught my elbow, swung me around. "This way."

He led me through a space marked "Private" into an underground parking area. A stretch limo with mirrored windows was waiting. He shoveled me in.

And promptly positioned himself on the other side, barricading himself with crossed arms.

"Hey. Hot time?" The limo moved out.

“Sorry. No.”

I sputtered. “You *lied*? Led me on?” I was upset, most of it disappointment in not getting any with Nikos. I lashed out. “If you don’t want me, just say so.”

“I want you.” The flat, angry look in his eyes contradicted him.

“Sure you want me. You’re so all over me. Been practically my second skin since day one because you want me so much. Oh, no wait. You’ve been *avoiding* me.”

“I have my reasons.” The limo started crawling through Queens traffic.

“Which are? Not going to say? Then let me guess. You don’t like black chicks. Or a mere secretary isn’t good enough for you. Or—”

“Stop that.”

“Stop what? Telling the truth? Don’t like it, white boy?”

“Don’t denigrate yourself. You’re a powerful, highly attractive, frighteningly intelligent woman. Don’t you dare pull that race shit.”

I was speechless. Nikos thought I was attractive? And all the other good stuff? He must have felt pretty strongly about it because he’d used almost twenty words.

It gave me hope. Maybe he wasn’t avoiding me because he hated me, or worse, just didn’t care. Maybe it was for the one reason I could do something about. *The v-reason*. When I finally found my voice, it was embarrassingly plaintive. “Then why won’t you even kiss me without pushing me away?”

“It’s not you. It’s me.”

“Please. That’s the oldest line—”

“I’m not good for you. Not safe.”

*Not safe*. There is was. “Nikos, you don’t have to play that game.”

“It’s not a game—”

“I know you’re a vampire.”

This time he was the speechless one, but only for an instant. “You don’t *know* that. You can’t.”

“Why is Nixie’s hubby so good with blood transfusion equipment? Why do Nixie and Julian need not one but *two* assistants—who are coincidentally inhumanly gorgeous? Why is the mayor ordering as much blood sausage these days as cheese balls? If you’re not a vampire, why did you stop me from opening the window blind on the plane? Why the underground exit at the airport and the limo with mirrored windows?”

The hard line of his lips softened. “You think I’m gorgeous?”

Out of everything, he picked that. “Yeah. But you’d be more gorgeous kissing me.”

He palmed my cheek. He was so big he didn’t even have to scoot closer to do it. “Twyla, guessing vampire isn’t the same as knowing. Reality would shock you. Scare you. That’s unacceptable.” His thumb caressed me, telling me other things.

Ooh, over a dozen words. A whole Shakespeare soliloquy for him. “I’m looking for thrills. So shock me a little.” I leaned into his hand.

His head bent, his mouth dropping to my throat. The heat of his breath, the coolness it left on intake, played like an intimate fan on my skin. “I...want to. But—” He straightened. “No. You don’t *know*.”

“Then show me.” I had a brief internal struggle. I’m not by nature an exhibitionist but something had to be done, quickly, while I had him trapped. Once we got back to Meiers Corners he’d have the whole town in which to hide.

My jacket was already open. I yanked T-shirt and bra up. My breasts popped free, bouncing.

His eyes shot open, blazing sienna. His granite jaw loosened. His chest inflated like he couldn’t breathe. And then—

Fangs. I saw fangs.

## Chapter Two

Nothing could have proven Nikos's point better. Guessing vampire was *certainly* not the same as being trapped in a limo with an aroused one.

Before I could even squeak my dismay he swung me onto his lap and wrapped me in arms of steel. I'm a nice curvy size six but sitting on his tree-trunk thighs, looking *up* into his flaming eyes, I really *got* sexual dimorphism. Slamming it home, his mouth slanting over mine covered real estate from Boise to Philly.

His lips landed moving, muscular ripples as strong and potent as the rest of him. They laved me like pounding surf, crashed through my flimsy barriers with hot desire.

I'd barely gotten used to overwhelmingly big Nikos kissing me when the whole fang thing hit. Smooth, long canines pressed like warm ivory against my lips. His tongue worked between them, teasing. Tongue, lips and fang together drove me a little nuts. I poked the tip of my tongue out for just a taste.

Rumbling his approval, he sipped at it. He caressed it between his own lips, silk and velvet and an intoxicating male taste. His tongue flicked the tip of mine in return, his so big it swiped half my mouth. He licked me again, maybe to tease my lips open, but his size made it more of a demand. I surrendered, lips parting on a breathless moan.

An instant later self-preservation kicked in. Vampire, fangs, trapped with a very big, aroused male. I closed up.

Too late. He swept into my mouth like a conquering warrior. His tongue was a flaming sword, stabbing deep, plumbing every dark mystery I had, licking me with light and blazing heat. I groaned.

Klaus had been a good kisser. A pointillist, every daub of tongue and swish of lips placed precisely so.

Nikos was a modern master, throwing aggressive splashes of bright color across aching, empty canvas. I wriggled at the size and feel of him, the taste of him, potent and smooth as aged whiskey or absinthe.

He pulled me tighter to contain my wiggles and captured me completely. His arms wrapped me from head to hips, one hand cupping my head. The other cupped my breast.

I have Tafel breasts, round heavy globes that overflow men's hands. They fitted perfectly in Nikos's.

My nipple slotted between his fingers. He pinched it erect. Need sparked. Any fear drowned in the wash of desire. He kissed sweeter than a dream, and his hand on my breast was oh-so-tutored, pinching and fondling.

He shifted me, pillowing my head on the enormous deltoid of his shoulder. Then he kissed me harder, deeper, pushing me into his own muscled strength. It left his hand free to plunge down my jeans directly onto my nub.

He petted my clit in welcome. At my gasp his tongue plunged deeper, began to drive into me. He kissed with the rhythm of sex, but he wiggled his finger on my clit lightly, almost teasingly. I rocked my hips, asking for more. Asking for the same fire as his kiss.

His hand withdrew. I whimpered until I heard a pop and a rasp, and my pants loosened. When he dove back in, his thick finger went straight into my aching body. His thumb grabbed my clit, his finger thrust deep inside, and he *pinched*.

My eyes shot open. *Sweet Monet, yes.* I arched into his chest. Licked his lips eagerly. “That feels amaz—”

He cut me off by laying claim to my mouth. He kissed me fiercely, his fingers pinching breast and pussy in rhythm. I rubbed myself against his crisp shirt, grabbed his shorn head and gave myself over to the wonder of it.

And he demanded more. His finger plunged harder. His tongue thrust deeper, opened me so far my jaw ached. It stabbed everywhere, lighting passion, demanding surrender. No part of my mouth went unclaimed by his hot, virile possession, inside or out. As his tongue thrust, his sleek fangs rode my throbbing lips.

I tried to kiss him back, brushing mouth and fang indiscriminately in my zeal. He groaned, and his fangs grew *longer*. It reminded me I had only *guessed*.

I lifted my chin. “Bite me. I want to *know*.”

His eyes were closed, lashes a jet fringe against his hewn cheeks. “Not yet.” His lids lifted, revealing dilated pits of red fire. He pinched my nipple, slowly, deliciously.

“Not yet?” I shuddered, wriggled on his finger thrust inside my body. He seized me more firmly, driving a second finger deep, and shook my entire vulva until I writhed.

When he let up I opened my eyes and panted. “What do you mean, not yet?”

He smiled, desire burning in his eyes. It was frightening, it was heady. “This.”

He tossed me onto the seat next to him and yanked my jeans to my knees. I tried to scramble up but he knelt in the seat well, restrained me with an arm dropped across my torso, and spun me toward the seat back. A hand pressed my face into the seat, another clasped my knees and held them down. I couldn’t see what he—

Breath seared my labia. A flaming tongue thrust me open. I jerked hard against him. He contained me easily. “You wanted shocking. Take it.”

He started to lap at me, great swipes of tongue that went deep into my body. I writhed against the invasion, embarrassed at how swollen and open I already was. It was only a start. He rode me with his tongue until I was mewling.

His fangs nicked my lips and inner thighs as he worked me. Each tiny prick scored me with pleasure. I could only imagine how thrilling his actual bite would be. “Nikos—bite me. Now. *Please.*”

“Not yet.” His rumbling purr buzzed against my wet, licked-open flesh.

I writhed violently but his great strength reduced it to mere ripples. “Then *when?*”

“Soon.” He thrust one finger inside and licked delicately at the hood of my clit.

I shrieked. As he plunged that thick finger rhythmically into me, I began to pant. I’d wanted shocking, sure, but he could have given me shocking simply by biting me. Instead a male of vast experience was doing his damndest to make sex thrilling for me. That went beyond shocking to electrifying.

He thrust a second finger deep. I curled into the seat at the intensity of it. He beat into me with two fingers, licked ardently at my nub.

I gasped. “Nikos, it’s too much.” My hips beat back, at least as much as he let them. His fingers sank deeper with every thrust, until I wanted to cry, until I wanted to scream. “Bite me. Please, I’m begging you.”

“Mmm. Nice. But not yet.” He began to suck at me and I moaned and pleaded and railed against him until I wept. He ignored it all, sucking and licking and thrusting with the same forceful, demanding rhythm.

Until I groaned to my very soul. “I...I’m coming...”

“Ah.” His deep voice was filled with satisfaction. “*Now* I bite.”

He grabbed my knees and head and held me firmly. Sharp needles of sheer pleasure drove hard into my swollen labia. My body wrenched in his strong grip, driving the pleasure to the bone. Tight spirals released, radiated out like rain washing from my heart to my outermost skin.

The orgasm was shockingly sweet. Thrilling, but more. Maybe because this was Nikos, the guy I’d been just a little nuts about since the first moment I’d seen him. With Nikos I got shocking and I got thrilling. But I also got a deep sense of rightness.

Not just “yeah baby” or “hat-sah”, but *finally*.



“Oh my.” Little fireworks were still going off behind my closed eyes. It must have been some time later because my jeans were back up and the limo was stopped.

Nikos helped me up. His fangs had retracted and his eyes cooled. But now I knew, rather than guessed. And it did make a difference.

Now I wanted him more.

Nikos pointed at the door. “Your cousin’s.”

I frowned. “I didn’t tell you where he lived. I didn’t even say his name.”

He almost smiled. The slight softening made his face so lickable it was probably illegal in Alaska. But he hardened almost immediately to Mr. Deadly Serious. “Don’t tell Aylmer about us.”

*Us.* It hit me low in the belly, started the motor all over again. “You and me?”

“Vampires.”

Oh. The motor coughed and died. “Yeah, I know. The whole my-best-friend-not-telling-me clued me in that you guys are underground. Care to say why?”

A muscle in his hewn jaw jumped. “Humans outnumber us.”

“So? You’re superstrong. Doesn’t that kinda level the playing field?”

“Not when the odds are four thousand to one.”

“Um, yeah. Okay, I’ll keep your secret. Aylmer won’t know a thing.”

“Good.” Nikos hit the intercom. “Ready.”

“Wait! I have questions. How did you know about Aylmer? What—”

“Business,” he said, reaching past me to open the door. A rush of cold air revealed a black-uniformed Kato. Behind him was a six-story brownstone. Nikos nudged me out, not giving me time to fully understand the implications of any of it, sex or fangs or this unseemly knowledge. One thing filtered through, the most inane. “My luggage?”

“My man will deliver it.” Nikos pushed me into the opening. “Go.”

Wisps of smoke rose from his exposed hands. I sucked in a breath. “Is that because of the sun?”

“Go.” Nikos’s voice rang in my head, weird and hollow. It shoved harder than his hands. Not enough to make me, but enough that when his chauffeur grabbed me under the arms and pulled, I popped out.

Before I could clamber back in, the door shut and the lock clicked. Smoke trailed around the edges. I stared, slightly horrified.

Having a vampire for a boyfriend might be a little more difficult than I thought. I turned and made my way up the brownstone’s stairs.



My mother was an African diplomat, my father a famous surgeon. When they settled down to have children they chose my father’s hometown of Meiers Corners, a small city west of Chicago where the beer flowed freely and the school uniform was lederhosen and clogs. Not really, but only because we all kept voting Principal Gustav down.

Anyway, my parents were internationally recognized people. My brother’s a lieutenant colonel in the Marines, my sister’s a neurosurgeon. I studied art and photography at the School of the Art Institute of

Chicago but when I graduated there weren't that many jobs for a newbie freelancer. My parents were dead by then and I had to earn a living.

So I drifted back to Meiers Corners where I ended up a glorified secretary for a small-town mayor, the underachiever of the family.

My cousin Aylmer made up for that.

Aylmer Tafel lived in an attic and thrived on conspiracy theories. Attic lofts are all the rage now but Aylmer's garret was more like a rat's nest. And nuts? He made Bruno Braun, who runs the survivalist shop Armageddon Three in Meiers Corners, look like a savvy entrepreneur.

Sherlock Holmes said art in the blood takes strange forms. I think it's more a matter of degree, like homeopathy. Art is the insanity gene, the only moderator being how much. I had maybe fifty percent. Aylmer was hovering at eighty-nine. But he was mostly self-sufficient and he wasn't dangerous.

I pressed the lobby doorbell labeled 7B—Tafel. After a few minutes I pressed it again. I hadn't called Aylmer with my arrival time but he never left his rooms. He was antisocial to the point that he didn't even leave to earn a living—he had his work delivered and picked up by express. In fact, the only way I got an invitation was because he owed me big time for getting him an in at a company called Bujný a Zvuk Magie. Don't ask me to pronounce it.

Actually, I more invited myself. Aylmer refused at first. But it took a lot for me to get him the job as the American rep for the high-powered Czech company, not your usual dream-job but look who it was for. I had to collect tons of personal favors, tug strings until my fingers were bloody. I thought the least Aylmer could do was put me up for a few nights.

Still getting no answer, I double-flathanded half a dozen doorbells. Thankfully someone buzzed me in.

There were two doors on the attic level. One side smelled musty, like stale cigarettes. A pockmarked metal 7A hung on scratched wood. The other door had no number but it reeked of rotting pizza layered with the stench of seriously stinky guy. I pinched my nose and knocked. "Cousin Aylmer? It's Twyla."

A flicker at the peephole presaged the *shht* of a bolt, three clicking locks and a *brrrt* of chain. Aylmer popped out, stick in one hand, clunky meter in the other. He was nineteen-fifties *très chic* in coveralls and tinfoil hat. He shot me furtive glances through blue-tinted lab goggles. "Don't come any closer. Hands up."

I dutifully raised my hands while he waved the stick in front of me. He checked the meter and broke out—well, not smiling. Aylmer never really smiled, not since the night at Grandma Tafel's cabin in northern Wisconsin when he sleepwalked, came back smelling of skunk and said it was an alien abduction. "Twyla. It *is* you."

"Good to see you too, Aylmer." I followed him into his apartment.

He set his ancient equipment on a document box, one of several littering the room. "It's Van Helsing now."

“Abraham? Or do you just go by Van?” I hugged him, awkward with his body odor kicking me in the septum but I made the effort because he was *family*. He felt light under my fingers, unwell. I held him away from me. He wasn’t looking so good, either. Peaked and scrawny, like he hadn’t been eating. “Why don’t we go to the kitchen? I’ll make some tea, see if there’s any food for an early dinner.” Last I looked at a clock, it was near four.

I didn’t know where the kitchen was but the place wasn’t that big. I’d have to run into it sooner or later. Besides, there was only one path through the boxes, strewn clothes, and “equipment”.

In the kitchen Aylmer fished an old tin box from deep within a cabinet. It jangled as he opened it, revealing a snake pit of keys. He stirred a finger into the mess, finally extracting a key ring heavy as a jailer’s. “Here. So you can get in tonight after the New Year’s thing. Although why you’d want to be in the middle of that mass idiocy...don’t wake me, okay? And make sure you relock everything after you’re in. Don’t forget the chain. And get *all* the bolts. You’re staying only one night, right?”

“*One* night?” I dropped the keys into my bag, wincing when something went *crack*. “Come on, Ayl...I mean Van. I had to call in some major favors to get you clearance. Whatever they do, Bujný a Zvuk Magie is a big international player.” I found a kettle but had to wait for the rusty tap to run clear, so I set it down to hunt tea. “That’s worth at least four nights.”

He sat at the table and took off his foil hat. “I said thank you.” His face was petulant. “Two.”

“Three nights and we’re even. What was that job for, anyway? Times Square came up in the conversations several times.”

His face closed down. “Twyla, I want to tell you. But I can’t.”

I smiled. Him and his conspiracies. “Because then you’d have to kill me?”

“No.” He practically snarled it. “Because you wouldn’t believe me. *Nobody* believes me when I tell them my theories.” He wore a two-year-old’s frustrated pout.

I found a tea canister I recognized as Aunt Myrtle’s, probably from when Aylmer moved out five years ago (at the age of thirty-seven). “You don’t have to tell me then, Ayl—Van.”

“But I want to tell *somebody*. It’s brilliant. I’m a genius.” He glanced furtively around, then ran out of the room. I was at the tap, filling the kettle when he returned with an ominous-looking metal suitcase which he hefted onto the table with a grunt. But when he opened it, it was filled with nothing more sinister than toggles and flashing lights. Still, he was very earnest as he flipped a couple switches, then a couple more. With another furtive recon of the room he motioned me closer. I put my head next to his.

