



# FERAL HUNGER

STEPHANIE BEDWELL-GRIME

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*Vlad the Impaler? Don't make her laugh...*

Vlad is un-living proof that even a shy guy with the unfortunate name of Leslie can remake himself. Vampire, cad, player, he embraces it all without a pesky thing called a conscience. Until he receives a “special delivery” on his doorstep. A woman on the brink of death. One look at the sexy blonde, and his inner Leslie—his long-forgotten conscience—moves him to do the right thing and save her life.

One minute Jaelyn is enjoying a night out at a club. The next, she's under a brutal vampire attack. Adjusting to her new life as one of them is hard enough without the added charm of Vlad's grumpiness with the whole situation.

Instead of sending Jaelyn on her merry way, Vlad gives in to another totally uncharacteristic urge—to solve the mystery of who assaulted her, and why whoever it was dumped her at his place. There must be a connection, and it surely can't have anything to do with their budding attraction.

But delving into a dangerous vampire underworld could remake their undead lives once again. Permanently.

Warning: Contains hot and heavy coffin action.

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# Feral Hunger

*Stephanie Bedwell-Grime*

# Dedication

For Derek, who continues to peacefully coexist with my vampires.

# Chapter One

The body landed with a thump on his doorstep.

Vlad yanked the door open. A comely blonde tumbled onto his black boots. Her head lolled to the side, rolling off his toe, so he couldn't miss the smear of blood across the woman's pale neck. Nor could he ignore the two deep puncture wounds.

Vlad glanced furtively up and down the hallway. The elevator doors had closed, the numbers swiftly descending to the ground floor. It was 23 flights down to the lobby. Briefly, he debated making a run for the stairwell and down to the ground floor. But just as he tensed to move, the woman lying at his feet moaned. Not a body after all, but a still-living, breathing woman. That complicated things even more. He looked up and down the hallway again. Nothing moved.

He could close the door and feign innocence until the police inevitably arrived. But he was a vampire. Innocent until proven guilty didn't always apply to his kind, no matter what the law books said.

The blonde groaned softly again. Coming to a sudden decision, Vlad bent and swung one arm under her legs and the other beneath her shoulders. As he lifted her into his arms, her head rolled back against his elbow, showing him more of the damage to her throat. Vlad smothered a gasp. Whoever had fed from her had ravaged her neck. Vampire or not, he objected to a woman being treated like this. Scowling, he turned back into his penthouse and slammed the door.

Her blood dripped across his new carpet as he lowered her to his black leather couch. He hissed in irritation. He rarely involved himself in other people's troubles, vampire or otherwise. And this was his *lair*, his domain. The place he brought his women, his meals. The shiny black grand piano with its dripping candelabra always helped in the seduction. He'd decorated his entire condo for just that purpose.

He'd been about to go out and get himself a meal of the warm-blooded female variety. The last thing he needed tonight was the picked-over remains of someone else's takeout. He glowered down at the woman on his couch and sighed. His underused conscience tugged at him. He couldn't leave her like this.

But what was he going to do with her?

By the severity of her wound, he guessed she had to have a fair bit of vampire saliva in her bloodstream. She would turn. There was little doubt of that. Not to mention the blood she'd lost. Without a donation of vampire blood she might even die.

Vlad shook his head. He lived an unencumbered life. The last thing he wanted was a new vampire to look after.

Another drop of her crimson blood splashed onto the carpet. The sight brought a stomach-squeezing pang of hunger. He had to do something soon—for her and for himself. Still, he hesitated. Making another of his kind was not to be undertaken lightly. He thought of the damage it would do to his reputation. How would he pick up women with a young female vampire in tow?

His shriveled conscience debated that for a moment.

His unwanted guest wasn't doing well. A sheen of sweat had broken out on her forehead. Her chest heaved with her rapid breathing. She'd lost a great deal of blood. It was entirely possible she was dying in his arms. He should call 9-1-1.

But how would he explain this to the police? The last thing he needed was a charge of biting without consent, manslaughter, or even murder.

His mind raced. Why would someone harm a beautiful woman and leave her on *his* doorstep? He had many acquaintances and few friends, but until tonight he didn't think he had any enemies. At least not in the vampire world.

Something about her predicament pulled at him, touching his frozen heart. What it was, he couldn't say exactly. It might have been the way he held her life quite literally in his hands. Or perhaps it was merely that they were both victims in this strange situation. Someone had attacked her, someone who meant to harm his reputation by leaving her on his doorstep.

Still, creating another vampire was not without consequences. Not everyone made it through the change, and he'd never made another of his kind. He wasn't entirely sure he *could* help her.

She uttered another soft moan full of pain and torment. That tiny, pitiful sound finally made up his mind. He simply couldn't let her die.

He knelt beside her and stretched one arm under her neck to raise her head. For a moment, he hesitated again, knowing there was no going back from what he was about to do. With a deep sigh of resignation, he bent his head over his right wrist.

He shivered at the foreign sensation of his own cool lips brushing his skin. His incisors lowered. The thin skin offered little resistance as they slid into his vein with a keen mixture of pleasure-laced pain. Thick, salty blood poured over his tongue. He swallowed convulsively. He shoved his hunger into a gnawing little ball in his stomach and yanked his mouth away.

He watched in fascination as a scarlet drop of his blood splashed onto the carpet, mingling with hers. He rarely saw his own blood, had never tasted it before. He raised her head, bringing his wrist to her lips.

For a moment, he feared it was too late, that she had slipped too far into unconsciousness and now lingered on the brink of death. His blood dripped onto her slightly parted lips only to run in bright rivulets down her neck.

"Drink," he whispered.

Her eyelids flickered. Her cool lips latched onto his wrist. She gulped the first mouthful.

“Easy,” he warned.

But she sucked strongly at the wound, drinking his blood as if it were the finest ambrosia. Her hands gripped his arm, holding him to her as if she were afraid he might get away.

Looking down at her in the candlelight, he could see the color beginning to flush back into her skin. Her breathing came in deep gasps as she swallowed more of his blood. Still, her strength was returning. He could tell by the death grip she had on his arm.

“Enough,” he ordered, even though she likely wasn’t conscious enough to obey. He let her take another mouthful before he attempted to pull his arm away.

She hung on, but in the end his superior strength won out and he ripped his wrist from her grasp. Her eyelids twitched once before she lapsed into a deep stupor. Vlad pulled his arm out from under her head and let her slide back against his couch.

He lapped at his wounded arm until the blood began to clot. The last thing he needed was more of it on the carpet. One last sluggish drop of his blood oozed from the wound. He licked it away. His body was already healing itself, but that wouldn’t take care of the crushing hunger that raced through him. His blood surged through her veins. When she awoke she’d be well into the throes of the change. And in the meantime he needed to feed.

Vlad looked down at the blonde. His blood was smeared across her mouth giving her a bizarre rictus grin. He stared at her for a long time, wondering who she was and what he’d say to her once she regained consciousness.

With one last backward glance, he strode to the kitchen and turned on the tap. The cold rush of water felt good against his skin as he rinsed his wrist. He was going to have to call someone, eventually. The woman on his sofa might need help if things didn’t go smoothly. Fear tugged at his brain, fighting with the sluggishness brought on by blood loss. He needed blood and then he needed to think.

Vlad gazed again at his unwanted houseguest. With a sigh, he reached for the paper-towel dispenser and tore off a couple of sheets. Another blast of water made them damp. He moved cautiously toward her, afraid she might rise up out of her stupor. Instead, she lay silently on his couch, breathing steadily. Indecision gnawed at him. He didn’t like the idea of leaving her alone in his condo, but what else could he do?

She’d sleep for quite a while, he reassured himself. At least he hoped she’d rest long enough for him to feed and decide what to do. Gently, he wiped the blood from her mouth and cleaned up the drops that had trickled onto the sofa. He wandered down the hall and tossed the paper towel into the toilet. No sense leaving anything incriminating in case she came to and called the police.

With that thought in mind, he reached under the sink for the spot remover. He took the bottle with its built-in brush back to the living room and scrubbed the rug.

Satisfied he'd done enough damage control, he let himself out of the apartment and locked the door, hoping his life would still be waiting for him when he returned.

## Chapter Two

Jaelyn swam in a warm haze of golden light. Exhaustion tugged on every muscle. She wanted to raise her heavy eyelids. Something in the back of her mind insisted she should. A fragment of a thought nagged at her consciousness.

Danger.

Fractured images drifted through her mind. She'd gone somewhere with her friend, Mandy. She couldn't remember where. They'd left Mandy's apartment in a cab. She recalled whizzing through the streets at breakneck speed, the city lights a dazzling kaleidoscope. Cool wind from the cab's open window had torn at her hair. She'd asked the driver to close it, she remembered that much. And after that...nothing.

Jaelyn forced her eyelids open. A strange room spun around her. She caught a glimpse of black drapery, black leather and a splash of candlelight all seemingly mixed up in a giant blender. Her skin itched. Something that burned like gasoline raced through her veins. She might have been sick if her stomach hadn't felt like it was being squeezed in a giant fist.

Startlingly, a fragment of a memory shot through her mind. She remembered being shoved against a wall. Cool brick behind her. Cold lips at her neck. The crushing pressure. The pain...

She opened her mouth to scream. The apartment door flew open.

Vlad reached his apartment door and sighed with relief. No police tape, no knot of blue-uniformed officers crowded the hallway. He'd met up with one of his usual donors at a nearby club and fed as quickly as possible. All the while, worry had gnawed at his gut. Still, things seemed quiet as he arrived home. His shoulders slumped as the tension left them and he felt in his pocket for his keys.

A scream pierced the heavy wooden door. He flung it open to find the blonde sitting up on his couch and staring at him in complete horror.

She had sea-foam green eyes, he noted abstractedly as she centered him in her gaze.

Vlad gave her what he hoped was a reassuring expression. But in doing so, he smiled a little too broadly, showing a hint of fang. Big mistake. She screamed again.

