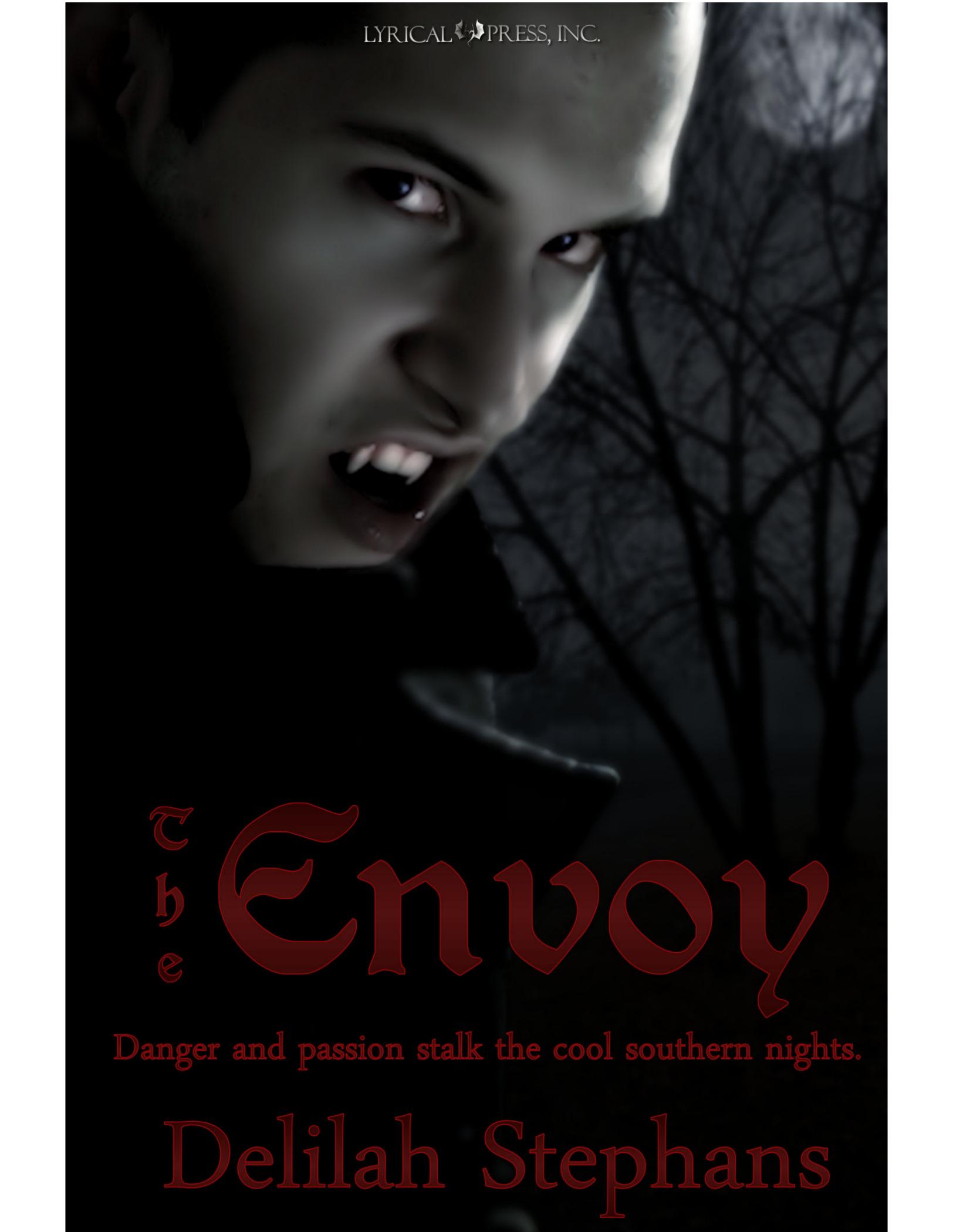


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The Envoy

Danger and passion stalk the cool southern nights.

Delilah Stephans

## Back Cover Copy

*Danger and passion stalk the cool southern nights.*

When Diana Matthews waited on Francisco Bolle at Electronic Avenue, she never imagined the dangerous world of vampires was more than mere myth. Nor did she imagine one would come to her rescue when three thugs confronted her after work. Fascinated with his old world charm, Diana can't resist being drawn to Francisco even though his true nature is as frightening as it is fascinating.

Francisco Bolle is intrigued by the feisty, petite sales clerk. But when an old enemy returns to challenge the laws of Vampire society, danger and death might come between them. Diana had just started to accept what he is when the worst side of himself surfaces.

Can Francisco and Diana survive the danger? More importantly, can they survive their love?

Content Warning: Sexual situations and violence.

## Highlight

“Diana, you have to get out of here.” His voice sounded strained to his own ears, not the commanding tone he needed.

Instead of doing as he asked, she pivoted on the balls of her feet and rose in a single graceful motion. “Why?”

He silently cursed everything he loved about her. “The Cruentus—the blood thirst wants your blood. I don’t think I can control it much longer.”

She didn’t run. Headstrong, foolishly brave woman that she was she stepped closer, wrapping her arms around him. Holding him as one would an injured child, one hand pulling his head down to rest on her shoulder as she stroked his hair and murmured soft words of comfort.

Francisco trembled at the tender yet dangerous gesture. As he opened his mouth to beg her to leave, his fangs brushed the silken smoothness of her skin. He fisted his hands at his sides in an attempt to refuse the commands of his violent thirst.

# The Envoy

by

Delilah K. Stephans

The Envoy

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## Dedication

*As always, to my wonderful husband who puts up with an author for a wife. And to those who work in retail, an extremely underappreciated job, for the grace and kindness you show your customers.*

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Mobile, Alabama for not only being the setting for this book but my hometown. To Bellingrath Gardens for being such a beautiful place to visit—especially during Christmas. To all the commission sales people I've known over the years, hopefully I portrayed the job in a positive light.

# Chapter 1

Diana Matthews lowered her aching feet off the chair and slipped the straps of her shoes back into place. She should have known better than to wear heels on the day after Thanksgiving, or as the press referred to it Black Friday. But these were her lucky shoes and every time she wore them, her sales were better. They hadn't let her down today either. Her sales were through the roof, and next week's check would be amazing. Maybe she could get ahead on the bills. Experience had taught her that January would be slow and she would be relying on her guaranteed hourly rate. She tucked a wayward curl behind her ear, stood, and grabbed her soda and the empty chip bag she'd tossed on the table earlier.

"Heading back out?" Jason asked, not looking away from the television where the local station was reporting from the front of the mall.

"It's money day," she reminded him. "Don't waste too much time in here or you'll miss sales. The early bird specials end in an hour." Diana tapped her watch with a manicured nail. Her heels clicked on the tile floor as she walked toward the refrigerator, pausing at the trashcan to toss the chip bag. She took another swallow of the soda and screwed the cap on tightly before sticking it in the refrigerator door. "See you out there."

"I've still got five minutes left on my break."

She shook her head at his very typical "first Christmas in retail" complaint as she pulled open the door to the sales floor. The dull roar of Christmas shoppers covered the carols she knew were playing. The store was filled with sales people in suits and customers, their arms laden with shopping bags and sales circulars clutched tightly in their hands. The television wall of Electronic Avenue was well covered by other associates assisting the customers. She glanced over to see that computers were adequately staffed as well. The cashiers worked furiously to keep up with the line of customers that stretched almost to the storeroom door.

Diana was clocking in at the cellphone display when she spied an unclaimed customer. He stood with his hands folded behind his back as he leaned over the counter examining the selection of MP3 players. His long black trench coat hid most of his wardrobe that normally would have given her a hint of what price range of merchandise to show him first. Straight black hair hung neatly to the collar of the coat, and he wore dress boots that were polished but still had some scuffmarks. Comfortable and able to afford what he wanted, she quickly decided.

Diana put on her best professional smile and tucked another rebellious curl behind her ear as she stepped behind the counter. "Good morning. I'm Diana. Would you like to see one of the players?"

"Yes, please," he replied, looking up to meet her gaze. "I am not certain which would be best to purchase. What would you suggest?"

His slight accent, steely blue eyes and the soft smile that graced his full lips made her stomach do a sudden flip. She couldn't deny that he had a mysterious and sensual quality, nor her own attraction to him.

*Down girl. He's a customer, not a potential date.* Diana covered her lapse by slipping off her wrist key coil and opening the case. She took a deep breath and slowly let it out, hopefully giving the impression she was carefully considering his question.

"I like the iPods," she answered while pulling out the three models and placing them on the counter in front of him. "The Nano, the eighty-gigabyte, and the hundred and sixty-gigabyte." She pointed to each as she mentioned them. "There is also the Shuffle, which we do carry, but it lacks some of the nicer features of these models. The basic difference in the models is the amount of storage space. We also carry the iTouch."

"Which would you purchase, Diana?"

"Personally?" At his nod she continued, "I'd buy the hundred and sixty-gig. It holds more music, and this is the video model so you can put movies or television shows on it as well. While you can do that with the iTouch, it can only hold a maximum of thirty-two gigs."

"Then I shall take the hundred and sixty," he said. "Is there anything else I will require?"

*Jackpot!* She squealed inwardly, but covered her excitement with a dazzling smile. She moved from behind the cases and led him to the slatwall island holding the accessories. She spent another ten minutes going over all the accessories, at one point leaving him momentarily to retrieve a small shopping basket from the edge of the counter. He soon had a collection of boxes and blister packs in it: a case, a power adaptor, and a back up battery pack complete with a twenty-four pack of double A batteries. "Is there anything else, Mr..."

"Bolle," he supplied. "Please, call me Francisco."

"Francisco," she repeated, nodding. "Is there anything else?"

"I will need to get a laptop computer as well."

"Certainly." Diana turned to hang up a few of the accessories he had rejected and mouthed a silent, *yes!* Back in control, she turned to face him. "Give me just a moment to store these items out of the way, and then I'll join you at the notebooks."

A half hour later, she escorted him to the register and introduced him to Cindy. "It was a pleasure assisting you, Mr. Bolle. Cindy will ring up your purchases and give you the pick-up slip for the computer. If there is ever anything else I can help you with, here is my card." She pulled a card from the pocket of her blazer and handed it to him. His fingertips brushed hers as he took it.

Diana turned and spotted two women standing at the televisions, eyeing the new high definition wall mounted models. She took a step toward them but stopped at the soft accented voice.

"I will certainly request your assistance."

She looked back over her shoulder and smiled as he placed the card in his pocket before continuing to the women looking at televisions.

The afternoon was as busy as the morning, and the hours flew by as she assisted customers with choosing Christmas gifts for their loved ones. At Cindy's register Diana handed off her latest customer, a woman purchasing a game system and games for her teenage son. Diana twisted her wrist, bringing the digital display of her watch into view, then groaned at the time, six o'clock. She glanced around the store. Dan Patterson, the floor manager, stood behind one of the store monitors. She walked over to him, avoiding making eye contact with any customer.

"Dan," she called, getting his attention.

He was a big man, almost as round as he was tall. His gray hair gave him a grandfatherly air, but when he lost his temper, you didn't want to be on the receiving end. His face was lined with the stress of his job and his ever-present smile.

"What ya need, Diana?" His drawl was more pronounced than usual, alerting her to the fact that he was tired or warning her that someone was in trouble.

"If you can spare me for a half hour or more, I was going to run to Mickey D's and grab a burger-fry?" She cocked her head, giving him her best wounded-puppy look.

Dan snorted and his fingers flew over the keyboard, then he studied the monitor. "Looks like you've had a good day," he muttered as he typed a few more commands. "Only took a break at nine-thirty. Go."

"Thanks, Dan."

"Take an hour. Let some of these idiots catch up with you."

She waved over her shoulder as she walked quickly across the floor. Diana slipped behind the counter, grabbed her purse, dropped her nametag in a pocket and clocked out.

The mall was still filled with people, only now there were more young adults and teens. They were more interested in visiting and roaming the tiled halls than actually shopping, evidenced by the lack of shopping bags in their hands. Still, making her way through them would use a good portion of her dinner break just to get to the Mickey D's at the other end of the mall. Instead, she decided to walk across the back parking lot. It was the same distance walking but not as busy.

Diana knew it wasn't the smartest thing to do, but assured herself that the extra security provided by the police officers patrolling on horseback would minimize the risk. She pushed open the door and stepped outside. It was warm for November, in the mid-sixties. The lights created overlapping circles in the darkness. No one was visible milling around the parking lot. Diagonally from the door, there were people leaving and entering the mall at the entrance near Mickey D's. She hitched the strap of her purse further up on her shoulder, checked the traffic, then started across the parking lot.

Halfway across the lot, three men climbed out of a white van that had been parked away from the majority of the cars. Something about them made the hair on the back of her neck raise and a shiver run down her spine. Diana lengthened her stride, hoping to out distance them.

"Yo, lady," one of them called.

She ignored him and quickened her pace again, berating herself for stupidly taking this route. There had been several stories on the news of some young woman disappearing in a parking lot, only to be found a few days later dead. Why hadn't it occurred to her that "some young woman" could be her? Every step brought her closer to the entrance, closer to the safety of the mall. Behind her, the sound of her pursuers' feet sped up. Diana reached into her purse, fingers searching until they found the container of pepper spray. She'd thought her mother was silly for giving it to her, but as she curled her fingers around the cool metal cylinder to pull it out she was grateful to have it.

"Hey." It was the same voice as before, this time closer. His call was followed by the softer, unintelligible voices of his companions.

*Let me get to the entrance,* she prayed silently as she continued her fast walk. She refused to run, nor would she turn to look at them. She'd seen too many horror movies where the girl turned back to look at her attackers, only to die at their hands. No one was close enough to see her other than as a figure moving down one of the lanes of cars.

A figure emerged from the shadows near the trash compactor and started toward her quickly. Her heartbeat sped up in fear that this was a fourth member of the gang. Then she noticed the flaring of the trench coat. Relief flooded through her as she recognized her customer from earlier, and she altered her course to meet him. The footsteps behind her slowed.