Even that close I barely heard his whispered, “Vampires are real.”

*No duh. I just had sex with one in a limo on the way from the airport.*

But v-guys were supposed to be this big secret, so I only said, “I see.” After all, Aylmer was just guessing. He couldn’t *know*. I set the kettle on the stove, turned on the gas. Flames licked bits of burned food, making them flame like charcoal.

“You don’t believe me?”

I was careful to keep my face neutral. “Sure I do, Van. Although I was wondering how you figured it out. If you—if *we* have any proof.”

“We don’t yet. But we *will*. I knew I could count on you, Twyla.”

“Sure.” I busied myself washing out mugs (desiccated spider bodies don’t steep well) wondering how he’d guessed. Just because he was right for once didn’t mean he was any less crazy. “Count on me how?”

“I came up with a plan. A brilliant plan. See, vampires are natural predators. Appeal to their predatory instincts and they’ll come out of the woodwork. We get it on film, instant proof.”

“I don’t follow.”

He snorted. “And they say you’re the smart one. C’mon, Twyla. What’s a vampire’s prey? People. And what city has the most people?”

“New York.” I saw where this might be headed, and didn’t like it.

“Exactly. And what’s the biggest outdoor event?”

I *really* didn’t like where this was going. “The Super Bowl?”

“At night, dork.”

And wrong city, but that wasn’t my point. “Vampires aren’t only awake at night—”

“Who’s the expert here?” He eyed me suspiciously. “I don’t think you’re taking this seriously enough.”

He really meant I wasn’t taking *him* seriously enough. I set a mug of chamomile in front of him, dunked the bag to stir the smell. The action and scent were reminiscent of Grandma Tafel, which I hoped would calm him. “Seriously, then. Times Square on New Year’s Eve. So what?”

“Normally the vampires try to blend. Even though it’s illegal to carry liquor in, people are already so drunk or just high with excitement that they don’t notice a thing, and the vampires get away with it.”

“Wait. Are you saying vampires are killing people at the New Year’s celebration? Wouldn’t we see the bodies the next day?”

“Vampires can drink from humans without killing them, silly. And they generally don’t drink in public, but New Year’s Eve is the exception.” Aylmer picked up his tea, waved the mug over the suitcase. Flipped a switch and did it again, peering closely at the blinking lights. Whatever they whispered to him, he apparently felt safe enough to finally drink. “So here’s my brilliant plan. We hypnotize the vamps to remove their inhibitions. They fang up in full view and people start screaming. Running. The running further fires the lurking predator and whammo! Tons of damning footage. Maybe even a few corpses if we’re lucky.”

I fell into my chair. “You’re going to remove whatever inhibitor keeps vampires from killing people? That’s no better than being a murderer yourself!”

He pouted. “It’s their fault for not believing me. Once I have proof, everyone will believe me. They’ll have to.” His eyes narrowed on me. “I don’t know why I tell you things. I don’t know why I tell anyone!” He kicked back his chair and marched out. Came back, banged his briefcase shut, took it and stomped back out.

I heard the slam of the bedroom door, sat for a moment processing. Vampires gone berserk, humans dying in droves. It was crazy. Aylmer couldn’t possibly do what he’d threatened. I held my mug but didn’t drink.

At some point the sun set and I got up to turn on the lights. Yes, it was crazy, but if there was even a possibility Aylmer *could* deliver on his threat, it was too horrendous to ignore. I needed more information.

I pulled out my cell phone and hit the speed dial for my friend Nixie Emerson.

## Chapter Three

“Vampires?” Nixie laughed. It sounded slightly off to my ears, but I wasn’t sure. A musician would have known—they can hear cues in the voice the rest of us miss totally. In this case, though, the musician I’d ask was the one doing the laughing. She said, “Why would you think *I’d* have the 411 on vampires?”

When talking with Nixie, I find it useful to shade toward her own brand of punk speak. “Girl, we don’t have time for a dodge. My cousin the madman is planning to out a whole bunch of bloodsuckers in Times Square *tonight*. Control their thoughts with hypnosis or something. So I’m asking you—is that possible? Do you or Hottie Hubby know anything that might make vampires go all fangy and drink people to death?”

There was a deep murmur from the background. “It’s Twyla.” Nixie was apparently speaking to said hottie hubby. Lips smacked, faithfully reproduced by my phone. “The vampires in the Big Apple—” smack, “—are in deep shit.”

The smacks told me they were in bed, doing it again. Near as I could tell they were *always* doing it. It was one of the things that clued me that Nixie’s hottie wasn’t entirely human. I thought of Nikos and shivered.

More murmuring. But if anyone could help it was hubby Julian, who was seriously smart.

“Twyla?” Nixie cleared her throat. Even a non-musician could tell she was uncomfortable. “There *was* some crap that went down at Christmas. If v-guys *did* exist—I’m not saying they do—but if they did one of them might’ve hatched a compulsion thing. A hypnotizer that works by sound waves. If it was real—’course it can’t be—it was *supposed* to be destroyed. But if there’s any chance it wasn’t—fuck me with a side order of damn. That would be bad.”

“I sort of figured that out myself,” I said dryly.

“Huh, Julian? Oh, yeah. Look, Twyla. You have to give Nikos a 911. That’s why we sent him with you.”

“You *what*? He said he was here on business but...aw, crap.” His *business* was to watch over me. He didn’t *really* care.

“If there were v-guys—not saying, but if—this would definitely be v-guy business. Twyla, just call Nikos. Here’s his number.”

If there were vampires—not that Nixie said there were, but if—their underground coffins still had cell phone reception. Nikos answered on the first ring. “What’s wrong?”

Damn, that sexy growl shot shivers straight down my spine to my sweet poo-say. *Business*, I reminded myself. “Aylmer is planning something awful. I called Nixie but she said I should talk to you—and she said you were sent to keep an eye on me. *That* was your business? Me? Were your kisses business too?” I made a raspberry. “I would have been better off with the prostitute.”

A breath of air came over the phone, his version of a sigh. “It’s complicated.”

“It always is.” I jammed the phone under my jaw and started doing dishes—loudly.

Another sigh. “We’ll need to talk. Expect Bruce in half an hour.”

“Bruce? For real? Kato’s name is Bruce, like Bruce Lee?”

“Meiers Corners,” he said by way of explanation. When God fished in the Coincidence Pool, he used Meiers Corners as bait.



On the way out I caught an edge of movement in the deep shadows between the buildings, a skulking figure with light hair and lush lips. Like Modelboy, but what would he be doing here?

Apprehension nearly sent me back inside but the limo showed up and I hopped right in. Bruce sped away, whisking me to an unmarked boutique hotel in Midtown.

Nikos opened the door to a luxury suite. The first thing I saw was the fireplace. The second was the massive four-poster bed. The covers were rumpled.

It gave me ideas. Maybe it was leftover frustration from not joining the mile-high club, although Nikos had taken care of me later, most satisfactorily.

Or maybe it was *because* he’d taken care of me that I sauntered over to the bed and slid one hand along its brass post. “Ever play games?” Turning, I gave him my most brilliant smile.

His eyes flared the hungry scarlet of a burning African veldt. He came closer. “What kind?”

“Naughty games.” I ran my wrist along the post, suggestively.

“I thought you wanted to talk.” He came closer still.

“Talk will wait. Got any extra of these?” I grabbed the end of his tie, yanked it to pull him even closer. He came, but under his own steam. My smile faltered.

“Plenty.” He cuffed my wrists, shackled them in one hand behind my back. Yeah, I’d forgotten he could do that.

It pressed my breasts into his abs. He reached down and fondled one. I was immediately seared by his heat. He pinched a nipple and heat blazed into passion.

He released my wrists to thread his hand through my hair. Holding me immobile he kissed me hard. Completely overwhelmed me with teeth and tongue.

My game suddenly didn't seem such a hot idea, not with Mr. Play-to-Win out to conquer the board. "Talk first." Polysyllabic words were impossible with his mouth devouring me.

"No. Sex first." He kissed me with tongue everywhere, deep in my mouth, licking my lips, flicking fire along my teeth.

"We don't have time." I pressed palms to his hard pecs, which didn't give an inch. "My cousin—"

"Twyla, shh." His voice was half-growl, half-purr. He buried his face in my neck. Sharp teeth scored my sensitive skin. His tongue rasped after, chafing, arousing.

My hands slid up his chest with each hot nip until my arms were wrapped around his shoulders and I was arching hard against him. "Nikos, wait. I have to tell you—*uhhh*."

His fangs had come out to play. Points of pleasure pricked my neck. My pulse leaped to meet them. I thrust myself closer as his fangs played across my vulnerable throat. Pressing his advantage he backed me into one of the bedposts, his head-cupping hand hitting it with a clang. He released me gently against the post and drove both his hands down the back of my pants.

Two big palms slid over my butt and pulled. He forced me into an arousal so big I nearly swooned. When he ground himself against me and grew *bigger*, my vision blackened around the edges.

Okay. Hours until midnight. Nikos was here now, and he was hot for me. Talk could wait. Time to push my limits. I rubbed my hips against his expanding bulge, rippled against it, teasing.

With a growl he swept me off my feet. He threw me under the saffron bed canopy and jumped in next to me, crowding me with his huge, naked body.

Sexual haze disintegrated. He was naked? When had *that* happened?

"Mist."

It was an answer but I couldn't think how. And then I couldn't care less as he ate me up with his hungry gaze, his pupils open circles of fire. "Your body is so lush." He tore my shirt and bra up, growling with satisfaction when my breasts bounced free. He palmed one, his thumb brushing the nipple. "So full and creamy."

He fondled me, strong bronze fingers sinking into the globe. Tendons rippled in his arm. Answering passion stirred between my thighs. I tightened them against the first flush of moisture.

He breathed deep. "You smell divine." His head bent and he fastened onto my nipple.

I arched. My hand found his back, ran over acres of sheer strength. I wanted to feel all that power on top of me. I wrapped one leg over his hips and tugged. "Kiss me."

He responded instantly—but not the direction I wanted. He vaulted to the end of the bed to yank my jeans off. Pushing my bare legs apart he climbed between them—and pressed a hard kiss to my sex.

The suddenness of it, his hot breath on my vulva, made every hair stand straight up. "Nikos!"

"Hush." He kissed my pussy like my mouth—sucking, driving, tongue plunging. My heels dug into the bed. He caught my hips in both hands and used his enormous strength to grind me like a millstone.

I fell back onto the coverlet. My breath came in short, sharp rasps. Overhead the saffron darkened to old gold as my vision narrowed.

“Moan for me.” His thumbs spread my pussy so he could attack my clit. His tongue rasped the nub. “*Moan.*”

How could I not when his tongue ran over me like hot oil, flicked me like a flint wheel? I moaned. He licked and flicked, then reached up with one hand and plucked my exposed nipple until my bottom clenched.

“Ride me, Twyla.” Without looking he reached forward, unerringly found and cuffed my wrists, brought my hands to his head. “Grab my ears and ride my face.”

“What?” Adventure, excitement, yes. But he couldn’t mean...he was just talking dirty, right?

“*Ride* me.” He bore down on my pubic bone with his mouth. “Fuck my face.”

“I don’t—”

He clamped his mouth over my entire pussy and *sucked*.

I shrieked. My hips undulated frantically, recklessly. Sweet Mona Lisa, his sucking mouth felt incredible. I rubbed against him, heat rising deep in my abdomen. My fingers shot straight out, scrubbing against the short silk of his hair.

His hands tightened on my wrists. Surfacing from between my legs he looked like a sea monster, his face glistening and his fangs half a foot long. He tore my fingers off his scalp, slapped them over his ears. “I said *ride*.”

With a snarl, he sank those sharp, gleaming fangs into my mons.

I screamed. Grabbed his ears, the only thing I could hang onto in the exploding storm, and ground myself against him. His tongue slapped against my slit, skidding on my cream. My hips moved, tentatively, riding his chiseled jaw. He bit down again. I jerked. Huge shivers wracked me. I rubbed harder against the granite of his face, his bites goading me faster and faster until I was finally pounding myself against him.

Climax overtook me, not like a surf or even tsunami but like a truck. Like a semi tractor-trailer hitting me square in the sex. I cried out as darkness washed over me.

My eyes slit open to soft yellow above. Oh yeah, bed canopy. Silky comforter and soft mattress below. A buzzing came from around my navel.

Nikos was licking my belly, purring. It brought reality home. A) I’d gotten it twice and he hadn’t gotten any yet and B) my boyfriend was a vampire. Or maybe not boyfriend, maybe it was only a business arrangement. Fine, my gigolo was a vampire. Who cared? I’d gotten some out of it, see A, above.

I watched him lick, not really *compos mentis* yet. His shoulders, twice as broad as my hips, were exquisite. Chiseled like a smoky quartz sculpture but in motion, muscles sleek under his glistening skin. His hair bristled from his skull, thick and jet black. I really was going to have to work on getting him to grow it long enough to curl.

I wondered what the rest of him looked like. Hadn't seen it yet, surprisingly. Most men I knew would have tried to stuff their John Henry in some orifice by now. Did vampires even have penises? I'd felt a healthy bulge in his jeans, but guessing wasn't knowing. "So do you do more than lick? Or *can't* you?" I tried to see past shoulders.

His head snapped up. His eyes were ruby red, his fangs were huge. Damn. Not in Kansas any more, Toto-wyla. He stalked up my body until we were face to face.

As he did, something hot and smooth trailed fiery fluid up my belly. Couldn't be what I thought, since he was at least a foot tall on hands and knees...I glanced between us.

Great Rodin's chisel—Nikos had a yardstick for a cock.

His eyes were riveted on mine and he must have read my shocked expression because he said, "Want to *know*?"

Excitement. Push the limits. But not *rip* the limits. "It won't fit!"

"Let's find out." He grabbed his shaft, pointed it like a cannon between my legs.

"Wait...I have something to tell you first." I scrambled back.

He seized me by the scruff of the neck, hauled me under him. I clenched my thighs tightly but he just pushed that monster erection through. My own cream lubed its passage.

I tried to weasel away again but he held me firmly and pushed forward until the head nudged my swollen sex. I clamped my legs tighter. He purred, rotated his hips, and pressed forward again. Despite clamping against him, his glans spread my labia.

"I said *wait*." I grabbed his arms, a mistake. His pumped biceps were too big for my hands, and his skin was slick with arousal. My vagina spasmed at the feel of him.

"You want it." His eyes were intense, almost as if he were reading my every thought, every emotion. "Why wait?" He pushed a little with his hips, but teasing, not threatening.

"I have information—"

"Excuse." His lids dropped as his focus shifted inside himself. He pressed forward another inch. His cock filled my opening, stretched me.

"No! All right, I'm scared."

He stilled instantly. "I won't hurt you, Twyla." His red eyes shifted back to me.

"I'm afraid because this is just business to you. You don't really want to do this."

He blinked. "I want to."

"You want sex, maybe. But not me. You don't want *me*."

His eyes closed. He shook his head, not once but several times. "How can you think that?"

"If you really wanted me you'd be more passionate. More carried away."

"Hercules run me through." Abruptly he pulled out. His eyes flared open, blood red, his fangs shot out halfway down his chin. "If I got carried away, *then* I'd hurt you." He grabbed his cock and dropped it on

my belly. It hit with a *whump*. “Stuff that in your tight little channel without a care? Sink my fangs in you as deep and hard as I want? Drink as much of your ambrosia as I want? As I *need*?” He leaped off the bed, stalked away, spun back. “You are driving me *insane* with want. And you’re saying I need to be *more* passionate?”

I blinked. “You never showed it—not unless I provoked you.”

“What *should* I have done? *Talked* to you? Twyla, love, I’m a Spartan general made vampire two and a half millennia ago. I now have a cock twice as big as a human man which I want to stuff up your cunt while I drink hot blood from your throat. And, oh yes, I have a bit of a thing for domination.”

He’d said more in the last minute than the whole of our acquaintance. That probably qualified as carried away. “You really were a Spartan?” My throat was tight. “That explains the laconic wit.”

“Out of everything, you picked that?” He barked a short laugh. His erection, jutting out from his hips, shuddered with it. “You’re impossible.”

“Hey, I’m not the mythical creature here.”

His mouth eased, a small but real smile emerging. “No. You’re a beautiful woman. But Twyla, you’ll never hear it enough from me. I was raised a warrior, not a poet. And oh, Zeus, I want you.” He groaned the last.

*I want* you. That was all it took. “Honey, you may not have a lot of words, but they’re the right ones. Besides, I don’t need words.” I spread my legs. “I need action.”

His sudden intake of breath was sharp. He jumped on the bed so fast he was a blur, practically mist. Or maybe, remembering his comment on losing his clothes, he *was* mist. He came out of warp space positioned on hands and knees above me.

He stared at me. “Are you sure?”

I almost smiled. “Now you’re giving me a choice?”

“No. Yes.” His eyes were intent on mine. “*I want* you. I can’t think. What do you want me to say?”