The last thing he needed was concerned neighbors in the hallways. He rushed toward her and clamped a hand over her mouth, not knowing what else to do. She bit him, hard enough to draw blood. He snatched his hand back. Her scream burst free.

“Shh!” He tried for a more human-looking smile. Usually, he kept his fangs in plain sight. Women liked them. At least the kind of women he favored liked them. The blonde wasn’t fooled. She shrieked even louder.

Vlad covered her mouth with a vise-like grip. It served to muffle the sound, but not much. *No good deed goes unpunished.* It had been his personal motto for some time now. Not that he was often prone to good deeds. He brought his face down close to her ear. “Look,” he said the word with as much gentleness as he could muster. “I know what you’re thinking, but I’m not the one who did this to you.”

Her eyes widened. He suspected she didn’t believe him, but she fell silent. She had no particular reason to believe him. He had done things to her, things she probably wasn’t going to appreciate once she grasped their full significance. Like making her a vampire.

“How do I know that?” she inquired against his palm.

He let his breath go in a rush. “You don’t. So you’re going to have to take my word that I found you unconscious on my doorstep.”

She struggled in his grasp. He tightened his grip. At least she didn’t bite him again, Vlad thought with relief. “If I’m going to help you, I need you to stop screaming and listen to me.”

She grew still. Silence stretched between them.

“Can I move my hand?”

She nodded hesitantly.

He drew his hand away, but kept it close, just in case.

She was still staring at him with those startling eyes. “You’re a—a—” She tried to scuttle away from him again, but he held her tight.

“Vampire,” he supplied and sincerely hoped she didn’t scream again. “But I’m not the vampire who hurt you.”

She studied his face and he waited while she perused him. It was often that way with women. They found his looks pleasing. Many of them had told him so. They found his dark brown curls appealing and his even darker brown eyes more so. Apparently not this one though, because she was staring at him with something close to horror.

The sight of the terror in her wide green eyes unnerved him. He never had to work to earn a woman’s regard. And for some reason he couldn’t quite fathom, he wanted her to like him.

Vlad studied this unfamiliar feeling for a moment and decided he didn’t like it. “Do you remember anything about what happened?”

She shook her head.

“Nothing at all?”

“Nothing that makes sense. Just frightening images.”

He could well imagine what those were. Accusation hung in the silence between them. This wasn't how it usually went. He must be off his game tonight. Normally, he'd have a woman in his large coffin in the bedroom by now. "Believe me, I've never had to force a woman to get blood." He sounded petulant, even to his own ears.

"Great," she snapped. "Just like other men, even male vampires have huge egos."

Vlad bit back a sharp comment. The last thing he needed was more screaming. That would get him in trouble with the condo association, who wasn't all that pleased to have a vampire resident in the first place.

"Look—" He put as much compulsion into his voice as he could. "I can help you, but you have to try and remember what happened."

She shook her head. "It's mostly a blank."

He was a pretty good hypnotist. But would it work on someone who was already becoming a vampire? Vlad tried again, lowering the timbre of his voice. "Okay, let's start with the beginning of your evening. Where did you go?"

The blonde stared past his shoulder as his voice took hold of her. "I don't remember anything after going to the club."

"What club?"

"The Pit," she said groggily.

He knew that club. It was one of his favorite haunts. It attracted a Goth contingent, many of whom were agreeable to some genuine vampire companionship. "Okay, let's start with you arriving at The Pit..."

The dark vampire's voice soothed Jaelyn, even though she was desperately afraid. A pulsing cramp squeezed her stomach. But that lilting voice pulled her into the past, opening up the bolted door to her memory.

Goth really wasn't her scene, but her friend Mandy wanted to go to The Pit. So she'd gone along. It was almost Halloween. A trip to The Pit seemed like an enjoyable seasonal event. And the club hadn't disappointed. Its black and red interior had been decorated with black pumpkin candles on every table. Clubgoers wearing black lace and black velvet were packed in like inky sardines. The music was good. It had been fun. Until...

She'd danced with that guy with the long black hair. She hadn't wanted to, but something in his almost black eyes had made her say yes. Mandy had encouraged her. The guy was drop-dead gorgeous, she'd said. How could she refuse?

What harm could a dance do? And he'd been a great dancer. He wore his sleek black hair tied back in a ponytail. The butter-soft leather of his dark trench coat had caressed her skin as he led her to the dance floor. She'd almost given him her regrets again, but he'd pulled her firmly along with him. As they'd danced, she'd gazed up into his face and caught a glimpse of black eyes tinged with red.

After that it all grew hazy.

Something horrible had happened. She whimpered at the half-memory.

“It’s okay.” The vampire’s breath was warm against her ear. Which meant he’d fed recently. She tried to wrestle from his grasp, but he held her with arms like steel. “You’re safe here. It’s all right to remember.”

Her mind didn’t want to relinquish the memory. But his voice insisted. She rifled back through her thoughts. The dance floor...dark, red-rimmed eyes boring down into hers.

And then a blast of cold air. A hard body shoving her against the rough brick. The tearing pressure. And worst of all, the wet sounds of his convulsive swallows.

A huge void stretched through her memory after that. She had the sense a great deal of time had passed, but she couldn’t be certain. Vaguely, she recalled someone lifting her and the worn leather of a sofa against her back. Someone urging her to drink...and the taste of copper and salt on her tongue.

Jaelyn cried out in protest at the recollection.

“Okay, that’s enough for now.” The vampire’s voice thrust her back into the here and now.

The room rocked precariously. Another wave of nausea-tinged dizziness threatened to overcome her.

She pulled away from him, and this time he let her. “What have you done to me?”

He leaned back against the sofa and sighed. “Trust me, I don’t like this any more than you do.”

Jaelyn looked at him incredulously. “Oh, I doubt that.” She studied him some more. He wasn’t the vampire from her memory. He didn’t have her attacker’s chilling good looks or his predatory grace.

“You got a name?” Knowing his name might help as well. Her fractured memory refused to divulge whatever name her assailant had given her. Something exotic, she seemed to recall that much.

“Vlad,” said the vampire beside her. “My name is Vlad.”

If she hadn’t been feeling like she might faint, she might have found that funny. “Vlad as in Vlad Dracul? Vlad the Impaler? Of course it is,” she said before he could answer. That would explain the Goth apartment with its black piano and dripping candelabra.

“No, not like that.” A flicker of embarrassment crossed his face. He opened his mouth as if debating telling her something. “My real name is Leslie,” he blurted finally.

“Leslie?” He looked so appalled at having revealed this to her she couldn’t help sympathizing a little. “High school must have sucked for you.”

He shrugged. “High school was a long time ago. Suffice to say my real name just didn’t go with my new life.”

Jaelyn glanced around the black-shrouded living room. Even that small movement gave her vertigo. But that didn’t stop her from sniping, “I can see why.”

He ignored the barb. “You haven’t told me your name.”

“Jaelyn.”

“Jaelyn.” He repeated her name, making it sound exotic, though she couldn’t find any trace of an accent in his speech. Maybe he affected one when he went out clubbing as Vlad Dracul.

He pressed a hand to her forehead. “You feel clammy.”

“I feel awful.”

“You need to rest.” He paused. “And then you need to feed again.”

The significance of his words sank in like a lead weight. “Feed...how?”

“Feed as in drink more of my blood.”

She drew back from him. “Okay, Vlad, tell me what you’ve done to me?”

Now what was he going to tell her? There was no delicate way of putting it. The woman was turning into a vampire. And he was the one who’d donated his blood to start the change. What on earth had possessed him to tell her his real name? The name he hadn’t used in decades. It hadn’t been so uncommon when he’d been born. Still, a vampire named Leslie would get laughed out of any Goth club in the city.

He gazed down at his unwanted guest, wondering what it was about this woman that attracted him. She was pretty enough with her blonde hair, sea-green eyes and curvy figure. But all the women he brought to his lair were pretty.

She was still staring up at him, waiting for an answer. She deserved the truth, even if it came with more screaming.

He took a deep breath, ready to clamp a hand over her mouth if she uttered another shriek. “You’re in the process of becoming a vampire.”

Her eyes widened. Her mouth fell open. His hand tensed.

“You made me into a vampire?” she asked in a horrified whisper.

No more screaming...yet. That was a good sign. “You’d been savagely bitten and lost a lot of blood. I had no choice other than to let you die.”

“They have hospitals to deal with that these days.”

“It was too late. You’d lost too much blood. The hospital wouldn’t have been able to help.”

“Says you.”

“Look, I can understand your anger, but I’m not the one who hurt you. I was just trying to help.” Why, he still had no idea.

She was quiet for a long moment. “Well, Vlad, or Leslie, or whatever your name really is, I’m going to find out who did this to me and I’m going to make him pay.”

## Chapter Three

His new roommate slept fitfully in his guest bedroom. Actually, it was his bedroom, Vlad thought darkly. He never slept in the coffin in the room at the top of his spiral staircase. It was just for show, for seduction. Women found it exotic.

Except for the one in his bed. She didn't seem to notice anything exotic or seductive about him. He sat on the side of the bed and studied her.

A light sheen of sweat beaded her forehead. She tossed and muttered in her sleep. Her eyes flew open, staring blankly at the wall behind him.

Vlad called her name. "Jaelyn?"

She moaned something unintelligible.

He reached to brush an errant lock of blonde hair from her face. "It's okay. You just need a bit more blood."

She shook her head, refusing his precious gift. The change was well underway now. No denying that. She had to drink to finish the process.

He bit into his own wrist, tasting the salt on his skin. The keen sharpness of his teeth stung briefly until he brought his wrist to her mouth.

She shook her head. "I can't." But the scent of his blood drew her. Her eyes glinted red in the candlelight. Her head turned slowly toward him.