She met him in a bright circle of light near the end of the line of cars. Her morning customer's steel blue eyes flicked up and down her form—was he checking for injuries—then moved to focus on her followers, narrowing slightly as he studied them. He removed the shoulder strap of his laptop carrying case and handed it to her.

"Diana, you did not wait." His voice was a soft calming caress even as he sounded like a boyfriend chastising his girlfriend. "Would you be so kind as to continue inside and get us a table? I wish to see what these gentlemen's interest in you is about." As he placed the laptop on her shoulder, he whispered, "Francisco."

It took her a moment to realize what he had said. Once it penetrated her panic-clouded thoughts that he had reminded her of his name and he was posing as the concerned boyfriend, she didn't know if she should be angry that he was putting himself in danger or grateful for the ruse.

As he pulled away, Diana grabbed his hand. He met her eyes, looking at her curiously. She wanted to tell him to come with her and forget about those men. "Be careful, Francisco," she whispered, but he had already stepped past her.

She glanced over her shoulder for the first time since they had begun following her and watched as he approached the three men. Discretion suddenly became the better part of valor and she dashed toward the entrance to the mall.

## Chapter 2

As Diana's footsteps faded, Francisco examined the three males in front of him. Long suppressed training instinctively took over far more easily than he was comfortable with. Their attire of baggy hoodies and low riding pants could hide a multitude of weapons. The confident swagger each thug exhibited as they moved to surround him indicated they didn't think him a threat. He easily picked out the leader by the not so subtle hand signals the man was giving his companions and stepped toward him. Mentally, he quickly identified the three as Boss, Righty and Lefty.

"You shouldn't have interfered, man," Boss growled. "Now we're gonna have ta mess you up."

Francisco spread his arms, elbows slightly bent and palms up. "You are welcome to try."

He kept his eyes focused on the Boss's hands, waiting for the signal to either Righty or Lefty, or if he was intelligent both. The twitch of his forefinger directing Lefty to attack first was a slight disappointment, but not a surprise. Francisco's current appearance did not hint at the predator they faced. He turned toward the threat, felt the sharp momentary pain of his fangs breaking through as they descended into place. The acrid metallic taste of his own blood coating his tongue sharpened his perceptions.

In the slow-motion haze of his awakened senses, he watched as Lefty pulled a balisong from the voluminous folds of his oversized jacket. The thug spun it open in his right hand, the whirling dance of handle and blade beautiful in its simplicity. Lefty lunged forward, surprisingly quick for his size, the knife extended.

Francisco moved right, arching his body to avoid the knife as he grabbed Lefty's forearm. The sharp crack of bone rang in his ears, along with Lefty's scream of pain and the softer clatter of the knife hitting the asphalt. Perhaps he should tone down his strength, then remembering the racing of Diana's heart he allowed a battle calm to descend. He continued his turn, tossing the disabled opponent into Boss. The pair went down in a tangle of arms, legs and curses. He turned his attention to Righty, who stepped back, fumbling to pull something from one of the pockets of his hoodie.

The loud clatter of horseshoes on asphalt echoed in the warm evening air as the horseback patrol galloped up. Knowing he had to calm himself, Francisco closed his eyes and allowed his fangs to retract. He heard Righty move toward Lefty and Boss, then their whispered swearing as they plotted the stories they would tell the police officers. The officers' horses shied away, sensing danger, and their riders yanked at the reins to regain control of the animals.

“We received a call from a female about a man being attacked.” Francisco knew what the officers saw. Two prone figures still trying to untangle themselves with the help of a third individual and a fourth standing with his back to them. He heard the creak of leather as one officer dismounted, then heavy steps as he walked over to the three. “So, what happened?”

“They attempted to assault a young woman.” Francisco opened his eyes and turned to face the officers.

“And you stopped them.” At the sharp nod he received in answer, Officer Dennis Josephs’s eyes narrowed as he studied the man, then smiled. “It’s been a long time, Frank.”

“Yes, Officer Josephs, it has,” Francisco agreed, his eyebrows knitting together as he tried to remember the last time he’d seen the officer. “Has it been four years?”

“Three. So who do I call, your people or mine?”

“Your people, though one of the attackers will most likely need an ambulance.” Francisco’s lips quirked upward. “I broke his right forearm.”

The officer shook his head, biting his lip to keep from chuckling. “We’ll need a statement from you.”

“I expected as much. May I stop by the security office after my dinner?”

“Yeah, just make sure I don’t have more reports to file afterward.”

“I will be certain to keep your paperwork to a minimum for the rest of the evening. I will see you in an hour.” Francisco inclined his head.

In the strobing flash of the blue lights of the approaching police car, he started toward the entrance. The people standing outside the doors, watching as the police handcuffed and placed the three attackers in two cars, barely noticed him entering the mall.

He scanned the crowd looking for Diana. A woof of air escaped him as a laptop was thrust into his chest. He fumbled quickly to grasp it before it could fall to the ground.

“Are you insane?” Diana stood before him angrily tucking a curl behind her ear. Her hazel eyes flashed green and gold fire at him. “You could have been killed. I don’t need that on my conscience, reminding me I was an idiot.” She emphasized each word with a poke on the case of the computer he still held at his chest.

As she continued berating his misplaced and perhaps foolhardy chivalry, he fought back the smile that threatened at her lecture. Normally he wouldn’t have felt the need to defend someone, simply intimidating the attackers would have been enough, but there was something about the petite sales clerk that instilled a fierce protective instinct within him. He knew it was silly and, in this day and age, dangerous for one like himself to have such chivalrous compulsions. Nor did the majority of independent women of this era seem to appreciate it, as Michaela would no doubt remind him as soon as she heard of the incident. But it was hard to undo the training of his childhood. He pushed away the questions within his own mind and concentrated on admiring the woman in front of him.

“It was not my intention to cause you distress, for that I apologize,” he interjected quickly when she paused to take a breath.

“Apology accepted.” She touched her forehead.

He noticed the slight tremble in her fingertips. It flowed down her slender arm to the shoulder partially hidden by reddish-brown hair. The minute quiver grew into shakes.

“I should thank you for coming to my aid.” Her voice quavered.

“It is unnecessary. You need to sit down, Diana.”

He moved to her side, placed a hand on the small of her back and guided her to the tables sitting in the middle of the mall. There were two seats at the end of one of the tables, with his free hand he pulled out a folding chair and guided her to it. He dropped to one knee in front of her. “Are you well?”

She blinked several times as she looked at him, then nodded.

“I will return momentarily.”

Minutes later, he returned with a tray and sat beside her. “Drink this.” He handed her one of the cups and watched patiently as she took a sip, then made a face. “Is the tea not to your liking?”

“It’s unsweetened.” She ripped open a few sugar packets and poured them into the cup.

“Ah.” He placed a salad in front of her and took one for himself. “I assumed you would prefer a salad.” He pried the lid off and set it to the side.

“Actually, a burger-fry would’ve worked for me.”

“Burger-fry?”

“Hamburger, French fries and a soda.” A charming shrug of a shoulder. “I’m surprised you didn’t get that. Most guys do.”

He opened the packet of dressing and poured it on his salad. “I prefer my meat rarer than fast food establishments cook it.” He speared a bit of lettuce. “Why were you walking across the parking lot after dark?”

She groaned around the mouthful of salad she was chewing. A moment later, Diana grabbed the tea and took a swallow. “Trying to save time by taking a shortcut. It wasn’t the smartest decision I’ve ever made.” She laughed softly at her own foolishness. “It’s perfectly safe during daylight hours, but after dark is a different story. Why are you still at the mall? It’s been hours since you came into the store.”

“I had an appointment to have some minor repairs done on my vehicle at the dealership. It seemed a better solution to spend the day at the mall than in their small waiting area.” He pushed a wilted piece of half-frozen lettuce around with his fork. “I did not expect it to take all day.”

She laughed and Francisco was relieved by the sound.

“I am pleased that my misfortune is amusing to you.”

Diana started to reply when her cellphone rang. “Sorry.” She opened her bag to fish the phone out and looked at the screen. “The store. Hello?”

He feigned interest in his salad as she spoke into the small device. She completed the call, then sighed heavily.

“Is there something wrong?”

“Oh, no. Well...yes, in a way, I guess. That was Dan, the floor manager.” She closed the phone and slipped it back into her purse. “A security guard told him what happened. It’s slowed down at the store, and since there are enough associates there now to handle it, I’m off for the day.”

He nodded his understanding. “I have to pick up my car, and then make a statement to the police about the incident. Afterward, would you be willing to join me for a more substantial meal?”

“I don’t know.”

“There is a restaurant here in the mall. I merely wish to enjoy the company of an attractive woman during my meal.” He hoped his flimsy reasoning would allay her apprehension. Her wit and quicksilver temper fascinated him. If he was honest with himself, it was the way her hair seemed to have a mind of its own and how her full lips tilted up at the corners even when she was angry that mesmerized him.

“I guess that will be okay.” She ducked her head, but he noticed the slight blush kissing her cheeks.

“Then I shall meet you there in an hour.” He was surprised his voice remained calm and detached. “If you will excuse me, I must leave you to attend to my car and the police.”

\* \* \* \*

An hour and ten minutes later, Francisco pushed open the door to the restaurant. Diana waited beside the host’s podium, arms crossed, her foot tapping angrily.

“Forgive my tardiness.”

“I was about to leave.” Her eyes were not flashing, so he knew she wasn’t furious with him.

“And I would have understood.” He looked at the hostess. “Table for two, non-smoking.” He returned his attention to Diana. “The statement took longer than I expected.”

“If you’ll follow me.” The hostess gathered two menus and started through the restaurant, weaving between tables filled with diners, not waiting to see if they followed.

Seated, orders placed and drinks in front of them, he found himself the subject of Diana’s intense scrutiny. He had met with heads of state throughout the world but none had made him want to shift in his seat as much as the lovely sales clerk.

“I am assuming you wish to know why the statement took longer.” A raised eyebrow and tilt of her head indicated that she did. “One of the gentlemen ended up with two broken bones in his right forearm.” He expected she might be offended at the violence and was unprepared for her reaction.

“I wish it had been his neck.” She mimed breaking something with her hands. “Not really. Thank you again for being outside, and I apologize for chewing you out. I was just angry...”

“At yourself?”

“Yeah.”

“Dare I hope you held some small concern for my safety?”

Her face flushed with color at his question.

The waiter placed their orders on the table and refilled their glasses in the silence that descended between them.

“Yes, a little,” she answered, lifting her glass when the waiter had moved away. “I’ve never seen you in the mall before, are you new to town?”

Francisco noticed the deliberate change of subject and allowed it. “No, I have lived in Mobile for many years now. I rarely come to the mall though.”

“That explains it.” She cut into her grilled chicken. “I’m here forty plus hours a week. What do you do for a living?”

“I am a liaison between D. C. and H. and the local government.”

“Ah, a lawyer.”

“I was once. Now I am a liaison.” He leaned forward, looked around the restaurant quickly, then crooked a finger at her. She sat forward, eyes searching. “That means I do less actual work but I am paid more.”

He smiled when Diana bit her lip trying to hold back her laughter, then reclined against her seat, her shoulders shaking with suppressed mirth.

“Can I have your job?”

“I am afraid the position is not available. It also has some very specific job requirements that you do not meet.” He thought for a moment. “There is an assistant’s position open, but I would prefer not to offer it to you.”

“Because you don’t know me?”

“D. C. and H. has a very strict no dating policy for executives concerning their assistants.” He placed his napkin beside the plate of half-eaten steak and pushed it back. “I find, Ms. Matthews, that I very much wish to become better acquainted with you outside of the professional world.”

## Chapter 3

Dust motes floated in the stream of afternoon sunlight coming through the open sliding glass doors of the second floor apartment as Diana placed the last bit of garland on the fireplace mantle. Christmas carols played softly on the stereo in a vain attempt to put her in the holiday mood. After five Christmases in retail and temperatures in the low seventies that kept sales down, her holiday spirit would have made Scrooge in his most bah humbug moment gape in awe. She backed away, hands on her hips as she studied the decorations for a moment, then stepped forward to adjust the Santa figurine, turning him slightly. Why she bothered to put them up anymore was a mystery to her. Satisfied that it looked festive enough to appease any visitors who might drop by, she sat down on the couch, lifted the glass of Merlot and took a sip.

She glanced over at the answering machine on the end table, no new messages. Maybe he wouldn't call her after all. Sitting beside the phone was a business card. How many times had she looked at it? Just every time she took a break from decorating, or answered the phone, or reached for the remote in the last four days. She slid the card toward the edge of the table, then lifted it.

The simple and elegant card intrigued her as much as the man. When Francisco made his bold declaration that he wanted to date her, she'd assumed that he was another mall gigolo looking for an evening of sex. Then he had walked her to her car, handed her his card and told her the next step was hers to take or not. She had been certain he'd show up at the store Saturday or Sunday to press his case, but he hadn't. She took another sip of wine as she flicked the top edge of the card.

"Diana Matthews, you are a coward. He's handsome, a gentleman who saved you from your own stupidity. Just pick up the phone and call him. If for nothing other than to say 'thanks for saving me.'"

It was a little late in the afternoon, but someone might still be in the office. She set the wine glass on the coffee table, picked up the phone and dialed the number. At the first ring, she slammed the headset back on the caddy.

"I'm a coward!" She flinched. Someone outside could have heard her self-recrimination. She fell sideways on the couch to lie there, one foot still resting on the floor. Sighing heavily, she righted herself. "Okay, I can do this. I'm a modern woman and he did make the first move, so it's not like I'm asking him out. Right?" she asked the Santa on the mantle.

Before she could lose her nerve, she grabbed the phone and hit redial. It rang once, twice, three times before it was answered.

"D. C. and H. Francisco Bolle's office." A well-modulated Old Mobile accented woman's voice answered.

Diana's throat constricted, and her mouth was suddenly dry. She couldn't do this.