Apparently want, for a vampire, was pretty intense. “I don’t want you to say anything.” I grabbed him by the ears and kissed him.

His big mouth covered mine. His tongue pushed inside me at the same moment his glans spread my labia. He groaned deep, went to his elbows to kiss me to my tonsils, his hands shaping my hair. His cock sank in another inch. I wriggled, felt my vagina open a little, swallowing another inch of shaft. A little thrill burst in my belly.

He was kissing me like he meant it, but he’d always done that. Should have listened to my mouth.

But this time he was also loving me like he meant it, trembling with his restraint, holding back when he obviously wanted to slam himself in to the hilt. I had no doubt his huge body could generate quite enough power to ram that monster cock past my cervix. I was ready, wetter than I’d been my whole life,

but even fully aroused he filled me, stretched me. I wrapped my ankles around his hips and snaked a hand between us, around the root of his cock to keep him from hitting too deep. I couldn't quite close my fingers.

He sank in another half inch, sweating now. "Heracles' teeth, Twyla. You're like an oven." He was practically panting. "When you're stretched, I'm going to take you like a bull. Like a locomotive." Another half inch. "Fuck." He stopped, swelling inside me, stretching me until I gasped. "You're so hot...so tight...I'm coming." He sucked in a couple breaths. "Damn me, I'm coming *now*."

He arched back until all I could see were the sinews standing out on his arms and the muscles of his chest, clenched so tightly they were almost white. Hot fluid filled me in a rush. I felt each hard spurt from his tight balls, several inches back on my buttocks. He still hadn't fully sheathed himself. It went on and on, until the fluid splashed out onto my thighs. He groaned and purred the entire time.

When it was over he relaxed onto me, weight heavy but not crushing, and kissed me tenderly, almost lovingly. As he kissed me he stroked my hair. He eventually rolled off, continuing to stroke me, to lie raised on one elbow at my side.

Even tender, he assumed the superior position. Like a Spartan general. If this relation went long term, I'd eventually have to deal with that natural machismo.

*Long term?* I'd thought that Nikos might be Mr. Long-term Affair but that was when I just guessed, didn't know. Now...now I was in New York for some excitement. For pushing boundaries, testing limits. Not for anything domestic. I'd sort out LTA later.

His hand stopped. "What?"

"Nothing." Or nothing I wanted to deal with now. "Can we talk about my crazy cousin? We only have until midnight."

He frowned down at me. "Why midnight?"

"Aylmer said vampires are going to be brainwashed into attacking humans in Times Square tonight."

He sat up, eyes cool and clear. "Tell me everything."

The taciturn general was back. I should have seen it before. Probably part of why I wasn't totally freaking out at the two-and-a-half-millennia thing. A Spartan vampire. Incredible, unbelievable. But it fit beautifully with the Nikos I'd experienced. And it sure beat the scenarios I *had* been dreaming up.

He let me talk without interruption. As I finished he arrowed off the bed for the dresser. The mattress got several inches higher. "I want to meet your cousin." He dressed quickly, efficiently. Oh yeah, definitely military.

Bruce drove us back to the brownstone. In the lobby of Aylmer's building I sorted through the keys he'd given me, but none of them got us in. That giant key ring and we were reduced to flathanding again. I guess with guys it wasn't size but how they used it. Aylmer's huge ring got us nothing.

Nikos's huge palms got us half a dozen buzzes.

Aylmer's apartment looked the same as when I'd left it, a disaster. Smelled the same too, unfortunately. Nikos's nostrils flared.

I said, "It's just month-old garbage."

"No. Blood. Fresh." His eyes narrowed and he prowled into the apartment, unnervingly like a beast of prey.

I ran after. Fresh blood could mean anything from a paper cut to a bad wound to...dead bodies. "How much blood?"

"Enough." He caught sight of my face, which must have been pale beneath my perpetual tan, and hooked my chin with gentle fingers. "Not that much." He kissed me.

"Oh. Good. Where?"

"Bathroom."

"Probably just bandaging a scrape then, right? Probably...oh, no." The bathroom was a door off the kitchen.

Through it I saw blood.

A lot of it.

## Chapter Four

“Don’t look.” Nikos blocked my view by shifting his massive body. “It’s not as bad as you think.”

“That much blood?” My memory splashed drying brown all over the peeling floor, spattered it down one thick plaster wall. “Let me see him, maybe we can still help.”

“Aylmer’s not here.”

“What? No, that can’t be. He never leaves his loft.” And with all that blood...my vision wavered.

“Twyla.” Nikos took me by both arms. “I know this is shocking to you, but it’s really not so bad.” He waited while I took a deep steadying breath, then released me to move into the bathroom.

I followed to the doorway. “So Aylmer walked out of here on his own? It only looks like a gallon of blood?” I managed to peek around Nikos’s massive frame, saw he was right. No body lay anywhere in the tiny bathroom.

“He lost one, maybe two pints. Made him dizzy, but didn’t kill him. Ah.” A *tink* told me Nikos had picked something out of the shower base. “Bullet.”

“Aylmer was *shot*? That’s bad. A bullet in the heart...or the brain... Oh, God.”

Hands caught my shoulders, pushed me to the floor. Tucked my head down. “Easy, Twyla. Not the brain. No gray splatter. And pumped blood is a different spray. Leg, probably, or arm. *Shh*, it’s all right. I’ve got you.”

I shook with cold and shock, my only thought being how damned chatty my vampire got when he thought I was losing it. Personal problems? Relationship woes? Monosyllabic grunts. But get me an inch from crying... I rubbed my prickly eyes and realized I was closer than an inch. I turned my face into his warm chest, let him hold me and rub my back.

When I could sit without embarrassing myself I took a deep breath. Gathered a very tattered cloak of my normal competence around me. “So. What does this tell us?”

“That’s my girl.” Nikos sat cross-legged on the cheap kitchen linoleum, pulled me into his lap and cuddled me close. “Two men were here.”

“Two men? How can you tell? Although...maybe that means it wasn’t Aylmer who was shot. Maybe—”

“Smell tells me there were two. But the blood is your cousin’s.”

“How can you *know* that—” I remembered that he drank blood for a living. “You tasted it? Oh, yuck. But how do you know it’s Aylmer...wait. It tasted like *me*?”

A little purr started. “You’re smart.”

“If I’m so smart what am I doing aiding a madman?” I was shaking again. “Why do haughty rich women look down on me? Why is my sister a happily-married brain surgeon and my brother halfway to Marine general while I’m only a glorified secretary?” I covered my mouth. Where had that come from?

“Shock,” Nikos said, answering my thoughts. “And breaking some boundaries automatically felled others.”

Since I wasn’t sure what was going to come out of my mouth, I didn’t reply. And here Nikos was getting downright talky. Like we were learning from each other. Maybe there was a future for us after all.

I had *not* just thought that. Shock. Yeah, shock was making me weird out.

Nikos laid a light kiss on top of my head. “It takes a lot to rattle my Twyla. I like that.”

My Twyla? Sometimes it only took a few words to completely freak me. “Don’t say stuff like that unless you mean it.” I scrambled out of his lap, rose to my feet. “Who do you think the other person is?”

“Klaus. He’s glib, annoying and far too interested in you.” Nikos frowned. “But he wouldn’t have left the blood.”

“Klaus...from the plane? But why wouldn’t he have left...oh no. Another vampire?” I sank to my knees. “I should be getting used to this. Look, you may be right about Klaus. I saw him here, at the brownstone.”

“*What?*” Nikos’s fangs shot out and his skin hardened alarmingly.

“But if they’re working together, why would Klaus shoot Aylmer? Wait.” I ran through the sequence of events in my head, from the plane with modelboy Klaus to Aylmer’s hushed whispers to Aylmer slamming out of the kitchen.

“Aylmer must have called Klaus to complain that I wasn’t taking him seriously. But in case I did listen, Klaus came here to silence Aylmer.” My knees collapsed. Abruptly I sat back down. “Aylmer was shot because of *me*.”

Nikos gathered me into his lap again. “If it helps, I don’t think Aylmer is dead. He would have squirreled away ‘evidence’ somewhere.”

It helped. As I relaxed, Nikos tucked me close. “Twyla, this frightens you, but you’re still fighting. You are a strong warrior.”

“I’m glad you think so.” I burrowed deeper into his strong chest, just for a minute. “I’m not my brother the Marine.”

“A good thing. I would not have enjoyed sex with him.”

I felt the start of a smile and sat up. “See. Not a lot of words but just the right ones. All right, how do we find out where they’ve gone?”

“The boxes in the living room, to start.”

The letter boxes were labeled eMailnXpress. I opened one, pulled a sheaf of papers from it and was surprised when more tumbled out. They were connected, multi-part printouts. I scanned a couple, saw lists of items, quantities and weights. But instead of dollar amounts I saw cities. “What are these?”

“Freight bills,” Nikos murmured thoughtfully. “Aylmer audits truck lines.”

I tossed the papers back into the box. “How can these help us find them? You know, things were a lot easier when all we had to do was stop my crazy cousin—wait.”

Nikos cocked a jet brow at me. Maybe his version of “tell me more”. He wasn’t as closed off as I’d originally thought.

I picked out a form. “Look at these. Paper, and pin-fed at that. Eighties technology. And Aylmer himself is stuck in the fifties.”

Nikos gave me a single nod. An eloquent “go on”, for him.

“Well, think about it. The favor I did involved a very high-tech company. How does that square with pin-fed forms and tinfoil hats? I think—”

A big warm hand suddenly covered my mouth. “Shh.” Nikos cocked his head at the front door.

Concentrating, I heard voices approaching. Boys, from the snickers.

Feet trundled up the hallway. “What’re we going to do to the old weirdo this time? Hey, I know. Let’s show him our *fangs*.”

“Nothing’ll top the look on his face that first time we delivered his stupid boxes. *You have to invite us in over the threshold, bleh*. I nearly peed my pants laughing.”

I sucked in a breath.

“The loon. I thought he’d have apoplexy when he realized he’d met *real* vampires and nobody’d believe him.”

“Although he tastes pretty good. For a nut job.”

Grim-faced, Nikos caught my eye and nodded. Vampires, just a little creepy and not very subtle. This explained how Aylmer found out.

Faster than I could follow, Nikos was at the door, throwing it open. He collared the two vampires, young men by the thin, hungry look of them, and dragged them in, slamming the door shut with a kick.

“Hey man, what do you think—”

“Stop it, you can’t—”

Nikos shut them up by shaking them hard. He eyed their uniforms, the eMailnXpress logos matching the boxes. “Foot soldiers,” he spat. “Who runs you?”

“Our boss?” one of them squeaked. “You can’t tell Klaus. He’d kill us!”

Nikos and I exchanged a glance. He tossed the young vampires sprawling to the floor. “Fine. But if I ever hear of you ‘tasting’ again—” His death glare finished the sentence more eloquently than words.

The boys scrambled to their feet, threw open the door and dashed out.

Nikos watched them escape. “Idiots.”

“Kids. But if you really think Aylmer’s okay, maybe we should put finding him on hold and get to Times Square. We know whatever Klaus has planned will happen there.”

“Not yet. We need better intelligence.”

Ever the general. “Well, freight bills won’t tell us anything.” The kids had dropped a couple boxes when Nikos yanked them inside, and I went to pick them up. “And since Aylmer isn’t here, who else can we ask? I can’t think he confided in anyone besides me. He didn’t have any friends.”

Nikos followed me to the door. “Maybe a neighbor.”

“Don’t think so.” We stared at the closed 7A across the hallway. “Although his neighbor must have heard Harold and Kumar too. I wonder what he thought of it.” I picked up a box, brought it inside.

Nikos brought in the other and shut the door behind him. “A knot has two ends. Tell me about Bujný a Zvuk Magie.”

“Besides their being headquartered in Eastern Europe, I don’t know that much. My job was to get Aylmer—or *somebody*—clearance to be their representative here. Or maybe it was as a subcontractor. We communicated in a mix of Czech, German and English and I wasn’t always sure of the nuances. It was very frustrating.”

He kissed the top of my head. “Bujný a Zvuk Magie means Light and Sound Magic.”

“I wish I’d had you then. You speak a bunch of different languages, don’t you? Well, in a couple thousand years, you’d have to. You’d have cut that red tape like sharp shears.” I slumped down on a pile of boxes. “I feel totally useless. Why couldn’t Nixie be here instead? She’d have done a much better job.”

“You feel inadequate? Why?” He frowned. “You’re smart, capable and sexy as hell. Why don’t you know that?”

“But it’s *sound*. Nixie’s the musician. Or tactical, then my brother Colin would help. Or—”

“No. Your disturbance—it’s more. Personal.” He knelt before me, looked deep into my eyes. “Your family?”

How did he figure *that* out? I jerked one shoulder. “Maybe. My mom, dad, sister *and* brother became internationally important people. I didn’t even find a job in my field.” The only time I got close to using my art degree was arranging table decorations for the mayor’s cheeseball-and-blood-sausage shindigs. “But it’s no big. I cope.”

“Your mother and father belittle you? Your brother or sister?”

“No.” I looked away. “Mom and dad didn’t live to see what a flop I am. And my sibs are nothing but supportive.” It came out more bitterly than I meant.

“Twyla.” Nikos cupped my face in both hands, made me look at him. “There’s nothing wrong with your potential.”

How nice if that were true. Maybe it even was. Of course then I was squandering that potential, an even bigger issue. I started to tug away but his iron hands stopped me. He said, “But sometimes living up to that potential needs the right circumstances. Being ready is just as good. Just as important. When the crisis comes, you’ll see.”

“But I don’t *know* that, do I? I don’t know how I’ll act in a crisis, if I’ll be up to it. I can guess, but you yourself said that’s not *knowing*.”

Nikos released me, saying simply, “I have faith.”

I jumped to my feet, started pacing. “Take this crisis. What good am I? A compulsion device that works by sound waves. I don’t even have the potential to solve *that* puzzle. I couldn’t tell a whole note from an octave. What the hell is an octave anyway?”

“It’s from ‘say’ to ‘see’ in the first line of ‘The Star Spangled Banner’.”

I ran the song in my head. Felt the notes with my throat. “Ouch. That’s a leap.”

“Yes.”

“But see what I mean? Here’s a crisis and circumstances or fate or whatever has put one of the least appropriate people for the job in the hot seat. What if ‘circumstances’ never come together for me? What if I’m just a dud?”

“Twyla, love. We need to go back to my hotel.”

I stopped pacing. “Pity sex?”

He smiled. “No. I must retrieve my patrol blade. And I think you’ll help me figure this out, but only when your thoughts aren’t blocked.”

Wow, over a dozen words, a veritable novel for the reserved Nikos. “Blocked by what?”

“By a belief that everyone has more to contribute than you.” He guided me out. “A mistaken belief.”

I checked the shadows of the building for Klaus but saw nothing. As we slid into the limo, I said, “A Spartan general, out unarmed? You must feel naked.”

“I have my public blade.”

“Whatever that means.”

In his hotel room, seeing the *xiphos* and *kopis* laid side by side on his dresser, I was smacked in the face with exactly what that meant. Twelve extra inches of cold steel. I swallowed. “Guess you’re serious.”

Nikos pressed a button on the shorter one, the *xiphos*. The double-edged leaf-like blade retracted almost magically. He picked up the longer one, started to rub the edges with a stone. His muscles worked steadily as he honed the wickedly curved blade. “The only way to stop Klaus is to cut off his head.” He paused. “Twyla. You have the heart of a warrior. But I don’t want you to watch that.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not into overachievement.”

He just shook his head and slid the *kopis* sword into its sheath in a quick, practiced motion. Setting it next to the switchblade *xiphos*, he turned the full force of his attention on me. “Come to bed.”

“I thought you said no pity sex.”

“More an exercise in confidence building.”

“Oh, that. The mayor has us do yearly team-building exercises. I’d rather have—what are you doing?”

He glided toward the closet, shimmering into mist as he moved. His clothes dropped to the floor. He re-formed while still moving, misting out of his clothes as easily as a man shrugs off a robe. Casually, naturally, as if he did this every night.

Hmm. Maybe he did.

And what was revealed—frickin’ yum. Forget Michelangelo’s sculptures. No mere artist could capture the stunning glide of lithe muscle under skin, the contrast of jet hair against ochre flesh, the gleam of intent in sable bedroom eyes as he grabbed some ties out of the closet and flowed to the bed.

I trotted after him like a puppy.

Nikos snapped the hold-back loops off the canopy. The curtains fell over the bed like sultry saffron promises. With a final scorching look, he disappeared in a billow of yellow.

But I hesitated. What did he have in mind with the ties? He was, after all, a Spartan general who was a tad dominant.

On the other hand—naked male. I climbed in after him.

He had tied his feet and one hand to the posts and was knotting the last wrist down with his teeth.

“What...?” I gazed at him in some alarm. His big body was spread-eagled on the silk of the comforter, and he was fully erect. Seeing him extended in all three dimensions like that, little ol’ me on my hands and knees next to him to measure against, took me way beyond guessing how big he was and smacked me in the face with enormous *knowing*.

