

Del Fantasma

Latin Lover

Tina Bendoni



Aspen Mountain Press

WARNING

This e-Book contains sexually graphic scenes and adult language. Store your e-Books carefully where they cannot be accessed by underage readers.

Tina Bandoni

Del Fantasma: Latin Lover

Tina Bandoni

Aspen Mountain Press

Del Fantasma: Latin Lover

Del Fantasma: Latin Lover

Copyright © 2008 Tina Bendon and Aspen Mountain Press

This e-Book is a work of fiction. While references may be made to actual places or events, the names, characters, incidents, and locations within are from the author's imagination and are not a resemblance to actual living or dead persons, businesses, or events. Any similarity is coincidental.

Aspen Mountain Press

PO Box 473543

Aurora CO 80047-3543

www.AspenMountainPress.com

First published by Aspen Mountain Press, March 2008

www.AspenMountainPress.com

This book is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution via any means is illegal and a violation of International Copyright Law, subject to criminal prosecution and upon conviction fines and / or imprisonment. The e-Book cannot be legally loaned or given to others. No part of this e-Book can be shared or reproduced without the express permission of the publisher.

ISBN: 978-1-60168-095-2

Published in the United States of America

Editor: Nikita Gordyn

Cover artist: Nikita Gordyn

Tina Bendon

Dedication

To Michelle: Because you pushed me and pushed me until I finally got it written. Hope it's as good as you wanted.

Del Fantasma: Latin Lover

Grace looked around the full bar and smiled. She was going to earn some nice tips tonight, and she could use them. Although she was almost out of the hole that Hank had tossed her into, she still had a little ways to go, and a short time to get there. Getting this job at Del Fantasma had been a blessing in more ways than one.

There hadn't been a night since she started that she hadn't gone home with less than a couple hundred in tips in her pocket, or a good feeling in her heart.

She didn't know why, either. After working an eight plus hour shift in any bar, she should be exhausted and drained. Instead she usually found herself rejuvenated and feeling better than she had when she went in.

Maybe it had something to do with the cute owner, Cody Warren. The man was hotter than a god, and built like one too. His short dark hair and striking blue eyes turned the head of more than one female—and a few males here and there, too.

Although he flirted with her on a regular basis, she knew he didn't mean anything by it. He flirted with her the same as he did the other females on staff, including Tara, the singer up on the stage.

Grace sighed. Now there was a singer. Tara could take a song and make you feel the emotions behind each and every word. The first few nights Grace had worked, she'd been caught not doing her job more than once when she was arrested by Tara's

voice. Now Grace just chalked it up to part of the ambiance of the place and let it soothe her. She just figured it was one of Tara's gifts.

Cody had asked her about her prejudices and beliefs before he hired her, and even though she knew he had no right she had told him she was Wiccan, and as such, would have no problem working the religious holidays.

He had smiled strangely and told her she was hired. She hadn't realized it was because he expected her to be a bit more open minded about strange happenings than the average citizen on the street.

It hadn't taken her long to figure out that most of his customers weren't all human. Her first hint had been the floating drinks when the group of women usually found in the back corner had gotten a little bit drunk the first full moon she was here. Add in the constant territory challenges, understated though they may be, and she'd have to be a hell of a lot more close-minded not to be able to figure out something was different about this place.

But it suited her. She was a misfit in the world of normal people, too. At least here everyone had their own shields and she didn't have to worry about stray images of their lives, or emotions and desires getting past her shields. At least most of the time.

She could handle the occasional emotion getting out of hand. Anything dangerous and Cody and his regulars would take care of it before it became a major issue. Most of the time, though, the emotions were strongest when Cody used his little matchmaking talent to get people together. Somehow, he could tell when the time was right to give away one of his special drinks to an unsuspecting customer. That was when the fireworks would fly. What did you expect in place where many of the customers mated for life?

Grace envied Cody that ability. She only saw the possible results after he linked people together. And even then she was never sure. But Cody was never wrong.

Grace glanced over the patrons of the bar and smiled. Brandon was beside the bar staring at Tara, his girlfriend of the past few months, and growling at anyone who got too close to her, or stared at her too long. Most knew that his bite was even worse

than his growl, and did their best to avoid him. Why mess with a Werecat unless you had to?

Her eyes drifted across some of the other regulars. Mundanes and paranormals together, creating an atmosphere that was different from any other place she'd ever been in. Even the tourists that were unaware of the true nature of the bar sensed something different here. It was one of the things that made the place so popular.

It was also one of the things that made her feel more comfortable than she'd ever felt before. The abilities and talents of most of the customers made her paltry ability seem nonexistent, which was what she preferred. It was sporadic and entirely undependable at the best of times. Take her present financial situation as a perfect example.

If her ability worked when and how she wanted it to, she wouldn't have found herself in the position to pay off ten thousand dollars in debt accrued by her ex-boyfriend – all in her name.

She tried to fight it, but since most of the things he had ordered through her credit cards and accounts he'd opened in her name, and had been delivered to her house and signed for by a woman with a signature that looked amazingly like her own. She had no case. That wasn't including the leg breakers that he had borrowed from either.

Since Hank had disappeared, they had come after her. She'd been paying them off ever since then. That was the last time she ever trusted a man.

And the money wasn't the only reason she'd kicked the bastard out. Whoever the woman was who had been in on it with him had been much more than a business partner. Something Grace had learned the hard way.

So, Grace had been screwed over, twice. Her ability had done nothing to help her. Hell, it had done the opposite. When she had first met Hank her inner voice had encouraged her to go out with him. Talk about worse than useless powers.

Well, at least she got a friendship out of the deal. Tara and she had become pretty good friends, and Grace could always use another one of those. In fact, Tara had been urging her get to know more of the customers and employees on a personal basis.

Regardless, Grace was happy with the way things were. She knew the regulars casually, and was friendly with them. That was enough for her. She had no desire to be burned again by anyone. And in her experience, that was what relationships tended to do.

Grace brought Brandon a beer and grinned at him as he growled at another patron.

"Easy, boy. That one's more interested in you than in Tara."

At his second growl, she snickered and walked away to serve the rest of her customers. Poor kitty never got a break.

"Hey Grace, give us another round." She nodded to the back table of witches to show that she'd heard them and turned to the bar after dropping off the last of the drinks on her tray.

She spent the next hour hustling tables and seeing to her customers before she could finally sit down and relax.

"Busy night tonight." Cody sauntered over and put an icy concoction in front of her on the bar.

"I'm still on the clock." She was not a fan of alcohol herself, despite where she worked.

"It's finally calmed down. No one else is gonna be coming in. You're pretty much done for the night."

Grace smiled. "Yeah, right."

At Cody's laugh, her exhausted body perked up, getting a little bit more energy. "Well, either way, take a break. I just found this recipe and wanted to give it a shot."

She eyed the drink carefully, "What is it?"

"Just give it a try. I'm sure you'll like it."

Warily, she took a sip and was pleasantly surprised by the taste. "Fruity. Is that orange or pineapple juice I taste?"

Typical Cody, he didn't answer, just winked and walked away to help someone at the other end of the bar.

Sighing, Grace took another sip of the drink and cast her eyes over the bar one more time. She had about an hour left on her shift, but Cody was right. It was getting late, even for Del Fantasma, and not many people were coming in. Most of the crew were regulars, and would be heading out within the next thirty minutes or so. Hell, she could set her watch by some of them.

Finished with her drink, she set it closer to Cody's side of the bar and hopped off the barstool. The drink must have been more powerful than she had thought, because she lost her balance and fell against a hard, warm chest.

The thumping of a heart beat against her hand. Her pulse instantly responded, matching its speed to that of the man that held her tight in his arms. The scent of forest and ocean waves assailed her senses and her mind spun as she heard a sigh in her head.

"Cuidado, querida. You don't want to fall into the arms of too many strangers. You never know who, or what, you may bump into here." The smooth bass of the voice sent moisture to her core and dragged her eyes up to his face.