"Hello?"

She cleared her throat. "May I speak to Mr. Bolle, please?"

"Mr. Bolle is not taking calls at the moment. Would you like to leave a message for him? He will call you back as soon as he is available."

She slumped back. "Yes, I would."

"Your name, please, ma'am?"

"Oh, sorry. This is Diana Matthews, and I was just—"

"Ms. Matthews, he's has been hoping you would call and has left strict orders to put you through immediately. May I place you on hold while I transfer the call?"

"All right."

"Just one moment, Ms. Matthews."

There was a click on the line as the voice was replaced by hold music. Christmas music.

\* \* \* \*

Francisco sat quietly half listening as he had for the past hour while Jonathon Howe lectured him, offering no defense for his actions. He felt the glare his boss was leveling at him. The same one he had ignored for the last ten minutes.

"What if that miscreant files a suit against you for assault?"

His thoughts were centered not on the senior vampire but on Diana, who though he had given her his home, cell and office phone numbers with a request to call at her convenience, had yet to contact him. The sharp slap of Jonathon's hands hitting the desk as he leaned across its polished surface to glare at him gained the attention demanded.

"Did you even think of that?"

Francisco blinked twice and refocused his attention on Jonathon. "Forgive me, my thoughts had wandered."

"Really? I couldn't tell that you stopped listening thirty minutes ago." The elder vampire's tone hardened. "Are you going to answer my question?"

"I do not think he will." Francisco shrugged. "I have paid the hospital bill and there is, according to the emergency room doctor, no permanent damage to the arm. It was a clean break. The police also assure me that as the delinquent threatened me and a young lady first, there is no possibility of such a suit moving forward. I spoke with the District Attorney's office this morning and they will not be filing charges. I have also declined pressing charges against the three."

No, he didn't want the human courts to deal with Boss, Lefty and Righty. They had threatened and frightened Diana, in a time not too long ago he could have challenged them, but now to seek justice he would have to make them disappear. Quietly. He had his years as a Cleaner for vampire society to make that possible.

While his mind had wandered again, Jonathan had started back into the lecture. With a tired sigh, Francisco picked up the pack of cigarettes he had placed there when he entered, pulled out one, lit it, took a deep drag, then blew out the smoke which twisted and curled in the still air of the office.

"That is unfashionable," Jonathon rebuked, waving away the tendrils of smoke that inched toward him.

"It will not kill me. Are you finished with the lecture?"

"No. It won't kill you, but it does stink. How you can stomach the stench, I can't understand. No. I am not finished lecturing you, but it does no good anyway. You aren't listening." He ran a hand through his salt and pepper hair. "Have you picked your replacement?"

Francisco sat up straighter. Wayward thoughts wondering if Diana would call and the bodily harm he would cause her attackers vanished. "Replacement?" Surely, the mall incident hadn't been enough of a faux pas to remove him from his new position.

"Yes, for head of the Cleaners."

He took another drag off the cigarette, giving himself a moment to calm his thoughts and form his argument. What he was about to suggest went against centuries of tradition, then again he had been suggesting it since he had become Envoy. He expected Jonathon to reject it as he had every other time. "I would like to put Michaela in the position."

"Absolutely not!" Jonathon narrowed his eyes. "We've discussed this before."

"And you are being just as unreasonable as you have been each time we've discussed it. At least hear me out this time," Francisco tried to reason with his superior.

"There is no reason to. As I said, we have discussed this before and your suggestion is as ludicrous now as it was then. There has never been a woman Cleaner before Michaela, and though she has done a passable job as your second, a woman does not have the ruthlessness to do the job. They are too sentimental to act effectively as judge and executioner."

"I would not allow Cassandra to hear you say that, if I were you."

Jonathon leaned across the desk, ignoring the cigarette smoke that twisted between them. "Cassandra Dewey is a unique and remarkable woman. She survived a harsh time during her life and after her change." His voice was soft but Francisco heard the steel in it. "Michaela was the coddled baby of her family. That she has done as well as your second as she has is impressive. But, I repeat she does not have the ruthlessness that being in charge of the Cleaners requires. The ruthlessness you brought to the job." The senior vampire reclined back into his seat, apparently considering the matter closed.

Francisco fought the urge to roll his eyes. Michaela insisted the man was archaic in his beliefs, and he was beginning to agree with her. "Thank you for the compliment, but a woman can be just as ruthless as any man, Jonathon, more so if the situation requires. Have you never heard the sayings 'There is no creature more dangerous than a mother protecting her child' or 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'? Yes, her family may have coddled Michaela but that was over a century and a half ago. She is no longer the child she was then. Why will you not see it?" He paused, giving the man a hard stare. "She was my second for a hundred years. She has also operated as the leader of the Cleaners for the last decade since you made me your Envoy. She is well-versed in the job and the most qualified individual for the position."

Jonathon leaned forward, resting his chin on the fist of his right hand. His craggy features etched in concentration and disgust, he considered the suggestion. "I need to think this over. Go on, get out of here."

Francisco stood and snuffed the cigarette in the glass ashtray.

"Don't cause any more trouble."

"I will attempt to stay out of trouble. Have a good evening, Jonathon." He reached across, shook hands with the other, lifted the pack from the desk and headed back to his office. As he closed the door, he heard Jonathon spraying air deodorizer.

He walked down the richly appointed hall, nodding to both the vampires and humans who worked there. It might be another decade or another century before Jonathon reached a decision on Michaela, but Francisco was determined that she would get the job in the end.

He opened the door to his office as his assistant placed someone on hold. When she looked up, he tossed the pack of cigarettes to her. She caught them and dropped them into the top drawer of her desk.

"Thank you for the loan, Sarah. As always, light one and Jonathon ends the lecture and shoos me from the office as soon as he can."

She handed him a mint from the candy dish in front of her. "No problem, that's what I keep them for."

He started into his office, unwrapped the mint and popped it in his mouth. As he passed, Sarah pointed at her phone.

"Diana Matthews is on line one for you."

Her laughter followed him as he pulled open the door to his office and quickly crossed to the desk. His thigh connected painfully with the sharp corner as he cut around the desk. "Bugger!"

"You're not British, Frank," Sarah called. The anglicized version of the curse he spat at her was ignored as she shut the door.

He sat in the leather executive chair, lifted the receiver and carefully pressed the flashing button. "Diana?"

\* \* \* \*

Diana smiled as his slightly accented voice sounded in her ear and a shiver ran up her spine. "Hi, I—um...well... I thought." She tucked a curl behind her ear, then tried again. "I was thinking about what you said Friday night about dating and wondered if you were still interested. I know I kind of gave you the brush off." She rolled her eyes at her inability to form a sentence that didn't sound like an airhead schoolgirl.

"You had a stressful evening. It is not surprising you needed time to collect your thoughts before accepting or declining."

"Yeah." She kicked off her shoes and pulled her feet up on the couch. "I have to work Friday and Saturday night, but I'm off Thursday."

"Let me check my schedule."

Through the receiver the sound of pages being turned sounded, then a pen tapping on a desk. Silence dragged on for several minutes, and she began to think he was going to turn her down.

“Francisco?”

“I have nothing scheduled for Thursday evening.” His voice was a seductive caress. “Is there any special place you would like to go or anything you would like to do?”

She twirled her hair around a finger. “Not really, I’ll let you surprise me.”

“Very well, I shall plan the evening.”

She heard the squeak of his chair. She could almost see him leaning back in the chair, but she couldn’t picture him with his feet propped up on the desk.

“What time should I call for you?”

“Around seven?”

“I shall pick you up at seven.” Another screech sounded through the phone. “I will require your address.”

## Chapter 4

The screech of coat hangers sliding against the metal bar was accented with comments. “Too frilly, too summery.” A pause as an outfit was carefully considered. “How about this one?” Diana pulled the charcoal gray pantsuit from the rack, then stepped out of the closet to show it to her friend.

Becky lay on the bed on her stomach, her knees bent, feet kicking in the air. “Kinda’ boring, but cute. Why don’t you wear that really pretty green dress of yours?” She rolled over and bounced off the bed, making her way into the closet. “It’s Christmassy and you look cute in it.”

While Becky flipped through her clothes, Diana wondered why she’d asked Becky for her opinion. The woman had no clothes sense except borderline slutty, making up for the time she spent in unflattering scrubs.

“This one.”

“It’s a summer dress.” Diana flicked the shoulder straps. “See? It’s December.”

Besides, cute wasn’t exactly the look she wanted. She turned back to the closet, her chin held in her hand, forefinger taping her lips as she inventoried her clothes. The closet was filled with work and bumming clothes but nothing suitable for dating. She wondered how long it had been since she’d been out on a date. Since breaking up with Richard four years ago. How had so much time passed?

“Ugh! I never thought I’d say this, Beck, but I have nothing to wear.”

“Well, that means only one thing...shopping trip!” Becky laid her arm over her best friend’s shoulder. “Let me run next door, grab my purse, and we’ll go to the mall.”

Diana rolled her eyes and shrugged off the arm. “You know I hate shopping on my day off. I can barely stand going to Wally World for groceries.” Bending, she grabbed a pair of flats from the floor of the closet and balancing with a hand on Becky’s shoulder, slipped on the shoes. “I’ll walk next door with you, and we’ll leave from your place.” As they left the bedroom, Diana walked over to the end table to pick up her purse and turn on the answering machine. “Okay, let’s get out of here. Where should we look? I really don’t want to be at the mall all afternoon.”

Standing beside the door, her hand on the knob, Becky shrugged. “Limited... Express... Gap... Dillards... It really depends on where he’s taking you tonight.”

“I don’t know,” Diana confessed, digging in her purse for her keys. “So, what do you think... something dressy, but casual?”

“Sounds good,” Becky agreed, opening the door. “Oh, hi there, cutie.”

A deliveryman stood outside the door, one arm wrapped around a vase filled with roses, lilies and greenery, his other hand raised to knock on the door. “I’ve got a delivery for...” He looked at his log. “Diana Matthews.”

"I'm Diana Matthews." Opening the door wider as Becky relieved the man of the vase, she wondered who could have sent her such an obviously expensive arrangement.

"Sign here, ma'am." He held out the logbook to her.

She took the book and signed as Becky stepped into the kitchen, sniffing the roses as she went. "Who are they from?"

The deliveryman took the log back, shrugging. "There should be a card. Have a nice day." He turned and walked down the stairs.

"Read the card."

Diana blinked before stepping back from the card held inches from her nose, then snatched it out of Becky's hand. She chewed on her lip as she opened the tiny envelope.

"Who are they from?" Becky whined.

"Francisco," she breathed.

"He say anything on the card?"

"Yes. I look forward to our assignation this evening."

"Assignation?" Becky wrinkled her nose as she pulled her head back.

"It's a fancy way of saying date. Can I read the rest of the card, please?" Diana raised an eyebrow, waiting until Becky smiled and nodded before continuing. "We will be dining under the stars, if that is acceptable to you. If not, please call me at your earliest convenience so I may alter our reservations. Your humble servant, Francisco Bolle." She brushed past her friend and into the kitchen to look at the flowers.

"He sounds like a boring stick-in-the-mud," Becky complained from behind her.

"No." Diana cupped one of the lilies and sniffed it. "He's old fashioned and a gentleman."

"Well, he could have just said 'we're eating outside if that's okay, if not give me a call.' That's what Bubba would have done."

"Bubba wouldn't have sent you flowers in the first place." She smiled at the flowers and placed the card beside them. Panic flooded her. "What's tonight's weather supposed to be like?"

"Don't know, but that's why God invented the Weather Channel."

She laughed as Becky steered her out of the kitchen away from the bouquet and out of the apartment. "Lady Di, I love you dearly but you are a hopeless romantic. If we don't get to the mall you're going to be borrowing something of mine."

"So not happening."

\* \* \* \*

Diana admitted to herself that the shopping trip had been a success, as she studied her reflection in the full-length mirror. The simple black pantsuit and emerald green sweater looked Christmassy and classic, yet was something she could wear to work long after the holidays. The outfit made her eyes look more green than hazel. The slim legged pants and heels made her seem taller. She smoothed the sweater over her stomach as she turned side to side admiring the way it

clung to her body, making her average figure appear almost voluptuous, or maybe that was the push-up bra she'd gotten at Victoria's Secret. She fluffed her hair, then flipped back the stray curls that fell in front of her eyes.

"Now all I need is the man."

As if on cue, there was a knock at the door. Diana grabbed her purse off the dresser, gave herself one more look over, then hurried to the living room. She stopped for a moment, taking a deep breath then let it out slowly before opening the door. Her heart missed a beat at the sight of the man standing there. Somehow in a week she had forgotten how devastatingly handsome he was. She'd half expected him to wear a suit but instead he was wearing black slacks, a turtleneck and trench coat. The monochromatic wardrobe made his eyes even bluer. Eyes that traveled down her form with appreciation.

"Good evening, Diana." Francisco's voice caressed her with warmth, as did his eyes. His lips tilted up in a slight smile. "You look lovely. The green is quite becoming on you."

Her cheeks warmed at his compliment. "Thanks. Why don't you come in for a second while I finish getting ready." She stepped back as he entered the apartment.

"Did you receive the flowers?"

"Yes. They're beautiful, thank you so much." She double-checked the answering machine, making sure it was on. "The note really makes me curious where we're eating."

He chuckled softly. "I am thankful that Mobile is warm, even in December. Else the location I have chosen would not be suitable."

"Yeah." She turned back to him. "I can't believe this warm front we're having. I mean, high fifties to mid sixties during the day is normal, but it got up into the seventies today." She shook her head. "That is going to be so bad for sales."

"I would not think the weather being pleasant, if unseasonably warm, would affect sales for the season." He stood, his hands in the pockets of his coat, his expression one of puzzled interest.

"Oh, it does. Christmas is supposed to be cold, even in Mobile. If it's not, people just don't get into the spirit."

"Then I shall hope the weather changes to more seasonable temperatures."