Vlad gasped as her mouth closed over the wound. Her tongue flicked across his skin. The painkillers in her saliva numbed the discomfort. The touch of her tongue brought a tight heaviness to his crotch. Her reluctance vanished at the first taste. His hand slid behind her head to cradle her against him as she drank.

Nothing had prepared him for the feeling of her drawing nourishment from him. The movement of her lips against the tender skin of his wrist made him wish they were entangled in the satin sheets of that wide coffin. He imagined their sweaty bodies entwined, sharing their lifeblood along with their passion.

He would be her sire. After tonight they would be forever blood kindred. He realized suddenly that thought didn't bother him as much as it should have.

Vlad yanked his arm away. He couldn't actually be feeling something for her...could he? He looked around his bedroom, feeling his unencumbered, easy life flowing away from him. Since she'd arrived on his doorstep mere hours ago, he'd felt the gears of fate grinding on his existence. Things were changing.

And he hated change. Last night he'd been a free vampire. This morning he had a vampire offspring. Fate be damned, he decided. He wasn't going to change, no matter what.

The new influx of blood had calmed Jaelyn. Her transformation was nearly complete. She lapsed back into slumber. An easier sleep this time, he noticed.

He laid her down against the soft pillows. Now that she'd drunk her fill, she'd sleep deeply while the change ravaged her body. He rose and turned away from the bed. That left the double-wide coffin for him. It was either that or the couch, which was far too narrow for his broad-shouldered frame. The coffin had never been meant to give someone a good night's sleep. It impressed the women he brought home, but they rarely spent the day, leaving him to sleep in his Egyptian cotton sheets alone.

Well, it was the coffin now. Making sure the drapes were closed for his new soon-to-be-vampire visitor, Vlad wandered down the hall to the master bedroom. For a moment he stared at the shiny black monstrosity in the center of the room. What on earth had possessed him to buy such a thing? He'd even had it ordered specially. Once vampires had become public knowledge, people had become interested. Women in particular had been fascinated by his vampiric existence, giving his love life a much-needed boost. At the time, he'd thought the coffin was an affectation that would help with the mystique. He'd never intended to sleep in it.

Resigned to just that fate, he lifted the lid and crawled inside. Cool satin chilled his skin. He lay back against the satin pillow and closed his eyes.

Without warning, the lid slammed shut.

Vlad sat up, banging his head. He pushed against the heavy lid, but it remained stubbornly stuck. "Hey!" His voice echoed back at him in the small space.

He shoved again, earning himself a wrenched shoulder for his efforts. Even his vampiric strength couldn't budge the thing. His day couldn't get better. He called again, but, seized by the change, Jaelyn slept like the dead.

The lid had a mechanism that locked it in the upright position to prevent accidents like this. He'd meant to entice women, not scare them to death. Although, a little fear sometimes added to the mood. Something must have happened to the folding bar that held the lid open. He envisioned trying to explain it all to Jaelyn and winced. As her sire, he should try to maintain an air of mystery and wisdom, not look like a buffoon who'd locked himself in his own coffin.

Resigned to staying there until Jaelyn awoke, he laid his head back against the pillow. But again he misjudged the distance. His head hit the wooden bottom with a jaw-rattling thump.

*Oh, the humanity*, he thought with a groan.

Jaelyn awoke to the gentle light of dusk leaking around the edges of the dark drapery. She stretched languidly against the soft cotton sheets. Her hand touched a second set of pillows. She jerked her hand back. Her narrow bed at home only had one pillow. Where was she?

The events of the previous night came crashing back. The bar...the man in black...waking up in a strange man's apartment...a man who insisted he was a vampire. He'd bitten her...

She leapt from the bed, crouching on the floor of the unfamiliar bedroom. It didn't look like a vampire's room. The contemporary bed with its high-end cotton sheets looked like it came from a decorator's magazine. Muted shades of brown and gray covered the wall. The coordinating duvet probably cost five hundred dollars at least.

It took a moment to realize that she'd leapt from the bed at record speed. Jaelyn straightened from her crouch. To test her new reflexes, she tensed and sprang again, landing lightly on the bed. Well, she couldn't have done that before. She moved to sit on the side of the bed and felt hesitantly in her mouth.

Her finger connected with an impossibly sharp incisor, drawing blood. She hissed at the sudden pain. Instinctively, she sucked on her finger and then froze. What was she doing?

She pulled her finger from her mouth and watched in fascination as the tiny wound healed itself. She licked the last drop from the tip. The skin beneath was flawless. Now that was new. It wasn't a nightmare then. She was in a strange man's apartment. And she really was a vampire.

Jaelyn rolled her shoulders, flexing her new muscles. No amount of time at the gym had ever given her a physique like this. Though she tried to eat well and work out, she'd never been particularly strong or healthy. She had suffered from asthma. Testing this new body, she drew air deep down into her lungs. No cough, no hitching of her breath. Apparently, she wasn't asthmatic any longer. Vitality sang through every vein. Maybe being a vampire wouldn't be so bad. She looked down at the tip of her finger. Except for the drinking blood part.

A loud hammering brought her head up sharply.

She ventured down the hall, looking for the source of the noise. She gazed down the loft's spiral staircase at the floor below. The living room was empty, the curtains still drawn. The couch cushions lay askew where she'd wrestled with her vampire host last night.

Still, the noise didn't stop. She listened intently, realizing that her hearing seemed much more acute than it had before. She could hear the gears turning in the elevator shaft. A television blared in a suite across the hall. The hammering was coming from inside the apartment. Her head turned in its direction.

As if pulled by an invisible string, she turned back toward the bedrooms. The door to the master bedroom was closed tight. She pressed her ear to the door. The noise was definitely coming from inside. The door wasn't locked. The knob turned under her hand. She pushed it open.

To find a giant shiny black coffin taking up the center of the room.

Besides that striking feature there were no other furnishings. Blackout curtains covered the windows, just like they had in the bedroom she'd slept in. Carpet a shade lighter than the curtains covered the floor. There were no dressers, not even a closet. Only the coffin.

As she drew toward it, the hammering ceased.

"Jaelyn?" came a muffled voice from inside.

"You in there, Vlad?" she asked, then, "Leslie?"

"Please don't call me that. I have no idea why I told you my real name."

"Maybe because it's your real name."

From the inside of the coffin, she heard a snort. "I need you to lift the lid. The mechanism's jammed."

She choked back a peal of laughter. "You're kidding me, right?" Despite her attempt to be serious, amusement leaked into her tone.

"Wish I was." He sounded pissed.

"Okay, okay." She fit her fingers to the groove in the lid and heaved. To her astonishment, the wood around the latch splintered. "Whoa!"

"What's happening?"

"I can't budge the mechanism, but the wood broke."

"Great." He was silent for a moment. She heard some irritated rustling from inside. "Try it again. I'll push from the bottom."

Jaelyn put her palms against the lid and heaved again. She watched in amazement as her arm muscles bunched—muscles she didn't know she had. Wood buckled as Vlad shoved from inside. A loud crack shot through the room as the top half of the lid broke.

Shoving the splintered wood aside, Vlad sat up. He'd obviously been twisting and turning inside for some time, because his dark curls were mussed and he wore an expression of supreme annoyance.

"Wonderful," he snapped, looking at the ruins of his coffin.

Her patience evaporated. "I can't believe you sleep in that thing!"

"I don't *sleep* in this thing." He braced his hands against the bottom of the coffin and levered himself free.

"So, why do you have it then?"

He glared at her, like it was her fault he'd locked himself in his own coffin. "To pick up women, if you must know."

"And that works for you?"

"Well, it used to," he said petulantly with a pointed glance in her direction. "Besides, you were in my bed, what else was I supposed to do?"

She didn't have an answer to that. She settled for, "Thanks for being a gentleman."

He gave her a curt bow. With his dark eyes and tousled curls, he did look kind of adorable. If she overlooked the coffin thing.

Vlad brushed the last slivers of wood from his black shirt and jeans. “You seem to be doing okay. How are you feeling?”

How indeed? She’d tossed fitfully all day, but as evening drew near, her strength had improved. Now she felt good. Better than good. Her body hummed with energy. She noted she could see Vlad clearly even though the drapes were still closed tightly. She’d wrenched the lid off that coffin with little effort. “Um, okay, I guess.”

His eyes narrowed as if he could see through her lie. “So, there are, er, a few things I should tell you. About being a vampire, I mean. And then you’re free to be on your way.”

“On my way?”

“Surely you weren’t intending to stay here?” He looked horrified at the thought. “You must have a life, after all.”

“I did. I mean I do. At least I did until someone attacked me in a club.”

“Yes, well, it wasn’t me.”

“Fine, tell that to the police.”

Alarm crossed his face. “Oh no, you can’t go to the police.”

“Why? Someone hurt me.”

He grasped her gently by the shoulders. She objected to being seized and shrugged out of his grasp.

“Jaelyn.” He dropped his hands and ran one through his hair, tousling his curls further. “You have no idea how the police treat our kind.”

“Our kind?”

“Vampires.”

“But you’re—we’re citizens, aren’t we?”

“Technically. But ‘justice for all’ takes on a whole different meaning where vampires are concerned. A lot of people still consider us monsters. They aren’t too keen to have us living among them, even though we always have.”

“But there are vampire police officers, aren’t there?”

“Well, yes, not many, but—”

“But what?”

A long sigh escaped his lips. It sounded more like a hiss. “The head of the vampire liaison division...there’s something not quite right about him.”

She was getting tired of these half answers. “Not quite right, how?”

He ran another hand through his hair, betraying a nervous tic. “I don’t know...he’s a vampire, but not like any other I’ve ever met. It’s like he’s something...else.”

“So I’m supposed to what? Forget about being attacked? Go on with my what...unlife?”

“No. But I’d advise against going to the police. Like it or not, you’re a vampire now. I hate to put it to you this way, but people are going to treat you differently.”

The implications of that were just starting to sink in. What on earth was she going to do with her day job? Find a night job instead? What would she tell her parents, her friends?