Sharp features met her gaze. Smooth, taut lips quirked led her eyes up to a long Roman nose, then to eyes which were a deep brown that she felt herself get sucked into, causing her to go breathless.

His Latino accent sent her pulse fluttering immediately. A hotter man she couldn't remember ever seeing. His biceps were strong and hard where she held them, and her hands tightened against them of their own accord. The rest of her body responded to his nearness unexpectedly, melting into him too eagerly as she pictured the two of them in bed together, rolling around the sheets in ecstasy.

His mouth widened into a full-blown smile as if he knew where her thoughts had gone. Her pussy clenched at the sensuality inherent in that one look.

Dammit, woman, get your hormones in check. You don't need another man in your life. Least of all one so attractive all you want to do is fuck his brains out.

She hissed. Oh, gods, she'd just been sucked under by a vamp, and if she didn't miss her guess, an old vamp. She swallowed hard.

"Sorry. I must have slipped off the chair. I'm not usually this clumsy."

"It was my pleasure, *querida*. After all, how often does a man have a woman fall into his arms as easily as you have mine?"

Oh, yeah, she had definitely fallen into his arms, and would willingly fall into his bed. Gods, she'd been alone too long if the first vamp she met other than Cody could mesmerize her so strongly. She would need to be taking out her battery operated rabbit tonight when she got home.

Realizing she was still in his arms, she pulled herself out reluctantly and smiled at him, unsure of what to say. A yell from the other side of the room saved her, as the witches called her over to give their final order before closing. So much for Cody saying she was done for the night.

Relieved, and a bit disappointed, she quickly walked away, feeling his eyes burn into her back the entire way across the room.

"Girl, what the hell are you doing with him?" Grace stopped short at the witch's question. Tara wasn't the only friend she had made in the past few months. These women had taken her under their wings and tried to help her learn how to control some of her abilities. But so far, they'd all had little to no success.

"Don't you realize he's a vamp?"

"I just bumped into him. I haven't had time to realize anything."

"He's been watching you for the last five nights. His eyes never leave you."

Grace felt a shiver go down her spine. "What do you mean he's been watching me? I haven't seen him in here before tonight."

"Girl, he's probably clouding your mind. Vamps can do that, you know."

Sakie, one of the older women at the table smacked the younger witch that had spoken on the arm. "Betty, don't be so stereotypical and prejudiced. You know nothing

about that man or his history. And the reason the girl hasn't seen him is because he's only here for an hour or so, and never sits in her section. This place has been hopping for the last week, so she's barely had time to breathe, never mind check out every cute guy that comes in here."

"Come on, Sakie, you know what he is." Betty practically hissed at the elder woman.

"Yeah, I do. But that doesn't mean squat. You of all people should know not to judge people by what they are, rather than who they are."

Betty had the grace to blush.

Sakie shook her head with a sideways glare at Betty. "Grace, don't worry about her. She reads too many of those paranormal erotic romances. She's convinced a Were is gonna sweep her off her feet and mate with her for all eternity."

Betty said nothing, just stared into her glass.

"Of course, none of us would be unhappy with a nice roll in the hay." Alyson sighed as she sat back.

"Least of all with that gorgeous hunk that you just fell into." Sakie smirked.

"Hell, if you don't want him send him this way. Any of us will take him."

"Or all of us. At once," the sixty year-old Judy pointed out, eyeing the candy across the room. The rest of the woman snickered, including Betty.

"I just bumped into him, ladies. There's nothing there to worry about."

"Oh, I don't know, dearie. The lust I saw shooting off of both of you at that contact tells me there is definite potential there. So why don't you go take advantage of it and have some fun tonight?"

It was Grace's turn to blush. Here she was thirty years old, getting sexual advice from a woman twice her age. One who was encouraging her to do something any other woman her age would be shocked at. Who would ever believe it if she told them?

"Sorry ladies, gotta run. The wolves look grumbly over there." Grace practically ran away before she had to listen to any more suppositions about the sexy Latino across

the room. The last thing she needed was another complication in her life. And a vamp would definitely be a big one.

Shit, shit, shit. Grace turned the key once more. Nothing. Not a click, a grind, nothing. If she didn't know better, she'd swear the battery was dead, but dammit, she just replaced it two weeks ago. Shit.

This was all she needed. Just a couple more weeks was all she needed to get herself out of her financial hole, and now she would have to spend goddess only knew how much of her money on getting the damn car fixed. And how the hell was she supposed to get to work in the meantime?

It couldn't have waited for another month or so to crap out on her? No, it had to be now. She looked at her watch and sighed. The odds of getting a taxi this late/early were slim to none, and Tara and Brandon had already gone home.

Well, damn, she had no option. She'd have to at least check taxis. If not, she'd be hoofing it to the nearest bus station and waiting at least an hour or two.

"Grace, is something wrong?" Cody called out the back door to her as she headed back to the bar.

Usually he or someone else kept an eye on the female staff as they left the building. It was a pretty safe area, and those who knew The Point knew not to make trouble near Del Fantasma, but every once in a while someone new to town, or even a new recruit from the base down the way, would be too interested and risk doing something stupid.

"I need to borrow your phone book, if you don't mind, Cody. My car seems to be on the fritz."

"Anything I can help with?"

"I don't know. What do you know about cars?"

Cody grimaced. "You want the macho answer I should give, or the truth?"

Grace laughed as they walked back into the bar. "Come on, don't all guys know something about them?"

"Grace, I grew up and tinkered on cars before fuel injection and all this new computer crap. Unless it's a V8 with a carburetor, don't look to me for much help. I can probably check the wires to the battery, but that's about it."

She smiled as she shook her head. "Already did that, thanks. Don't worry about it. If you don't mind, I'll just leave it here and get a taxi home. I can call the garage when they open and ask them to pick it up for me."

"Car trouble?"

That deep voice from earlier in the night had her senses all aquiver again as she remembered being held in those strong, firm arms against that hard chest.

"Grace can't get her car to start so she was going to call a taxi," Cody told the man standing behind her.

He had to be close, Grace could feel her hair standing on edge from the electricity of his presence. Once again her body betrayed her as her heart beat faster and her breathing grew shallower.

"Where do you live, Grace? I can drop you off."

Forcing herself to answer, she turned around and looked at him. "No, that's okay, really, I don't mind. I can get a taxi—"

"That's ridiculous, Grace. If Eduardo is willing to take you home, then it would be for the best. You'll be fine with him." Cody walked away and turned back as he swung open the door leading into the main area of the bar. "If you need a ride into work tomorrow night, give me a call an hour before your shift, and I'll make sure someone is there to get you."

Grace looked Eduardo with a nervous smile. "Really, that's okay. It's not a problem. Don't feel obliged—"

His smooth tone cut her off mid sentence. "Grace, I told you I would take you home. Cody assured you that you're safe with me. If you refuse, I'm going to wonder if you're afraid of me."

Grace glared. She wasn't afraid of any man, or vampire, dammit. She'd lived enough of her life afraid. That was how she had let herself get suckered in by Hank. *Never again.*

"Fine." Her agreement was far from courteous. "The car's already locked up, and the extra keys are in the wheel well. Let's go. We don't want you to be caught by the sun, now do we?"

Eduardo didn't say anything, and she couldn't see his face as she preceded him out the door, only to stop short, unsure where to go.

"This way." He led her to a silver Mercedes Benz SLK Roadster.

"Nice."

"It gets me around."

Grace raised an eyebrow at him as he opened the door for her. Must be nice not to be awed by a car that cost more than she had earned in two years back in Wisconsin as a social worker.

He saw her settled in, and then went around to the driver's side of the car. She looked over the interior of the vehicle with its leather seats, fancy console, and sophisticated controls. Impressive, was the word that came to mind. It made her ten year-old Corolla look like junkyard fodder.

"Where to?"

Grace gave him directions to her home in the North Park section of town. It wasn't a bad area, and she considered herself lucky to have found a place when she moved here two years ago that was reasonably priced. At least reasonable for California. But still, his car would definitely stand out.

No biggie, he'd only be dropping her off at her townhouse. Not like he'd be staying the day. They passed the North-East end of Balboa Park, and with a couple more turns, made it to her street.