“Come Twyla. Life has given you mixed messages. You are a siren, a beauty. A strong, powerful woman. Make love to me.”

“Make love...to you? Aren’t you supposed to be the dominant one?”

“I am.” He purred. “But tonight you are the dominatrix. Love me, my mistress. Give me what I need with your strong, lush body. Your beautiful mind. Your indomitable spirit. Kiss me.”

“I’m not sure—”

“You will be.” His eyes held mine, promising satin and sin.

I fell into those dark bedroom eyes. My arms buckled. My lips met his.

His mouth pursed, cushioning my landing. Talk about lush. I kissed first his upper lip, then the lower. Okay, maybe I could start small. Siren, probably not. But explorer I could do, my limited field his warm mouth.

I sucked gently at his lower lip, teased it with my tongue. He gave a satisfied sigh. His face was serene, confident. His eyes were closed, his lashes perfect onyx half-moons against his burnt sienna cheeks.

Encouraged, I kissed the corners of his mouth. He purred. I expanded my field, kissing along the line of his carved jaw. I kissed his face piece by piece until I knew the texture of every hair and the sleek feel of every plane. I took my time, moving slowly from face to neck to strong collarbones to muscular chest. The longer I took, the darker the purr, until it was a growl.

He arched his hips. "Love me, my mistress. Do not tease me."

"Tease?" I bit his nipple. His body reared off the bed. His erection grew even fatter. "I'm tasting, not teasing." And even if I weren't teasing, *I* was supposedly in charge. Which meant I could *do whatever I liked* to him.

*Whatever I liked.* I tried the idea in my mind, found it frightening, forbidden—and oh so exciting. I licked away the sting of my bite. He groaned.

I continued my slow journey of exploration, kissing and licking his gorgeous chest. To prove I wasn't teasing, though, I snaked a hand around the root of his erection. Stroked up about an inch, lightly. He let out a frustrated puff of air. So I stroked down. He twitched. I set up a soft rhythm, stroking that bottom inch so lightly, over and over. Okay, maybe I was teasing, just a bit. And I loved it.

From the deep restless groan he emitted, he enjoyed it too.

My mouth left his chest, continued its downward journey. I think he wanted me to skip right to the hot and juicy part but the wavy ripples of his belly fascinated me. The smooth skin was the same bronze-with-undertones-of-blue as his chest. A feathering of glossy hair shadowed the center, begging to be licked. I played my tongue over warm male muscle, delighted in his taut jerks of reaction. The combination of silky smooth and crisply rough textures was fascinating. And he tasted good too. Right. He tasted oh so right.

His erection filled until it tipped over onto his belly. The glans hit just short of his navel. My tongue ran up over the mountain ridge of it. The tip dripped glistening liqueur that tasted much more strongly of salt and male. I breathed on it. The root, still in my hand, jerked. I licked the tip lightly. His whole body jerked.

"Twyla—" His voice sounded strangled.

I glanced at him. His head was thrown back, exposing his strong throat. When he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbed hard. His whole torso, neck to chest to belly, was clenched tight. "Love me. I need you *now*."

He was *aroused*. And *I* was the woman arousing him. No, more. I was driving him insane.

It was a rush. I felt powerful, sexy. I felt—hot. I opened my mouth over his cock and drove it straight down my throat.

He *roared*. His arms and legs jerked so strongly I heard the creak of bent posts. The curtains sagged around us but I barely noticed. With his erection down my throat I swallowed.

His hips came off the bed. His pained bellow nearly deafened me. His cock erupted in spasms so strong I had to back off or drown. Semen spurted onto his belly. He didn't seem to notice, his expression hitting nine-point-oh on the Twyla scale.

Well damn. Maybe I was some sexy bitch.

Finally his eruptions subsided. When his eyes opened a lifetime later they were rolling. "*O Theos mou*. You are an angel. A tigress. More, my mistress."

In my hand, his cock filled and lengthened until it was bigger than before. "But you—that's impossible. Unnatural."

A small smile curved his lips. "Preternatural, perhaps. More?" His bedroom eyes trailed stardust down my body to the juncture of my thighs, leaving no doubt what he'd like more to be.

Oh, yeah. Me, too. I swabbed off his stomach with one of the bed's multitudes of pillows, enjoying the way his abs bunched and flattened.

Then I tossed aside the pillow and stripped out of my clothes.

In response his monster cock rose straight from his body, a tall and proud skyscraper. I put palms to pecs and straddled him, gingerly—at that size it was like mounting a really tall bike. His erection nudged my thigh as I mounted. I pinched his nipple. "Stop that." Who was in charge here?

He just smiled.

I guided him to my vulva and locked the head in place. Returning both palms to his chest, I looked him in the eye.

He was still smiling. With a sudden, sharp jerk, he thrust three inches inside me.

I had to struggle against spasms of delicious response. "I said *stop* that." Hooking my insteps over his thighs, I bore down with my entire weight. Probably not enough to really stop him if he chose to go all dominant on me—not even the ties could keep his monstrous strength completely subdued. Nor did I want them to. I just wanted to channel that power, and that only for now.

He was still smiling. So I said, "Behave *well*, or I'm getting off." The smile disappeared and he subsided obediently.

I took my time sinking onto his pole, because it tortured him and because my own arousal climbed with every inch. By the time I got halfway down I was shivering and he was purring. Each inch by slow inch went in with slick fullness. By the time I felt his head nudge my cervix, I was trembling. He was growling.

"Make yourself come." Nikos's hot eyes flicked down to where even I could see my clitoris, rising hard and crimson from my curls. "Do it."

My breath caught. "Ask nicely, and maybe I will." I honestly didn't think he'd ask. I didn't think he was capable of it.

So it really undid me when he purred, “Please, mistress. Masturbate while you sit on my cock.” His voice was deep and rough and got under my skin like psychic needles of lust. Automatically my hand went to my nub. His responding purr was so loud it rattled my bones.

“Hey. None of that vampire coercion of yours.” I stopped my hand inches from my clit and started to get off him.

He groaned. “*Please*, Twyla. Your channel is so hot I am burning. Your pearl is so swollen and red it cries to me. Ride me, mistress. Your breasts are beautiful as they bounce. Ride me while you pinch your nipples and stroke your precious pearl. Come for me, Twyla. *Please*.”

I slid back onto him and, self-conscious, stroked my clit. His erection jacked up one size. I stroked again and he groaned. I started pumping my hips as I stroked again and a sound escaped his throat that in a lesser man would have been a whimper.

That unlocked whatever reservations I felt. If I could make Nikos whimper, it was good—and I was doing it. I put one hand to my nipple and the other to my sex and stroked myself to fever pitch.

Nikos watched with hot eyes, his fangs growing long, his cock swelling even fatter inside me. His chest pumped up and his hands were almost white from pulling against the ties. Not to escape. No, to keep himself from moving, not wanting to distract me, his total focus on my every act.

I could move, and I did with abandon. Seeing my arousal stoke his, I pinched my nipple and fondled my pussy and stroked myself eagerly on his fat cock. I got so turned on I forgot myself and grabbed handfuls of male chest and started to ride him hard.

I pumped myself on him until I was panting, he was panting, and our bones were rattling. Under my hands his chest flushed with sex rash. His nipples were tight as pins.

“Twyla...love...can’t stop. I’m coming.” He threw his head back, jaw clenched, obviously in extremes. “You’re *making* me come.”

“Then come, damn it.” I clutched my pussy muscles screamingly tight and slammed myself into his body like a jackhammer.

Roaring even louder than before, he arched back, a muscular rearing stallion, driving himself so far into me my throat hurt. I exploded just as he did, in hard waves of pleasure that nearly ripped me apart.

Nikos cried out. “*Theos*—your tight sheath is *milking* me. I come...more...again.” He writhed under me as if dying. His face was clenched as if in agony. His hips bucked.

I held on through it all, destroyed by my own orgasm.

When it was over I slumped limp onto Nikos’s slick body. His heart beat hard in my ear, slowly returning to normal. I wished I could.

Before, he was intriguing—and safe. I’d poke at him, he’d ignore me.

Now that I’d gotten his fierce attention, though...Nikos was a conqueror, plain and simple. Hot water to the wool sweater of my ego. It was already shrunk enough.

A deep voice rumbled against my skull. “You will like living at the apartment with me.” A big hand started rubbing my back.

My eyes slid open. Scraps of tie decorated the bent bedposts. Nikos could have freed himself at any time. Control was an illusion. There was a lesson in that somewhere. “What apartment?”

“Emersons’.”

“I already like...living—I’m not moving in with you!” I sat up, pushing against the only solid surface—which happened to be his huge chest. It only proved my point. He was the kind of male who’d roll right over a woman. If I had inadequacy issues before, he’d make me feel like a bug under the Statue of Liberty. “We slept together once. A couple times. Whatever! It doesn’t mean we’re going to live together.”

“Twyla.” Nikos sat up easily to take my face in both hands. His sable eyes searched mine. “This was about giving you strength, not stealing it.” He kissed me, softly. For such a big man he could be amazingly gentle. “We’ll talk of hearts later. Have you laid any plans for battle?”

“What? Me? Why should I—”

His dark look cut me off. And that was the Spartan general too. Never accepting anything less than a soldier’s best.

“All right, wait. Let me think.” I tried to imagine myself the warrior Nikos thought me. Tried to pretend I had as much to contribute as everyone else. Hell, it was better than thinking about *hearts*. “Do you have your computer? I can show you what I know about the Magie company I set Aylmer up with. Klaus. Whoever.” I did a face-palm. “Now I understand why Aylmer had me use Jones instead of his real name. Damn, there’s so much I’m missing. Maybe you can fill in the blanks with some translations.”

Nikos leaped out of bed, sweeping me along easily in one arm. He sat me in a chair in front of his netbook. Naked. Between the bent bedposts and the upholstery cleaning from my, um, he was going to have quite a bill.

I pulled up my web-based email. Leaning over my shoulder, Nikos started scrolling through it. The position must have been uncomfortable for him but I loved the feel of his heat behind me, the small kisses he bestowed on me each time he paged down.

While he read, I thought out loud. “We have to assume the vampire plot has something to do with the favor Aylmer asked me. I can’t imagine him feeling obliged to invite a houseguest for anything less.”

“Reasonable.” Nikos was a fast reader, flipping through emails as quickly as the connection let him. No doubt we’d have to buy a second bookshelf for our bedroom—shit. He distracted me by pointing to a paragraph in Czech. “Bujný a Zvuk Magie has a number of subsidiaries. The group you worked with is Steale Programové. They do computers. I don’t like this.”

“Computers? That only proves Aylmer wasn’t the one I got the job for. He thinks computers are the joint invention of the devil, the IRS and little green men.” Conscience kicked me as I remembered the

blood in Aylmer's bathroom. Crazy, yes. But injured, possibly critically. Maybe bleeding out...no, I had to trust Nikos's judgment. Aylmer was alive and relatively intact. I hung on to that.

As Nikos flipped emails, his dark eyes flashed taupe in the screen's reflected light. "Specifically, Steale Programové computerizes light and sound systems."

"Taken in conjunction with Times Square—damn."

"What?"

"Steale Programové must be involved with the New Year's sound system. And shoulder-to-shoulder skyscrapers make Times Square a box canyon of sound. What time is it? We need to get out there."

"Past ten thirty." Nikos started throwing on clothes, not his usual suit and tie but black jeans and sweater. Somehow he made even the casual clothes look severe.

Or maybe it was the long leather coat he used to cover the three-foot *kopis* that made him look so deadly.

I dressed too. "I read up on the New Year's celebration because I planned to go. People start arriving before sunset, whole blocks of them. By ten thirty the area from Thirty-eighth Street to Fifty-ninth is filled. The entertainment has to reach all of them, so there's a huge sound system. Then when the Ball drops, everything stops except for the beat marking the seconds. The whole square counts off the last ten seconds. A million people, chanting together."

"You've mentioned the Ball Drop before. What is it?"

I stared at him. "How can you have missed the most important New Year's fixture of the last hundred years? Nearly six tons of crystal and LEDs starts at the top of a flagpole at eleven fifty-nine and descends to the bottom in exactly one minute, flashing a huge light show. We've gotta hurry, Nikos."

"First we must gather information and allies." Nikos flipped out his phone, hit a speed dial. "Julian. There's a problem." He spoke rapidly and to the point.

While he talked I picked up the switchblade *xiphos*, tested the feel and weight. It was built for gigantic Nikos, thick and heavy in my hand. Although I wanted to be useful if it came down to a battle, I'd be more likely to hurt myself with this than help. Reluctantly, I set it back down.

"Julian said the hypnosis device was destroyed." Nikos slipped his phone back into his pocket, his face grim. "Tonight we are dealing with the unknown."

I started for the door. "All the more reason to hurry."

"No. We can't go into battle blind—" His fangs shot out full-length. He pulled me from the door with a low growl.

A rich voice sounded from the hallway. "Pax."

It was Klaus. Nikos growled louder and, pushing me behind him, drew his sword from under his coat.

"I need to talk to you, Nikos. I demand pax."

"We don't have time."

“Make time. Would I risk crossing *you* if it weren’t important?”

“Fine.” Nikos yanked open the door and pointed his sword at Klaus’s throat. “Make it good. And fast.”

Klaus raised both hands. “Somebody’s going to fuck over vampires tonight at Times Square. I need your help to stop him.”

## Chapter Five

The limo threaded through traffic with agonizing slowness. Twelve city blocks normally takes about two minutes. We left the hotel at ten fifty and when I checked my phone again at eleven we had gone all of one block. At that rate we'd hit Times Square just in time to throw kitty litter on the blood.

"We've been hearing rumors of a vampire terrorist in New York for the last year." Klaus acted as cool as the refrigerated dill of similar name. Only a slight whitening around his nostrils betrayed he was as tense as me. "We traced the rumors to Aylmer Tafel. He was already using a shadow company of mine, eMailnXpress, for his business, which made his apartment ridiculously easy to infiltrate. Unfortunately Aylmer's cohort and Bujný a Zvuk were not so easy. So when we heard the charming cousin Twyla was coming to New York, I was sent to escort her. We hoped to learn more."

Nikos, splayed like a roadblock between me and Klaus, started growling.

"Who's we?" I asked before Nikos could do something we'd all regret (but mostly Klaus).

"New York's ruling vampires, the Cadre. We're the equivalent of your Chicago Coterie."

I looked to Nikos. His closed eyes said "long story". Five minutes and another half block went by. I poked him. "We have time. Give me the MTV version."

Nikos shot Klaus an irritated glance, like my curiosity was *his* fault, and said, "The Coterie runs businesses, vampires and blood in Chicago."

I did a mental translation to v-Mafia. Not that I knew anything about La Cosa Nostra beyond film and TV, but that was my main source for info on vampires too.

"My alliance stands against them." Nikos gave Klaus another glare, this one pointed. "And so against the Cadre."

"I am not the enemy here." Klaus sneered at Nikos down his nose. "I do not work with Aylmer or his unknown associate. Our goal is the same as yours, to keep vampires from going feral tonight."

"Not the same." Nikos advanced to glowering. "I want to keep humans from dying."

"Well, pardon me for not thinking of a few humans when *our* very existence is at stake."

"We would not die. Humans would, and more than a *few*." Nikos leaned over Klaus until they were practically smashing noses.

"A drop in the bucket compared to *all* vampire kind."

The testosterone being flung around was giving *me* chest hairs. "Hey guys. Enough. Stopping this plot will save both human and vampire lives."

They both *humphed* back and sat in stony silence for another eight blocks. By then it was eleven twenty. “This is ridiculous. We’d make better time walking.”

“Not tonight.” Klaus darted a glance at Nikos. “Not with all the foot traffic.”

“Are there really that many people? A million?”

“Let me put it this way. The city removes all trash cans, mailboxes and newspaper machines for the event.”

“For room?”

“And to reduce the potential for terrorism.”

We fell silent again, thinking about terrorists, about Aylmer and his unknown associate. I really hoped my cousin was okay. But at that moment I might have shot him myself for getting us into this mess in the first place.

At eleven thirty-five the intercom switched on. “The streets are closed to Thirty-eighth Street. This is as close as I can get, sir.” The limo pulled to a stop.

When I jumped out cold air smacked me in the face. But that wasn’t the only shock. Light slashed my eyes, radiant as the day.

Some cities are a river valley of skyscrapers cut by streets. Manhattan was more like the floor of an ocean, rising tides of multihued neon and LED fish spiraling up for miles. The pervasive intense light, the overwhelming abundance of swirling blinking *color* was more deafening to me than the blast of sound from the several stages and million people.

Nikos slid out behind me. His reaction was even more pronounced. His nostrils flared, and his eyes burned bright. Tyger Tyger, all that warm blood. He pulled back, his hands and jaw clenching rhythmically. “I hate crowds.”

“Nikos, we only have twenty-five minutes. We need to hurry.” I grabbed his hand and tried to pull him forward. It was like dragging a cliff.

“Wait. I have a call.” He tapped his pocket. I couldn’t hear anything above the crowd noise.

“Sounds like an excuse to me.” I tugged again.

“It may be important.” He reached into his coat.