She could call in sick for a few days. That might give her enough time to figure out what she needed to know. And then what?

There was too much to think about all at once. First she needed to decide what to do about what had happened to her.

“Fine,” she said, coming to a decision. “But I want to find out what happened to me and why. And I want you to help me.”

“What I can do? I was having a completely uneventful evening until you appeared on my doorstep. I don’t know anyone who would have done such a thing.” He raised his arm to run his hand through his hair again and then seemed to realize what he was doing and dropped it abruptly. His hair already stuck out in unruly tufts. She had to admit the overall effect was kind of cute. It made him look like a little boy. A very grown-up and dangerous little boy. She yanked her traitorous thoughts away from the darkly handsome man before her. Must be the blood, Jaelyn thought. She was not going to fall for Mr. Full-Of-Himself who kept a coffin to seduce women.

She brooded on that for a moment until suddenly the answer became clear. “We’ll start at the source. At The Pit.”

“I’m not going to The Pit with you,” Vlad said.

Jaelyn gave him her most fetching stare. The one that had always worked for her. “Of course you are.” She looked around the bedroom, her eyes stopping at the ruined remains of the coffin. “I don’t suppose you have an evening dress handy.”

“A wha—” He paused, considering. “Actually I might.”

## Chapter Four

The evening dress belonged to Michaela, an ex-girlfriend—another vampire. One of the few relationships he'd had that had lasted more than a couple of dates. They'd been a couple for almost a year, a record in his dating history. It hadn't ended well—she'd caught him in the big coffin with one of his donors. But he'd always held out hope that given enough time, she might forgive him and they could give it another go. She hadn't forgiven him—yet. She hadn't come back to pick up her belongings either. That left the slinky black dress sitting in his closet. If she knew he'd loaned it to another woman there definitely wouldn't be any reconciliation, but what else could he do? Jaelyn was intent on going to The Pit. And for some indeterminable reason he felt compelled to go with her.

He studied that unfamiliar feeling for a moment. No one—not even his former vampire flame—had made him feel protective. *Must be the blood bond.* Hopefully it would wear off.

“Come on then.” He nodded in the direction of the other bedroom.

She trailed him down the hall to the room she'd vacated. The sight of the unmade bed brought vivid images to his mind. His gums tingled in anticipation and his body tightened at his traitorous thoughts. He pictured holding her in his arms until the day-sleep claimed them both. He imagined awakening at dusk to make love and feed from each other again.

*Blood bond,* he reminded himself. A mere accident of vampire biology, nothing more.

He strode past her to the giant walk-in closet and ventured inside. He could feel her waiting outside, her body vibrating with withheld laughter at the neat rows of mostly black shirts and pants. Shoes lined the floor. Lighted drawers held his ties and accessories. He passed the suit jackets and the rest of his formal wear and reached for the dress he knew without looking hung at the back of his closet. He emerged and held it out to her. “Here.”

She took the dress and held it up beside him. “Somehow I can't picture you in this.”

“Funny,” he snapped, shocked at how much her attempt at humor stung. It reminded him of missed opportunities and regrets, something he rarely indulged in. “It wouldn't nearly fit me. It belongs to an old girlfriend.”

Jaelyn ran her hand over the slinky material. “It's nice. Expensive, I think.”

“Oh, I'm sure it is. She had good taste.” In far more ways than one, but he kept that to himself. He motioned to the en suite bathroom at the far end of the room. “If you insist on playing detective and going to The Pit, you can get ready in there.”

“You coming with me then?” For a moment she looked unsure.

“Guess so.” Vlad disappeared back into his closet to find something to wear.

Jaelyn contorted her body trying to wiggle into the dress. Its former owner had obviously been slightly taller and much thinner than she was. She wrestled with the zipper—no way was she going out there half-zipped and submitting herself to Vlad’s mercy if she didn’t have to. Standing back to admire herself in the mirror, she had to admit the effect was striking. The supple material highlighted every one of her curves. Something in her new vampire blood made her eyes shine and her skin glow. No amount of makeup had ever given her such luminance. Another apparent advantage of her transformation to offset the blood-drinking and skulking around in the darkness.

She studied her reflection again. *Wait a minute—mirror?*

She opened the door to find Vlad standing there waiting for her and nearly gasped in appreciation. He’d tamed his unruly curls and dressed in a loose black silk shirt. A pair of black pants that left nothing to the imagination and freshly buffed shoes completed the outfit. He looked sexy and...stunning. His eyes moved slowly from her head to her toes, which were bare since he hadn’t offered her any shoes. For a moment he merely gazed at her with adoration plain in his eyes. No man had ever looked at her with such blatant hunger and longing.

“Why can I see myself in the mirror?” she blurted, completely ruining the moment.

Vlad shook himself as if she’d splashed him with cold water. “The thing about mirrors—it’s a myth. Vampires probably started it to throw humans off our trail. And just so you know, we show up just fine in film and digital photography as well.”

All she could say was, “Oh.” Then, “I don’t suppose there are shoes to go with the dress?”

He looked down at her feet and then nodded, disappearing back into the closet and emerging with a pair of spike-heeled sandals. Their owner had narrower, longer feet, but she managed to wedge hers into them.

Vlad was still staring at her, that look of desire on his face.

“I don’t suppose she left any diamonds to go with the outfit?” Jaelyn asked, making a joke to break the sexual tension.

He gave her one last sweeping glance and then turned away, motioning for her to follow him. “No, she took those with her.”

Jaelyn looked beautiful, Vlad thought as he drove his sleek Porsche through the congested streets. The club district teemed with people. Throngs surged into the streets with no regard for traffic signals. He darted another look at his passenger. He’d realized she was attractive when she arrived on his doorstep, but dressed in Michaela’s cast-off clothing she was simply stunning.

He was falling for her. His heart knew it even if he refused to acknowledge it. Hopefully tonight she'd have the answers she sought and life could go back to normal. Then his heart could just deal with it. He'd have to get the coffin repaired...

"There!" Jaelyn pointed to a car pulling out of a curbside parking spot. He maneuvered the Porsche into the space. He circled the car to open the door for her, but she'd already emerged and was teetering in Michaela's ridiculously high heels on the sidewalk. He offered her his arm.

As they walked toward the club's roped-off line, Vlad decided he liked the feel of her slender fingers curled around his arm. His heightened senses caught the sway of her hips against his as she moved. He hadn't been this aware of another being since...well, he couldn't quite remember.

Vlad was about to flash his dazzling smile to the doorman, the way he usually did to gain entrance, when he came to a startling conclusion. The bouncer wasn't the usual hired muscle. This new doorman was a vampire. *Damn.*

And then he remembered. Rumor had it the club's owner had recently become a vampire. Apparently, her transformation came with a new outlook. She'd never employed vampires before. He'd pretty much had the run of the place. Not anymore. Now he was going to have to part with a hefty tip to get them inside. *Damn and damn!* Life as a vampire had always been easy. Until now.

They approached the line that snaked around the corner and down the block. Maybe news of the owner's transformation had increased the club's appeal, because the line had never been this long before. Jaelyn moved to take her place in the queue.

"Wait." He pulled her along with him to the front of the line.

"But—" she started to protest, then her eyes narrowed. He realized she was staring over his shoulder. He turned to glance in that direction. A low gasp escaped Jaelyn's lips. "That's him!"

A shadow darted through the streetlight that pooled on the sidewalk, heading for a nearby alley.

"You're sure?" The last thing he needed to do was get in a fight with some stranger.

"I'm sure. I remember his long black hair."

"Lots of guys have long hair," he pointed out. Still, he moved them toward the dark, narrow space that ran between the two buildings.

"It was his eyes that really convinced me. He was staring at the people in the lineup as if he was studying a buffet. I remember him watching the people on the dance floor like that before he came up to our table."

Vlad stared after the departing stranger. He wanted to know why someone had hurt Jaelyn and dumped her on his doorstep as much as she did. In fact, the thought of another vampire harming his woman made him bristle with fury. *His woman?* He pushed the thought aside. No time now to think about the call of her blood or his growing attachment to her. That was for later, once they'd solved this mystery and were out of danger.

“Okay.” He slid his arm out from under hers and grasped her firmly around the waist. No way was that vampire getting close to her again. “Let’s follow him and see where he goes.”

They peered around the mouth of the alley in time to see the shadow pause at the back door of the club. The human bouncer thrust his arm across the door, barring the way. But after looking into the vampire’s eyes for a moment, he turned and went back into the club, leaving the door unattended. *Damn again*, Vlad mentally kicked himself. Why hadn’t he thought of that? Why pay off the doorman when he could have just mesmerized the human bouncer at the back door? He felt his carefully constructed façade crumbling around him. He glanced down at Jaelyn. Since vampires had become public knowledge, he’d been able to coast on the fantasy of his existence. Life really hadn’t been much work. Until last night, he’d been content to carry on that way, but now he found himself wanting more. Suddenly he wanted to be known for who he really was.

Later, he reminded himself, wrenching his thoughts back to the present. He’d deal with these strange new feelings later. They crept down the alley after their quarry. Luckily there were no smokers loitering around the back door. Vlad pulled his hand into his sleeve, using his cuff to grip the handle. Just in case. It wasn’t locked. The door swung open. He motioned for Jaelyn to precede him inside.

## Chapter Five

The club's ambiance sucked Jaelyn into her memories. It was like stepping back into a nightmare. The throbbing beat of the music, the red sweeping lights overhead and the smoke from the dry-ice machine gave the club a hellish cast. With Halloween drawing closer, they'd ramped up the atmosphere. But the loud music and the cacophony of conversation were the same. Her eyes scanned the dance floor where the throngs in black leather and black velvet gyrated to the music. She'd been sitting right...there. She easily located the table where Mandy and she had spent most of the night. And the dark man had been standing... She swept her gaze across the crowd to the space by the bar where she'd first seen the man with the long hair. Sure enough, there he was, watching the dancers with that same cold, calculating look she remembered.