"That's it, the fourth unit." Grace nodded, and then turned her head. It looked like her garage door was open. That was weird — she never left it open. Hell, she rarely used it.

“Do you normally leave the house wide open?” Eduardo’s voice sent shivers down her spine, both from fear of what she was going to find in her house, and from desire that he seemed to rip from her very soul.

“No. Never.” Her voice was small and worried as she bit her lower lip.

He pulled in front of her place and parked. “Stay here, let me check it out.”

“No, Eduardo, you don’t—”

He smiled coldly. “Grace. Stay. It’s not like anyone is likely to hurt me, remember?”

He climbed out of the car and was gone in an instant. Damn those freaking vamps. They could move so quickly, it drove her insane.

After about five minutes without Eduardo returning, Grace began to get worried. Even though he was a vampire, that didn’t make him invincible. She bit at her bottom lip wondering if she should go after him. A quick glance at the lightening sky decided her. The sun would be up soon, and if Eduardo didn’t need help now, he would soon.

Decision made, she climbed out of the car and slowly walked toward the doorway at the back of her garage. It was the door that Eduardo had gone through, and since it was open, it made sense to her to try it, as unlocking the front door would just make too much noise. And if anyone had been waiting for her there, they would have already met up with Eduardo.

Grace walked in and stopped short. What the hell had happened here? The laundry/mud room looked like a tornado had come through. Powdered detergent was tossed everywhere and her laundry supplies were strewn all over the floor. It looked like someone had even tried to tip over her treadmill in the back corner, but they hadn’t had much success.

Walking through to her living room, Grace gasped as tears sprang to her eyes. The place was a mess. It had been torn apart. Someone had obviously been looking for something.

Her closets and shelves had been emptied, things thrown everywhere. Broken crystal lay throughout the living room, swept off the shelves into destroyed bits.

"I'm sorry. Whoever it was is long gone."

Grace jumped at the sound of Eduardo's voice. She turned to face him with tears in her eyes. She opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. All she could do was shake her head as the tears flowed down her face.

"Shh, Grace, don't worry." He was by her side before the first tear had fallen off her cheek. He held her against his chest, stroking her hair as she shook in his arms.

"They're gone, *querida*. No one will hurt you."

"It's not that." Grace snuffled against his chest. She wasn't worried about her personal safety. She understood whoever it had been was long gone. But for the first time in her life she understood why people that were victims of home invasions said they felt violated.

"You will need to call the police, Grace."

"Later. Not now."

"Grace."

Grace took a deep breath before moving away from him. "Let me check the place over first, please? Let me see what they've done."

Eduardo nodded, and followed behind her as she went from room to room. The destruction wasn't total. In fact, it looked more like someone had had a temper tantrum more than tried to rob her. Things of obvious value were broken rather than taken, or even left completely intact.

Her living room was on the main floor, connected to the garage through the laundry room and seemed to have received the brunt of the destruction. The gauzy curtains were drawn on the picture windows at the front of the room, hiding the room from casual view, but she didn't know how this could have been done without anyone seeing the bastard.

Climbing the stairs to the second level, she assessed the damage in the kitchen and the guest bedroom she'd made into an office to pay bills and use the computer. The kitchen survived relatively unscathed, with only the few things she kept on the counters brushed onto the floor. The other room, however, had been fairly well trashed.

Amazingly her computer was untouched, but many of her personal items had been thrown across the room to lay broken on the floor.

Eduardo picked up a vase that lay on its side, unbroken, and raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, Murano. That's what's not making any sense here." Grace shook her head as she looked into the guest bath. Not much for anyone to destroy in there.

"Whoever broke in either didn't know the value of some of your things, or just didn't care." Eduardo agreed with her unspoken conclusion.

"Exactly. There are things here they could have hocked for some decent money, and they just left them or destroyed them. That vase retails for over three hundred dollars. I won it in a charity auction last month."

"How much is actually missing?" Eduardo continued to follow her to the room at the top of the house. The master suite was the only thing on the third floor, and she was glad he was with her. She wasn't sure what would be waiting for her there.

Grace felt a shiver go through her body as she stood in the door to her bedroom. It had been torn apart. Everything from the sheets and comforter on the bed, to the mattress itself had been slit open with a sharp instrument of some kind. The matching curtains had been partially ripped down and shredded.

She felt laughter bubble up from the bottom of her throat. "At least I can finally get rid of this horrible bedroom set."

At Eduardo's concerned look, she assured him she wasn't going hysterical. "My boyfriend bought the entire thing for me last Christmas. I hated it from the get go, but he was so proud of having picked it out, I didn't have the heart to tell him how atrocious it was."

"Boyfriend?"

She grimaced. "Ex. Very much so."

At his raised eyebrow again, she continued. "He fucked around on me, and borrowed money from some shady characters. I've been paying them off for the last three months. It's why I got the job at Del Fantasma."

"And why you?"

"Because Hank disappeared. The man who visited me assured me they were going to get their money one way or another. It was up to me."

Eduardo growled. Grace's stomach flipped at the sound. It sounded predatory and protective, and warmth flooded her body.

"It actually was very civil."

"They threatened your life, and you tell me they have been civil?"

Grace smiled sadly. "Don't get me wrong, they want their money. And I think it best if I pay them off, but I've been doing that. There isn't any reason for them to have done this. It would only make it harder for me to pay them."

Eduardo frowned. "No, you're right. If you were paying them off as agreed, then there would be no reason for this. So then perhaps a standard robbery, only done by someone very stupid?"

"I don't know what else it could be."

"Grace, how many people have a key to your front door?"

"Just me." She continued walking around the room, checking for damaged articles, picking up things from the floor as though in a daze.

"Do you have a spare around where someone can find it?"

"No, there's no need. I can always punch in the code at the garage door to get in if I lost the key."

"What about your ex?"

"I made him give me back the key when he left. Hell, I even changed the locks."

"And his code?"

"I deleted it." She frowned. "But I didn't change my code. I didn't think he knew it, but the bastard might actually have figured it out."

"I didn't see any sign of forced entry. No broken windows, no busted doors. Whoever did this had a way of getting in without you knowing."

Grace nodded as Eduardo talked, agreeing with him. "God Damn it!" she yelled as she got into the bathroom. Eduardo was there before she was even done cursing.

"It was Hank."

"Your ex?" At her nod, he continued. "Are you sure?"

Grace gestured to the mirror. Sprawled across the shiny surface were the words, "I'll be back, you ice cunt bitch."

Eduardo sucked in a breath. He obviously hadn't seen that in his earlier sweep of the house.

"That was Hank's parting name for me when I kicked him out."

Eduardo's eyebrow rose once again. "You dated a man like this?"

Grace sighed as she ran a hand through her hair. "Don't remind me. It was a low point in my life. A very low point. I'd been out here for a couple years, and I wasn't doing too well. At least not emotionally. My family was all gone, I had just lost my aunt – the last relative I had left. My job was sucking me dry. I didn't seem to connect to anyone out here.

"He was from Madison originally, and he seemed to be a bit of home when we first started dating. I'm still not sure how the hell he managed to get me to go beyond the first date or why I allowed him to move in with me. I knew it wasn't what I wanted, but..."

Eduardo grimaced. "Sometimes when we are in pain, we do things that make little sense later."

"Tell me about it." Grace barked out a harsh laugh. "And then we pay for it in more ways than one."

"Is he likely to do you physical harm?"

"Honestly? I don't know." Grace shrugged. "I never would have assumed he would do this, so I guess my character judgment isn't that good."

"You want to call the cops?"

"No, I don't think so. I have no proof it was him, and it doesn't look like he actually took anything, just like he was pissed about something." Grace shook her head as she walked out of the bathroom.

"Why?"

"I have no freaking ide...oh shit!" A thought occurred to Grace and she ran across to the closet. The door was off the tracks and she pushed it out of the way before squatting down to reach for something.

"Dammit!"

"What? What is it Grace?"

"The bastard stole the money."