"I remember the year that it snowed on... I think it was a Wednesday. Snow in Mobile is unusual enough, but it really got people out shopping the next day." Diana realized she was rambling. "But you most likely don't care about that."

"Quite the contrary, I am very interested in anything you choose to tell me."

She could tell he really meant it. Unlike Richard, his eyes hadn't wandered away from hers, nor had they glazed over with boredom. "Well, I'm boring me. I'd much rather hear about where we're going."

"It was necessary to redeem several favors owed me for tonight," he admitted. "I hope you will be pleased with my efforts."

"I'm sure I will." Diana adjusted the strap of the purse on her shoulder. "I'm ready."

“Then let us proceed with the evening.” Francisco reached behind him to open the door.

Once they reached the parking lot, he led her toward a stylish sedan and started down the passenger side. She smiled at how well the vehicle fit its owner. As she stopped by the door and waited for him to open it, she looked into the interior, admiring the leather seats and wood. The GPS system in the dashboard caught her interest, and she couldn’t wait to play with it.

She looked up, wondering why he was taking so long to open the door. He wasn’t beside her. Puzzled she glanced around to find him standing beside an older model beige pickup, the passenger door open and an amused smile on his lips. Her cheeks heated as she walked quickly to where he waited. “Sorry, thought that was your car.”

Once she had climbed into the truck, he handed her the seat belt before closing the door and moving to the driver’s side. “I should consider replacing the truck with a sedan.” He cranked the engine, laid an arm over the back of the seat, then turned to look behind him as he backed out of the space. “But it seems wasteful to replace a vehicle that runs as well as this one for mere vanity.”

“That makes sense. I just never would have expected you to drive a pickup.” Diana looked out her window as they reached the apartment entrance. “You’re clear this way.”

“Thank you.” He took a left out of the parking lot, heading toward University Boulevard. “The pickup was...useful in the past.” He made a left turn at the light.

“Oh? Did you do a lot of hauling?” She was surprised when he didn’t turn onto Airport Boulevard but continued through the light. Obviously, they weren’t going to get on the interstate, eliminating the downtown restaurants, or anywhere on the Eastern Shore or Gulf Shores.

“Yes, hauling was an unpleasant part of my previous job.”

“Ah. May I ask you a question?” Her fingers played with the snap on her purse as she watched him for some reaction. After his nod she continued, “The flowers were beautiful, but your note was...so...formal.”

“You wish to know why?” He finished the question for her.

“Well, yeah.”

“It is the way I am.”

She recognized that for the truth it was. In every conversation, Francisco had been polite and formal. In many ways, he reminded her of the heroes of the old black and white movies she’d watched as a teen, the heroes who had starred in her adolescent fantasies.

They turned off University, driving through the sleepy neighborhood, past the tennis club. Only sheer willpower kept Diana from bouncing in her seat with excited anticipation, as they turned onto Zeigler and she saw faint lights from the Performing Arts Pavilion. “What’s going on at the Pavilion tonight? Do you know?” She turned to see Francisco’s lips curve upward.

“I believe I do.”

When he made the turn into the park, the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. “We’re eating here?”

“I have always thought this would be the perfect place for a quiet dinner for two.”

He parked the truck so that her door was centered on the pathway leading to the pavilion. She reached down for the handle, but stopped at the slight clearing of the throat from her date and placed her hands in her lap. She was jostled slightly as he closed his door. A moment later he was opening hers and offering a hand.

## Chapter 5

Diana took Francisco's offered hand as she slid out of the truck. Luminaries lit the concrete walkway on alternating sides, going around the obelisk marking the founding of a Jaycee chapter in Korea. In the distance, she could see white Christmas lights hung along the arch of the pavilion's lime green roof. She took a step away from the truck and heard the door shut behind her. Her eyes burned and she quickly blinked back the tears threatening.

"Would you prefer to dine elsewhere?" Francisco's voice was filled with concern as he stepped in front of her and brushed a tear that had escaped her lashes.

She shook her head. "No. I'm sorry. It's just no one has ever done anything so romantic for me." Diana remembered her ex-fiancé Richard's last failed attempt at a romantic dinner—Mickey D's Meal Deals by candlelight during the half time of the Super Bowl. "It's beautiful."

Francisco studied her face for a moment before nodding and moving to her side. He placed her hand in the crook of his arm. Neither spoke as they walked toward the softly lit pavilion. At the ramp she stopped, awed by the beautiful setting. In the center a table waited, elegantly set with china and crystal. Across from the ramp, in front of the stone wall that blocked the view of the road, a buffet table held covered platters. Behind it stood a formal attired waiter, his hands resting comfortably behind his back. On the benches at each corner poinsettias sat in alternating red, green and gold foil wrapped pots. Above them, on the supports, candles flickered in the slight breeze.

Francisco left her side and moved to the table. He pulled out one of the two chairs for her. The awed stupor released her and she walked up the ramp.

"This is..." Diana paused, searching for some sophisticated way to say what she wanted, then gave up. "Awesome."

"I am pleased that my preparations have met with your approval."

Diana slid into the seat. "Oh, I more than approve. How did you set all this up in three days?"

Francisco sat across from her and motioned to the waiter to begin serving before he answered. "The caterer was not difficult. D. C. and H. uses them frequently at corporate functions. Having the decorations put up and being allowed to use the park after dark did require more effort."

"Those favors you mentioned earlier." The waiter bent forward to place her plate in front of her and Diana leaned back slightly to give him more room. "Thank you."

"Yes. Though your reaction to the decorations and location did make the calling in of those favors worthwhile." Francisco nodded politely to the waiter as his plate was placed in front of him.

She felt her cheeks warm again. How did he manage to do that? The simplest comment reduced her to a blushing teenager on her first date. "Where are you from? You've got an accent I can't place."

"I have lived all over the world, at different times."

His evasive answer puzzled her, but she decided not to pursue the subject. "I've always wanted to visit England."

"Any particular area?"

"London." She saw his smirk. "What?"

"I found myself in a, as the British would say, spot of trouble with Scotland Yard in London."

Diana could tell that whatever had happened Francisco was amused by it. "Oh? What happened?"

"I was in the wrong place at the wrong time," he admitted. "It is how I met Lord Cheetham and became employed with D.C. and H."

She waited for him to continue, but he seemed content to let the subject drop. His secrecy about his past both intrigued and frustrated her. If he was reluctant to talk about his past, maybe he'd be willing to talk about his work. "So, what exactly does D.C. and H. do? I've heard of them, but I don't know anything about the company."

He looked up from cutting his steak and studied her. Diana took a bite of her own steak to keep from asking if he planned to answer the question.

"D.C. and H. is a multinational corporation with diversified interests."

He went no further with the explanation, and she wondered again at his secrecy.

Eventually they managed to navigate through the "awkward first date, what to talk about" confusion. Their conversation traveled the globe, places she wanted to see, that he had. They discussed the previous hurricane seasons and the widespread damage done by the storms.

The tag line of a comedian, *Can we talk*, echoed in her head. She wanted to scream at him that idle chitchat was great at parties but horrible on dates. Instead, she kept an interested smile on her lips. *Maybe I should just cut my losses and call it an early evening?*

Diana lifted her wine glass, taking the last sip as she gazed out over the beautiful decorations. Why couldn't she be satisfied with a devastatingly handsome gentleman who had planned the perfect romantic date? Even the mere hint of a smile on his lips or the quirk of an eyebrow could make her heart race. Why wasn't it enough for her?

"Would you care to take an after dinner stroll?" Francisco's voice jolted her out of her thoughts. "Perhaps to the pier by the lake?"

She was about to say no but looked out toward the lake. The pier was draped in Christmas lights with the path illuminated by more luminaries. The picture it created was too inviting. She agreed there was no reason not to appreciate the full evening. They walked back down the lit path past the truck. After they crossed the street, a white caterers van pulled past, turning the corner. The distant murmur of the catering crew's voices melded with the honks of the geese settling in for the night and the crickets chirping to create an almost musical accompaniment for their stroll.

The pier didn't jut out into the lake, instead it paralleled the shore. As they climbed the few stairs Diana saw a small table with two champagne flutes and a chilled bottle waiting. Francisco moved ahead of her and carefully removed the cork. He lifted one of the glasses and held it toward her questioningly. She nodded.

"Thanks." She took the glass from him and turned to the shore, taking a sip.

Other than the reluctance of her companion to talk, the evening had been wonderful. She smiled into the darkness as he stepped closer to her side, joining her at the railing.

"Was the evening acceptable?" His voice was a soft purr that surrounded and caressed her.

Not trusting her voice, Diana nodded. Her pulse raced and an electric tingle ran up her thighs to meet under her breast. The tingle turned into a burning fire racing through her as his pinky stroked her wrist. Never would she have imagined such an innocent caress could kindle such a reaction.

"I am pleased that my efforts were to your liking."

She looked over her shoulder to see him facing her, his champagne glass sat on the rail of the pier. As his right hand traveled up her arm, she fought to keep a longing sigh from escaping her lips. Diana turned to him as his hand came up to cup her cheek. Desire changed his eyes to a stormy blue, defeating her will to resist, and she released a shuddering breath. His eyes never left hers, searching for any sign of refusal of his actions. Resistance was impossible for her. She stepped toward him. She had to taste him.

His mouth was cool from the champagne they had sipped and it flavored his kiss as his lips slid over hers in a caress as soft as rose petals yet as forceful as a tornado. She wrapped her arms around his waist and then slid her hands up his muscular back, pulling him closer. She molded her body to his, desperate for more contact. The hand that had cupped her cheek slid through her hair to grasp the back of her head, angling it for the domination of his mouth. Diana whimpered as her knees grew weak. If not for the arm locked around her waist she knew she would have slid to the deck. Too soon, he lifted his head, ending the kiss. It took several blinks for her eyes to focus on him. Blue lights flashed once from the direction of the bridge that wasn't visible in the growing darkness. Francisco released his hold and stepped back.

"What was that?"

"The police informing me that our time is up." He smiled down at her. "As much as I might wish it otherwise, this evening could not last forever."

She leaned forward, resting her cheek against his chest. Beneath her ear, the steady beat of his heart raced. She didn't want the evening to end either. Especially after that kiss, a kiss that still had her senses reeling. "We could go to my apartment," she whispered, not raising her head.

"Are you certain?"

Diana looked up, meeting his questioning gaze. Realizing what he was asking, she quickly answered, "We could have coffee. Get to know each other better."

"I would like that." He stepped away and placed the champagne flutes back on the table.

She mourned the loss of his touch, the evening air chilling her after the heat of his body. He recorked the bottle and wrapped it in a napkin, then placed it back in the bucket.

“Shall we?” He offered his arm.

Diana barely managed not to run over and grab his arm. Instead, she walked smoothly to his side and slipped her hand onto his arm. Their walk back to the truck was silent, the geese now quiet. The once beautifully lit pavilion was dark, the luminaries gone from the path. As they approached the truck Diana noticed a figure sitting on the open tailgate. Francisco stiffened beside her. He removed her hand from his arm and stepped in front of her.

“Wait here.” His voice was a whisper but she recognized the command in it.

She wrapped her arms across her chest as he stepped forward to confront the man.

“Francisco Bolle, I’ve waited a long time to find you again, you son of a bitch.”

Diana shivered.

“What have you done with the caterers?” Francisco demanded in a tone she’d never heard from him—soft, menacing and lethal. He continued to move away from her, pulling the man’s attention with him.

The man laughed maniacally. “What do you think I did with them?”

“You do realize what this means?”

She saw Francisco’s hand motion her to back away, and she began to step backward until the transient spun to her.

“Don’t go far, pretty girl. Once I finish with Frank, you and I will party.”

Her blood ran cold at what he hadn’t said. She wanted to run to safety, but safety was hopping in Francisco’s truck and driving away. Between her and safety was danger.

“You will not touch her.” Francisco’s voice dropped lower and if possible became even more dangerous as he shrugged off the trench coat. She watched the expensive garment fall onto the pavement in a billowing heap, ignored by its owner as he kicked it to the side. The black turtleneck and slacks turned him into a silhouette in the dim light remaining in the park.

“You won’t be able to stop me. You’ll be dead.” The transient moved away from the truck, following Francisco as he backed into the wooded area.

“I am not so easy to kill.”

“You don’t think I can handle you?” The man laughed. “You are nothing but a strutting peacock.”

As the transient stepped into a small circle of light, Diana saw that he had fangs that dripped blood onto his lips and chin. Her mind refused to believe what her eyes were telling her. She gasped, stumbling backward as the transient lunged toward her. A scream tore from her lips.

“Don’t worry, pretty girl. I won’t touch you ’til Frank’s dead.” He dragged his arm across his chin, wiping off the blood.

From the shadows of the park, Francisco's voice calm, deadly and seemingly bored, drew the transient's attention away from her. "If you are going to kill me, please cease wasting my time and do so."

"Anxious to die, Cleaner? You think I can't see you there, don't you?"

Diana watched as the man stalked into the shadows. She continued to hear him hurl accusations at Francisco, his voice becoming shriller with each claim. Claims of retribution for the death of a brother, of turning his back on his nature, and of things she couldn't understand. She squinted into the darkness, trying to see what was happening. Her pulse raced. She winced at every thud and *oof* of breath that sounded. The accusations stopped after a sharp crack echoed. She took a step toward where the fighting noises had come from, then froze. A figure walked stepped into the light, and a cry of relief slipped from her lips as she recognized Francisco's silhouette. She closed her eyes for a moment, thanking God that he was all right.

Diana opened her eyes to see him walk into the light. The black slacks had dirt on them. His turtleneck was ripped at the shoulders. There was a trickle of blood on his chin.

She blinked and looked again. Gleaming in the light, two fangs rested on his bottom lip.