She elbowed Vlad. He grunted in surprise. "There he is!" She tipped her head ever so slightly in the man's direction. She'd come to think of him as the dark man because of his dark hair and black clothing. He looked like a shadow come to life.

Jaelyn watched as Vlad's gaze swept over the room, coming to rest on the shadowy figure by the bar. "You're certain?"

"Yes." Of course she was. She'd never forget those black eyes boring into hers.

He drew her back behind a fence of bystanders, all watching the gyrating bunch on the dance floor. "We can't just walk up to him and accuse him."

"Why not?" He'd assaulted her. He'd all but drained her of her lifeblood. He'd nearly killed her.

"Because we have no proof."

Anger shot through her, hot and demanding. "Aren't I proof enough?"

A kid with spiked black hair who barely looked old enough to drink glanced in her direction.

"Shh." Vlad's breath stirred the hair at her ear. "It isn't as simple for us as it is for humans. There aren't the kinds of tests to conclusively prove that kind of thing yet. And," he lowered his voice even more. His lips brushed her ear as he spoke. She felt that tiny movement all the way down her spine. "Trust me, since you've already become a vampire, the police will consider it a vampire problem. They won't be so keen to get involved."

"What about the liaison office?"

"Oh, I imagine they'll look into it. But they're understaffed. And they've had a huge mess to clean up with that maniac who was trying to create a vampire hybrid."

Jaelyn remembered hearing about that on the news, but like much of what was reported in the newscasts, she'd never thought those distant events would touch her life. Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. She hadn't cared much about what went on between vampires either. Until it had become her reality. "So what do we do?"

He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear and spoke very quietly. "We wait for him to make a move." Each brush of his lips felt like an intimate caress. She'd never known her ears were so sensitive. Jaelyn hauled her thoughts back to the present.

The tempo of the music slowed. Vlad held out his hand. "Would you like to dance?"

"Dance? In these shoes?" She hadn't meant for it to slip out like that. She'd been trying to tame her suddenly overactive libido, which was now insisting on exploring her conflicted feelings for Vlad. The last thing she needed was to be up close and personal with him on the dance floor.

He glanced down at her borrowed heels. She couldn't help but notice that his gaze lingered on the contours of her legs beneath the long dress.

"Don't worry, I'll hold you up."

Tearing her gaze away from him, she nodded to the man standing in the shadows near the bar. "Won't we be seen?"

Vlad looked at the throngs on the floor. "It's crowded. I'll make sure you keep your back to him, so he won't be able to recognize you."

He had a point. The club was especially busy, and they'd be less likely to be spotted if they were moving instead of standing there staring at him. "Okay then."

Vlad's arm slipped around her waist as he led her out onto the floor. He kept to the periphery, hiding them behind the throngs of the gyrating crowd. The music slowed even further as a new song began. A slow dance. No chance of a fast-moving song that would allow her to put some distance between them.

As if thinking just that, his other arm came around her and he pulled tight. She brought her arms up to circle his neck. He gazed down at her, adoration shining in his eyes. "You look wonderful tonight."

"Thanks." His dark eyes gleamed in the red light. The glow haloed his curls, making him look like a fallen angel. No wonder women had been so eager to go home with him. "You clean up good yourself."

That hadn't come out the way she wanted either, but it made him laugh. Jaelyn tried to marshal her thoughts and turn her attention to the task of flushing out her attacker.

"Can you see the man with the ponytail?"

Vlad brought his mouth down to her neck, pretending to nuzzle her there. "He's still over by the bar. Don't worry about it, I'm on it."

It was either worry about the man with the long hair or the man holding her tightly. With her quarry out of sight, she found it difficult to think about anything but Vlad. Pressed against him, she felt every inch of his muscular body. His broad shoulders tapered to a narrow waist and his chest rippled with muscle.

Taut thighs pressed against hers. He was thinking about her too. She could tell by his thickening erection. She tried to put some distance between them, but just then he moved his head and his lips brushed hers.

That feather-soft touch set every nerve on fire. She felt the whisper of his lips all the way to her core. His tongue slid between her lips as he deepened the kiss.

No one had ever kissed her so thoroughly. He all but devoured her like she was a delicious feast. *Good lord, if that was how the man kissed...*, she thought, her last rational thought for some time.

She returned his kiss, tempting him with her own tongue. People swirled around them on the dance floor, but she couldn't spare her attention for anything but Vlad. Oh no, this was it. Despite her vow, she was falling for him. Strangely that thought didn't bother her.

Suddenly his head came up. The loss of his mouth startled her. Then her instincts sharpened. Vlad covered his movement deftly, moving his mouth back to nuzzle her ear. "Don't look, but he's on the move."

When she would have brought her head up to look, he said, "Just pretend we're dancing. I'll maneuver us in his direction."

She did just that, gazing up into his eyes, pretending to chuckle at something he'd said. Vlad played the part of ardent suitor, twirling her deftly, but she noted his eyes were fixed on their prey. They turned and she caught a glimpse of the dark-haired man leading a blonde woman off toward the back hallway that led to the alley.

Memories swamped her mind. The past night's events came flooding back. He'd led her down the same hallway. It had seemed a reasonable enough idea at the time. They'd danced. He'd said he smoked, that she should come with him while he had a cigarette. Tobacco smoke bothered her asthma and made her breath hitch, but she'd gone with him anyway. Looking up into those flat dark eyes, she'd found she couldn't refuse.

The next thing she knew, they'd been out in the cool air and he'd...

Vlad's pace increased as he led them toward the hallway. He gave up the pretense of dancing and grasped her hand. "Hurry, he's heading for the door."

He seemed as interested in tracking down the dark man as she was. She hurried after him, trying to keep up in his former girlfriend's spiked heels. With her enhanced eyesight she could plainly see the man in black leading the blonde woman down the hall.

Just like in her memory, he wore the same leather coat. His ponytail hung to the middle of his back. Beneath he had on dark pants and a pair of expensive-looking leather boots. His pale skin all but gleamed in the dim light. She caught a glimpse of the woman he'd tucked under his arm, a woman he was practically dragging down the tiled hall. Jaelyn smothered a gasp. The woman bore a passing resemblance to her.

Her blonde hair was longer and curlier. Blue eyes flashed as she stared up at the man rushing her along. She didn't want to go with him any more than Jaelyn had. It didn't look like she was being given much of a choice.

Vlad pushed through the last of the crowd, taking Jaelyn with him. The dark man and his prey disappeared through the back door leading to the alley. There was no one else in the hall now. They hurried after them.

Jaelyn's heightened hearing brought her the sound of the woman's heels scraping across the concrete ground outside. She heard a gasp and then a smothered protest. Vlad shoved the heavy door. It opened into darkness, but with her sharpened vampire sight Jaelyn could see the blonde woman wedged against the wall. The dark man thrust her against the bricks. His incisors gleamed in the dim light as he brought his mouth down to her neck.

The woman struggled in his grasp. "No," she pleaded. Her panicked eyes scanned his face for mercy and found none. She tried to dart to the side, moving her neck out of his reach. The vampire's mouth closed with an audible click as he missed his target. Anger tightened his jaw. Quickly, he wrestled her back under his control. He opened his mouth again, making sure she saw his razor-sharp fangs as he closed the precious inches between his mouth and her throat.

Jaelyn remembered that feeling of being overpowered, of having no choice but to surrender. Fury tightened every one of her muscles. "Stop!" Her voice echoed off the brick.

At the sound of Jaelyn's voice, the other vampire raised his head. His dark eyes centered on her. Recognition crossed his face, followed quickly by cold anger.

Jaelyn sprang. Cool air rushed by her. She barreled into him, momentarily throwing him off balance. The side of his body hit the wall, but he didn't release his prey.

"Leave her alone!" Jaelyn put the sum of her fury into another hard shove, but the long-haired man was stronger and he refused to let the woman go.

"Jaelyn, no!" She heard Vlad holler. He leapt into the fray. Jaelyn's assault had distracted the attacker, giving Vlad an opening. Using his longer reach, he seized the dark man by the collar of his trench coat and ripped him away from the blonde woman. Even overpowered, he still wouldn't willingly release his meal. His hands left long claw marks on her arms as Vlad hauled him away. "I didn't hear the lady give you her consent."

For a moment, the blonde woman stared at them, stark fear plain in her eyes. Jaelyn watched as her terror turned to shock and she slumped against the brick. Jaelyn reached out to catch her.

Vlad shoved the other vampire face first against the wall. The dark man thrashed violently in his grasp. Jaelyn heard a muffled curse as Vlad grappled for a better grip. He thrust the vampire's feet apart and leaned against him, using his weight to hold him in place. It was obvious his efforts wouldn't hold him for long.

Jaelyn tightened her grip on the woman in her arms. “I think we have no choice but to call the police now.”

Vlad frowned at the thought. It was plain he still didn’t want to involve the law. The vampire renewed his struggles. Vlad shoved him harder against the brick. “Who are you?”

“What’s it to you?”

Vlad nodded in Jaelyn’s direction. “You bit a woman and left her on my doorstep to die. I’d say it’s a lot to me.”

When no response was forthcoming, he shoved the vampire harder. “Answer me!”

“You!” the vampire growled. “This is all your fault.”

For an instant there was silence, then Vlad asked, “My fault?” He leaned into the vampire’s back, earning a groan from his quarry.

“You’re the worst of us, *Leslie*,” the dark man snarled through clenched teeth.

“Me?” Vlad reared back as if he’d been struck. His prey struggled, nearly breaking free before Vlad recovered and renewed the pressure holding him in place. Jaelyn noted he hadn’t denied his name was Leslie.

“What have I done that’s so bad? I’m not the one attacking innocent women!”

“You’re a plague on our kind. Dressing in black, sleeping in coffins, reinforcing all the old stereotypes. You alone have thrown us back to the dark ages.”