Twenty-four minutes. I tried to grab his wrist but he played arm double-dutch and I ended up with my hands twisted and him with his phone out.

But he just stared at it. “Damn. Missed call.”

“And excuse gone. Come on.”

“No. Not yet.” His eyes were a little wild, gazing at the thousands upon thousands of people, thick even here on the back side of things. North of One Times Square was where all the action was. I couldn’t imagine how hard it would be for him if we had to go there.

"This is not getting us anywhere." Klaus emerged from the limo. He pushed past Nikos, grabbed my hand and marched off.

Nikos stared after us, outrage on his face. "Wait. We don't know where we're going."

Klaus shot him a triumphant look over his shoulder. "The center of things, of course."

As Klaus dragged me along my phone rang. I couldn't hear it but I felt its vibrations in my pocket. I whipped it out one-handed. "Hello?"

"Twyla? It's Nixie. Hey, Julian tried to raise Nikos but couldn't connect. We've got some serious shit on that Steale Programové. They programmed the light and sound for this year's Ball."

"The *Ball*? I thought a U.S. company did that. They did an awesome job last year."

"The Magie guys stole the contract. It's all shady and nefarious. But this means your bad guy is at New Year's Ground Zero. One Times Square."

"Nikos!" I twisted, walking backwards on tippy-toe trying to see the limo. It was already swallowed up by the crowd but Nikos's huge keyed-up body was impossible to miss. I shouted, hoped his super-duper vampire hearing would let him pick out my voice. "Nixie says Steale worked on the Ball. We have to get to One Times Square."

I couldn't see Nikos's face very well. But by what I *could* see, his expression was tight, his eyes closed. "Nikos! Twenty-three minutes."

That finally got through to him. He started after us with all the enthusiasm of a man wading naked into Lake Michigan in the middle of winter. Without a word, but jaw clenching like he was chewing bullets, he followed us.

"It's just a little crowd," Klaus called.

I caught the twinkle of his blue eyes. "How come the blood doesn't affect you?"

"Oh, it's not blood that has poor Nikos upset." He laughed and refused to say more, despite my prodding.

When Nikos caught up he grabbed my hand—and glared at Klaus, his sable eyes sparking murder. I wondered, if not blood, what it was about the crowd that bothered him so. As a Spartan general and warrior throughout the ages, it couldn't be crowd phobia. How would he have fought?

We passed a uniformed officer herding people into a pen. He ran to stop us. "You! You can't go there."

I gritted my teeth against a sharp reply. Twenty-two minutes. How long would Officer Krupke here delay us?

Nikos didn't even slow. "*You will let us pass.*" His voice, hollow and ringing, stopped the officer flat.

"But—" The officer turned, watched us with a puzzled expression.

"How'd you do that?" I said. "You didn't even wave your hand."

"Yes, that was impressive," Klaus said. "Are you an ancient?"

"I've got a couple millennia. You." He snapped his fingers at another police officer. "We need to get to One Times Square. Take us. On a route with *no people*."

The officer cut his way past the pens of dancing, shouting, laughing people. Nikos clutched my hand harder.

Partially to distract him from the crowd, partially because I was curious, I asked, "Can all v-guys influence people that easily?"

"More or less."

"So if Aylmer's accomplice was a v-guy, he wouldn't have needed my help—he could have hypnotized his way into the Magie company. Does that prove he's human?"

"Perhaps. Unless Magie is run by my kind."

"Oh." I really hoped not.

Even with the police escort it was eleven forty-two by the time we jogged up to a long narrow building. One Times Square, with its façade of full-color ads and news zippers, was as well-known as any Hollywood star's face. The Grande Dame of New Year's, where even the police outpost sported a pink and blue neon sign. The officer got us inside through Walgreens' retail space.

Only three stories were occupied. The next twenty-two floors were untenanted. The officer told us this at Nikos's prompting. Ever the general, Nikos wanted to know the lay of the land, but I found the info interesting for its own sake.

Or I would have if it weren't eleven forty-three p.m. and counting. We took the elevator to the twenty-third floor then hiked up the remaining two flights. Paradoxically Nikos relaxed as we mounted the final stairs.

I shook my head. "A whole building just for billboards?"

"It avoids the hassle of being a landlord, does it not?" Klaus shrugged. "Besides, most of the windows are covered by the spectaculars, scrims and signs. Unusable as office space."

The door to the roof was locked. The officer used his key, but the door didn't budge. He frowned. "This isn't good. I'd better call for backup." His hand went to his radio. Before he could connect Klaus sank white fangs into his neck.

The officer's face scrunched in extreme agony—or pleasure. His eyes rolled up into his head and he dropped limp to the floor.

"What the hell did you do that for?" I checked the officer's pulse, good, and his neck, perfectly intact.

Klaus shrugged. "The door is blocked. Something is on the roof, something unexpected. It's better if we don't have an audience." He pointed at the door, grinned at Nikos. "I don't mist. Would you do the honors?"

"Fledgling." Nikos dropped into smoke and shot through the door. Moments later it was open. Klaus sauntered through. I peered out more cautiously after him.

The roof was typical Manhattan—cooling tower, pipes and metal grates. It was empty except for two men. One wore a funky Giants hat and was bundled in a coat. His eyes were panicky and his arms were behind his back. Above him, the huge New Year's Ball blazed, its reds and golds and greens cascading merrily across the white template of his face.

The other man was gray-haired and thin as a rail. He held a gun trained on the panicked man.

Passing the gray-haired man on the streets, I wouldn't have looked twice, might not have seen him at all. He was that ordinary. No, even Walmart has some style. This man was flat, washed out.

Except for his eyes. He was endlessly surveying the rooftop, as if it were about to erupt hordes of enemies. His eyes twitched continuously, like acid burned them. Twitch, twitch, twitch. Or like he was sick. Or maybe the brain that the eyes were attached to was sick. That possibility was downright scary.

As I edged out onto the roof the gray-haired man saw us. The gun snapped into both hands—aimed at *me*.

Handguns are hair-raising enough—packaged death. Having one pointed at me? My vision darkened, the metal barrel unnervingly bright in contrast. I couldn't hear beyond the *whoosh* of my heart. My whole being jumped to the nozzle of that gun. *I'm going to die. Now.*

Nikos stepped in front of me and just that suddenly the threat was gone.

I heard the man spit. "Damn." His voice was hoarse, like a lifelong smoker. "I needed Aylmer to get me into the Magie, but I *should* have killed him. Now I'll have to kill you."

I peeked around Nikos. The thin man's features were red and scarred, less than perfect. Even if I hadn't suspected it, that would have told me he wasn't a vampire. I didn't recognize him, despite him obviously recognizing us.

"Mr. Jones, wait." Nikos's hands were up, peaceful, but his stance spoke volumes of readiness. I wondered how he knew the man's name. "Why are you doing this?"

The man laughed, high-pitched. "Why kill thousands of people? Why destroy hundreds of monsters?"

"No, Mr. Jones. Why destroy the fragile peace vampires and humans have?"

"Peace." The gun shook. "I fought for peace, once."

"You were in Vietnam." Nikos nodded. "It was horrible."

"Horrible? *Horrible?* You punks are all alike. Think you know what it was like when you don't! It wasn't *M\*A\*S\*H*. Nam was *brutal*. Savage."

"Actually, I do know." Nikos shot Klaus a glance. Klaus gave an imperceptible nod, started edging toward the man while Nikos continued. "I know they sent us home in airplanes, so we couldn't process what we saw, what we did. No time to talk about it before we were dumped back into 'normal' society."

The man squinted at Nikos. Took an unwilling step forward. "You're too young...unless—"

Nikos nodded. "Yes, Mr. Jones. I'm a vampire. And yes, I was there." His voice softened, became beguiling. It was a tone I hadn't heard before, a poet's croon. "They sent us back from the lush jungles that

smelled of rampant growth and death and dropped us into concrete warrens with people who hadn't been there, couldn't understand."

"I had it worse." Jones took another step forward. "I was a spy. Secret even from my own unit. Suicide-pill secret. I barely made it out alive."

"And I was a POW. It warped us, all of us, made us angry and afraid. And *we* had to deal with it, not them. *But this isn't the way.*"

The man jerked straight. Blinked. Shouted, "Your vampire tricks don't work on me." He pulled the trigger.

Klaus leaped. I thought maybe he'd get there before—but he was too far away.

The man shot, bang-bang, bang-bang.

Klaus's chest and forehead bloomed red. Nikos was in front of me so I couldn't see what happened to him. But he was a huge target.

Nikos jerked, went down on one knee.

I screamed. Klaus was out, Nikos was down. Jones stalked closer, gun pointed at Nikos—to finish him. I couldn't let that happen.

I skirted around Nikos's big fallen body and ran at that madman like a banshee, Burgundy Blast nails clawing.

Jones's eyes widened, seeing me rush him like a lunatic. And maybe I was, to charge an armed man. And maybe I wasn't, because his gun shook.

I barreled toward him, death in my eyes.

Nikos caught me from behind. "Twyla. Let me."

"What the—? Lie down, you! You're injured. I'll kill the bastard and then we'll get you to a hospital and—"

I was flat on the rooftop without knowing how I got there. A sharp report split the air right above my head. Nikos lay atop me, body shielding mine. Damned fucking hero.

I pushed him off. "That nutjob *shot* at me."

"I know. Just a minute." Nikos exploded into smoke, whipped around the gray-haired man, reformed behind him.

Jones spun, too late. Nikos slammed a fist into the man's jaw, seized Jones's gun from his loosened grasp. Lights from the Ball played over them both, colors flashing like a strobe. Jones grabbed at his belt for another gun. Nikos threw the first clattering onto the grating, snared Jones's wrists in one big hand and yanked him tight into his body.

Then Nikos grabbed the man by the throat and bit him.

Jones squirmed and moaned as Nikos tasted him. When Nikos lifted his head, his eyes glowed bright red. "All right, Jones. You will tell us what you did."

The gray-haired man struggled. Nikos held him firmly until he quieted. Jones spat. “I’ll tell you. But not because of vampire mind tricks. Because you can’t stop it. In fifteen minutes the Ball’s lights are going to unleash the monster in every vampire in Times Square. And unless my demands are met, I’ll do the same in Chicago. Los Angeles. More.”

The *lights* of the New Year’s Ball. Not the sound system at all. A laugh—or sob—rose in my throat. *Bujný*, not *zvuk*. Not Nixie’s bailiwick but mine. Nikos was right again.

“What are your demands?” Nikos’s face was carved granite.

“One hundred billion dollars. Release of five hundred political prisoners. Air Force One, fueled and ready to take me to Asia.”

“Impossible.”

“Then I guess we’re gonna have some blood.” Jones laughed.

“No. Tell me *exactly what you have done*.”

“I...changed...the program—” The man’s eyes went wild. “No! I won’t tell. You can’t make me!” His jaw clenched, and there was a crunch.

Nikos grabbed Jones’s shoulders, started shaking him like he was a rag doll.

No. It wasn’t Nikos shaking him. It was Jones himself, shaking uncontrollably, as if every muscle in his body was contracting simultaneously.

Jones grabbed his chest and started panting, like he was having trouble breathing. Nikos eased him onto the grating just before Jones threw up.

“My God.” I ran over. “Is he having a heart attack?” I tried to remember my last CPR refresher.

Nikos peeled back Jones’s eyelids, difficult because the man was jerking hard with convulsions. “His pupils are pinpricks. Drug or poison of some sort. Call 911—damn it.”

Jones stiffened like a board, his eyes suddenly glazed and fixed.

I clapped hands over my mouth. “Oh my... Is he...?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, God. So fast. How?”

Nikos opened the man’s mouth and felt inside. Whatever he felt made him withdraw his hand with a grimace. He rubbed his index finger against his thumb, staring at his fingers in distaste. “Thick and oily. Like motor oil. Maybe VX, although I don’t remember it working this fast.”

“VX?”

“Nerve agent. Extremely toxic, highly illegal. Maybe Novichok.”

The crunch, just before Jones started shaking. “A suicide pill?” Another thought struck me. “You’ve been exposed!” I tore out my phone only to stop when Nikos dissolved, reforming holding me tight.

“It’s fine. Even if I weren’t indestructible, the mist will have taken care of it. Twyla. We need to concentrate on more important things.”

“But you...and Jones...and *Klaus*...” My eyes shifted to another crumpled form, blond hair flashing red and blue in the Ball’s light.

Nikos barely spared him a glance. “Klaus’ll be fine. Twyla, love, I know this is horrific but you can fall apart later.”

I blinked at him, wondering how I could possibly process everything that had happened in the last minute. My sister the neurosurgeon would have known how. Or my brother. Colin had been in situations like this, and worse, in Iraq. And yet he’d gone on.

But I wasn’t Colin, and didn’t know how to handle myself in an emergency—*wait*.

I had never faced sudden death before, but I *did* know how to handle myself in a crisis. In fact, I was the epitome of calm in the madhouse that was City Hall. *I could fall apart later*. Nikos was right. I didn’t need to process everything now. In fact, it was too big—I *couldn’t* process it now. I’d simply pack it away until I could.

Right now I had a job to do. I sucked up my competence and applied myself to the problem at hand. Jones had sabotaged the Ball. Discovering how needed to be our first priority. “What about the man Jones was holding hostage? Maybe he can tell us something.”

“That’s my soldier.” Nikos’s eyes waxed even more eloquent in his relief, pride and...love?

Well. Deal with that emergency later too.

The man in the Giants hat lay a few feet from us, his hands bound behind him with a zip tie. As Nikos sliced it off with one razor claw I checked the time. Eleven fifty. The whole drama had taken less than five minutes. It still didn’t leave us a lot of time.

Released, the man chafed his wrists. “I can’t believe I’m free.”

I took the man’s hands in mine. They were freezing from exposure and lack of circulation. “What happened?”

“That guy...he had clearance. He was one of us.” The man shook his head. His cap was askew. “No, I knew something was wrong about him...yeah, I knew all along. Well, about eleven he pulls a gun. Makes us all tie each other’s wrists. Carted us down one floor then picked me as a hostage and brought me back up—shit, nearly forgot. There’s another guy down there, crusted blood on his pants.”

“We’ll take care of that,” Nikos said. “But first, is something wrong with the Ball?”

“The Ball? Not that I know. But I’m only doing the fireworks. Security, fireworks...the guy was doing the Ball, I think. Maybe that was a cover, though. This guy was bad, you know? He took us all out—even the security.”

I patted the man’s hands soothingly. There was some warmth coming back, and some color to his face. I shifted my eyes to Nikos, telling him that I thought we could leave the man safely on his own for a while. Nikos nodded, stood.

Then I realized what I had done. Was I getting as taciturn as my Spartan? Channeling Queen Gorgo? Were we becoming alike, like two old married people?

It was cute, it was scary, and it would have to get stuffed away in the burgeoning pack of *later*. I rose next to Nikos. “I know some kinds of flickering light can cause seizures in people. And the color red makes them hungry. But could light or color hypnotize vampires, like Jones said?”

“Our senses are heightened. We may actually be more vulnerable than humans.”

I frowned. “Speaking of Jones, how did you know his name? Or were you guessing?”

Nikos’s nose wrinkled. “He smelled of cigarettes, like the door across from your cousin’s in the brownstone. And I smelled faint traces in Aylmer’s apartment, recent. When I rang doorbells to get in I noticed 7A was labeled Jones. A guess, but logical.”

“Jones was Aylmer’s neighbor? He could have found out about vampires the same way Aylmer did.”

“Yes. That might have also triggered their association.”

“Speaking of vampires—” I nodded toward the fireworks man. He was watching us with wide eyes, and his color had drained again.

“I will deal with his memories later. Now we must discover what Jones has done and stop it. We have only...damn.” Nikos had pulled out his cell phone and was staring at the readout. “It’s eleven fifty-one.”

Nine minutes. Only nine minutes to figure out what Jones had done to the Ball. “Okay. We know Jones was *the* Jones I got in as the American rep for Bujný a Zvuk Magie. Specifically, he worked with Steale Programové. He could have directed the Ball’s programming, saying certain things would appeal to American audiences. Maybe he even did some final adjustments here, if he was a coder.”

“We also we know he would target the sixty seconds while the Ball is descending.”

“And everybody’s riveted on it, yes. But I have no idea what kind of visual might rile vampires. Do you?”

“No.” Nikos did not look happy. “This is beyond the reach of my sword, Twyla.”

“I don’t know enough either. We need a lifeline.”

“A what?”

I smiled. Spartan generals must not watch too many game shows. “You’d say time to gather information and allies.” I pulled out my cell phone, hit my own Emerson speed dial. “Nixie, I need to know what kind of colors or lights might make vampires go on the rampage.”

A flash of numbers caught my attention—the time, thrown up on the side of the huge building next to us. Eleven fifty-two and five seconds. Six. Seven. “And please hurry. The clock is ticking.”

“On it.”

While I waited for Nixie, I watched the seconds change. Nikos’s sable eyes followed my gaze. He frowned.

“Twyla. Will everyone be riveted on the Ball? Or is there a countdown?”