At Eduardo's look of confusion, Grace explained. "I kept money rolled up here." She held up a Tigger slipper that looked like it had to be a couple decades old. "It was my emergency money. My mom always used to keep enough for emergencies on top of the fridge in an old cookie jar. Even with ATMs everywhere, it was a habit I couldn't break. Shit!"

"And this guy knew your hiding place?"

"Yeah. He'd lived with me for almost a year." A hollow laugh escaped her lips. "I never thought he remembered anything I told him. I guess I was wrong. My sister used to hide things from me in her slippers because she never wore them. She hated anything on her feet, so her slippers were more useful to her to hide things in than to wear."

"I thought you said you had no family?"

"I don't. Susan died at seventeen from leukemia. Those are her slippers." Him messing with Susan's slippers felt worse than anything else she'd seen in the apartment. Grace fell back on her ass and more tears seeped out.

Eduardo sat behind her to wrap his arms around her and hold her tight. She didn't know this man from Adam, but being held in his arms felt right. As though he would protect her from all the bad things in the world. There was something about him that made her feel safe.

Grace wanted nothing more than to sink into his arms and take the oblivion they seemed to promise. But she couldn't. She had things to do.

Pulling herself away regretfully, she grimaced. "I assume he was pissed because there wasn't that much there. Less than a thousand dollars. And knowing what I now know about him, I'm sure he was hoping for more."

"Did you used to keep more?"

"Not really. But I don't think he ever knew for certain how much I had in there. I'll grant him this; while he was here, he was subtle. I never realized how bad he was until he was gone."

Shaking her head again, she said as she walked out of the bedroom, "I guess you're right, I probably should call the cops. Do you need to leave before they get here?"

"No, we still have a while before full daylight. I doubt they'd ask me to step outside in the light of the sun." The smile that flashed across his face had her responding warmly for just a second, until she remembered where she was, and what she was, and why she was there.

Sighing she stood up to get to work.

Grace took a breath. The cops had left, phone calls had been made and codes were changed. The cops had noticed that her windows on the third floor weren't wired, so arrangements were made for the alarm company to come by the next day and wire them with sensors. She looked around. Eduardo had disappeared sometime in all the mess and she'd never even realized it.

He couldn't have gone home, could he? If not, though, where had he gone? She remembered the last time she saw him he'd been walking toward the living room while she answered the last of the cops' questions. Heading that way, she stopped short and looked around. She didn't know how he'd done it, but in the time she'd finished with the cops and called both the alarm and her insurance companies, he'd managed to clean up the entire room. Everything was back in its place, or in one of the large trash bags on the floor in the corner, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Grace turned and walked up the stairs to her bedroom where she found more evidence of his hard work. He'd stripped the bed and stuffed everything into another trash bag, as well as straightened everything up. Her closet door had been repaired and hung on its glide as neatly as it had last night when she'd left. Hell, her clothes were even more organized than she'd had them.

Noises from her ensuite bathroom had her heading that way and stopping in the door to watch him. He'd just finished washing the mirror and all traces of the nasty message away. If she hadn't seen evidence of it with her own eyes, she never would have known her house had been in shambles earlier this morning.

He turned and looked at her as he tossed the paper towel in the trash basket. "I called Cody and told him you probably wouldn't be in this evening, he said to take a couple days off. They're delivering your new bed any minute, along with all the bedding you will need."

Grace started at him. Unsure of how to answer him, she just stood there.

He walked up to her and pushed her chin up to close her mouth. "Please don't protest. You've had a tough morning and need your rest. It's Monday. Cody can handle the crowd without you. If not, one of the regulars will help out.

"That's my job, dammit. You have no right to do that."

"You're right. I don't. But it's done. Deal with it."

Grace fumed. She had never been as speechless as this man seemed to make her. It was beyond frustrating. She turned and watched him walk into the bedroom and lift the mattress like it weighed little to nothing.

She frowned, realizing it was dark in the room. She'd left a brightly lit kitchen just a minute ago. The sun. Eduardo must have closed the blinds. Hank hadn't touched them in his swath of destruction through her house.

"Shit, shouldn't you be asleep in your coffin or something?"

Eduardo laughed. "I will need to rest soon. But I don't sleep in a coffin."

Grace realized that this was the only room that she could close up completely from the sun. It was too late for him to go anywhere else.

Before she could say anything the doorbell rang.

"That's probably the new bed."

Grace frowned again before opening her mouth to tell him she would pick out her own bed, dammit. She didn't need his help. The doorbell ringing again changed her mind temporarily and she walked out of the room in a huff.

Grace shut the door behind the men as they walked out with the remains of her old box spring. Now it was time to talk to the arrogant, full of himself vampire. Who did he think he was? He'd ordered the mattress set with adjustable firmness and dual controls. Not to mention a pillow top and a small forest of pillows.

How the hell did he expect her to pay for that? The total was more than she paid in three months for her mortgage. She'd be damned if she was going to make payments for a freaking bed. She'd tried to argue with him before the guys had left, but he'd signed the paper and did his best to ignore her. Which seemed to be right up his alley, because the delivery guys had ignored her protests and set up the bed.

Storming back into the bedroom, Grace was shocked still, for at least the third time today, as she watched an Alpha vampire making her bed with a set of sheets he must have gotten from her linen closet. He looked perfectly at home doing domestic chores in her house.

"Would you care to tell me what that was all about?" she asked him as she helped him get the fitted sheet over the mattress.

"You needed a new mattress. You never would have been able to sleep on that one."

"Great, then I would have gone down to the local discount store and got one when I could afford it. I have a perfectly good couch I could have slept on in the meantime."

"Yeah, but I couldn't have slept on it."

"Excuse me?" The bed made, Grace tossed the pillow she had just stuffed into the case onto the head of the bed.

"It is close to noon. There is no way I would be able to make it home. That means I need to stay here. I believe in comfort."

Grace didn't say anything as she threw another pillow on the bed. The damn man had ordered six of them. With that many, there wouldn't be any room for him on the bed.

"Fine. I just hope they have a satisfaction guarantee, 'cause it's going back tomorrow."

The look Eduardo gave her should have frozen her in her tracks. Instead it just pissed her off even more. "I am not going to pay for this damn thing, Eduardo."

"Who said you had to?"

"Well you sure as hell aren't going to."

"I'm the one that ordered it."

"Damn it, Eduardo, I am not going to let you pay for a freaking mattress." She put her hands on her hips and just managed to stop herself from stomping her foot. "I just met you, dammit."

The look that Eduardo gave her burned straight through to her soul. Something inside of her melted and she heard her heart whimper as it gave up the fight.

"You're going to have a bitch of a time returning it, Grace, because the bill was sent to my place."

Grace growled in anger and turned to walk away, muttering. "Fine. Whatever. Freaking ass macho Alpha vampire. That's all I need in my life."

Raising her voice she tossed to him as she walked out the door, "There are towels in the closet in the bathroom if you want to take a shower. I'm taking one downstairs and then bunking on the damn sofa. Wake me when you leave."

Grace continued to mumble all the way to the bathroom and even under the shower. Males were bad enough when they were human. The freaking paranormal ones were even worse. Their mothers had read too many damn romances with Uber Alpha heroes when they were in the womb.

Every single male she'd met at the club was the same way. Alpha to the core. She wondered how any woman in their world managed any kind of independent life at all. No wonder Betty warned her away from Eduardo. She'd probably been burned by him or another like him.

Shower over, Grace climbed into cotton pants and a spaghetti strap tank top to get ready for bed. Or at least sleep. Half asleep despite the shower, she opened the door while thinking about calling Cody and telling him she would be in despite what Eduardo said. All she needed was a few hours sleep and —

An arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her against a hard body. She opened her mouth to scream and a hand clamped over her mouth.

"It's me, Grace," the husky voice whispered in her ear. She relaxed instantly when she recognized Eduardo. Then tensed as he picked her up in one swift motion and carried her down the hall and up the stairs.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"I'll be damned if you sleep on that little couch when there is a perfectly good bed up here." His hair glittered with drops of water from his own shower. Her hand itched to run through the shoulder length tresses to see if it was as soft as it looked, even damp.