Vlad opened his mouth to protest, but before he could say anything, the other vampire continued, “Not only that, it’s working. You’re out with a new woman every night. The rest of us have to be stuck with your leftovers.”

The expression on Vlad’s face turned from outrage to horror. He glanced at Jaelyn and the woman she still clutched in her arms before turning back to the dark man. “You did *this* because you couldn’t score with women?”

“No one wants an honest guy anymore. All they want is the theatre. The fangs, the black velvet, the blood-drinking from crystal goblets. As a human, I watched you over the years at different clubs. You always had the prettiest women. You had your pick of them all. Even *my* ex-girlfriend couldn’t resist you.”

Vlad shifted uncomfortably. “Look, I’m sorry if I—”

“You weren’t sorry. You never cared what happened among us mortals. Once I’d lost Lori to you, I decided that if I had to become a vampire to get even, then that’s what I’d do. *Your* ex-girlfriend was kind enough to oblige me.”

Jaelyn watched as Vlad blanched a shade paler, if that was possible. “Michaela brought you over?”

Barely able to move his head with Vlad holding him against the wall, the vampire nodded.

“And this is what you did with the gift she gave you?”

“What gift? It didn’t work. It didn’t change anything. All the women still went home with you.” Scorn thickened his voice. “I realized finally that you didn’t score with women because you were a vampire, but because you put on a show.”

Vlad cast a sheepish look in Jaelyn’s direction. He didn’t look pleased to have his dating habits stated so callously.

“But I never thought you’d bring her over,” the vampire continued. “I never thought you’d take the responsibility.”

There was silence for a moment. Vlad drew in a long breath. “Yeah, well, I guess I’ve changed.”

The vampire turned his head as far as Vlad’s weight would let him. “Have you?”

Jaelyn looked at the crowd gathering in the doorway. People were on their cell phones taking pictures and making calls. Someone had likely notified the police, whether Vlad wanted to involve them or not.

“Vlad—”

Before she could complete the sentence, the door burst open and several uniformed police officers wedged into the doorway.

“We need an ambulance,” Jaelyn shouted. “That vampire attacked this woman.”

The police relieved Vlad of his quarry, cuffing the vampire with silver handcuffs. She heard one of the officers putting in a call for the vampire liaison office. Just as Vlad had feared.

Medics came and took the blonde woman away in a special ambulance geared to deal with vampire emergencies. Police officers escorted them into the club’s office and requested they stay until the liaison officer arrived. They left the club’s vampire owner, Alix Greenberg, in charge of making sure they did. The newly turned vampire looked extremely displeased to have trouble in her club. They sat in stony silence.

Jaelyn glanced down, noticing that she’d torn her borrowed dress beyond all repair. The thigh-high slit in the side now exposed most of her hip. She shifted in her chair, trying to cover herself. Vlad was missing most of the buttons on his silk shirt. It hung open nearly to his waist, showing off his heavily muscled chest. The club owner didn’t seem to have noticed, but Jaelyn gave him a pointed nod. He looked down, shrugged, and then covered his chest by crossing his arms. His dark curls stood out in all directions. It surprised her that she found the effect appealing. He had the air of a little boy who’d been caught fighting at school and was now sitting in the principal’s office. She might have laughed if the situation hadn’t been so dire.

Someone knocked on the door. Still keeping an eye on them, Alix crossed the room and opened it. A blond man with golden eyes stood in the doorway, flanked by a tall woman with dark hair.

“Come in Dante, Xandra,” the club owner said. The pair crowded into the small office. Jaelyn noted that Vlad followed Dante’s progress warily.

The vampire liaison flipped a badge in their direction. “Vampire Liaison Officer, Dante Rodriguez. This is my associate, Xandra Wheeler.”

The liaison officer's golden eyes centered on Vlad, pinning him to the chair like an exotic bug. It looked to Jaelyn like Vlad was trying hard not to squirm under his scrutiny.

Jaelyn studied the liaison officer. She was so new to being a vampire, she didn't really know how to judge him, but it seemed like what Vlad had said was true. He wasn't like any other vampire she'd ever seen, not that she'd seen many. For one thing, his coloring was all wrong. Golden eyes gleamed in the dim lighting. His associate studied the two of them blatantly. The tall woman wasn't a vampire, Jaelyn was certain of that much, but she didn't seem entirely human either. The way she stood still as a statue unnerved her.

Alix gripped the door handle. "If you have things under control in here, I ought to see what's happening out in the club."

There had been a mass exodus when the police and the ambulance had arrived.

"That's fine," Dante said. "I have a few questions."

"More than a few," Xandra added.

Vlad sighed, "I'm sure you do."

Dante took Alix's abandoned seat behind the desk. He leaned back in the chair, making himself at home. Xandra rested one hip against the desk and folded her arms. "Why don't you start by telling us what happened."

Jaelyn glanced at Vlad. He still looked entirely uncomfortable, but he nodded for her to begin. She launched into the bizarre story of her last twenty-four hours.

The office was silent when she finished. Dante glared at Vlad. "You should have called us sooner."

"The moment Jaelyn landed on your doorstep," Xandra added.

Vlad shifted in his chair. He pulled the edges of his shirt together again and re-crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah, well I've found out what happens when you involve the police. Even if you've done nothing wrong. Do you know how many police lineups I've been in?"

He threw the words down like a challenge. For a moment no one said anything, but tension hung thick in the air.

Dante sat forward and gripped the sides of the desk. The wood groaned. Suddenly he seemed to become aware of it and loosened his hands. He crossed his arms, mirroring Vlad's defiant posture. "I admit when vampirism first became public knowledge things got a little crazy. Fear ruled, I regret, sometimes even within the police force. But that was years ago. My department—" he nodded to his partner, Xandra, "—and I have worked very hard to ensure fair process for all of our citizens." Resentment crept into his tone, like he took Vlad's comments personally. "You should have called us. Rogues are dangerous to us all. We've been investigating reports of women being attacked in the downtown area. This vampire who goes by the alias, Night Incarnate, has been a person of interest."

"Well, you've got him now," Vlad said.

Jaelyn came to his rescue. “Before anyone else got hurt too badly.”

Dante nodded grudgingly.

Xandra turned in her direction. “If you wish to see a medical specialist, we can provide one for you.”

Did she want to see a specialist in vampirism? Jaelyn rolled her shoulders, feeling the increased strength and vitality that came with being a vampire flowing through her body. She searched her feelings. Early this evening, she had been angry. Furious at the strange twist her life had taken. But she’d prevented her attacker from hurting anyone else, which would have been impossible without her new abilities. She glanced up to find Dante, Xandra and Vlad watching her intently.

She held Vlad’s gaze. Worry crossed his face, but he said nothing, merely waited for her response.

“No, I’m fine. Vlad has promised to help me adjust to my new...situation.”

Xandra gave her one last probing look. “If you do need anything, you know where to find us.”

“All right then.” Dante rose from behind the desk. Xandra joined him. Together they walked to the door. The vampire liaison turned back, his hand gripping the doorknob. “I’m sure we’ll have further questions. I trust you’ll be at the addresses you’ve given us?”

In other words, don’t leave town, we’re not finished with you yet.

Vlad nodded. “We’ll be there.” He looked intensely displeased at the prospect.

“Good then.”

The door closed behind them, leaving Jaelyn and Vlad together.

Vlad let his breath go. “There’s something strange about that guy.”

Jaelyn had to agree. The memory of the liaison officer’s amber gaze lingered in her mind. Now that the danger had passed, even her vampire strength waned. She tried to lighten the oppressive mood. “Is it always this exciting being a vampire?”

He barked a laugh. “No, I’m afraid most of the time it’s pretty much the same as being human. With a few new considerations, of course.”

Jaelyn raised herself from the chair. “I guess we’re free to go.”

Vlad stood and held out his hand. “Come home with me, Jaelyn. Give me a few days to show you the good things about being a vampire, then you can decide what you want to do.”

What she wanted to do about the rest of her life as a vampire, he meant. Which she guessed was going to be a very long one.

She gazed at Vlad and he looked back at her with hope in his eyes. His blood sang to her with recognition. Blood bond, he’d said. But it was more than that. She wanted him, both the man and the vampire.

His shirt gaped open as he stood, having no more buttons to hold it together. She glanced from his dark eyes to that muscular expanse of male flesh and realized she very much wanted what he was offering.

“Okay, let’s go home.”

He smiled, a real smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes. He lost that brooding look when he grinned like that. She decided she liked the effect. She put her hand in his.

He had no idea what to do now, Vlad thought as they arrived back at his waterfront condo. Jaelyn hadn't said much on the ride back. There was a great deal to talk about, but he didn't know where to start.

Jaelyn had appeared on his doorstep, an unwanted problem. Since then she'd become so much more. At first he'd wanted her to disappear. Now he desperately wanted her to stay.

The door swung shut with a click. He leaned against it and studied his new houseguest. She looked wonderful, even with her dress torn and her hair mussed. Her skin had taken on that translucent quality that gave away her vampirism, but her eyes shone. A strange sensation settled beneath his heart. For the first time, his solitary life held little appeal. He realized with a start that he wanted to share his life. With Jaelyn.

Expectation crossed her face as she gazed back at him. But he also saw trust and hope in her expression. He didn't know what to say, so he started with a profound, "Um..."

She smiled, showing the tips of her tiny fangs. The sight tightened his groin. He wanted her so badly, and yet he didn't want to ruin the mood. He didn't want to force the situation by saying anything that might make her decide to open that door and leave.

Instead, she crossed the narrow distance between them. Gripping him by the lapels of his ruined shirt, she stood on her tiptoes in those ridiculously high heels and kissed him.