“Damn, you’re right. There’s a billboard too, with numbers flashing, and—” I swung around, seeing again the glaring color and light that was Times Square at night. “Everything’s lit up for miles around. It’s not just the Ball. It’s the whole damn canyon.”

Except Jones couldn’t have screwed with every building in Times Square. He’d only had access to the Ball, and maybe some connected mechanisms. Still, I waited impatiently for Nixie to get back on the line. My internal clock clicked off each second like a notch on my gut. Sixty seconds passed, and then another.

We’d never fix it in time. Another thirty seconds carved into me as I gazed at the crowds below, seeing a Google-Earth-sized *Where’s Waldo*. Only in this case the vampires would be only too easy to find.

“Twyla. Power-tie colors. Red and yellow.”

I blinked. Focused on the clock, which read eleven fifty-five. Five minutes left. “Red and yellow?” I pictured the old Windows color scheme called Hot Dog. Thought of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*—the introductory credits with the llamas. Winced. “Yeah, that’ll do it.”

“Huh, Julian? Twyla, there’s a problem. Julian says the Ball isn’t set up to do all red and yellow.”

“What? You know that how?”

“He’s on the line with a computer guru in Iowa. Mr. Goo Roo hacked into the Ball through some sort of SyFy interwebz.”

“You mean the Ball is doing a normal show?”

There was a long pause. “Goo says it’s not normal either. But it ain’t pus and blood. He’s not sure what it is. Huh, Julian? Oh yeah. One more prob. Even if the Ball were screaming chartreuse, it’s not big enough to send v-guys into spasming conniptions.”

“Chartreuse is green.”

“Yeah, okay. Thing is, the Ball is too small and too far away to do more than make a vamp a little sickly carmine.”

“Carmine is red.”

“Fine. Puke-y green. Up-gechucken green. Vomity—”

“I *get* it.” The clock flashed across from me, eleven fifty-six a full story high. “What about the countdown clock? It’s on a screen, and flashes with the Ball. Maybe they’re coordinated.”

“Hey Julian. Ask Mr. Goo if the Ball of Damocles is tied to the ticking crock.”

Sometimes Nixie’s cultural polyglot is confusing, but this time I got it. I laughed. “Ticking Crock. Like the crocodile that swallowed the clock in *Peter Pan*.”

“What? No, that’s *Team America*.”

“Huh?”

“For shit’s sake, Twyla, what eon were you born in? What, Julian? Oh. Yeah, the Ball and clock board are tied. But that still won’t be enough firepower to fry a vamp’s circuits. And it’s still the wrong colors.”

I pushed knuckles into my skull. “I should *know* this. I’m the light and color expert.” Nixie’s handle on chartreuse and carmine hammered *that* home.

Nikos, maybe feeling my frustration, started pacing. His eyes were red and his fingers were awfully long and pointy.

Something niggled at me but it wouldn’t quite settle. Kind of like my big Spartan lover. “I should know this,” I repeated.

I panned through years of art school memories, but there was so much. Photographic theory. Mixing oils, different than mixing watercolors. Arc welding. Even some CAD. Centuries of knowledge, condensed into an impossible four years. Now I tried to pack that into four minutes.

No, three. The clock turned eleven fifty-seven while I was thinking.

Nikos stopped pacing abruptly. “I’m going down.”

“Into the streets? You hate crowds.”

“It’ll be a bloodbath. Somebody has to help. They’re mostly fledglings down there, and I’m old. I can take them out.”

“And what happens if you’re as overcome by Jones’s light show as the rest? How much more damage could a millennia-old vampire do?”

Without a word, he kicked into pacing again, although his pacing screamed curses.

Eleven fifty-seven and twenty seconds. “Nixie. Is there a way to see what your computer guru is seeing?”

“Hey. He’s not a guru for nothing. Julian?” She spoke with her hubby for a moment, then came back on the line. “Okay, take a look at your display.”

I pulled the phone from my ear. Nikos came to watch over my shoulder.

Sure enough, the normal display had been replaced by a picture of the Ball, all flashing colors, descending on its pole. Colors played, indigo to orange to white. Red and yellow weren’t even predominant. I cudgeled my brain, trying to figure out what that meant. Or even trying to guess a way to structure my thoughts to figure out what it meant. I clapped the phone to my ear again. “Can I see that with the countdown added in? Cut it down to the last fifteen seconds.”

“You can see the whole damned building, and hear it, too. Julian!”

Moments later we saw the same play of lights, view expanded now. Whatever Jones and Steale Programové had done, it coordinated the entire building. Color swirled, intensifying with the percussion that hit the final ten seconds.

“What’s wrong?” Nikos’s breath was warm on my ear.

“The colors intensify on the beat. But they don’t change. Don’t *flash*. On television the Ball flashes the last seconds of the countdown in bright, white light. But this one swirls a cacophony of colors.”

“Isn’t it just artistic design? Maybe there is no purpose.”

“All art has purpose. Sometimes only to shock or please the viewer, but the artist made it for a reason. And in this case, we even know the purpose—stimulate vampire vision. But how, without the red or yellow? Damn it, Nikos, I’m missing something.” I gasped. “It’s missing—”

The music stopped. Loudspeakers blared. “Two minutes.” A roar erupted from the city’s miles-long carpet of people.

“Damn it, I had it! Before that stupid announcer broke my concentration—”

“Calm down, Twyla.” Nikos stroked my hair. “You had it, you’ll get it again. Something missing.”

“Missing, yes. Missing.” I snapped my fingers. “Color. The way it combines. Red and blue, red and green—no wonder I didn’t see it before.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What if the Ball isn’t the focus? What if Jones programmed the colors, not to trigger the vampires, but to *trigger the other buildings*?”

“What? Why would he do that?”

“Colors *combine*. Imagine the Ball—and the whole damned glowstick of the One Times Square building—throwing its light on these skyscraper-sized neon billboards around us. Beaming colors in just the right order so that everything that’s not red or yellow is changed *to* red or yellow. Now the whole ocean that’s Times Square is pulsing pus and blood. Combined with the noise, the blood scent of the crowd, the excitement—”

Nikos nodded impatiently. “Vampires would go wild, especially the youngsters. But how? Yellow and blue combine to make green. Yellow and red make orange. Nothing combines to make red or yellow. They are primary colors.”

I sometimes forget that not everyone went beyond kindergarten art. “In paints, yes. Paints are *subtractive*. But light mixes differently. Light is *additive*. RGB.”

“Twyla, make sense.”

“Red Green Blue. Red is a primary, but it’s a color we want. Blue can be flashed with red light to make magenta, a violently bright pink.”

“And green? Green plus blue is aqua, and green plus red is just ugly brown.”

“Not in *light*. Green plus red equals *yellow*.”

His breath sucked in. “What? That’s impossible.”

“No, it’s physics. Every single light in the Square can be morphed into a variation of red or yellow.”

Nikos blinked once as his brain processed what I was telling him. “The whole Square is a vampire time bomb. And we’re standing on the detonator?”

“Exactly. In the last minute, as the Ball descends, the Square will be awash in yellow and red. Vampires will go berserk. Did you hear that, Nixie?”

“Yep. Mr. Goo’s on it. But it’s going to take him a minute to reprogram.”

*Mary Hughes*

That was when the Ball started to drop.

## Chapter Six

The bright bustle of color oozed around us, morphed in the streets below. Red began to predominate, and a spoiled-egg-yolk yellow. The beat of the final seconds hit my ears like a battery of drums. I stared out, horrified. “We don’t have a minute!”

“Julian, Twyla’s got a panic on, and that can’t be good...uh-oh. Take a look at the idiotbox.”

They were seeing what I was seeing. The cement and glass ocean of Times Square was bathed in light that was red as fresh blood. The color would be real soon enough.

“Damn, Julian, look at the crowd. That guy, there. Look at his face. His *eyes*.”

“Nixie, I’m on the roof. What are you seeing?”

“This,” Nikos said from behind me.

Nape crawling, I turned.

Fangs split his lips like gleaming daggers. His skin was hard as a shell and his eyes were deadly rubies.

“Are...are you okay?” I squeaked.

“No. But I will control it.” His fingers clenched like he was concentrating really, really hard. His claws poked holes in his skin but his fangs receded somewhat.

I wasn’t afraid, not of Nikos. He would never hurt me. He would manage whatever was happening to him.

But I *was* shaken. “Nixie. We could really use your guru to come through about now.”

“He’s hamster-wheeling it, but it’s not that easy. He has to figure out which colors are combining with which buildings and signs, all over satellite bandwidth—”

“No he doesn’t. Just scramble it!” Below me, the roar of a million excited people sharpened with the edge of panic. “All he has to do is bump the colors coming from the Ball. Make them *random*.”

“Oh. Yeah. Julian—you heard?”

The lights intensified. Red and yellow became screaming vermillion and lemon. They brightened so much I had to squint, my eyes aching. Vermillion and lemon became salmon and canary...and then pink and buff...and then white.

And suddenly the pounding blood colors fell apart, muting into spring green and sky blue. The horrible feeling of drowning ebbed.

More importantly, Nikos's features eased into their normal severity. His eyes opened, a warm seal brown, and landed on me. "Twyla. You did it. You saved us."

He swept me into a kiss. All the rest of what he had to say was nonverbal, but quite eloquent.



When questioned about the strange images on some of the film from that night, nobody could answer. Nobody remembered that anything was off with the light show, almost as if their memories had been erased. And the films themselves disappeared, one by one. You can still see their holes on the Internet.

We found Aylmer and the rest of the crews on an untenanted floor. The crews went on to finish New Year's in grand style. Aylmer had taken a clean shot to the leg, which had bled a lot but caused no damage to bone or nerves. After the EMTs cleaned and stitched and gave him fluids, he was taken into custody by some suspiciously handsome police officers. He was eventually released to go home and play with his tinfoil hats, any memory of v-guys forgotten. The officers also searched Jones's brownstone loft, where plans for future terrorist acts were found.

"It was a human after all," I said on the flight back. I was sitting next to Nikos in a private jet piloted by Bruce, ultra first class. For the first time I felt like I belonged. "Not the New York Cadre, or whatever they call themselves."

"This time."

We were back to the Spartan. *And* he was hogging the window seat. Well, one thing at a time. "I know, their philosophy isn't the same as yours. But this proved you have *some* of the same goals. Doesn't that mean there's hope you can find some common ground?"

"Maybe." His eyes shaded red.

"But...?"

There was a soft ding. "We're about to hit some turbulence, sir." Bruce even sounded a little like Bruce Lee. "I'll try to get above it."

Nikos popped the intercom. "Fine." He turned to me. "I didn't say but."

"No, but your eyes did." I wasn't a musician, able to hear lies in the nuance of a voice. But I had other methods, other expertise, and I'd forgotten that. Nikos had helped me remember.

He sighed, the barest breath. "The code."

"Code—you mean the program used to control the Ball?"

"And screens, yes. It was written by Steale Programové. *Steale Software.*"

"So? Wait, that sounds familiar. Isn't Steel Software a big security software firm? One of the biggest in the Midwest, I think."

"Steel Software, with an 'e', yes. This is a rip-off. That's how our computer guru hacked in so quickly. He recognized most of the base code as his own."

“That’s awful!”

“But common in second- and third-world countries.”

The plane shook like a car on a rough patch of road. I pushed down a slight feeling of panic. “What, you mean like China?”

“And the Middle East and the old Soviet Bloc. Ever hear of Adibas shoes? Hanghai Sharpies?”

“And you’re worried. Don’t try to deny it.” I brushed fingertips against his cheek. “Your skin is hardened like glazed pottery.”

A half-smile touched his lips. “It may be nothing. But until we *know*, we’re increasing staffing and security on all Alliance-protected blood centers.”

We’d broken the single-syllable barrier. But he was still hogging the window seat. One down, one to go. I reached over him to open the shade.

“Twyla.” Nikos caught my hand, his eyes telling me I’d crossed yet another of his internal lines.

“Why do you do that, anyway? All the invisible lines and such.” It hit me. “You were a Vietnam vet.”

“And other wars. Many more.”

“As a general?” We hit a pocket of nothing, dropped abruptly. My body dropped but my stomach stayed up for a second, zinging back like a snapped rubber band. I clutched the armrest, forgot about opening the shade. It was a *good* thing I couldn’t see out.

Nikos didn’t seem to notice. “I was more often a foot soldier as the need for anonymity grew. Twyla, are you going somewhere with this?”

He knew me so well already. “The way you talked to Jones—it sounded personal. And your fear of crowds has to be recent. You couldn’t have fought in a phalanx otherwise.”

He sighed. “And you’re just going to keep digging around my ramparts, aren’t you?”

“Yep.” My smile faltered as we rumbled over midair speed bumps.

“Vietnam was different. Even in WWII they put us on ships to come home. We had time to discuss what had happened. You’re right. The ‘invisible lines’ as you call them, the hate of crowds, came only after Nam. Maybe dioxin impurities in Agent Orange did me permanent damage, though it’s rare for my kind not to heal.”

“No. You have PTSD.”

He stared at me as if I’d gone mad.

“Post traumatic stress disorder. I had to go to all sorts of training on it when my brother first went over to Iraq. Have you ever seen a good psychiatrist?”

He blinked. “To diagnose one of my kind? No.”

“Then I’ll call my brother. He’ll be able to recommend a few. I’ll get several names. Maybe there’s one who knows about you v-guys.”

“But—”

“No buts, Nikos. This isn’t something I want to fool around with. We need to get you healthy and happy.”

His eyes warmed. “When we are married, my life will change in more ways than one.”

“Marrie—” The plane hit a huge void. My stomach dropped out my toes. “Who said anything about marriage?”

“Healthy and happy? You dream of happily ever after, do you not?”

My cheeks heated. I never admitted that out loud, never thinking enough of myself that I deserved HEA. “Well, maybe. But I’m a strong, independent woman, as you pointed out. I don’t need to get married to be everything I can be. Especially now that I’ve found I’m good in a crisis.” Although this was shaping up to be a new crisis, and I wasn’t sure I could handle it.

“Yes. Strong and independent.” Nikos started purring, which worried me. And his sable eyes took on a distinctly persimmon cast.

“What?”

He glanced at the closed door at the back of the short cabin. Maybe it led to the restroom.

“Oh.” Cautiously I took off my seatbelt and got up, holding the seat back in case the plane pulled any more rollercoaster moves.

Nikos passed me, hooked two fingers under my neckline and bra strap and towed me in his wake.

“What—?”

He opened the door and I stared, not at a compact toilet but at wall-to-wall bed. “You can’t mean...we have turbulence. It’s dangerous. I need to keep my seatbelt on.” I lurched back toward my seat.

He hooked me again, nearly took my sweater off. “I could secure you with my ties.” His purr increased.

“Nikos, no. I’m strong and independent and—” I was sailing through the air. I landed on the bed with a whump, a very naked vampire landing on top of me. I put out hands to stop him. My palms smacked against rock-hard muscle covered in hot velvet.

“Don’t worry, love.” He leaned forward to kiss me. His weight bore me to the mattress, pinned me there. “I’ll keep you safe.”

And then, before I could say another word his mouth captured mine.

His kiss was the charge of a Spartan general, phalanx of lips, teeth and tongue ramming my resistance, spearing hot into my defenses.

But I was a strong, independent woman. I was not going down without a fight. I grabbed his shorn head and kissed him back, sparring with his tongue, darting my own fire into his dark spicy mouth.

The plane hit a pocket of turbulence and the bed stuttered under us, reminding me this was insane. I pushed elbows against mattress to lever Nikos off. It was like levering against a wall.

“Stop squirming,” he growled.

“Yeah? Or else what?” I should have remembered what happened to Xerxes.

Note to self: never challenge a Spartan.

Nikos reared to his knees over me. Damn, he was huge, the rising power of his abdominals flaring into mountains of chest. He was bowed over slightly so his head didn’t hit the ceiling of the cabin.

Breathless, I started to scrabble off the mattress. He contained me simply by squeezing me gently between his muscled thighs.

Then he seized the neckline of my v-neck sweater, one side in each hand, and ripped it in two. I’ve heard there’s a trick to tearing a phonebook in half but believe me when I say he used all muscle, no finesse in shredding the garment. I saw every jerk and bounce of his huge pecs, the sudden powerful bulge and flare of his lats, the sliding mountains of biceps as he tore the sweater open.

My breasts, encased in a lace demi-bra, were revealed.

His purr resonated through the cabin. He reached forward, cupped a breast in each big hand. He tested their weight, began to fondle them.

“Hey, Mr. Macho.” I grabbed his wrist. “What happened to admiring the strong, independent woman?”

“Woman,” he repeated with satisfaction. “All woman.” He grabbed one breast and held me firmly as he lowered his head. His breath heated the sensitive skin a moment before his mouth latched onto my nipple and suckled. I gasped.

He played the other nipple with his fingers as he suckled. “Strong, yet exquisitely sensitive. Responsive. You’re competence wrapped in seduction. I love your breasts.”

“So I see. And feel.” I shuddered as he nipped lightly, the sharp edge of teeth scoring the stiff bud. His thumb and fingers worked the other nipple, rubbing and plucking it in tandem with his nibbling. All the while his thighs cradled my body, and his erection pulsed long and hard on my belly.