"I am not gonna sleep with you."

His grin sent her heart fluttering. "Who said there'd be any sleeping involved?"

"Eduardo!" Damn, she may have been stupid when it came to men, but she wasn't easy.

"Relax, Grace. I have nothing but sleep in mind. It's beyond my bedtime, and I'm sure that you are just as tired as I am. I should have been asleep hours ago. It's almost noon, and I am not up to much of anything. I would feel better if you not only were more comfortable, but if you were closer to me. I doubt that asshole ex of yours will be back, but if he is stupid enough to come back, I want you safe."

"How safe am I gonna be if you're unconscious?"

His sigh reverberated through her body. "I won't be unconscious. I will be sleeping. It's not like I die every morning. You need to stop watching all those old movies."

Grace just glared at him as he walked through her bedroom door and placed her on the bed as he told her, "I want the right side. I sleep on my side."

"Fine, oh great bossy one."

"You are the most infuriating woman I have ever met."

"Good. Now you know how I feel."

Eduardo had been wearing his dress pants when he picked her up, and nothing else. Content that he would at least be decent, she turned her back to him and got ready to sleep. The sound of clothes rustling had her head whipping around and then quickly away as she realized he was climbing into the bed naked.

She tensed, waiting for him to do something. Ravish her? Turn away? She didn't know.

When he reached for her, putting his arm around her waist and pulling her against him, she sucked in her breath.

"Relax, Grace. I just want to get some sleep."

Grace was too tense to sleep. How the hell could she sleep when she had the sexiest vampire she had ever seen holding her tight against him while he was stark naked. Sleep was impossible.

That was the last thought she had before oblivion came up to meet her.

Warmth met her as she woke up. She was cradled from behind, being held against a warm, hard chest. She snuggled back against it until the morning came back with a rush. Her house. Hank. Eduardo – in her bed.

"Mmm. You smell delicious."

The rumbling voice sent shivers through her body, straight to her pussy. She realized his hand was cupping her breast and a very impressive erection was pressed against her ass. And she was hornier than all get out.

What would it hurt to indulge in a bit of harmless fun? She was an adult. She could make decisions like this.

"Um, Eduardo?"

"Hmmm?" He answered her almost absently as he sniffed her, burying his nose in her hair. He nipped at her neck, and she was lost.

"Never mind."

His low chuckle caused something deep in her chest to tumble rapidly and she moaned as he massaged her breast. Grace arched back into him with a groan, tilting her neck to allow him easier access.

He pulled her toward him to lay her on her back. His eyes were black with desire and intent. "Grace, tell me now if you don't want this. I don't have much will power right now, if we continue, I won't be able to stop."

"By this, do you mean...?" Grace's voice tapered off as images from hundreds of vampire movies and books ran through her head. Did he want just sex? Was he going to bite her? Would it be as hot as the romances led her to believe?

"This." He thrust against her hip with the bottom half of his body. "Sex. Making love to you."

"Will you, um, have to, um bite me?"

He smiled grimly. "I used a lot of energy this morning, love. I need to recoup that energy. I do that with blood."

Grace swallowed. Her pussy clenched. "It won't..."

"No, no lasting effects."

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

A part of Grace's heart melted at the look of interest and excitement that came across his face, quickly chased by need and desire. It was obvious he wanted and needed her, and still he denied himself until he was certain she was willing. Her heart melted just a little bit more.

She briefly thought about pregnancy, but was on the pill, so didn't ask him if it was even possible. Instead of answering him in only words, she moved her hips, rolling against him slowly as she groaned, "Yes, I'm sure."

With a growl, he took her lips with his in a bruising kiss. It was hard and forceful, and sent shivers straight down to her toes. He ravished her mouth, there was no other word for it, and she reveled in the feeling.

His hands roamed over her body, up and down, stroking her waist down to her hips and back up again. She arched into him once again as he cupped her breast and stroked her nipple through the thin material of her top.

The kiss started out harsh and forceful but suddenly became soft and gentle as he massaged her lips, teasing them with his tongue, asking for admittance. A flick of his thumb against her nipple had her gasping, and he took that chance to invade her mouth, caressing the inside of her lips with his tongue.

He pulled away once he had her toes curling and her body crying out for more, only to work his way down her jaw line, to her neck, where she tensed, waiting for him to bite her.

He chuckled as he kissed her neck and worked his way down her collarbone, his tongue flicking out at the hollow at the base. "Don't worry, my love. By the time I get there you will want it as much as I do."

Grace moaned. Who was he kidding? She wanted it now. Hell, she was craving it already.

He tugged her shirt over her head and his head continued its way down her body, kissing, licking and nipping all the way down to her chest where he engulfed a breast in his mouth.

Grace's body was aflame with desire and need. The hard suck he gave her nipple had her arching into him. One hand held her in place, the other kneaded her other breast, massaging it forcefully. Grace's hands reached up and wrapped her hands in his thick black hair. It was smooth as silk, the feel of it sending more tingles through her body.

He reached up and tugged at one of her hands, bringing it down to her breast, and silently instructing her to play with herself as his hand reached down to the apex of her legs and cupped her.

She arched into his hand, eager to feel his fingers against her skin. The pants were an unwanted barrier that he quickly removed before returning to her breast and core. Cool air wafted across her pussy just before his hand brushed against her curls. A small whimper escaped her mouth as she waited for him to move further. He caressed the cleft of her lips gently, her hips wiggling against him as she urged him on silently.

He eased his mouth back to play with her nipple, teasing it, nipping gently with his teeth. "I want to taste you, Grace. I want your essence on my tongue as I make love to you."

Grace groaned. Oh, gods, where did this man find his dialogue. Something inside of her body unfurled and roared in need and acceptance of all he wanted to do.

He kissed his way down her torso, hands stroking her as he moved until he hovered right over her core. He looked up at her and their eyes met. His deep inhale had her squirming and his satisfied smile burned a hole deep within her body.

With both hands he slowly separated her lower lips and then gazed down at her bared sex. His tongue darted out and lapped at her from bottom to top, sending her hips into a thrusting motion against his mouth.

Grace had been eaten out before. It was one of her favorite things, in fact. Eduardo had decades, if not centuries, of practice over the men she'd had in her life, and it showed. She didn't know what he did differently than any of her previous partners, but within seconds he had her writhing and screaming with one of the strongest orgasms she could recall ever having.

"Oh, gods, Eduardo! Stop, enough!" Grace breathed hard, gasping for breath as his tongue, lips and fingers all pleased her beyond the threshold of mere pleasure.

He ignored her, his fingers thrusting into her hard and harder, one, two, now three, as they scissored inside her, stretching her for what was to come. His tongue licked her faster and faster driving her over again and again.

Finally, when she was weak from orgasms, sure she had not one bit of energy left, he raised up on his arms and positioned himself at her entrance. Slowly he pushed his way into her body. Good goddess, how thick was he? She swallowed the giggle that came on the heels of her irreverent thought when he thrust in a bit faster. He filled her completely, making her glad he had stretched her earlier.

Eduardo rolled his hips and she gasped as her body answered his. It was only when he moved again that she realized he still wasn't completely in. Her eyes went wide and she smiled up at him.

"Damn, I guess those romance novels have it right, don't they?"

Eduardo winked at her before bending down for a kiss. "I have no idea what you're talking about, love."

"Yeah, right, and I bet you have no idea why Judy and the rest of the coven was drooling over you last night."

His eyes twinkled in response as he slowly pulled out of her before pushing back in just as slowly.

Grace quickly lost herself in his motions as he made love to her. And there was no doubt about it in her mind. This was making love, not fucking. And not a quick meal. Eduardo kissed her body, caressed her, stroked her inside and out. His small nips across her breasts and shoulders had her shivering in anticipation of more.

Her orgasm came soft and gentle, and he seemed to take it as a signal to pick up his speed as his slow, gentle thrusts became more forceful and determined. He thrust into her faster, ripping gasps and moans from her while he whispered words she could not understand in a language older than Spanish, yet somehow familiar.