As her soft lips brushed his mouth, he couldn't stop the low growl rising in his throat. He crushed her to him, feeling every inch of her supple body. Her generous breasts pressed against the hard planes of his chest. His hands slid from the slender dip of her waist to cup her buttocks. He caught the spicy scent of her blood rushing just below the surface of her skin mixing tantalizingly with the natural scent of woman and the perfume from her shampoo. She smelled sexy, vital, and he wanted so much more of her.

She sighed against his mouth. Her tongue slid between his lips and he was lost in the taste of her. He brought one hand up to tangle in her long blonde hair, holding her in place. She didn't seem to mind his possession. In fact, she seemed to have her own conquest in mind. She tilted her head slightly to gain a better angle. Her hands roved over his shoulders and up his neck to ruffle his curls. Sudden pain made him gasp as one of her incisors pinched his lip. He tasted the tang of his own blood.

Her tongue tangled with his as she tried to steal that drop of blood. Convulsively, his hand tightened on her butt, pressing her harder against him. She squirmed in place, testing the extent of his arousal. The sensation of his hard flesh at the juncture of her thighs seemed to drive her passion higher because she pulled her mouth away. Tendrils of her hair hung in her face. Her breath came in small pants. "Let's go upstairs."

"Upstairs," he repeated. He wanted her out of Michaela's dress and shoes. He wanted every trace of Michael gone, leaving only Jaelyn.

Vlad hooked an arm beneath her knees and swung her into his arms. One of her borrowed sandals fell from her feet. He left it there on the carpet as he walked toward the spiral staircase. Jaelyn ringed her arms around his neck. She kissed him again with such ferocity he had to stop halfway up the staircase. Eventually, they made it to the top of the stairs. He paused in the hallway, deciding which room to take her to. The coffin wouldn't do. He decided on the room with the bed. His real bedroom. He wanted her there, in his inner sanctum, his most private of places.

Her eyes caught the coffin as they passed. They twinkled with amusement.

"I need to get rid of that thing," he said. "I've had enough vampire props to last a lifetime."

Jaelyn turned her head as he kicked open the door to the bedroom and crossed the floor. The rumpled bed was just as she'd left it. There hadn't been time to make it. Vlad freed a hand to yank the covers into place before he laid her gently in the middle. He sat down beside her.

She reached up to slide his ruined shirt off his shoulders. Silk whispered as it fell to the floor. She ran her hand over his pecs. His silky cool skin caressed her palm. His gaze tracked her hand as it slid down his taut stomach and stopped at his belt buckle.

He chuckled. "Don't go getting too far ahead of me."

She turned so he could undo the long zipper. The hiss of metal sounded unduly loud in the silence. She wiggled out of the dress and turned back to face him clad only in her panties and one borrowed shoe.

His gaze raked over her, lingering on the line of her neck before plunging lower still. Blatant hunger burned in that look. He yanked his eyes back to meet hers.

She expected him to grasp the elastic of her panties, but instead he bent to slip off the sandal and toss it onto the floor. He was going to make her wait, she realized. Damned if she let him.

Her fingers closed on his belt buckle. He sucked in his stomach to give her room to undo the clasp and slide down his zipper. His impressive erection sprang free, held only by his boxers. She slid her hand in to caress him through the silk and earned a low hiss for her efforts. She caught a glimpse of his fangs. The sight sent a pleasure-tinged shiver through her.

She pushed his trousers down over his hips, linking her fingers through the elastic of his boxers to push them down as well. He stood to slide them off and toss them on the growing pile of clothes. Then he joined her back on the bed.

Jaelyn couldn't take her eyes off him. She followed the contours of his body with her gaze, taking in his broad shoulders that tapered to slim hips, the taut muscles of his thighs and the hard length of his erection. He slid over on the bed so he could lie down beside her.

His cool hand slid down her flat stomach to her tiny lace panties. His finger dipped lower, caressing her through the lace. She felt a hot rush of wetness at her core. He teased her again until she uttered a groan

of frustration. He laughed at the sound, but obliged her by pulling down her panties. She lifted her hips so he could take them off.

Finally, she lay completely bare before him. She should feel vulnerable. He was, after all, nearly a stranger. Instead, her new vampire strength hummed within her. Blood called to blood as if she'd known him forever. He gazed down at her, his eyes filled with longing and none of the self-assurance she'd seen there before. A dark curl tumbled down to rest against his forehead. She reached up to push it away and then pulled him down toward her.

His weight settled gently on top of her, pushing her against the downy comforter. He shifted, the broad head of his erection settling at the juncture of her thighs. She bucked her hips, showing him with her body just how much she wanted him. But he made her wait. He lowered his head, brushing her lips with a feather-soft kiss that sent little shivers all the way down her spine. He deepened the kiss, using his tongue to preview what he wanted to do to her body. She moaned against his mouth, demanding more.

Vlad slid an arm beneath her neck to raise her throat. His mouth left hers to trace the long line of her throat with searing kisses. His lips hovered over her pulse point. She felt that barest of touches all the way to her sex. He cupped one breast. His thumb flicked over her nipple, raising it to a taut peak.

Beneath his skin, his blood sang to her. She moved her mouth to press a kiss against his throat. Her incisors scraped his skin, earning her a low groan. Now he was impatient. With his knee, he spread her legs wider and thrust gently inside her.

Slowly, he began to move. She matched his rhythm, raising her hips to meet his. Her body responded, far quicker than it usually did. Already the tight heaviness grew inside. Vlad quickened his pace and she followed him.

She gripped his muscular biceps, letting instinct guide her mouth to his shoulder. His breath gusted across her neck as he sought her vein.

Desire coiled tighter. Her teeth pierced his flesh. The shock of his blood rushing across her tongue sent her over the edge. She heard Vlad's deep groan of release before his fangs penetrated her throat.

Orgasm rushed over her in a dizzying wave. Every mouthful of his blood sent another tiny peak of pleasure rushing down her spine. Every movement of his mouth against her neck shot sensation straight to her sex. Together they rode out the crest of their pleasure until finally he drew his mouth away.

Jaelyn followed his lead. With the tip of her tongue, she licked away the last of his blood and let her head fall back against the pillows. Gently, Vlad disengaged and tumbled down beside her. He raised himself on one elbow and gazed down at her, his dark eyes shining.

"Wow," she breathed. "I never knew it could be so intense."

He kissed her lightly and she tasted the ghost of her blood on his lips. "There *are* good things about being a vampire."

If that was any indication, she intended to enjoy her new life very much. The thought made her laugh. “And I’ll have you to teach me.”

He raised her hand, turning her wrist so he could brush his lips against her pulse. “It would be my pleasure.”

## About the Author

To learn more about Stephanie Bedwell-Grime, please visit [www.feralmartian.com](http://www.feralmartian.com). Send an email to Stephanie at [sbedwellgrime@hotmail.com](mailto:sbedwellgrime@hotmail.com).

Look for these titles by Stephanie Bedwell-Grime

*Now Available:*

Feral Passion

*It's never a good idea to date your prey...*

## Feral Passion

© 2009 *Stephanie Bedwell-Grime*

Xandra had a thing about vampires—like not dating one. Ever. But now that she's on the hunt for the mastermind behind a newly formed vampire army, she's sucking it up and dating every vamp in her little black book. Her prime suspect: Dante. Cop, vampire—and drop-dead gorgeous.

As the police force's vampire liaison officer, Dante is no stranger to crime. Feral vampires are attacking in droves, and he's hell-bent on finding out who's responsible before the backlash robs them all of their hard-won rights. His number one suspect: Xandra. Hunter, smartass—and sexy as sin.

No one is more surprised than Xandra when Dante shows up as her date. Her cover is not all that's blown during their mutual interrogation. Sparks of attraction fly—right before an attack leaves her gravely injured. With no choice but to inoculate her with his blood, Dante has more questions than ever before. Like who wants her silenced.

As they race to uncover a long-buried secret, Xandra realizes she can trust no one. Not even Dante. Especially since his blood is giving her unpredictable side effects...

Warning: Contains violence and hot and heavy vampire action.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Feral Passion:*

"I think—" she started to say. "I need—"

And then the worldslipped away from her.

Dante cursed in the darkness. Motion stopped. With his arm slung across her shoulder, he walked across uneven gravel. He leaned her against a brick wall and ordered her to remain standing. The brick was still warm from the sun and comforting somehow. She couldn't stop shaking. It seemed inevitable that she would be sick.

She protested weakly when Dante moved her away from the warm brick. Keys jingled in his hand. The smell of mildew and disinfectant assaulted her senses.

She tried to warn Dante about her nausea, but he herded her across the floor and lowered her to a lumpy bed. It creaked ominously as he lay down beside her.

Xandra turned toward his warmth, the only comfort in the misery she couldn't escape.

"It's going to be okay, Xandra," he whispered. His breath ruffled her hair. She heard another sound, something wet and tearing. "Here." Dante's voice sounded disproportionately loud above the ventilation system.

His wrist pressed against her lips. She tasted the saltiness of his skin and felt his arms tighten around her, as if he expected it to hurt. Thick, coppery blood seeped into her mouth. Even though her mind rebelled, her body remembered what to do. She swallowed reflexively.

Dante's blood flowed into her. Like electricity it rushed outward through her veins, repairing the damage the vampires had done to her. And for a moment she was content just to drink and be healed. Then gently, he pulled his wrist away.

She clasped his wrist, desperately trying to bring it back to her mouth, but he firmly disengaged her fingers. She moaned at the sudden loss.

"Easy," Dante said. "Trust me, you don't want to have too much."

Alarm bells rang in some distant part of her mind. No, she certainly didn't want to have too much. That led to the inevitable changes that would make her a vampire. A creature like those hopeless fiends who'd attacked her.

Her eyes flew open. Panicked, she stared at him.

"Don't worry," he said, sensing her alarm. "You only had a little. Only enough to offset the effects of the virus."

The nausea had vanished. Pressed against Dante's warm body, the shivers had ceased. Xandra felt stronger, clearer headed. She looked into his amber eyes, only inches from hers.