Natural machismo, yes. I’d wanted to break that before it crushed me to dust. But now...thousands of years had honed his masculinity, which included boldness and dominance—but also protectiveness and honor. It made him who he was, the Nikos I loved...damn. I loved him.

This take-charge lovemaking was part of him. Part of what made Nikos the sexy Spartan he was. So why fight it?

Yeah, why fight insanity? ’Cause I must have been nuts to even think of giving in.

And yet...if insanity in small doses was simply genius...I lay back and put my arms above my head. “Love me, Nikos. Take me here, now.”

His purr thundered in the close space. He seized my wrists and pinned them to the bed, holding me captive.

And then he stared *deep* into my eyes. Soul-searching deep. As if reading my truest intentions, my most basic needs. As if, despite all his ego-crushing dominance, he was only interested in what was best for *me*.

Whatever he saw made him slowly smile, and disappear in a puff of mist.

Seconds later he reappeared in the doorway, filling it, his erection jutting. Two ties dangled from his hand.

Okay, I invited it. But was I ready for this? Was I ready to make love with a vampire, join the mile high club, and have my first experience with being dominated all at once?

Nikos sprang onto the bed like a leopard bringing down its prey. He caught my wrists and wrapped a tie around them, looped it between, twisted and knotted it with quick, sure moves to form shackles.

Well. Ready or not, I was getting it.

He tore off my jeans and bound my ankles while I was still getting used to having my hands fettered. Then he leaped to hands and knees over me, leering down at my bound form. "Now. What will I do to you?" He smiled, slowly, his lids lowering suggestively. "Ah, yes. *Anything I want.*"

What would Nikos's eyes look like, heavy-lidded with desire? Now I knew. They looked hotter than a furnace. Blazed brighter than the heart of the sun. Slowly I tilted my head back, offering him the soft skin of my throat.

He made a deep, possessive sound and dropped his mouth to my neck. Kissed along the ridge of tendon, nipped the line of my jaw. Sucked little love-nips along the side, licked the small hairs. I shivered.

His sucking got more raw. Harder. My blood leaped to meet his mouth, my pulse starting to throb. His tongue rasped the flesh, stoking my need. I arched my neck to offer everything he wanted, anything he wanted, forgetting he could take all that and more.

Nikos hadn't. He licked my throat until I was in a frenzy, scored sharp need with his fangs. But he didn't bite, despite my silent urgings. "Not yet, love. We have two hours. I'm going to use all of it."

The plane swooped, my belly with it. Two hours of foreplay? Butter me and throw away the twist-tie, 'cause I was toast.

But what could I do? My hands and legs were bound and my body was penned in by several hundred pounds of male muscle. When Nikos seized my breasts in both hands and suckled me through lace until I was sore and moaning, I was helpless to stop him.

"I could thrust down your throat," he purred. "I could push my cock into your hot mouth, stroke deep enough to touch your tonsils and you'd have to take it."

"I could scream. I could bite. I'm not completely defenseless."

"Mmm. Your white sharp teeth on my shaft. Your screams of pleasure in my ears." His cock expanded. "You're never defenseless, my strong, capable love." He grabbed my bra with clawed fingers and shredded it.

“You owe me a thirty-dollar bra, Spartan.” My voice was breathless. “And a fifty-dollar sweater.”

“And how much for the panties?”

“Wha—?”

Too late. He’d slashed my string bikini panties in three places. They were nice panties, too, with a little heart charm dangling on one side, now lost in the bedclothes.

“Hey... what am I supposed to wear when we land?”

“Me.” Nikos’s purr was so loud it was almost deafening. He turned me on my side and plastered himself to my rear, legs supporting mine, erection nestled against my buttocks, ripply abs lining my spine. Nibbling on my earlobe he added, “Inside and out.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

His arm banded my hips, his fingers seeking my vulva. “You don’t have a choice.”

I tucked my pussy out of reach. “I always have a choice.”

He thrust his hand between my tightly-closed thighs. I expected him to complete his conquest by driving his hard fingers into me, but he only massaged the tender flesh of my inner thigh.

“You have a choice,” he agreed. “But I can help you decide.”

His hand was so warm, so exciting. He rubbed his hips against my behind, his cock stuttering against me, arousing me more. His mouth plundered my ear, breath hot.

“What happened to my conquering Greek?” I was panting.

“Ancient Greeks also employed guile,” he murmured in my ear. “Trojan horse?”

“Inside of which were conquering Greeks.”

“You’ll have to open the gates to my enticements first.”

“You’ll have to entice harder.” But I arched into his questing hand. His palm slid up my thigh in response, fingers circling nearer my sensitive labia. When they brushed the ends of my public hair I strained against him.

“Is this hard enough?” He tickled my pussy with the tips of his claws.

“Not nearly.” My hips rocked of their own accord, seeking his caresses in front, his hard ridge of hot flesh in back. His cock flexed against me in return, a drop of fluid teasing the downy hair on my coccyx. I released a sigh of pleasure.

“I can do more.” He pushed a hand under my ribs, cupped a breast and drew me snug to him. I felt lips on my ear, fingers kneading my breast, hips rubbing mine slowly, erotically. A palm rasped up my thigh to the soft, wet, now-throbbing juncture.

And then, frustratingly, he said, “Enough?”

“No.” I tried to grab him to show him just how not enough, to make him bite my lobe or pinch my nipple or rub forcefully between my legs—and jerked wrists against tie. “Damn.”

“Yes.” Nikos’s purr resounded in my ear, against my spine. “Whatever *I* want. As long and slow as I want.”

In that moment I understood. Two hours. He planned two hours of this. Would I even survive half that? “If you *ever* want sex with me again, you’ll speed this up, Spartan.”

The plane dipped, rolling me into him. He held me closer, licking my ear softly. “The thing about Spartans, my strong, independent woman, is that we are trained. We have almost limitless self-control. Incredible patience—and endurance.” One finger touched the top seam of my labia, wiggled them gently apart. Stroked the lightest touch down the shaft of my hardening clit.

I groaned. “How much endurance?”

“Let’s see,” he said, lifting my hips to him and filling me with a single thrust.

“Uhhhn.” I panted. My vagina stretched around him, resonating with that possessive impalement.

His finger stroked the hood of my clit, barely touching it, over and over. I surged to meet him, urging him to pet harder. He kept up that same light mind-numbing stroking.

“Come on Nikos.” I tried to press into him, to rub myself harder against him. He simply gave under my pressure. I tried to grab for purchase with my legs but the tie binding my ankles stopped me. My pussy clenched helplessly around his throbbing shaft. His purr increased at my obvious frustration. “Damn it, Nikos, enough. Screw me, bite me, already.”

“No. Anything I want.” He pinched my nipple, plucked it.

I groaned. “Fine. Whatever you want. As long as it happens *faster*.”

He laughed. “Yes, my mistress. No, wait. I am master now.” He stroked once into me. Then lay throbbing inside.

I squirmed on his thick erection. Clenched a few times around it. “Master *this*, Spartan.” I contracted every muscle in my abdomen and bottom as hard as I could.

He sucked in his breath. “Your sheath is a tight, hot glove. But you’ll have to do better than that. Spartan control, remember? Spartan endurance.” He slipped a fingertip onto my clit and wiggled.

A moan hissed from between my gritted teeth. “Not fair. You’ve got me tied, helpless.”

“That’s the idea.” His laugh was ruffled by purr. “You must submit to whatever I want. Like this.”

His fangs sank deep into the trapezius muscle of my shoulder. Lightning struck sharp and bright down my body, exploding between my thighs. I screamed.

“And this.” He rolled me onto my belly, lifted my hips with one muscled arm and started thrusting into me, his driving strokes so hard I could feel my buttocks stutter.

Just at that moment the plane hit an air pocket and dropped what felt like a thousand feet in seconds. Nikos kept me firmly pinned to the mattress and drove into me, hard and deep, over and over. By the time the plane leveled out my stomach was on the ceiling, my uterus was in my throat, and I was weeping with pleasure.

He thrust into me tirelessly, driving me toward greater and greater tension. I tried worming away but his banding arm restrained me. I tried clawing with my hands, shoving with my feet, but tied together they were worse than useless.

I was bound and helpless, Nikos's to do with as he pleased. So much for the strong, independent woman. I could do nothing but submit to his driving sex.

Nothing...except enjoy.

As he pummeled me closer and closer to the edge of insanity, a paradoxical clarity flooded me. A certainty, that it wasn't a question of submitting. That it never had been about me being insignificant or less. But that sometimes life put me on the receiving end. That sometimes I should fight fate for how I thought things *should* be—and sometimes I should just enjoy what was.

Well. Maybe tomorrow life would hand me pain and suffering. Today it was throwing me pure pleasure. I relaxed and enjoyed.

The instant I did, Nikos growled. He thrust a hand under me, grabbed a breast and pinched my nipple. Bit me again.

And finally he beat my clit with his rough, hard fingers, matching and surpassing the driving force of his pounding hips.

He stroked and nipped and pounded until I stiffened in his arms—and climaxed. Liquid fire washed over me, through me, pulsing from his fangs piercing my shoulder to his fingers stroking my clit.

He drew my climax out, milked it. And when I finished, instead of holding me tenderly, he hauled my body to the edge of the bed, pushed my head off the end of the mattress and pounded twice as hard.

Head hanging, blood rushed into my brain. I built again, higher, sweeter. Faster. Fire consumed me. My breath rasped, my eyes flashed wide open as I saw it coming. The all-consuming orgasm, the climax so big it would incinerate me, burn me to ashes.

He pinched my nipple, derailing me. Then he sank fangs into my breast, jumping me back on track with a hot bright jerk, and started pounding *harder*. I opened my mouth to scream *sweet heavens*—

It exploded all around me, deafening me. Black noise hit my ears, black velvet wrapped around my head. My voiceless scream caught in my throat. White light burst behind my closed lids, blinding me. Pleasure knifed me, fierce and sharp.

Nikos roared but it was muffled, distant. His cock jerked in my sheath, pulsed as it emptied hot into me. It pushed my own pleasure deeper, a swirling surge in my womb.

When I lifted my head, hours/minutes/an eternity later, Nikos had to help me.

He gently untied my wrists and cradled me, a soft purr warming me.

"I'm not sure that was fair," I mumbled.

"More than fair. You loved me when I was bound. Turnabout is fair play."

“Okay. But next time?” I pulled the tie sleepily from his hand. Rolled myself over in his arms and wrapped the tie around his softened shaft and heavy testicles. A renewed interest tightened both. “Next time’s my turn.”

He was silent for a long time, and I nearly fell asleep.

“Twyla. You don’t need to marry me.”

That woke me up quick.

Nikos caressed my cheek reassuringly with a single thumb. “But I love you. Surely that counts for something.”

“You...you love me?” I sighed, nestled back in. “I love you too.”

“Then come live with me. We’ll see what develops.”

“I guess I can handle that. Whatever develops?”

“Yes.”

I kissed him sleepily, and knew that was enough. Because I had remembered a lot of my past, and who I really was. And I remembered my photography classes.

In film, what developed was only the picture that had been there all along.

## About the Author

Mary Hughes is a computer consultant, professional musician, and writer. At various points in her life she has taught Taekwondo, worked in the insurance industry, and studied religion. She is intensely interested in the origins of the universe. She has a wonderful husband (though happily-ever-after takes a lot of hard work) and two great kids. But she thinks that with all the advances in modern medicine, childbirth should be a lot less messy.

To learn more about Mary Hughes, please visit [www.maryhughesbooks.com](http://www.maryhughesbooks.com).

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*At last, the perfect lover. Now what? Stake him, shoot him—or screw him?*

## **Bite My Fire**

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### *A Biting Love Story*

Elena O'Rourke lusts for two things—her detective's shield and a good lay. *Sass-Cgal's* "Bad Girl Sex Tips" will win her the man. But keeping the shield hinges on solving a murder.

Warrior-gorgeous Bo Strongwell stands in her way.

Powerful as a Viking warship, Bo would be Elena's one-stop solution to celibacy—except for his apartment building full of mysteries. Plus, his kisses...and nibbles...and full body tongue-swipes...keep distracting her from the case. As if a caped clown named Dracula, a hooker with a heart of gold (and boobs of steel), and Elena's own clueless partner aren't distraction enough.

Bo Strongwell is a master vampire who needs a cop snooping around like he needs a garlic enema. Fighting rogues keeps him busy enough without Elena trying to pin the murder on one of his kind...even if she does taste like heaven.

Two fighters for justice. One incredible attraction. A terrible secret. Drunken women dancing on the bar... It all rides on Elena solving the Case of the Punctured Prick.

*Warning: Jammed with hot explicit sex, graphic fanged violence, and acid cop humor. May contain donuts.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Bite My Fire:*

Bo caught me outside the Fudgy Delight, cuffing my wrist. I wasn't a small woman but his hand made my arm look almost delicate. I stared down at where we were joined, skin to skin...another jolt of sensation rippled through me.

Dammit, I was *on duty*. Never before had I had such trouble maintaining a proper distance. Frankly, it scared me. "Let go!" I tugged. Pulling against iron would have been more productive. I got exactly nowhere. The man was strong as a horse.

But I was smarter. I jerked up and back, right against the break between thumb and forefinger where his grip would be weakest. I put my whole body behind it.

It worked beautifully. I yanked free.

And sailed smack into the door behind me. Old and weak, the lock gave. The door burst open. I tumbled in.

The Fudgy Delight had been a dance hall in the forties. It had a small stage, room for a couple dozen tables and a recessed dance floor. I tumbled through the door straight down a short flight of stairs into the

dance pit, ended up sprawled on the lacquered wooden-slat floor. Around me, stripes of moonlight picked out café-style tables, some in the dance pit, more on the level circling it.

Bo was instantly on his knees beside me. And I do mean instantly. I was still sliding when I saw him reaching for me.

“Elena. I’m so sorry, I couldn’t stop you...are you all right?” His fingers ran over my limbs, head and neck, checking for injury. “Any tingling, burning? Loss of feeling?” His tone was actually worried.

Nobody worried about me. They worried about Gretchen or Nixie, but not me. As a child, I was the big girl who took care of herself. Later I was the cop who took care of herself—and everyone around her. Bo’s concern was nice.

“I’m fine.” More than fine. His skimming woke every body part he touched, incited tingling need. Burning, yes, but not the nerve-damaged kind.

“Thank goodness.” He pulled me into his arms, burying me momentarily against his massive chest.

It was like being slammed into a wall. Sweet chocolate Glocks, Mounds-o’-Muscle here was actually harder than he looked. I drew in a surprised breath, choked on it. A masculine scent, steamy and spicy, nearly dropped me unconscious. As it was I started trembling. “Uh, Strongwell?”

“Damn it, Elena, you’re shaking. You’re *not* okay.” He held me away from him. Zeroed in on my eyes, which must have said exactly why I was shaking.

I licked my lips. His gaze dropped precipitously to follow, his pupils dilating big as dimes. He yanked me in. Hot lips descended.

Bo kissed me.

His mouth, warm and firm, pressed against mine. Circled masterfully. A tongue licked the seam of my lips with bold expertise.

My trembling increased. My hands fell onto his cotton-covered chest. It was like palming velvet-covered boulders. My lips parted slightly in amazement.

His tongue flicked at the opening. Little sparklers lit where he licked, small crackles of sensation, tiny zaps that made my lips swell and throb. He kissed me, silky soft, licking little shivers at the corners and edges of my mouth until I wanted to scream.

I grabbed Bo’s head, pent-up lust twisting my fingers into his thick hair. I vaulted onto my knees. My knees and shins rapped hard wood but hunger overwhelmed any pain.

I kissed him back.

His kiss changed, his head angling, his jaw working. No deeper, but harder. Taking command, not giving me the option to stop, even if I wanted to.

Which I most certainly did *not*.

Suspect, yeah. Janitor, yeah. And maybe he was doing my sister, though I hoped not.

But Nixie was right, I was desperate. The last time I was intimate with a guy was at a police convention in a conference room that was supposed to be empty. Except we forgot daylight savings time. Just when the guy settled down to a workout at the Y, forty people walked in. Too bad, because his jump rope was extra long and thick. That frustrating little scene, with variations, had been going on for the last five-plus years.

So I was a bit, um, eager.

I tried to tell Bo that with my open mouth, my thrusting tongue. That he didn't have to go slow. That he didn't have to be a gentleman. That he didn't have to arouse me because I was already pitched at frantic.

That my head had already catapulted to crumpled sheets and writhing damp bodies and please-oh-please filling my empty ache.

He heard. His powerful arms cinched me close. A low rumble of approval lapped at my ears. His tongue thrust into my mouth, deep, stabbing like a flaming sword. I was not small but his tongue *filled* me. I tasted timber ships and roaring fires. Sea spray and raids and rich plunder. He drove deep again. And again.

I grabbed his ears and tried to crawl into his mouth.

His fingers tightened in my hair. His other hand thrust into my waistband, tugged the shirt hem out. Strong fingers rasped directly onto my skin. His hand was big enough to span my entire back. I shivered.