The penetration of teeth took her by surprise, but she had no time to process it as the most intense orgasm she'd ever had in her life crashed over her, bringing her screaming to fulfillment, her body thrashing against the mattress and Eduardo.

Finally, her body calmed down enough that she could breathe again, even if a bit ragged and fast. "Oh my freaking God!"

Eduardo's chuckle against her throat sent tingles all through her body.

"Is it always that intense?"

"Well, I will admit your reaction is a bit stronger than most women's."

"Good lord, do it again, please." Her giggle was weak and drained of all strength.

"Even vampires need a little bit of recovery time, my love." His voice still held a thread of amusement. But she couldn't take offense. She was amusing herself, too.

"Well, then." She tapped her hand against his hip. "You better get off of me. You may have had your meal, but I have yet to have mine."

With a groan, Eduardo rolled off of her, but not before nipping her on the tip of her chin, causing her to break out into small giggles.

"Who showers first?" She asked as she stood up, only to be grabbed from behind and lifted into Eduardo's arms.

"Eduardo, put me down!"

"I like carrying you."

"No, stop. Put me down right now."

Eduardo stopped in mid stride and looked down at her. "Why don't you like to be carried, Grace?"

"I just don't, now stop this." Grace tried to struggle, but she knew it was fruitless, so instead she tried to be content with covering her body as much as she could.

The growl that came from Eduardo's throat had her looking up at him quickly.

"Don't cover your body."

"It's my body, I'll do what I want to it."

"Why do you try to hide it?" Eduardo had resumed walking and gently put her down in her large master bath. He turned her to face the mirror that was over the vanity.

"Eduardo, stop. Let me just take my shower. We can deal with my insecurities later."

"No. I want to deal with them now."

Grace's temper flared. "And do you always get what you want?"

“Always.” His response was flat and smooth, totally without anger, but also full of determination.

“Fine, let’s get this farce over with. You are going to tell me that I have large breasts and hips perfect for nursing and child birth, a stomach that is a bit rounded, making a perfect pillow for your head, and wide strong legs.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

Grace frowned into the mirror at him.

“I was going to point out the plump redness of your recently kissed lips, and tell you that they invite me to steal just one more kiss before I let you leave my arms.” His hands trailed down her body as he told her what he thought of each and every inch of her.

“Your breasts are large, yes, and comfortable to hold on to. There is a small artery right here,” He stroked the upper side of her breast lightly, “that will feed me nicely when we make love. I can bury my head against you and take what I need.”

“Your stomach is larger than what is considered sexy to the fools in today’s world, but when I was born, when I learned the value of beauty, this stomach and waist would have been the envy of all the women in the city.

“Your legs, yes, your legs speak to me of strength. They tell me that you can prop yourself up when I slam into you again and again. Or that you can wrap them around and hold on to me when I am crazy with lust.”

Grace had been watching his eyes as he spoke, as he stroked and caressed her body when he talked about each part. She didn’t know if he realized how expressive they could be, but they told her he was being completely honest with her. He found her beautiful and desirable. Not just a handy meal on legs. She looked down in shame.

“Never think that.” Her eyes flew up to meet his in the mirror. “Never think that, Grace. I could have left this morning. I could have bundled up from the early morning sun. My windows are tinted enough I could have gotten home, or to a hotel. I wanted to stay with you, because I found you desirable.”

Before she could answer him, he spun her around and pulled her against him to crush her lips in a bruising kiss.

The lust rose up quickly this time, leaving her little time for breath, never mind awareness.

Eduardo picked her up and walked into the shower stall forcing her to wrap her legs around his waist. He turned on the water, hot, the way she liked it, never letting go of her lips or her. He kissed his way across her cheek, nipped at her ear, and massaged her ass.

"Never think of yourself as less than you are. A beautiful, desirable woman. One that drives me insane with need and desire."

He thrust into her quickly and she screamed as she came around his hard shaft. He thrust into her again and again, her back propped against the wall of the shower as she came continuously, her body a ball of hot need. The last thing she was aware of his was his shouted, "Grace" as he shot his orgasm into her waiting body.

Grace came to probably seconds later. Her body was still sandwiched between the tiles of the wall and Eduardo. Her breathing had slowed down a bit, her legs still locked around his waist.

"*Dios mio*," Eduardo groaned, leaning his forehead against her shoulder. "Never have I had a woman make me lose control so easily as you."

"That's okay. I've never had a lover as, um, enthusiastic as you."

"Oh, *querida*. I'm sorry. Are you okay?" Eduardo leaned back and held Grace as she unfolded her legs. He held her until she was standing securely and then stepped back.

"Yeah, just give me a minute." Grace shook her head as she breathed deeply. Good lord, this man was potent. Not to mention thorough. "Let me just, um take my shower"

"*Querida*."

"No, please, Eduardo. I don't want to talk right now. I just need to take my shower." She closed her eyes as she put her hand toward him. She just couldn't take him right now. She needed the time to breathe.

She was surprised when he grasped her hand gently and kissed the palm before letting go. By the time she had opened her eyes he was gone.

Grace took her time showering, knowing she needed to clear her head and decide what she wanted to do about this strange man – vampire – that had invaded her life.

At least he wasn't spouting off all that crap about lifemates and being meant for each other. The last thing she needed was a man that insisted he knew what was best for her for the rest of eternity.

Finally done showering and changing, Grace opened her bedroom door to brave the man that had been all she could think about for the last fifteen hours. It was nearly ten o'clock, and she didn't care what Eduardo had told Cody, she was going into work tonight. Now to convince Eduardo of that.

"Eduardo, I need you to take me back to Del Fantasma." Grace figured a direct offense was her best bet. Don't let him start setting down rules, set down her own, and she would be able to keep things moving the way she wanted them.

"I don't think so, *querida*."

"Fine, then I need you to leave because I am going to call a cab to come get me."

"I don't think so, *querida*." Eduardo sat there in the middle of her kitchen, a cup of tea in front of him.

"Excuse me?"

He handed her the tea and sat back, more relaxed in her house than he had any right to be. "You are not going in to work tonight."

"And when did you become the boss of me?" Grace cringed at her wording. It made her sound like a preteen.

A raised eyebrow was the only response.

“Eduardo, despite what happened earlier, you do not have any say in what I do.”

“I beg to differ, *querida*.”

“A fucking roll in the sack does not make you my lord and master.”

Eduardo stood up and was suddenly in her personal space. Personal space? Screw that, he was millimeters from her. She felt his breath wave over her body as he spoke. “If you want to play Master and slave games, *querida*, all you had to do was ask.”

Grace stepped back. Quickly. Pushing him away wouldn’t have done any good. “You are so fucking infuriating.”

His smile sent shivers down her spine. “Wait until you really get to know me.”

“What makes you think I want to?” Her heart clenched at her words. She did want to get to know him better. Her body burned when he was near, and her heart soared with pleasure. Every time she looked at him she felt content, needed, not alone.

“I think you want to very much, Grace. The question is are you going to let yourself?”

She couldn’t live life like this. Her mother had lived like that, and Grace had seen what it had done to her. Living for another person, whether it be a man or a child, never ended well. You needed to have your own life, and she knew that Eduardo would take over her life completely. She could already see him doing it.

He only ordered a mattress, Grace.

And pillows. And now he is telling me I can’t go to work.

He knows you are tired and stressed from yesterday. He only wants to keep you safe.

Grace did her best to ignore her inner voice and stop arguing with it. It wasn’t going to win, no matter how right it might be. She did not need a man like Eduardo in her life.

“You don’t know anything about me, Eduardo. So get over yourself and stop trying to psychoanalyze me.” Grace walked out of the kitchen and into the mudroom. It was the only area of the house Eduardo hadn’t cleaned up this morning. And she knew that was only because of the large window that let in unfiltered sunlight. By the time he

was done with the living room, it would have been too sunny in there for him to do anything.

Finally she heard him get up and go upstairs. The sound of running water assured her that he had climbed into the shower and would be at least a little while. Now was her chance.