He closed the distance. His mouth covered hers, possessive and demanding. His tongue probed the recesses of her mouth, seeking the remnants of his blood. It should bother her. A week ago, it would have. But the way Dante kissed her made her feel wanted and loved. And his blood coursed through her veins, making her strong.

That strange feeling of being cared for brought a sudden rush of tears to her eyes. She gasped for breath. He pulled away.

"Xandra?"

"Shh." She placed a finger against his lips to silence further questions.

He studied her carefully. "If we're moving too fast for you here—"

She shook her head. "No." How to explain this strange flood of feeling that touched places she'd kept hidden since her mother died? She didn't even think she could summon the words.

Rising, he held her against him while he pulled down the bedspread. She looked around the room, suddenly taking note of her surroundings.

"Where are we?"

"In a motel off the highway."

Danger brushed at her senses. She stiffened in his arms. "A motel? Why?"

"I couldn't run the risk of taking you back to your place. Or mine."

"Or the hospital?"

“The hospital would only have made things worse. Not to mention they’d probably call your boss.”

Memories of Jeremy’s dressing down rushed to the forefront of her mind. “It’s probably not a good idea to involve him.” She wondered how Jeremy had gone from a father figure to an enemy in less than a week. “But I don’t understand. Why does your blood make me better?”

He brushed his lips against hers again, setting off little bursts of pleasure all down her spine. “We’ll talk about that later,” he whispered. He settled her back against the sheets.

Dante stripped off his jacket and tossed it onto a nearby chair. He pulled his T-shirt over his head and added it to the pile. Then he strode to the bathroom and returned with a wet wad of tissue. “Don’t use the towels,” he said, pulling up the leg of her pants and wiping the blood from the back of her knee. He tossed the tissue into the toilet and flushed it. “Not until you’ve showered.”

Xandra nodded. The last thing they wanted to do was to leave DNA evidence in the motel. Evidence Jeremy could use against her. She unhooked her torque and put it on the night table with her cuffs.

“I haven’t done anything wrong,” she protested. “Three times now I’ve been attacked and Jeremy’s making me feel like *I’m* a criminal.”

“We need to find out why that is,” Dante said softly. Then he added, “Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” she agreed.

He reached for her. His callused hands slid down over her arms until his fingers located the hem of her gore-splattered shirt. Gently, he pulled it over her head and added it to the pile of clothes on the chair. Then, he lay down beside her again.

She felt strangely vulnerable and exposed in just her bra. She nuzzled against him, burying her nose in the soft tangle of hairs in the center of his chest.

“Hey,” he teased. Grasping her chin, he raised her head and kissed her again. His hair caressed her cheek, a contrast against the roughness of his beard. She buried her hands in his silken curls and returned the kiss. He moaned low in his throat.

Hooking one arm beneath her neck, he lowered her back against the pillows. His body covered hers. His chest pressed against her breasts, still confined by the lacy material of her bra. She pulled away a little to peruse him more fully.

Aside from tangle of downy curls, his chest was bare. Blond hair covered his forearms. With his head of unruly hair framing his face, he looked like a lion at rest. The light caught the earring in his left ear and the medallion around his neck.

Dante was busy with his own study of her. His gaze centered on the pale peaks of her breasts nestled in her bra, then continued down the line of her ribcage to her hips. His hands followed in their wake as if he wanted to memorize her contours.

His free hand slipped behind her back and deftly undid the clasp of her bra. She let him pull the material away. He gazed down at her with those golden eyes and smiled.

He kissed her lightly over the pulse point in her neck. She felt the touch of his lips down to her very core. He rained little kisses and tiny nips over her collarbone and then took the peak of one breast in his mouth. Xandra moaned.

Dante raised his head and gave her a smile that promised far more of such pleasure. His even white teeth gleamed in the dim light. Not a fang in sight, she thought in relief, as he bent his head to taste the other.

She threaded her hands through his curls again, demanding more of that caress that seemed to touch on every pleasure center in her body. And Dante complied. He moved lower, painting her ribcage with kisses and then dipping lower toward her navel and the waistband of her jeans.

Abruptly, the motel door slammed open.

*A powerful attraction is the last thing these arch enemies need. Or is it?*

## The Trouble with Curses

© 2008 Anara Bella

Selena Tremayne is different. For one thing, how many vampires do you know faint at the sight of blood? Despite the problems her “differences” cause, she’s grateful. It means she’s not an all-out-evil killing machine. It also means she can’t afford to let anyone get too close. And a guy like Rafe, delicious as he is, is to be avoided at all costs.

Rafe Hunter is a vampire slayer, an odd job thrust upon him by dint of birth. And with his augmented abilities, no one else does it better. Those abilities run into a major short-circuit, however, when he meets Selena. The mysterious beauty clouds his every instinct—something he can ill afford in his line of work. Because of her, his quarry has somehow slipped out of his grasp. Twice.

Coincidences are piling up, and he can’t help but wonder if simple lust is the culprit. Or if it’s something deeper—with dangerous repercussions that extend beyond anything either of them imagined...

**Warning: Explicit, sizzling-hot slayer/vamp sex. Please note: No vampires were harmed during the writing of this book.**

*Enjoy the following excerpt for The Trouble with Curses:*

“Okay, Rafe. I know you’re back there. You may as well show yourself.”

Nothing.

“I have no intention of letting you find out where I live, so you have nothing to gain by following me. I’ll wander around all over town all night long before I’ll show you where I live.”

A dark shadow separated itself from the wall. “How did you know I was here?”

His rich, deep voice shivered down her spine in its usual intoxicating way. “I have a sixth sense about these things.”

“Has to be something like that because I’m damned good at what I do. No one’s ever caught me tailing them before.”

She threw him a quizzical look. “You do this often, do you?”

He chuckled. “Actually, I do. I’m a private investigator.”

Well, that explained it. If she hadn’t *felt* him behind her, she wouldn’t have known. “Just my luck.”

“I didn’t intend for you to ever find out I’d followed you home tonight. I was just going to make sure you got in safely and leave.”

That would have been great except he’d still have found out where she lived. “That’s really nice, but I already told you that I’m fine. I don’t need you checking up on me.”

She heard rather than saw him shrug. One of the perks of having amazing hearing.

“Sorry. My father always taught me that you took care of a lady. Made sure she got home safe and sound.”

“But I wasn’t your date, so I’m not your responsibility.”

“Doesn’t matter. Look, Selena, whether you like it or not I like you, and I want to get to know you a helluvalot better. I won’t give up on you anytime soon, it’s just not my way so you may as well give in and give me a chance.”

“And I have no say in the matter?”

“Yes and no.”

Despite herself she laughed. “Meaning?”

“You’ve already decided. Your heart and body have already said yes. It’s only your mind that refuses to give in.”

“Unfortunately for you, it’s my mind that’s got the deciding vote.” The second the words passed her lips she wished them back. She’d as much as admitted to what he said.

He shook his head. Stepping closer, he reached out and cupped her cheek. “No, it doesn’t. *This* is the real deciding factor.”

She felt his sweet breath on her face just moments before his lips gently brushed across her own. They were feather-light and warm, at first coaxing, then growing more insistent as her response became evident.

She knew she should push him away, but she couldn’t seem to make herself do it. She’d been fantasizing about kissing Rafe from the moment she’d first heard his voice trickle over her senses. Now that it was happening, the last thing she wanted to do was stop him.

Her hands developed a mind of their own. Happily, they explored everything they could reach, from his hard biceps to his strong neck and finally ended up clutching his tight ass for everything she was worth.

She was right in her initial assessment—he was most definitely sex-on-legs. And right now, with his erection nestled between their bodies, she wanted nothing more than to traverse the very path that led to what felt like his very impressive sex.

She moaned into his mouth and ground her hips against him, feeling him return the exquisite pressure. Their tongues danced along each other, questing, exploring, enticing. Her breath caught. Blood pounded in her ears, all but igniting in her veins. She tried to tell herself it was just a kiss, nothing more, but who was she kidding? She’d never felt anything that came close to this kiss before.

Everything about him struck a chord with everything she was, and everything she wanted for herself, but was too afraid to take.

With an answering groan, his mouth started eating at hers, their tongues now melding together.

Tasting.

Needing.

*Wanting.*

Oh Lord, how she wanted. She wanted it all with this guy. Sex without a doubt, but the terrifying thing was she wanted more than that. She could deal with just the physical. In fact, Anne was probably right that all she needed was a good, long night of hot and heavy sex.

But with Rafe, she found herself dreaming of the happily-ever-after, and there was no happily-ever-after for her. There couldn't be because of what she was.

Pushing him away with a determination she didn't even know she possessed, she stepped back. Did she have the same stunned expression on her face he did? With disgust, she realized she must.

Neither said anything. They couldn't. Both of them were breathing so hard you'd have thought they'd been running for their lives. Then again, maybe they had. Rafe, because he was chasing after her. Her, because she was striving to get away from his magnetic attraction.

The whole thing was ridiculous.

"Why can't you just leave me alone?" Damn her voice's quavery betrayal.

He reached out and skimmed his thumb across her lips. "Because I can't."

She shook off his touch and his hand dropped away. "That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I can give you."

Selena threw her hands up in frustration. "What am I going to do with you?"

An utterly wicked chuckle erupted from him. "I can think of a few things."

"I'll just bet you can." So could she, although she'd never let him know it.

Despite her resistance, he pulled her into his arms and held her close. "Stop fighting this, Selena. At least give us a chance."

It felt so good to be held in his arms. She felt warm, secure and cherished. She nuzzled into his shoulder and inhaled his comforting scent.

How was it possible to feel so comfortable with a man and yet be so turned on you wanted to screw him senseless at the same time? It didn't make sense.

She sighed and snuggled in closer. "You need to go away."

His arms tightened, drawing her even closer. "Whatever you say. Just as soon as I see you home."

"You're not going to give in on this, are you?"

He kissed her forehead. "Nope."

"Bastard."

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