## Chapter 6

Francisco released his hold on the transient vampire and watched as the body fell to the ground with a dull thud. His heightened senses heard the frantic beating of Diana's heart, and the distant traffic zooming along Zeigler Boulevard. She stood near the truck, leaning forward, squinting her eyes to try to see what was happening. He stepped over the body, realizing he would need to drive her home, explain away the claims that had been screamed, then return with a team of Cleaners and begin to formulate a plan to explain the death of the caterers. He knew the instant he came into her view by the way the tension released from her body and her eyes slid shut. When they opened again, she focused on his lips. Her eyes widened and she stepped back, shock and fear warring for dominance in them. Remembering the head butt he'd received that had punctured his lip, he reached up to wipe the blood away and felt his still descended fangs. He cursed himself for forgetting to retract them.

"Diana," he said softly, stepping toward her.

"What are you?" Her voice was shrill, the scent of her fear wafting to him on the slight breeze.

"I will not harm you." He took another step toward her but stopped when she retreated.

"No. Don't come any closer."

He nodded and remained where he was. "I did not intend for you to find out this way."

She shook her head violently. "I can't hear this right now. I need..."

"Time," he finished for her. "How would you like to proceed?"

While waiting for her answer he concentrated on retracting his fangs, still too stimulated from kissing Diana earlier and the fight for them to retract without effort. Not since he was a newly turned vampire had he had such difficulty pulling in his fangs.

Descending or retracting them was much like breathing. Normally, it was not a conscious thought, just something that happened, but it could also be controlled. He finally felt the familiar readjustment of his teeth as they slid back into place once his fangs were fully sheathed in the roof of his mouth.

"I just want to go home, but I don't want to be in a car with you."

It was the answer Francisco had expected, but not the one he wanted to hear. He nodded. At her feet lay his coat, the only solution to their dilemma was obvious. "Diana, the keys to the truck are in the right hand pocket of my coat."

"But, you'll be stuck here."

Her protest gave him a small measure of hope that things between them would eventually work out. "I will retrieve my cellular phone from the glove box of the truck. I need to clean up this situation, afterward I will have someone drive me to your complex to reclaim the vehicle."

“Okay.” She nodded as she knelt to retrieve his keys from the coat. “Clean...he called you Cleaner? And said you had cleaned his friend?”

“Yes,” Francisco admitted as he walked around the front of the truck, keeping distance between them. He opened the passenger door, reached into the glove box and got his phone.

He heard the keys jingle in her hand and looked over the roof. She stood on the other side watching him, fear still in her eyes.

He closed the passenger door, then backed away from the vehicle, giving her the space she silently requested. “Please, drive carefully, Diana. I do regret that our evening was ruined.”

She nodded, then climbed into the truck.

The engine roared as it cranked to life. The tires kicked up a bit of the loose gravel as she pulled away. He watched the taillights fade into the distance and for the first time in centuries hated what he was, but even that was mitigated with the knowledge that if he wasn’t a vampire he’d have never met her.

He flipped the phone open, scrolled through the contact list and pressed the call button to dial Michaela. He gave her a brief explanation of the situation and his location. Assured she was on her way with a team, he hung up. Slowly he walked to the pavilion, the once understated beauty of luminaries was now a line of crushed white bags that spilled sand onto the grass.

The plates were still on the table exactly as they had been when he and Diana had left for their stroll to the pier. Francisco looked over to the left and saw that the van still sat on the road where it curved nearest the pavilion, its side door open. He sighed. Carefully avoiding the serving trays littering the stairs, he made his way to the van. Inside lay the body of the caterer who had set up the pier then drove around to pick up the server. On the ground next to the van was the server, his white shirt red with his blood. Even knowing what he would find, he checked both bodies for a pulse.

While he and Diana had strolled down to enjoy a glass of champagne, these two had been in a battle for their lives. A battle they couldn’t win. He had been so intent on Diana, he had been deaf to the sounds of their struggles.

“Forgive me,” he said to them as he reached into the van, pulled out two tablecloths, and covered the young men.

He followed the road to where he had fought the transient, his guilt consuming him. He had been a Cleaner for over a century, enemies came with the job. A scant decade as Envoy couldn’t make immortal enemies forget their hatred. He had been a fool to forget that fact, even for an instant. His foolishness had placed Diana in danger. When he reached the body of the vampire, he glared down at it.

“You had to reappear tonight. Fifty years I looked for you to finish the job. Tonight of all nights you show up.” Anger boiled within him as he remembered the creature’s taunts to Diana, the promises to harm her. The desire to rip the vampire apart raced through him, filling him with a lust for blood he hadn’t felt in decades.

His foot connected with the chest of the body and another sickening crack filled the night as ribs broke. Francisco stopped himself before he kicked it into an unrecognizable heap of tissue and bones. He bent, grasped a forearm, and pulled the body over his shoulder in a fireman's carry to take back to the pavilion. There was no need to leave more work for the Cleaner team than necessary.

As he unceremoniously dropped the body behind the van, a black Chevy Suburban pulled in behind it. The woman driving climbed out and joined him. Her long, shockingly white hair was highlighted with neon green streaks. Tight black low rider jeans that hugged her legs were tucked into combat boots. Her black t-shirt was equally tight, ending an inch before the waistband of the jeans.

"Evening, Frank," she greeted as she moved to join him.

"Michaela. White and green?" His eyebrow quirked at the latest hair color combination she was sporting. Francisco had long ago forgotten what Michaela's original hair color was. Had it been a dark blond or maybe a light brown? She had worn it every color and style imaginable in the century and a half he had known her.

She shrugged. "It'll wash out, the green I mean. Thought you had a date tonight."

"I did, until he showed up." He pointed at the vampire. "He killed the catering staff."

He watched as she looked over the scene, a frown on her elfin face. She lifted the tablecloths, clicking her tongue at the ripped out throats.

"Messy. At least I don't have to send a team out to hunt his sorry ass." She dropped the sheet and looked at the pavilion, seeing the two tables. "The team'll be here in a minute to get this all cleaned up. You're a mess."

Francisco frowned at her. "I realize that. I was dressed for a romantic evening not a cleaning."

"Don't give me that face," Michaela snapped back. "You have no sense of humor."

"Forgive me, my sense of humor disappears when my evening is ruined by a vampire I should have cleaned fifty years ago, who threatens my companion."

"Date." When he gave her a puzzled look, she continued. "The term at this time is date, you really need to drop the turn of the century manners, boss."

"Threatens my date," he tried the new phrase, then shook his head. "I am too old to change my ways, Michaela. Once we are finished here I will require a ride to retrieve my truck."

"No problem, boss-man." She flicked her hair back over her shoulder, then looked at her watch and pursed her lips. "Hmm, they are taking way too long to get here. I'm going to have to drill these new guys."

No sooner had the words left her lips than lights pulled in behind her SUV and two men climbed out of the truck. Michaela marched over to them. She lectured them for several minutes, her tone showing her displeasure as she berated them for taking so long. He realized that he didn't recognize either of the men. At one time he knew every Cleaner who operated within the city, but these two he had never met. To their credit, they didn't argue with her but accepted the reprimand silently. Finished with the lecture, she gave them instructions on all the tasks that needed to be done.

"I'll be back later. This mess better be cleaned," she finished sternly.

"Yes, ma'am," they answered in unison before sprinting to the pavilion to clear the tables and decorations away.

"The pier was also decorated and a table set up there. As well as luminaries that lined the path to the street and then again to the pier," Francisco informed Michaela as she rejoined him.

Her eyes narrowed. "Overkill much? Damn Frank, do you have any idea how much work that is going to be? I'm going to have to call in another team."

She walked up to where the two Cleaners were working diligently to pack up the dishes and linens. They stopped and listened, nodding their understanding. When she left, one of them pulled a phone from his jacket.

"Come on, Frank." She headed toward the Suburban, not waiting for him. "Let's go get your truck. I can't believe you actually let someone drive it. Hell, I'm not even allowed to drive that hunk of junk."

"It was the best solution to the problem, and my truck is not a hunk of junk," he answered as he climbed into the passenger's seat of the vehicle.

"Damn, you are testy. I didn't ruin your date so don't take my head off. Where are we going?"

As she pulled away from the curb, he gave her the name of Diana's complex. He had no idea how to approach Diana again. A small hand waved in front of his eyes, drawing his attention back to the driver. "Yes?"

"I asked how the date was going before..."

"It was a lovely evening. I cannot honestly say that the reappearance of our *friend* was what sent her running." Francisco ran a hand through his hair. Finding a few strands of pine straw, he removed them and dropped them onto the floorboard.

Michaela stopped at a red light and glanced at him. "So, what did?"

He sighed heavily. "My inability to retract my fangs."

"Ouch." She shook her head. "The fight and earlier events, huh?"

"Yes."

"Well, it doesn't sound like she ran off screaming, so that's a good thing."

Despite himself, Francisco chuckled. "No, she just did not wish to be close to me."

"Psh, not surprising. I wouldn't want to be close to you if I didn't believe in vampires and suddenly was with one." She patted his knee. "Don't worry, long as she didn't go screaming in fear I think you'll get another chance."

"I hope you are correct, Michaela." He pointed out the window. "Turn here."

She made the turn, then another into the complex. He directed her through until his truck came into view.

"Thank you for the ride."

## Chapter 7

“No problem.” Michaela watched as Francisco walked to the truck and tried the doors. She fought back a laugh when he discovered that his date had locked them and cursed. She pulled into the empty parking space a few cars down and climbed out. “She locked it and took the keys?”

When he turned to look at her, she noticed his fangs had descended again. “What’s the apartment number? You really don’t want her to see you right now.”

“And why would I not want to see Diana?” He snarled.

“Hey, I’ve already told you not to take your bad night out on me. You’re way too keyed up, boss.” He narrowed his eyes. She placed one hand on her hip and pointed at his mouth with the other. “You’re a bit long in the fang right now.”

He gave her the number, then lowered the tailgate and sat on it.

“Back in a minute.”

Michaela took the stairs two at a time. She paused at the door, taking a moment to smooth her hair and run her tongue over her teeth before she knocked, wouldn’t do to show up with *her* fangs down. As the door opened she smiled. Instantly she could see what Frank saw in this woman, there was a vulnerability about her that covered a core of pure steel. If the two of them could just navigate the issue of what he was, they’d be terrific together.

“Can I help you?”

“Hi. I’m Michaela. I gave Frank—umm, Francisco a ride to pick up his truck, but you locked it. So, I need to get the keys for him.” She kept her voice friendly and non-threatening.

“He’s not coming up?” Diana stretched to look around her.

“No,” Michaela answered gently. She was relieved to hear the slight disappointment in the woman’s voice and the attempt to find him. That was definitely a good sign. “He’s still a little to wound up. Can’t control his fangs.”

“You...you know what he is?”

She smiled as the woman’s eyes searched her face. “Course. He was my boss for a long time. Don’t worry about Frank, he’s a sweetie.”

The human nodded but Michaela could tell she wasn’t really convinced. Not that she blamed her, today’s society was too inundated with the stereotypical vampire out to grab an unsuspecting human and kill them for food. Really only Angel on Buffy had come close to the truth, and he was such a broody puss.

She shook her head to dispel the thought as the woman walked into the apartment to get the keys. Michaela followed, stopping by the kitchen doorway. “Nice place. I’m Michaela or Mike.”

“Diana and thanks.” She turned and let out an *eep* when she saw Michaela standing beside the door. “Oh, I thought you were a...”

“Vampire? I am.”

“But, vampires can’t come in unless invited.” Diana’s voice was getting shrill.

Michaela cringed and lifted her hands up in front of her. “Easy hun, or Frank’ll be charging up here to rescue you. That’s something that Stoker...least I think it was him...came up with and movies have perpetuated. Let me get the keys down to Frank and I’ll dash back up and answer any questions you have.”

“I don’t...”

“I’m not going to bite you. Promise. Frank’d kill me if I did. Besides, I don’t feed off women or the unwilling.”

“You don’t?”

“Nope. It’s against the rules to feed off unwilling humans.”

“But how can you feed off willing humans—err, people, when it will kill them?”

Michaela stepped forward, taking the keys from Diana’s hand. “Let me get these to Frank, and then you and I can sit down and have a nice long conversation about the reality of vampires, ’kay?” When Diana nodded, she winked. “Be right back.”

Francisco was halfway up the stairs, fangs down and blood in his eyes. She grabbed his arm and pulled him down to the parking lot.

“Why did Diana scream?” he demanded, his voice a dangerous growl.

She rolled her eyes. “Jeez, Frank, get a grip. I startled her, that’s all.” She thrust the keys into his hand. “Get in your truck, crank it and get the hell out of here. I’ve got damage control to do after the park.”

His fingers closed around the keys in a white knuckled strangle hold. “Ask her to call me, if she wishes, after you talk. I won’t be asleep.” Then he turned and started for the truck. She watched as he went to it and followed her instructions.

Problem number one handled. Now she had to go upstairs and convince Diana she wasn’t insane and that all the movies she’d seen were not true. After that she had to go back to the park, make sure that scene was cleaned, invent an accident to explain the deaths of the two caterers, write her report for Jonathon, and do it all by sunrise. She shook her head; a woman’s work was never done, even if the woman in question was a vampire.

## Chapter 8

After the woman with green and white hair left her apartment, Diana pushed the door closed.

*What am I doing?* She shook her head. She hadn't really invited a vampire up to her apartment to chat, had she?

A vampire? There were no such creatures. They were the products of an overactive imagination, characters in horror films and cheesy romance novels. Beings created to terrify or titillate their audience. They couldn't be breathtakingly handsome men who were formal, romantic, and could kiss a woman so thoroughly that her normal inhibitions flew out the window, or women with white and green hair. The males were Dracula, Lestat, and Spike. The females were Lucy or Mina or hell, Vampirella. They weren't Francisco and Michaela.

She moved into the living room and perched on the arm of the chair, rubbing her forehead in an attempt to ease the building headache behind her eyes. A slight shiver started in her shoulders, the shiver that always came after some stressful event, and she started to slide backward into the chair.

She jerked up at the knock on the door. With a sigh, she walked to the door, opened it, and leaned heavily against it. Diana swept an arm into the apartment, inviting the woman, no the vampire in.