Grace looked at the clock above the bar. Nearly four o'clock in the morning. Her shift was almost over and still Eduardo hadn't shown. Maybe she'd misjudged him. Maybe he didn't care that she snuck out while he was in the shower. Hell, she'd been so paranoid she hadn't even called the cab from home. She'd used her cell phone and had it pick her up a couple blocks away. But even with that, Eduardo could have beaten her to the bar easily. She hadn't pegged him as someone that would give up that easily.

"What makes you think I gave up?"

Grace turned around at the sound of Eduardo's deep voice, but saw no one behind her. She was alone. Well, as alone as one ever got in the middle of a crowded bar like Del Fantasma. But damn, she could have sworn she had just heard his voice.

What the fuck was wrong with her?

"Grace? You okay?"

Grace spun around again, this time to face the bar and Cody standing behind it.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry, thought I heard something."

Cody gave her a strange look. "Are you sure you're okay after what happened?"

"I'm fine, Cody. Stop worrying about me. I'm a big girl you know."

"Fine. Then tell me at least how you liked your Latin Lover last night."

"What?" If she'd been drinking, she would have spluttered it all over him. How the hell did he know what happened between her and Eduardo?

"The drink I gave you last night. It's one I found on the net. What did you think of it?"

The drink was called Latin Lover? God damn Cody and his drink, as well as his matchmaking habit.

"It was fine. But one is more than enough for me," she responded tartly.

The smile on his face made goosebumps pop all over her body. Damn him and his ability.

"One is all you need, *querida*." This time, when she turned around Eduardo was right behind her. Mere inches away.

"None suits me even better." She shot at him before storming away to clean up a table just vacated. Of all the nerve. She'd told him she didn't need his help, didn't want him in her life. But did he listen? Of course not. He was the big Uber macho vampire, come to protect the little lady.

So then why didn't he come protect her earlier?

"Perhaps I knew you were safe."

Gods, it was bad enough when she was talking to herself in her own voice, now she was talking to herself in his voice.

She tamped down the feeling of warmth that flooded her knowing he was here looking after her. She didn't need that.

Cody had called the garage to pick up her car after Eduardo called him. It had only been the alternator, and they'd replaced it and recharged her battery while she was at home. Thankfully it wasn't much, and the garage said she could make payments. So the car was waiting for her in the parking lot.

Now if she could only get home without Eduardo stopping her.

"Don't count on it, little one."

Grace looked up to see Eduardo still across the room. There was no way he could have said that. She was going freaking nuts.

Clean up done, there was little more to do than wait until the rest of the patrons left. The other waitress had urged Grace to go home earlier, and she had refused, knowing she'd rather be working than home alone. But after seeing Jane with only a couple tables full, Grace changed her mind.

Eduardo was deep in conversation with Brandon and another vamp. It was now or never. Gesturing to Jane, who nodded back, she snuck out the front door and made

it to her car in record time. It started better than it had in years, and she sighed in relief as she pulled out of the parking lot.

The thought flashed across her mind that she should flatten Eduardo's tires, but she just couldn't do it. Anyway, the bastard would probably just turn into a bat and hunt her down that way.

Grace continuously checked the rear view mirror the entire drive home. She didn't know what she was more worried about, Hank or Eduardo.

She finally had to laugh at herself. She had no proof that Eduardo had come to see her tonight. The way he and Cody were talking, he seemed to be an old friend. Just because she had never met him before didn't mean they weren't. She only just started working the late shift since she got laid off from her day job. Up until a week ago she'd been working the earlier shift.

And if he were that interested in her, he surely would have made more of an effort to keep her at home tonight. Or if not that, at least to speak to her at the bar tonight. The fact that she had avoided him was irrelevant. If he had wanted to, he would have found a way. Hell, there was no way she would have gotten away from him if he had really wanted her there.

Girl, what the hell do you want? You get pissed when he gets bossy, you get pissed when he gives you space. Why don't you make up your mind?

Grace knew she was being irrational, but she couldn't help it. She lost all sense when she thought about him. If it was like this after twenty four hours, how would it be in the long run?

But what would it be like to have a man that wanted you for you? That cared for you because of who you were and not what you could give him? Eduardo could have any woman he wanted, and he had already told her he wanted her. The feel of hands running down her body made her shiver in excitement and warning simultaneously.

God, she must really need sleep. Between hearing people that weren't around, and feeling hands that weren't there, she was seriously screwed tonight.

By the time she'd gotten home, she'd forced herself to accept her reasoning. Despite Cody's matchmaking abilities, he'd failed this one time. Now if this nervous feeling in her stomach would only listen to her head and go away.

The garage door was still closed, and Grace groaned when she remembered they'd locked it from the inside earlier in the day. Dammit, it meant she'd have to go through her front door.

Scanning the area around her townhouse, she saw nothing suspicious so climbed out of her car. Hank wasn't likely to come back. Hell, she still wasn't sure why he had shown up in the first place. She had given or thrown away all his shit months ago, and it wasn't like she ever had much in her hidey-hole.

Relocking the front door behind her, she reset the alarm immediately. It took her a second to remember her new pin code, but the alarm was rearmed and ready. It looked undisturbed. Score one for the good guys. Hopefully she could catch a few winks before the men showed up to wire the top floor.

Grace tossed her keys onto the entry table as she walked toward the stairs and the kitchen. Food sounded really good right now. She made it to the top of the stairs before she was grabbed and pulled back. Hands wrapped around her mouth and neck.

Instantly, she knew it wasn't Eduardo this time. The stench of old blood and unwashed male assailed her senses. It was almost strong enough to make her gag.

"Goddamn fucking cunt, where is it? You better fucking tell me or you're fucking dead." It was only then that she realized that Hank held a knife to her throat.

"Hank, what are you talking about?"

"Goddamnit, bitch. Where's the fucking money? Harrison found me thanks to your new fuckin' boyfriend. He said the asshole made sure they knew you were done paying them. Where's the fuckin' money?"

New boyfriend? Done paying? "Hank, what are you talking about? God Dammit, I have been paying them, you asshole!" Anger started to overcome the fear she had felt when he had first grabbed her. For the last six months she'd been paying off

this asshole's debts, working two jobs, eating ramen noodles, and he not only broke into her house, but now he wanted more money. No freaking way.

"Bitch, don't make me mad."

Grace opened her mouth to tell him exactly what she thought of him, but the voice from the shadows stopped her cold.

"I think you need to let go of the lady before you don't live to regret it."

"What?" Hank spun them around frantically. The voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

"You heard me." Eduardo's voice dripped coldly with malice.

Grace hoped he never had reason to turn that tone of voice to her. It scared her to death, and at the same time she felt relief run through her. Eduardo was here. She was safe. She knew that as well as she knew her own name. He wouldn't let anything happen to her.

"Show yourself or I cut the bitch here and now!" Hank was practically screaming as his arms tightened against her. Grace felt the knife break her skin and a drop of blood run down her neck. Nice knowing you, Hank.

It was over in an instant. She knew she'd never be able to explain what had happened next in any detail. One second she was held prisoner, the next she was held by Eduardo in his arms while Hank writhed on the floor screaming about his broken arm.

"Be silent." Eduardo's commanding tone had Hank suddenly silent, tears running down his face as he rolled around in pain.

"*Querida*, are you okay? I'm sorry, I was too late." Eduardo squeezed her tightly, only to pull back and look at the nick on her neck.

"Too late? I'd say you got here just in time."

"No, I never intended to let you enter the house alone. I was detained, though, by Cody and Brandon. I will never forgive myself, or them for that."

Grace laughed. Apparently Cody's abilities to match up people were a bit stronger than they realized, either that or it was just plain luck.

"Eduardo, I am fine. But I think we had better call the cops and get Hank taken care of."

Eduardo's sigh had her smiling. Hopefully she would still be smiling later. They had some things to discuss.

"I have to admit that I really do like this mattress set."

Eduardo said nothing, just pulled her tighter into his arms.

Grace let him, snuggling against him before she started asking the questions she'd been dying to ask ever since he showed up. "What did he mean about Harrison?"