His hot palm caressed me, burning friction. His fingers were fire, licking down my spine. Flames lapped the delicate hairs over my back cleft. The night was humid, but that made steam roar out of my ears.

I arched into him, my breasts rubbing the powerful swell of his chest. My nipples tightened, pleading mutely. Need fired deep inside. My panties dampened.

Abruptly he broke the kiss and raised his head. His eyes were closed, his nostrils flared. "Fuck, Elena...that scent...*your* scent."

*Thank you, Hulk It.*

"And your *taste*." Bo bent, nuzzled my ear, his breath tickling the lobe. "Mmm. I want to taste all of you, Elena. Every succulent inch." He bore me to the hardwood floor, held me there with the weight of his Viking body. His hips pressed into mine.

A huge bulge prodded my belly. I gasped. *Was that a cock or did he have a Viking warship in his pants?*

A rush of desire hit me between the legs. My knees, still throbbing from the floor, parted. One thickly muscled thigh thrust between mine, pressed intimately. Rhythmically. Suddenly my knees weren't the only thing throbbing.

His palms planted on either side of my head, he stared down at me, deeply, as if reading my thoughts. And maybe he could because slowly his mouth curved in a sexy, knowing smile. "We have time, Elena.

Let's do this right." His eyelids lowered, heavy with desire. Exquisitely deliberate, he bent his head toward me.

Hot, slick lips met mine. I opened, eager for the fiery thrust of his tongue. But he slid his mouth over mine, superbly unhurried, tasting me thoroughly, drinking in my panting breath. Licking and nibbling and tonguing until I was going crazy.

Years of unfinished foreplay sharpened every smell, every sound, every sensation. My nostrils filled with the rich, dark scent of male. My ears rang with Bo's deep sighs and my own frustrated groans. My body rocked with frissons of desire.

I circled his strong neck with my arms, wrapped my cop-long, cop-strong legs around his waist and rubbed against him in bold, needy strokes. He shifted to nibble my ear. I tightened my legs and rubbed harder, until I was practically grinding his monster erection with my pubic bone. "Enough of slow, dammit!"

At last, he growled. Deep, bone-buzzing, heart pounding. His mouth left my ear to trail wet fire down my neck. One hand slipped under my shirt, found my breast. Palm and fingers cupped and kneaded while a thumb rasped my nipple erect. "Do you like that?"

I trembled under him. "Wonderful. More."

"More?" His tongue glided over the side of my neck. Sharp nips followed. "Yeah, I'll give you more."

His hands ran fire over my breasts, his mouth sucked pleasure along my neck. His hips ground slowly, inexorably into my vulva.

The heat of his body, the thrilling pressure, poured liquid excitement into my belly. I rocked harder against him, close to...something. Something big compared to even my vibrator. Way beyond frustrated foreplay. "*More.*"

Bo's hips jerked. His cock swelled until it burned the entire length of my vulva. "Lord, Elena. Do you want to kill me?" He muttered it against my neck, breath hot, sharp teeth scraping skin.

So close. I wriggled under him. Perspiration dotted my skin. "More, now!"

He growled. Released his full weight against me. I only thought I was under pressure before. He smashed me into the hardwood floor. Crushed my breasts and hips with his overpowering male strength. And I loved it.

I grabbed his head and pressed him closer. "That feels so good." My heart was pounding. My whole body was throbbing. His tongue swiped long strokes over my throat. Sharp. Hot. Shocking.

"Damn. The smell. The sound... Elena, are you ready?"

I was panting so hard my breath caught in my throat. "*Ungh.*" Please, do it. Whatever *it* was. I writhed under him, seeking...seeking...

"You want it?" His teeth, needle sharp, pressed into the skin.

Pricks of desire lit my neck. My throat was swollen with need. I forced the words through. “*Yes*. Finish this before I implode.”

He let out a soul-deep sigh and his teeth stabbed into my throat.

*Seeing dead people is bad enough. Loving him could make her one of them.*

## Catch Me In Castile

© 2009 Kimberley Troutte

When the mother of all panic attacks prompts Erin Carter's boss to pass her over for promotion, her mind doesn't just crack. It explodes like an egg in a microwave, shattering her career along with the company car she crashes into the office building.

The death grip she's kept on her sanity slipping, she takes a friend's advice and flees to Spain. There she finds comfort in the healing arms of surgeon Santiago Botello—until a fifteenth-century ghost warns her that being with Santiago is dangerous, possibly even lethal.

Santiago has his hands full protecting his sister from a dark curse and his family from a very modern-day psychotic killer. The last thing he needs added to his plate is a neurotic American. Yet something about Erin tugs at his heart so hard he wants to wrap her in his arms and never let go. No matter the risk.

Erin's attraction to Santiago makes her the killer's next target. Survival means she must face her greatest fear, solve an ancient murder mystery—and hang on tight to the one man she's fallen crazy in love with.

*Warning: This book contains a woman willing to lose her mind for love, a hot Spaniard with hands a girl could die for, deadly family curses, a ghost with memory disorder, and a really mad killer.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Catch me in Castile:*

"You worked with Maria?" Santiago asked.

"I am...was...am a stockbroker." I laughed. "It's a little confusing right now. I'm taking a break from it all." I sat back. "Call it a vacation."

"Ah," was his polite answer. He probably suspected I'd been canned. I let him think whatever he wanted. Somehow being fired from my job would have been better than losing my mind, heart, and soul to it.

"It's a difficult business, especially for a woman."

My hackles rose. "For a woman?"

His eyebrows rose to match my tone. "It's not?"

"It's a hard business for many. A woman dedicated to succeeding in her career can handle it just fine."

"You're a career woman."

"I most certainly am—hey, watch out!" A fist to my shoulder blade rudely cut off my thoughts. Spinning around in my chair, I was ready to scream at the brute who had the audacity to sock a woman in the back. Oddly, no one was there.

*Dear God, I'm imagining things?*

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Facing him again, my hackles had gone down, replaced by goose bumps all over my skin. "Did you see who hit me in the—?" I closed my mouth.

His dark eyebrows hitched up in confusion.

*No, I scolded myself, Stick to Plan 3 in my Get a Life Journal—don't go crazy.*

"Nothing." The old fight to stand up for myself and my gender was gone. I sighed. "To answer your question, I'm trying to be all right. Sometimes...it's hard."

Emotion I couldn't decipher passed over his face. "I know."

He had his own hardships to bear. I wasn't about to drop mine in his lap. "Santiago, all I want to be right now is on vacation. I need a break from my life. When I get home, I'll try to sort out what I want to be when I grow up."

"Fair enough." He still eyed me suspiciously. "How long will you be staying?"

"Trying to get rid of me already?" I teased, but thought it might be true.

"No. How long will we be fortunate to have your company?"

"Ah, a charmer you are. My condo is rented out for the summer, so I have three months to play around. I'll probably travel Spain a bit. See the sights."

"Why don't you stay here the whole time?" His mouth opened in surprise as if he hadn't meant to say that at all.

"Here? In your home?"

His lips parted, but no sounds came out.

I kept my answer light. "That would be imposing. Something my mother tells me not to do."

He pinched the bridge of his nose, thinking. What in the world was he debating in that glorious head of his? Finally he said, "The house is big. I'd appreciate it if you keep Maria company while she settles back in. It will be good for her to look after you. I'm not here often. I have a flat downtown, closer to the hospital."

"Oh."

"Please consider staying. Here."

"You and Maria are very kind. I'll think about it."

*Oh man, that devastating grin.*

We switched gears and I asked him about his career, while the candlelight shimmered in his eyes. He had a general practice, was trained in internal medicine and elected to the position of Chief Medical Doctor at the Salamanca hospital.

I smelled modesty. "Impressive. Where'd you go to school?"

"I graduated from UCLA. Pre-Med. My graduate work was here, in Salamanca."

“You must know Dr. John Stapleton at UCLA,” flew out of my mouth before I had a chance to rein it in.

He thought a moment. “Doesn’t ring a bell. Which medical department is he in?”

*Holy crap, please tell me I did not drop my psychiatrist’s name into casual conversation with the sexiest man on the planet.*

I ran my hand up the back of my neck. “Um, not sure.” *Think, Erin, think.* “Hey, I almost went to UCLA too. USC has a better Economics department.” I drew lazy eights on the glass table with my fingers, trying to calm myself. “Too bad I can’t speak to you ever again.”

“What?”

“We’re rivals.”

“I hope not. You make me look good on the dance floor.”

*Nope, did that all by himself.* I wondered for a millisecond about Helena. Had she gone home? Could I be so lucky? “I, uh, noticed you dancing with a lovely lady over there.”

“With beautiful red hair?”

“That would be the one.” I resisted touching my own sandy locks. “Is she, are you two, you know?”

“Helena is a friend of mine who volunteers at the hospital.”

“Say no more.” I held up my hand. “Been there myself.”

He frowned, studying my face. “Been where? The hospital?”

I blushed. “No, I meant you don’t need to tell me about your relationship. I understand the need for—” I searched for the appropriate word, “—discretion at work.”

He smiled and leaned a little closer. “Helena and I are friends. You had male friends at your last job, right?”

Dry gulp. “Not friends, exactly. More like spiteful, vicious—Ow!”

“What’s wrong?”

I rubbed my shoulder. “Something pinched me. Do you have mosquitoes here?”

His face was serious “What happened in your job? Did someone hurt you?”

He seemed determined to make me tell him the gory details. I wasn’t going there. Not anymore. I looked into his sensitive eyes. “My life is...” I thought about Maria, “...littered. I’m trying to clean it up. And I will. For now, I’m seizing the day one moment at a time. Starting with this one.”

I flattened my palms on the round table and leaned closer. He watched curiously as I moved toward him until we were face to face. Softly, I kissed his lips. Calculating career woman would never dare do such a thing. The newly developing goddess in me was feeling reckless. Alive.

I meant for it to be a soft peck, a gentle caress. I had absolutely no intentions of flicking the tip of my tongue across his bottom lip, deepening the kiss, sucking his delicious bottom lip into my mouth, and running my fingers through his glorious black hair. None at all. But the best laid plans...

The attraction raged like a storm out of control, snapping and crackling under Santiago's skin. He couldn't help it. The dancing had warmed his blood and the fire roaring inside the woman threatened to consume him.

Erin was beautiful beyond words. She was also smart, sensitive, and courageous. But he saw something else behind those deep honey eyes that scared him. Every now and then he caught a flash of anguish, a twist of her pain, buried deep in her psyche.

It ate at him. He wasn't good at sitting idly by while a beautiful woman was tortured before his eyes. And why she kept looking over her shoulder was beyond him. Hallucinations? Post-traumatic disorder?

*Damn it!* What happened to her?

*Don't get involved*, he warned himself. *I can't fix her.*

Besides, he had more than enough problems to worry about. No, he had to squelch the firestorm spreading through his veins. For both their sakes.

But when her lips met his...

Dear God, when she kissed him electricity sparked through his nervous system and lightning struck his heart. It was as if he'd been zapped by the hospital's defibrillator. His mind was five seconds behind, trying to comprehend the situation. And when her tongue ran across his bottom lip, slowly, sensually...*mierda*, he had to learn how to breathe all over again.

Erin Carter was a force of nature, unlike anything he'd ever seen. Lord help him, he wanted to seize the lightning in his fists and dive headlong into the storm.

*Getting the girl might not be as hard as keeping her alive.*

## Waitin' on a Hero

© 2008 Sydney Somers

Finley Gallagher is hot and tired. Tired of the endless heat wave. Tired of pretending she isn't interested in her sexy next-door neighbor. And really tired of everyone's endless talk about the city's mysterious vigilante who puts criminals in their place.

But when Finley is attacked and her apartment vandalized, she's forced to rely on the two men she'd rather not have anything to do with. One hides who he is, unleashing her deepest fantasies from the shadows; the other proves how wrong she was about him with one devastating smile after another.

Plagued by visions that let him glimpse the future, Trace Fairbanks is determined to do whatever it takes to keep the streets safe, even if it means leading a double life. He's also determined to prove to Finley that he's not the playboy she thinks he is.

Too bad Finley is completely turned off by his alter ego...or is she?

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Waitin' on a Hero:*

No matter how hard she strained to really see him, the shadows swallowed him up. "I won't tell anyone who you are."

"I *am* making you nervous."

"No." Okay, maybe a little and only because her commonsense demanded to know what sane woman would linger in the dark with a man she knew nothing about—one with violent tendencies, if the stories circulating in the media from the criminals he'd taken down were to be believed.

"But you'd be more comfortable talking to me with the light on."

"I don't know you. I don't even know why you're here." Didn't know why she wanted him to be there except that he made her feel safe. Not since her mother died had it felt like there was anyone else watching out for her.

"Neither do I," he confessed. "Don't worry, I'm not stalking you."

"Just happened to be in the area?"

"Something like that."

It seemed a bit coincidental that he just happened to be in the neighborhood. Then again, had anyone predicted she would be saved from assault by the Night Watcher, she would have laughed and walked the other way. He'd likely come across her name and address somehow and was checking up on her. Actually, that seemed just as unlikely since she couldn't imagine why he would bother.

"Make house calls often?" she guessed, a part of her foolishly wishing he was as curious about her as she was about him.

“Not a habit of mine.”

His answer startled her, but more startling was the way she found herself leaning towards him. “Is this how you always talk?”

He inched closer in response. “Does my voice bother you too?”

“No. I just wonder why you’re trying so hard to hide who you are.”

“Am I?”

She arched her brow, then, remembering the gesture was lost in the dark, scoffed in disbelief.

“Do you trust me?”

“We just met,” she answered matter-of-factly, telling herself that reason alone should have her backing up, not yearning to feel the press of his hard body against hers.

He made a sound that was almost disagreement. “It would be foolish of me to trust anyone I don’t know with my secrets then, wouldn’t it?”

“Not unless you’re worried I’d recognize you.”

His silence kicked her brain into overdrive.

“Would I?” She straightened, her hand relaxing on the railing. She didn’t let go completely, not when the dark made it impossible to predict his next move. A fact that made her both cautious and breathless with anticipation.

She wet her lips, the silence stretching between them until she couldn’t think beyond the pounding of her own heart in her head.

His thigh brushed hers, and the simple touch unleashed a rush of excitement and desire that pooled low in her belly.

“I expected you to be more wary of me.”

“Pleased or disappointed?” Finley felt the need to stay on her toes with him, otherwise she really would be wary of a man who used the dark to cloak his intentions as much as his identity.

He angled his body towards hers, his quiet laugh whispering across her cheek. “Do I seem the type that gets off on making other people nervous?”

“You wear a trench coat when it’s one-hundred-and-fifteen degrees outside. You carry some kind of tranquilizer gun that would make a zookeeper envious. Clearly the hero complex does something for you.”

“Maybe,” he conceded.

His fingers caught the ends of her hair and she sensed his mouth close to her face. The slow hum of anticipation burrowed through her bloodstream. Instead of feeling panicked by his proximity, she ached to get closer.

And she blamed it entirely on her conversation with Avery.

His fingertips threaded the long strands and her stomach flipped backwards. She bit down on her bottom lip to trap the sigh that threatened to break past. What was it about him that made her forget how

dangerous he could be? Was it because he'd saved her? Or was it something else? Something beyond the mystery surrounding him?

She fiddled with the empty water bottle she still carried. "Why do you do it?"

"Because I can help people."

"Have you ever gotten hurt?"

"A couple times."

The admission made her insides draw up tight. "Who looks after you when you are?"

"Is that your way of asking if I have a girlfriend?" She heard the smile in his voice.

"No." She couldn't get the denial out fast enough, feeling foolish for bringing it up. "You risk yourself to help others, and I was just wondering if, when you needed it, there was someone to help you."

"Now I am disappointed."

"Why?"

He moved so only a breath separated their mouths. "I was hoping you were curious about the girlfriend thing."

"You don't seem to care about whether or not I have anyone in my life."

His hand closed over hers, drawing it towards his mouth. "Would you be standing here in the dark with me if you did?"

"Are you always this arrogant, or is it just part and parcel with the hero complex?"

"Arrogance is my fatal flaw."

"I suppose you have an arch enemy too?" It was getting damn difficult to pull together a coherent thought, let alone be remotely witty when he held her hand, his thumb trailing seductively down the center of her palm.

"None to speak of yet, but I'll keep you posted." He leaned in, bringing his chest in full contact with hers.

She sucked in a surprised breath as drops of water from his jacket dripped down between her breasts. "You're wet."

He peeled her shirt up, exposing her midsection. "I think you are too." The wicked tone suggested he was talking about more than her clothing.

She slammed her eyes shut, her senses at war over which part of her ached the most for his touch.

"What were you doing on the roof?" As much as her body hungered for something from this man, she couldn't drown out the voice that warned her not to confuse her fantasies with reality. The rough brick wall against her back was real. The hard, damp body pressed intimately against her belonged to a flesh-and-blood man who courted danger on a nightly basis. A man as threatening as he was sinfully provocative.

"Watching you." His jaw scraped against hers.

"For how long?"

“Just a few minutes.”

“And what are you doing now?” She swallowed as he tucked her hand between their bodies, over his heart.

“Trying very hard not to kiss you.”



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