"Frank asked me to request..." She made little quotation marks in the air. "That you call him, if you want. After we talk, of course."

Diana nodded. "I don't know, it's been a crazy night. Would you like something to drink?" Her eyes closed as she realized what she had asked and to whom she had asked it. "I have wine, soda, tea. I could brew a pot of coffee."

"A glass of wine would be wonderful. Don't worry, I told you I don't do girls." Michaela smiled. "See? No fangs."

Despite herself, Diana laughed as she moved into the kitchen and took out two wine glasses from the cabinet. "This is just so weird. I thought vampires weren't real. Then to meet not one but three in the same evening it's..."

"Overwhelming?"

"Extremely." She opened the refrigerator and pulled out the wine. After pouring it, she handed Michaela one of the glasses and walked out of the kitchen, leading her guest to the living room. "How long have you known Francisco?"

"I met him right before the turn of the century."

"Oh, so only a few years." Diana nodded. She took a sip of her wine and placed it on the coffee table.

"Not this century, the twentieth century."

Diana had been in the process of sitting on the couch, at the startling statement she missed the couch to land heavily on the floor. “Twentieth century?” She squeaked.

Michaela set her glass on the coffee table and offered Diana a hand. “I think it was eighty-one...maybe eighty-three? You okay?”

Taking the hand, she pulled herself up then sat on the couch. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just realizing that you and Francisco are over a hundred years old startled the hell out of me.” Diana laughed. “You look so young. I’d have thought you were twenty-five at most.”

“I was twenty-three when I was changed.”

“So, when you were twenty-three some vampire bit you three times and now you are one?” Diana couldn’t believe she was asking these questions, but figured she’d never get a chance like this again.

“It’s actually not that easy to become a vampire.” Michaela sank gracefully onto the opposite side of the couch.

“Really? But, that’s what the books and movies say.” Diana leaned back.

“Who are you going to believe, someone who’s been through it or some writer trying to sell a story?” The female vampire took a sip of her wine, held it for a moment before swallowing. “This is a really nice wine, what is it?”

Diana picked up her glass “It is, isn’t it? It’s a Chilean winery. They’re new to the US so it’s not as expensive as some of the California wines. I never can remember the name of the winery. I’ll look when I refill our glasses.”

“All that matters is it drinks well and you like the taste. Kind of like blood. Trust me, in a century I’ve had some excellent wines and some really crappy ones.”

“I’ll take your word for it. So how does someone become a vampire?”

“It’s a long involved process, now.” Michaela stretched her legs out and laid an arm on the back of the couch. “They’ve changed the rules a lot since I was turned and technically I wouldn’t have met any of the requirements to be changed. Now, if you want to become a vampire you have to have some skill that’s useful in our society, a sponsor, and Cassandra has to approve. I’m not real sure of the procedures, since I’m not a Mistress of the Change.”

“Mistress of the Change?”

“Every change is overseen by someone who is trained in helping a new vampire learn the rules of our society. More men are changed than women, and they’re more comfortable with a woman getting close to them than another man.” Michaela ran her fingers through her hair. “Really, think about it, if it was as easy as books and movies make it seem to become a vampire there’d be millions running around. Every one of them thinking they could have their own private little band of lackies, kind of like that ass you ran into tonight.” She leaned forward and placed a hand over Diana’s. “I’m sorry about that. My teams were supposed to be hunting that jerk. I can’t believe he got through. If I wasn’t so short staffed a few heads would roll, literally.”

“It’s...” Diana frowned. “Okay isn’t the right word, but it wasn’t your fault. Did he...”

“Kill the catering staff? Yeah.”

“Oh God, it’s my fault.”

“No, it’s not,” Michaela comforted quickly. “It’s not Frank’s fault either, but if I know him, he’s going to be blaming himself for it. It was that dumb fuck’s fault. He knew facing Frank was suicide.” When Diana met her gaze, she continued. “Frank’s the best Cleaner there is. I’m thrilled he was given the position of Envoy, but I’ll never be half the Cleaner he was. Don’t let that gentle old-world manner of his fool you. He can be ruthless if the situation calls for it. He never gives up, never stops, and once he gives his word, he never breaks it.”

“You’re in love with him.”

“Yeah, I love him.”

Diana smiled sadly and nodded, there was no way she could compete with the vampire in front of her.

*Not that I want to.*

*I should stop kidding myself. If I didn’t I wouldn’t be sitting here with Michaela asking questions.*

Michaela grabbed her hand that was lying on the back of the couch and squeezed. “Oh no, not like that, hun. I meant I love him like a brother. The same way I loved my big brothers when they were alive. I’m proud of his every accomplishment. I tease him when he screws up, which, by the way, he rarely does. What you see of him is what you get. He was my mentor after my change. Took me under his wing, taught me the truth about being a vampire. All the rules. Got me in the Cleaners which had never allowed women to join, and that was before the women’s lib movement.” She winked. “Now, why don’t we play twenty questions? Ask me any twenty things you’d like to know about vampires and I’ll answer them—if I can.”

“Okay. Let me think.” Diana felt strangely relieved by the things Michaela had told her. The female vampire had an easy, open way about her that made Diana want to trust that maybe she really didn’t need to fear that Francisco was going to rip her throat out. “How much blood does a vampire actually have to drink?”

Michaela smiled, lifted her wine glass and pointed to a spot near the top of the glass. “About this much. We have to drink blood at least once a week, nightly is better. The longer we go without blood, the weaker we become, and then we risk entering the Cruentus or blood fever. I have my staff drink a minimum of three times a week. I drink every other night, but don’t worry, tonight isn’t my night.” The smile she gave was all little girl mischief.

“That’s all? Wait, don’t answer that, it would be one of my questions.” She laughed and Michaela joined her.

“I’ll answer anyway and not count it. Yup. Rare meat, sushi, salads, even yogurt help extend the time between real feedings. It’s like eating at a fast food joint, it’ll fill you up but it’s not the same as a well balanced meal.”

Diana thought back to the three times she had shared a meal with Francisco. The first time had been a salad, followed by a rare steak and even tonight he'd had a steak. "Wait, I thought vampires couldn't eat food. Or is that another stereotype thing?"

"Question number two and yes, it is. Surprisingly, Joss Whedon got that kind of right. I'd love to eat one of those fried onion things, they look yummy, but don't want the stomachache I get after eating fried food. He even got the daylight thing kind of right. We don't burst into flames immediately, but it's not exactly comfortable to have third and fourth degree burns. As long as we stay out of direct sunlight, we're okay. In fact, I know a couple of vampires who move to Alaska every winter. They're always arguing about whether Barrow or Fairbanks has less sunlight."

"So, vampires can eat food, sunlight doesn't make them instantly burst into flames, and it's not easy to become a vampire." Diana tapped her chin as she thought of her next question. "Number three, can vampires become or control animals like bats and wolves?"

Michaela rolled her eyes. "No. Though there are times I wish I could become a bat and fly away from a bad date."

"I know that guy!"

Both women laughed as they clinked their wine glasses together, toasting their membership in the Universal Sisterhood of Bad Dates.

"Number four, crucifixes, real or fictional?"

"That's a loaded question." Michaela thought for a moment. "Yes and no. It depends on the vampire. Frank thinks they are quite beautiful and loves to study them as works of art. I have a little problem with them. Some vamps run in terror at the mere thought of one. Cassandra says it is psychosomatic and not real."

"Cassandra? You mentioned her before."

"Cassandra Dewey, the architect of modern vampire society, and that was question number five."

Diana slapped Michaela's hand. "No fair!"

"I gave you one freebie. That's all you get."

"Meanie." She stuck out her tongue at the white-haired vampire. "Okay, question number six." Diana paused. "I'm not sure what else to ask."

"Well, you could always save your remaining fifteen questions for another time. I really should go see how my team is doing cleaning up the park." Michaela put her wine glass on the coffee table.

Diana stood and walked Michaela to the door. "I don't know why I trust you. I should be terrified but..."

"You aren't. Don't judge all of us by one asshole or Jonathon."

"Jonathon?" When Michaela shook her head Diana let the question slide. "It's hard not to when all the books and movies say vampires are mindless killing machines who rip the throats out of their victims. I really need time to think."

“Sure.” Michaela pulled out a small metal case. “Here’s my card. It’s got my cell number and email on it. I don’t sleep much, and I’m an internet junky. So I’m online most of the day and am compulsive about checking my email. Call or shoot me an email anytime you want to use a question.”

“I’ll do that.” Diana was surprised that she had felt so comfortable talking with Michaela, almost as comfortable as she was talking to Becky. “I had a really nice time.”

“Me too, it’s been a very long time since I had a girlfriend. Maybe we can go out pub crawling one night. And call me Mike, all my friends do.”

“British?”

“Aha! Number six! No, but I did live in London for several years.”

Diana leaned against the door as Mike stepped out of the apartment. “Oh well, wasted question. Night.”

“Night. Call Frank when you’re ready.”

She nodded. “I just need to think.” She looked down at her watch. “And get some sleep, I’ve got to be at work in five hours.”

“And I have a night full of work to do. I’m outta’ here.”

Diana watched as Mike turned and started down the stairs, then shut the door. After putting the wine glasses in the dishwasher and double-checking that the door was locked and dead bolted, she walked to her bedroom. All she really wanted to do was kick off her shoes and flop on the bed; still, she took the time to remove her makeup, change into her favorite sleeping shirt, then crawled into bed. Her mind whirled with all that had happened, it seemed hours before she finally drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter 9

Diana balanced the package on a knee, her mail held in her teeth as she unlocked the door to her apartment. It had been an interesting week, starting with finding out the man she was attracted to was a vampire. Making friends with Michaela had been an unexpected bonus. She had never thought the two of them would have so much in common or become close friends so quickly. The game of twenty questions had been informative, even if at one point she'd gotten silly with the questions. She still blamed the margaritas for asking how a male vampire got an erection, if they did—that was her story and she was sticking to it. Work had been booming on the weekend, but with the schools still in session, the weekdays had been slow. She was glad tomorrow was her day off.

Pushing open the door with her knee, she wrapped her arm around the package as she stumbled into the apartment then closed the door with a push of her shoulder and a tap of her foot. She placed the package on the table, removed the mail from her mouth and toed off her shoes as she let her purse slide off her shoulder. A sigh of pleasure escaped her as her toes curled in the plush carpet and cracked softly.

Diana looked at the return address on the package and shook her head. As much as she loved her Aunt Mable, her annual gift of fruitcake was going to end up where last year's had—in the garbage.

Sorting through the mail, she found the usual bills, junk, Christmas cards from college friends and a letter. Her fingers trembled as she read the return address—Francisco Bolle. She opened the envelope, then blew out a breath before pulling out the letter. A smile lifted the corners of her lips as she read the brief note.

*My Dearest Diana,*

*Mere words cannot express my most heartfelt regrets concerning the events of Thursday evening. That the violence that is such a part of my life came close to you is unforgivable. I can only humbly beg that you accept my sincerest apologies.*

*I would very much enjoy escorting you to dinner at a location of your choice. I shall, naturally, respect whatever decision you make.*

*Ever your servant,*

*Francisco Bolle*

Diana sat on the nearest chair. She wondered how she should respond. Part of her wanted to forget Francisco Bolle, forget that vampires existed. But there was another part of her that wanted him to hold her, to kiss her until the reasonable part of her brain was quiet. She brushed her fingertips over her lips, remembering his kiss. The way he'd made her feel like she was precious, beautiful and desirable, everything but one of the guys.

She pulled her phone from her purse and dialed his cellphone number. He answered on the second ring.

"Bolle."

Startled by the sharp tone, she didn't respond immediately.

"Is anyone there?"

"Francisco, it's Diana," she hurriedly answered.

"Diana, I am glad you called." His voice, which a moment before had seemed angry and frustrated, was now relaxed.

"I was wondering if you would like to come over this evening so we could talk?" She twirled a strand of hair around a finger as she waited.

"I would like that. Is eight o'clock acceptable?"

"Great, I'll see you then. Umm...Francisco?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for giving me the time to adjust to everything. It means a lot to me that you didn't push."

"I will never force you to accept anything I may offer, Diana," his soft voice reassured her. "I shall see you at eight."

"Okay, bye." She hung up the phone and looked at her surroundings critically. Mail lay piled up on the dining room table, and underneath it were four pairs of shoes that she'd kicked off. Half open magazines and remotes lay on the couch. Her breakfast dishes she knew were still in the sink.

The apartment hadn't been straightened up since her last day off, and though far being the neat-as-a-pin home that her mother had raised her to keep, it wasn't a mess either, it was what she liked to call "homey cluttered." She bent and grabbed the shoes and headed to the bedroom; she needed to change and straighten up a bit.

At a quarter to eight, Diana sank onto the couch, satisfied with her straightening. A napkin-wrapped sandwich in one hand and a can of soda in the other. She had changed into a pair of jeans and an oversized t-shirt for comfort that clearly communicated that tonight was about talking, not seduction. There were so many questions she needed to ask him, so many things she needed to know before she could move forward with a relationship with him.

*Just keep your hormones under control.*

She snorted, that was going to be easy—not. She couldn't help that she'd always been attracted to tall, dark, mysterious, fit men, and Francisco Bolle certainly met those requirements. Being a vampire added that touch of bad boy—another one of her fantasies. Her pulse raced as she remembered the dream she'd had the night before. Francisco had replaced the platinum blond hero of that steamy romance nicely.

*Down girl!*

*Hush.*

Great, she was arguing with her conscience. She stood and walked into the kitchen. After taking the last bite of her sandwich, Diana upended the soda can, drinking the last swallow, then dabbed at her lips with the napkin before tossing both into the garbage can. Deciding coffee was a better choice for drinks than wine, she started a pot just as a knock sounded at the door.

Diana reminded herself to remain calm and in control. This conversation would determine if they could have a relationship. Her hand on the doorknob, she took a deep breath, then let it out slowly before opening the door. She was glad she had taken that moment, Francisco looked as enticing as ever. His long frame was again clothed in solid black, but this time it was snug black jeans, black button-down shirt and in deference to the cold front blowing, a black leather jacket. He looked every inch the sexy, dangerous bad boy.