"I have no idea of what you are speaking." He kissed her temple, then her cheek, working his way down to her jaw line.

"Hank said Harrison told him my new boyfriend said I was done paying, and he needed to get the money from Hank."

"Boyfriend?" He kissed her neck, down to her clavicle, licking under the spaghetti strap of her tank top. "Do you have a new boyfriend I should know about?"

He knew damn well she didn't have a new boyfriend. And the only new man in her life was him. "Fine, what did you do to Harrison?"

"Mmm" was the only response he gave her as he nudged the strap to the side.

"Eduardo, stop! We need to talk." She knew if she didn't stop him now, she wouldn't be able to stop him in a couple minutes. Never mind whether or not he would be too far-gone, she *knew* she would.

Eduardo sighed deeply before pulling away from her slowly. He turned them both so she was tucked under his arm, his back to the headboard.

"All right, what do you want to know?"

"What did you tell Harrison? And how do you know him?"

"*Querida*, I am over four hundred years old. You don't think I got this far without having some contacts, do you?"

"No, but —"

"Let's just say that I took care of it. You don't have to pay Harrison anything else."

"But —"

"Nor do you have to worry about any of Hank's other bills."

"Eduardo —"

"Let me do this for you, *querida*, please. It will make me feel better that I did not make it in time tonight."

"Eduardo, I'm fine, I wish you would stop saying that."

"You are not fine. That *pendejo* hurt you. If I had been here on time, it would not have happened. I never should have let you out of my sight."

"So then why did you?" Not that Grace liked the idea of him thinking he had the right, but, hey, he did rescue her. And she did like having him in her bed. He felt nice. Not to mention he was an incredible lover. "Why did you let me get away?"

"Because you were never really away from me."

Grace opened her mouth to respond, when she realized he hadn't spoken aloud. He'd said it in her head.

"What's that? How are you talking in my head like that?" She arched her head to look at him.

"It's because we shared blood."

"Shared blood? We didn't share. I didn't drink anything last night." She hadn't agreed to any thing like that. She agreed to him drinking her blood. That was it. Full stop. Not that she didn't like him here, in her bed. And in her body.

"Doesn't your brain ever stop, *querida*?"

"Explain it to me, Eduardo."

"You are correct. We didn't exactly share blood. Forgive me for my wording." He stroked her arm as he answered her. "Once I took your blood, I was able to tell where you were and what you were doing."

"You can read my mind?" Grace yelled, trying to sit up.

Eduardo held her close to him, preventing her from moving. “When it’s not shielded, yes.”

Damn men. She knew it. Freaking Alpha male vampires, always bossing people around. Sneaking in people’s heads, thinking they knew what was —

“Grace!”

She settled down and let him finish, but she crossed her arms across her chest to let him know she wasn’t happy.

“I know you aren’t happy.”

“How could you keep this from me? I asked you last night if there would be any repercussions.”

“I’m sorry, Grace. I never expected it to be as strong as it is.”

“So why is it so strong?”

Eduardo took a long time to answer her. Too long. “Eduardo?”

“You can learn to shield, to keep me out.”

“Eduardo, that wasn’t the answer to my question.”

“The only reason I can think of, *querida*, is because I have feelings for you.”

“Feelings? We only just met.”

He chuckled. “Don’t I know it. For a man that has lived four hundred years, these last twenty-four hours have seemed to have lasted a lifetime.”

Grace wasn’t sure how to take that, so she just let it go. For now. It was probably a compliment. Probably.

“You know what Cody did, didn’t you?”

“What do you mean?” He stroked her hair, and she relaxed against him. He made her feel warm and protected, and she was fast learning that it wasn’t a bad thing.

“That drink he gave me. Last night, no, the night before. The night we met.”

“I don’t understand you, *querida*.”

Grace sighed heavily. “For a man who can read my mind, I have to explain an awful lot to you.”

“I am trying to stay out of your mind, Grace. You deserve some privacy.”

The thrill that ran through her at his words warmed her all the way to her toes. Maybe Cody had been right. To hell with it. She'd explain Cody's ability to pair up partners by way of a special drink later. Right now she wanted more from Eduardo than just words. She wanted *him*.

In a move that was a surprise to both of them, Grace broke free of his hold, and rolled up to straddle his waist. "You know we are going to have to set some ground rules if this relationship is going to continue, right?"

Eduardo's hands cupped her hips as he sighed heavily. "Yes, dear."

Grace arched an eyebrow. "Yes, dear?"

His smile warmed her straight through her heart. "*Querida*, I only want you to be happy and safe. I know being involved with me won't be easy, but I need you in my life."

"Are you going to turn me?"

"Not unless you want me to. And not until you are sure it is what you want."

"So we can just," she moved her hips against his crotch, "grow to know each other?"

Eduardo growled. Something was definitely growing. "Are you going to keep talking? Don't you have some gratitude to show me?"

Grace's eyes narrowed as she leaned down, lips almost touching his as she whispered. "Oh, I have something to show you, and I promise you, you will be the one showing gratitude when I am done."

Latin Lover



Ingredients

1/4 oz Lemon Juice
3/4 oz Lime Juice
3/4 oz Tequila
3/4 oz Cachaca
2 oz Pineapple Juice

Directions

Shake well over crushed ice in a shaker. Strain into a large highball glass over crushed ice, add a pineapple chunk, and serve.

We hope you enjoyed *Latin Lover*, another in the Del Fantasma series. Visit www.AspenMountainPress.com and sign up for our newsletter so you can be informed of when the next Del Fantasma story is due.

Aspen Mountain Press also has a community loop for those who wish to chat with other readers about our stories. You can join it at www.AMP_Community@yahoogroups.com

And now for an excerpt from Del Fantasma: Screaming Orgasm by Michelle Hasker, available now at www.AspenMountainPress.com

* * * *

"Can I have a Screaming Orgasm, Cody?" Tara leaned against the mahogany counter and glanced around at the growing crowd.

"Sure thing, sweetheart. I get off about two, when do you want to get off?"

Tara choked on her own saliva. She'd set herself up for that one. Cody was a flirt, she knew that. She should be used to his flirtatious banter by now. She recovered quickly as he set the drink in front of her. "If I thought you'd take me up on the offer, handsome, I'd say every hour on the hour."

"That's what I love about you, Tara. Your comebacks. I'm going to miss you when you move on."

"Yeah, well, you know. A rolling stone gathers no moss, or whatever."

"Sweetheart, you're no rolling stone."

"Thanks." Tara took a deep sip and enjoyed the way the vodka, Bailey's and Kahlua hit the spot, numbing her, at least temporarily.

"I really do wish you'd let me set you up with someone. Trust me, Hon, a real screaming orgasm would do you wonders."

"You know why I can't." Tara looked away and focused on the jukebox against the far wall. Those memories needed to stay buried. Remembering was too painful. There was nothing she could do about it now, but she could make sure she never hurt another person as she had hurt Chad.

Tara glanced back at Cody as he moved down the bar to serve his customers. He was a pleasure to watch. All hard, toned muscle, tanned skin and blue eyes that either saw right through her, or made her want to melt into an orgasmic puddle at his feet.

When she had first come here, Cody had intimidated her, but now that she had gotten to know him very well, the incorrigible flirt had etched a spot in her heart forever. Too bad she really did need to get laid.

Even though Cody had his pick of women, love seemed to elude him like it did her. While he had no problems matching employees and friends, he had yet to find someone special for himself. Or her. Thank God—but it wasn't for lack of trying on his part. As much as Tara wanted to stay here at Del Fantasma with Cody looking out for her, she couldn't. Her job as a singer was temporary. Once she had enough funds she would move on. Again.

Perhaps she could convince Cody to follow through on his teasing offer to get her off. He knew what she was and could protect himself. But then what would happen to their friendship? He was the only person she'd ever met who wasn't frightened by her special ability. Not only wasn't he frightened, he seemed to embrace her uniqueness. She was no fool. Most of his customers were special and they all got the same treatment she did. Still, he made her feel human.