She swallowed hard. "Hi. Come in, it's getting cold out there."

"Thank you." He stepped into the apartment, shrugged off his jacket and laid it across his arm. "I am relieved you called."

She took the jacket from him and hung it up in the coat closet. "I'm sorry I didn't call sooner, but with work and Christmas shopping, it's been crazy." Diana turned to face him. "Thank you for sending the note, but you really didn't need to apologize. Nothing that happened was your fault. Let's sit in the den to talk."

She waited until Francisco sat on the sofa before taking a seat in the chair furthest from him. His slight frown told her he was unhappy about the seating arrangements, but she needed to keep her head clear.

"Last Thursday really scared me." She held up a hand when he started to interrupt. "When I left, I don't know if I wanted to see you again. But after I got back I realized I wasn't afraid of you. It was..." She ran a hand through her hair. "The homeless guy's threats were what scared me. They would have terrified me even if he hadn't been a vampire. I also, in a strange way, was glad that you were a vampire." Diana looked down at the floor.

"Diana?"

Francisco's soft voice broke into the silence after her admission. She looked up to see him watching her closely and smiled. "If you weren't a vampire, could you have stopped him?"

"No, I would not have been able to stop him from carrying out his threats. But he also would not have been there making them. The fault is mine for placing you in danger."

She was surprised to realize that he really did feel guilty about the incident. “If you hunted him for fifty years and couldn’t find him, how could it have been your fault?”

“I allowed my feeling for you to cloud my judgment. I was in charge of the Cleaners for too long not to have enemies. Enemies that would harm me in any manner they could, including harming someone whom I care for.”

Francisco’s eyes never left hers. She could see the sincerity in them and her heart raced at the implications of his quiet statement. Something Michaela had said that horrible night came to mind. “Michaela said you could be ruthless.”

He blanched but nodded. “If the situation requires it, I can be. It is not a trait in myself that I admire, but as a Cleaner it was necessary.”

“Required?”

He sighed heavily, sinking further into the couch, seeming to realize that this was going to be a long conversation. “I am assuming you wish to know more about my duties as a Cleaner?”

“I have a lot of questions,” she admitted as she stood. “But before we continue I need a cup of coffee. Would you like one?”

“A glass of water would be better.”

“Okay. Lemon?”

“Yes, thank you.”

\* \* \* \*

Francisco watched as she started toward the kitchen, then paused on the opposite side of the coffee table from him.

“Before you tell me about being a Cleaner I do have one other question. Why does Mike call you Frank?”

She continued into the kitchen, and he took a moment to slowly let out a breath. Diana, he was certain, had picked her outfit to let him know of her desire to talk. Unfortunately, he found the casual attire erotic. The way the oversized neck of the t-shirt would slip to the side as she moved, exposing one slim shoulder or the other, showing no bra strap, was wrecking havoc on his senses. He tugged at his jeans, readjusting his position slightly, hoping it would be enough to hide the increasing evidence of his appreciation.

“Francisco?” her voice called, bringing him back to the question she’d asked.

“Every fifteen to twenty years it is necessary for a vampire to create a new identity.” He spoke loudly enough for her to hear over the clink of ice cubes. “We try to keep the names close so we respond when someone calls us and avoid confusion if someone overhears. However, as friendships between vampires last centuries it is easier to use shortened forms of the name.”

“That makes sense,” she answered, handing him his glass of water.

As he took it his fingers brushed against hers, and he wondered if she felt the same electric spark that the simple touch ignited. He watched as she sank onto the cushions at the opposite end of the couch, tucking one leg under herself.

“Now, about Cleaners... What are they, and what do they do?”

Francisco took a sip of the water to hide the smile that threatened at her unconscious choice to move closer to him, perhaps she had felt the same spark. “Cleaners are charged with the investigating, apprehending and punishment of vampires that break the laws of our society.

“So, Cleaners are like Vampire Police?”

“That would be an excellent analogy.” He nodded, pleased she had grasped the basic function of the Cleaners.

“But you said they punished them so it’s also like the court system?”

Her eyes were filled with confusion, and he thought for a moment about how best to answer her question in a manner that wouldn’t scare her. Realizing that there was no way to avoid the truth of his past job, he sighed. “Cleaners act as police, judge, jury and executioner.”

“Executioner?” Diana squeaked, pressing herself further into the corner of the couch.

Francisco frowned as her eyes darted away from him and around the room as if seeking a means of escape. She was, he knew, fighting the urge to leap out of her seat and run from him. He scooted back, giving her the space she needed. He watched as she calmed herself, drawing her knees up in front of her, wrapping her arms around them.

“Yes, it is sometimes required.” He placed the glass on the coffee table.

He waited. Only Diana’s breathing and the tick of the clock on the wall broke the silence of the room. As the long moments ticked by, a single drop of condensation slid slowly down the clear surface of the glass, weaving between other droplets on its way to form another wet circle on the napkin beneath it.

“M-Mike said you could be ruthless,” she stuttered, restating her earlier question. “I didn’t quite believe her.”

He heard the fear that had crept into her voice. Fear of him. His chest constricted at the pang of regret that coursed through him. He reached out to her but pulled back at her flinch. His mind raced as he tried to think of how to calm her.

“What happened to the caterers and that vampire?”

Her voice was barely above a whisper, and he strained to hear it. There was no option but to be honest with her. “A single vehicle accident was staged to cover the caterers’ deaths on Highway Ninety-Eight...”

“Bloody Ninety-Eight.” She giggled nervously.

“The vampire was taken out in the bay by the Cleaners and left for the alligators or the sun to dispose of.”

The color drained from Diana’s face, and her hand flew to her mouth. She scrambled off the couch and ran down the hall. He’d seen that reaction too often from others to not know she had dashed to the bathroom to empty her stomach.

His hopes of a relationship plummeted as the door to the bathroom slammed shut behind her. The fabric of his jeans rolled and smoothed beneath palms as he rubbed at his legs, keeping his hands busy as his mind raced. He stood and began to pace.

*How can I reassure her? How can I make her see that while the human race is often referred to as a “dog eat dog world,” the vampire race could aptly be described as a “tiger eat tiger world.”*

Pictures of family, Christmas cards taped to the mantle, a neatly stacked pile of bills rested on the pass through counter; all evidence of a normal life filled the apartment. A normal life that being with him would destroy.

He heard the running of water and looked to the door she had disappeared through, waiting for it to open. It didn't. His chest tightened when as soon as the water stopped it began again.

He wandered into the kitchen and ran a finger along the counter, stopping at the vase of flowers he had sent Thursday. Had it only been a week? One cabinet door gaped ajar, and he reached up to close it. The hard realization hit him that for her safety and well being it would be best if he left. It came complete with the plummeting of his heart into his stomach. He looked down at the counter to find a glass filled with water and crushed mint, with no memory of making it. He opened a drawer and found the dishcloths.

He made the decision to allow Diana to set the course of their relationship—even if it meant walking away from her. He would give her the option of tossing him out on his immortal ass, if she so desired. As he left the kitchen, a glass of water in one hand and a bowl with a damp cloth in the other, the bathroom door opened. She came back down the hall, her color only slightly better.

“What’s that?” she asked as she sank onto the couch.

He handed her the glass. “Water with crushed mint and a cool, damp cloth for your throat.”

“Thanks.” She took a sip of the water and accepted the cloth. “What’s this for?”

“Place it around your neck,” he explained. “It will help.”

“I’m sorry—”

“It is unnecessary, most everyone has that reaction. I am rather surprised that you had it tonight and not last week.” He watched as she nodded. “Would you like to continue our discussion or shall I leave?”

He waited as she placed the cloth back in the bowl then took another sip of water, praying she wouldn't ask him to leave, but fearing she would. Her eyes flitted about the room, occasionally meeting his only to slide away, increasing his fear that she would tell him to leave and never contact her again. Over a century as a vampire had taught him the value of patience. If he wanted any type of relationship with Diana he couldn't rush her now.

“May I see them?” she blurted, as her green-gold eyes fixed on him.

“Excuse me?” The unexpected question startled him. He was unsure who or what she could mean.

“Your fangs.” Her cheeks reddened. “I mean, I’d like to see them when I’m not terrified out of my wits.”

Francisco had known the request would come eventually. It always did. But was she truly ready? “You are certain?”

Diana nodded quickly.

“Very well.” He took a deep breath, and held it for a moment before releasing it and his fangs. As the few drops of blood touched his tongue, his senses expanded. He knew, from the rapid beat of her heart, that a flood of emotions was racing through her. The bitter scent of fear coming off her, along with the minty scent of the mouthwash she’d used, filled his nose.

He saw her for the first time with the amplification of his senses. Her hair flowing around her face in unruly waves of copper and mahogany caught the room’s low light, giving it a mellow, lulling hue that was as inviting as its scent. Her hazel eyes were now more green than gold as they studied him nervously. Her skin was almost luminescent with health, youth and warmth. He imagined it would be equally achingly vibrant to touch. The minute fidgeting of her fingers and the steady, rhythmic push of the skin over her pulse focused into sharp relief, and the natural heat that left her body in alluring red waves became visible to his heightened eyes. She had never looked more alive and beautiful.

She leaned forward. Her hand came up, moving toward him. He was fascinated by the trail of red waves that followed its passing. Waves that rushed forward to caress his chin as she jerked her hand back. Francisco blinked twice, dispelling the image, and met her eyes. Not trusting his voice, he raised an eyebrow in question.

“Sorry. I was...”

“Going to touch them?” He smiled as she nodded. “If you wish to it will not bother me.” He didn’t tell her how remarkably sweet and innocent that desire made her seem or how the request filled him with longing.

She cautiously brought her hand back toward his mouth. As her fingers neared, he nipped playfully at them and she yanked her hand back with a gasp. He winked at her. They both chuckled, the tension between them gone. He held still as she scooted closer and reached out to feel both fangs, running her thumb along the sharp tip of one.

“Do you have feeling in them?”

“Like any other tooth, I have a sensation of them being touched.” He grasped her wrist to prevent her from withdrawing her hand. “However, it is unlike the sensation of holding onto your wrist.” Her fingers curled into a loose fist as he tugged her hand closer and rubbed it against his cheek. “I feel the warmth of your skin. Feel the pounding of your pulse. If I kiss your fingers...” He brushed his lips along her knuckles. “I can taste you.” He stared at her knuckles. “The spicy sweetness of you underneath the salt of your skin.” He released her wrist, missing the warmth of her skin in his hand. As she pulled her hand back, Francisco retracted his fangs.

Minutes passed between them in awkward silence. He wondered if perhaps he had been too forward, and hoped she hadn't felt that he had. He knew she was still nervous about his life.

"So," she said, breaking the silence. "What happens if I tell someone vampires are real?"

"They would not believe you." He smiled.

She shook her head. "No, I mean what would..."

He understood what she was asking. "Nothing. Most people are skeptical about anything outside the norm. Things that do not fit into their preconceived boxes of scientific fact or religious dogma are discarded as myth, fantasy, or the ravings of a lunatic. Vampire society has learned the value of ignoring those who tell of our existence."

Diana nodded and looked down at the small sliver of couch cushion between them.

"Diana?"

She shook her head, refusing to raise her eyes to his.

*Here it comes. She's going to ask me to leave and not return.*

Francisco steeled himself for rejection. Instead of the curt order to leave, Diana's hand came up around his neck and pulled him forward, her lips covered his gently as she kissed him. He grabbed the cushions to prevent himself from pulling her into his arms, the hard wood frame of the sofa biting into his fingers as he tightened his grip.

She sucked and nipped at his lower lip.

He fought his desire to lay her back on the couch and rip that overly large t-shirt and jeans off her. He knew he should push her away. She could not be thinking clearly, not when moments before she had run to the bathroom.

*Stop this before she goes too far.*

The mental warning was forgotten as he lost himself in the spicy sweetness of her mouth. His eyes slid shut as he released the back of the couch. He followed the curve of her shoulder in a feather light caress up the smooth column of her neck into the silky softness of her hair.

Her hand left his neck and traveled down his chest, stopping at the first button on his shirt. Nimble fingers released it, then moved down, repeating the action on each button until she reached the waistband of his jeans. The tails of his shirt were yanked free of his jeans. Cool air breathed against the exposed skin to be replaced with the white-hot heat of her hands running along his chest. Still, she kept her mouth on his in a sensual and languid kiss that robbed him of the will or desire to resist what she willingly offered.

The skin of his abdomen twitched as she skimmed her hands along the opening of his shirt; it fell open and she moved up his chest to his shoulders.

He watched in amazement as she slid off the couch, moved to sit between his legs, and began to work at the buckle of his belt. Restraint reentered his brain, he grabbed her wrists and pulled her up as he stood.

"Diana, you do not know what you are doing."

## Chapter 10

“Wha–what?” Diana blinked twice, clearing the haze of her desire to meet Francisco’s eyes. He held her wrists against his chest in a gentle but unbreakable hold.

“You are not thinking clearly.” His spoke gently, in the voice one would use to calm a child.

She yanked at the restraint. “I *am* thinking very clearly.” She needed this. Needed to feel again and in a perverse way desperately needed to see which was the stronger, the ruthless side or the gentle side of him.

Realizing there was no way to break his hold on her wrists, she switched tactics and pushed forward. He fell backward onto the couch, pulling her down with him. His shocked and puzzled expression made him seem almost boyish. While adorably cute, it was not what she wanted at that moment. No, what she needed was the ruthless bad boy, the one that she was only beginning to realize lurked just under the surface. The one that would push her back onto the floor and rip her shirt and jeans from her, then take her to the heights of passion with no apologies. Or maybe she needed the gentle side of him, the side that would ease her to the heights in slow, agonizingly pleasurable steps. She didn’t know, she only knew she needed.

She leaned forward and nipped at his neck then licked the tender skin, his moan of pleasure resonating in her ear. She smiled against his shoulder, knowing her actions were breaking through his walls of control. The strong grip on her wrists loosened, and she slipped one hand free and moved up his neck, along his jaw, alternately nipping and licking. Her hand traveled to the center of his chest, she curled her fingers and scratched at the hard wall of it as she bit his earlobe. Her other hand stroked along his erection through his jeans.

Francisco grasped her shoulders and pushed her back. She feared he was going to stop again until he grasped the hem of her t-shirt. She smiled as she raised her arms and he jerked it off, then tossed it across the room.

His heated gaze traveled appreciatively down her now exposed chest.

Diana chewed on her lower lip nervously. Her ex-fiancé, Richard, had often complained about her less than ample breast size. At over a century old, would Francisco feel the same?

“*Bellissima.*”

Her worries melted away under the heat of his gaze. His hands fumbled at the button of her jeans. Impatient, she brushed them aside, stood, unzipped then pushed her jeans and panties down her legs. When she stepped out of them, she shook her hair off her shoulders to stand before him proudly.

He rose from the couch and removed his jeans, the heat from his body burning her. He gave her no time to examine him as his arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her hard against him. Chest hair scraped sensitive nipples, the hard length of him pressed against her belly. His lips descended on hers in a bruising kiss. She felt the scrape of his fangs on her lip and tasted her own blood. The coppery taste wasn't disgusting. It was erotic.

He lifted her, aligning their bodies, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. His cock pulsed and she arched closer. She needed him to quench the burning desire for him growing within her. Diana moaned into the kiss, imagining his hard length filling her as they both sought completion.

With each step he took she felt the slide of him along the folds of her sex. The laminate counter of the pass through was cold against her skin for only a moment, then heat surged through her. Strong masculine fingers stroked her breast, thumb and forefingers tweaking her pebbled nipples, riding the line between pleasure and pain. She broke from the kiss, throwing her head back at the firestorm of passion growing within her. Grasping the counter tightly, she thrust her breasts toward him.

A masculine chuckle caressed her skin as he licked, nipped and suckled down her chin and neck to her breast. He moved one hand behind her, pulling her hips closer to the edge while the other traveled down her belly. Moist lips touched her breast as his fingers found her already wet core. He worked his fingers in time with his delicious torture of her breast.

Her breathing became harsh and ragged as he brought her to an orgasm that left her trembling. "Watch me."

Helpless to disobey the gentle command, she opened her eyes and watched as he guided the plump crest of his cock to her entrance.

She pushed down hard, feeling herself stretch around him. His hands now resting on her hips helped steady her as their bodies joined. Male and female. Hard and soft. Giving and taking. Thrusting and retreating. Ever faster, they moved in concert.

She grabbed his shoulders, her nails digging into the hard muscles. She threw her head back in abandonment as he thrust into her, filling her completely. Grunts of pleasure escaped both of them as they moved, each seeking release. She couldn't hold back the keening scream that escaped her as white light flashed behind closed eyelids as she came. The opening of Beethoven's Fifth symphony played over the thundering of her heartbeat. Francisco thrust into her harshly as the sharp pain of fangs puncturing her shoulder sent her tumbling over the edge again.

They slumped back into each other, temporarily satiated. Diana snuggled into his chest, sighing happily. He rubbed his chin against the back of her head then with a finger he forced her to meet his eyes.

"I am sorry."

"For what?" She tilted her head. "That was fantastic!"

Francisco chuckled and pulled her close. “For biting you, I should not have done that. And, thank you.”

“Then I’m sorry I bit you first.” She snuggled into his chest. “And you are very welcome, though I should be the one doing the thanking.”

Beethoven’s Fifth sounded from beside the couch where their clothes lay. “What is that?”

“Michaela’s ringtone.” He pulled from her with a groan.

Her cheeks burned in embarrassment as she realized Mike’s earlier call had been ignored. But the view as he walked over and leaned down to grab his jeans was breathtaking. She hopped off the counter and went to get her own clothes as he answered the phone. Trying not to think that she’d just had the hottest sex of her life with a vampire.

“Bolle.”

## Chapter 11

Tapping his foot impatiently on the carpet of the elevator, Francisco fumed as he rode up to D.C. & H's third floor offices. Michaela's call informing him of this *mandatory* meeting with Jonathon had been unwelcome, unwanted and untimely. He glared at the digital readout above the door. It seemed to mock his anger and frustration as the two remained lit. Part of him wondered what could be so important that Jonathon would call such a meeting—something he had never done before.

*How long does it take for an elevator to rise two floors? I could have walked up the stairs faster than this.*

He glowered at the number. The two remained, taunting him as the elevator continued to hold him within its plush prison.

Diana had been understanding of his having to leave, more understanding than he was. She had walked him to the door, wearing only the oversized t-shirt, and urged him to hurry back. Now if only the elevator would cooperate.

He hissed at the small digital screen. As if in response, the two flickered, to be replaced by a three as the door slid open. He stepped out of the elevator, stalking across the small foyer into the office lobby.

Thoughts of Diana disappeared as he made his way into the heart of the office, expecting to find deserted halls. Instead, muttered comments, apologies, and a multitude of hurried footsteps filled the air as Cleaners and clerical staff, weapons or files in hand, dashed into and out of offices. Only reflexes honed by years of combat prevented him from being run over as he made his way down the corridor. Something had happened. Something big. He quickened his pace to Jonathon's office. He opened the door, a question on his lips.

Jonathon looked up, the phone glued to his ear. He covered the mouthpiece. "Sit down, Frank." His usual designer suit and tie had been replaced with a rumpled white oxford and jeans.

Michaela stood looking out the window, her back incredibly straight, her hands clenching and unclenching into fists.

"What's going on?" Francisco asked as he moved across the office, unzipping and shrugging off his jacket before perching on the edge of a chair. He looked from one to the other of the two vampires.

Jonathon replaced the handset in its cradle. "Langdon's back."

Francisco had been looking at Mike when Jonathon made the announcement, and he snapped his attention back on the elder.

"Langdon Dewey? But that is impossible." His eyebrow quirked upward.

Michaela spun to face him, her hair swirling around her. “He killed four of my best. Jeff, Rick, Tom and Bob.” Mike’s voice was as tight as her posture. “I’d say it isn’t impossible.”

The harsh smack of a hand on paper centered the other two’s attention on the elder. “Michaela! Focus on the problem.” Jonathon’s voice gentled. “I know it’s hard to lose them, but you—no, *we* must make plans.”

Francisco cleared his throat, bringing the other two’s attention to him. “Would one of you please explain to me how Langdon Dewey has returned from the dead?” He rubbed his forehead trying, unsuccessfully, to make what he’d just learned mesh with what he’d always been told.

Jonathon waited as Mike left the window and sat in the chair next to Francisco before he took a seat in the large chair behind his desk. “There is no doubt it is Langdon Dewey. He left a note pinned to Tom’s body.” He shifted through the paper littering his desk, tossing several sheets on the floor before lifting the note. “I’ve returned, Grandmother. I know how disappointed you must be that I didn’t die under the sun, which is as unforgiving as your heart, as you obviously intended. It took centuries for the burns caused by your cruel staking of me to heal to a degree where I could show myself in public again. A punishment inflicted for some imagined transgression. Consider these four deaths of your chosen as the beginning of the gifts I shall send you.”

“Gifts? He actually referred to their deaths as gifts?” Mike stood and walked to the bar near the window. “Bastard.”

“Michaela.” Jonathon’s voice was a warning.

“Oh, just tell Frank what he needs to know.” She flipped a glass over, poured a drink and downed it in one gulp.

“We’ve known for over fifty years that Langdon hadn’t died. Three brothers, whom he turned later that evening, rescued him. Two have been cleaned, one fifty years ago and one a week ago, Thomas and Robert. Robert was the transient who attacked you at the park, Frank. We don’t know the whereabouts of the third brother, Lucas. We now know that the kidnappings of young women from shopping centers are the work of gang members Langdon has convinced he’ll make vampires.”

Francisco sat up straighter, remembering the three thugs who had attacked Diana. He suddenly realized his fangs hadn’t frightened them. They had been foolish for trying to attack him individually, but not afraid.

Diana.

Was she picked at random, because she had been foolish enough to walk across a dark parking lot alone? Or could someone have seen them together earlier in the day? Was she targeted because of him? If she had been targeted because of him, had his own pursuit of her endangered her more?

“Frank!”

“What?” His eyes met Jonathon’s across the desk. He didn’t have time for this. He had to make certain Diana was safe. He’d put her on the next plane, bus, cruise ship, or train leaving the city, whether she wanted to go or not.

“The attack at the mall, do you think it could be connected?”

“Yes.” He stood, pushing his fears away, and began to pace. “I didn’t realize until just a—” He paused to glare at Michaela, who was drumming her nails on her glass.

“Sorry.” She looked over at him and put her hand in her pocket. “Nervous habit.”

“As I was saying, I did not realize until you mentioned Langdon using gangs that they did not react to my fangs. Give me a moment.”

Jonathon nodded, leaning back in his chair. At the bar Michaela poured herself another drink. This time she sipped it.

He crossed to the window, staring unseeing into the night as he thought through everything he had been told about this new threat.

Langdon Dewey had been raised by his grandmother, Cassandra, after his parents’ death. Around the age of thirty, he’d become a vampire. Unable to let go of his grandmother, he’d changed her as she lay ill and dying.

Vampire society in the early 1700’s was chaotic. Each vampire existed on their own, killing indiscriminately, stealing and all other forms of lawlessness performed in the name of surviving. The possibility that she would have to accept that type of life grated on the staid grandmother’s sensibilities.

Unlike most vampires of the time, Cassandra enjoyed being awake during the daylight hours. She learned quickly that sleeping during the day was only a myth, provided the drapes of her manor were drawn against the sunlight. A waste of time that could be better spent bringing order to chaos.

She spent her days writing laws, the very ones that vampires now lived by. Rules dictating the way vampires should function within human society, to avoid killing, and outlining a formation of a vampire government that would span the globe. She became the first Envoy, approaching local law enforcement and government officials, offering her assistance on cases they couldn’t solve.

It was while she was assisting them with a case concerning the mysterious deaths plaguing Dulwich that she discovered Langdon’s evil nature. In the early hours of the morning she had found him, sated on blood and sex, dozing contentedly beside the corpse of his latest victim. She’d pulled him out of the saloon and into her carriage. Then driven him, in the still dark hours before dawn, to a clearing and tied him to stakes with chains, becoming the first Cleaner.

“Frank?” Jonathon interrupted his thoughts.

He held up one finger, asking for another minute.

If Langdon were turning the muscle he’d used to abduct the women, they wouldn’t follow the laws Cassandra had made. But other than the number of abductions going up, there was no other indication of an increase in illicit vampire activity. No, Langdon wouldn’t want young, undisciplined, uncontrollable vampires alerting anyone of his presence. Not yet.

Why would Langdon chose Mobile and now to reappear?

There was only one answer. Cassandra's New Year's visit.

"He's after Cassandra. These abductions are food for him and Lucas. If I'm not wrong about him, the gang members who kidnap the young women will also be their victims."

Jonathon leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk. "You're sure, Frank?"

"It is the only thing that makes sense. He is obviously still bitter about Cassandra's staking him out to burn, else he would not have mentioned it in his note. It is no secret that she is planning to be here for New Year's. Is Lord Cheetham coming this year?"

"I just received word yesterday he was..." Jonathon's voice trailed off. His eyes widened then narrowed as the implication of Langdon's plan registered in his mind.

Michaela slammed her glass back on the bar. "You don't think he would..."

Francisco moved to stand behind the chair he had vacated and rested his hands on the high back. "If he desires to return vampire society to the anarchy of the past, which I suspect is the case, the New Year's Eve celebration would be the perfect opportunity. Cassandra Dewey, Lord Cheetham and Jonathon Howe will all be in one place at the same time."

"How do we stop him?" Jonathon met his eyes.

"I am not certain. I need time to plan and to talk to an informant. Provided, of course, Michaela has no objections to me returning to my previous post—temporarily."

Both men looked to the woman standing by the bar.

"You're the best, Frank. I'll gladly let you take point on this one." Michaela saluted him with her glass before draining it.

"Thank you. It may take me a day or two to locate my informant and even then, it could be that he will not know anything."

"What should we be doing while you're seeking this informant?"

He looked at Jonathon. "Go over the arrangements for the New Year's Eve celebration. Triple check the security plans, have Jeff—" He shook his head, remembering the vampire who had once been his third was now dead. "Have Garrett look them over for any ways to get in. Where was the New Year's Celebration supposed to be held?"

"The Grand Hotel at Point Clear."

"Too many access points for security to monitor. Who chose that location?"

"Andrea. She thought it would be perfect."

"Of course she would. She tried every time she was in charge to move it there. I always overruled her. Michaela, you must learn to think of security first." He raised a hand, stopping the objection before she could voice it. "Move the celebration to Bellingrath Gardens. The Great Lawn and Home will be lovely at night with the Holiday lights and provide better security with less access or danger to citizens." Francisco paused as he thought through the logistics. "When are Lord Cheetham and Cassandra due in?"

“A few days before the event. They wanted to tour the city, meet the mayor, sheriff and police chief.”

“Ask them to change their plans to arrive the day of the party. There will be plenty of time for those meetings after the first of the year. Besides, I believe the mayor intends to be out of town that week.” He turned to face Jonathon. “I will require as much cash as you can lay your hands on.”

“The informant?” Jonathon was already kneeling behind the desk to open the safe.

“Yes, his—habit is expensive.”

“There’s ten thousand dollars in the safe. Is that enough?”

“More than I require.” Francisco thought for a moment. “A thousand should do it. I had not realized you kept so much in the office.”

Jonathon stood and placed a bound stack of hundreds in his hand. “Late night cleanings take large amounts of cash to not end up on the morning news.” The pointed look the elder gave him left no doubt that he meant the fiasco at the pavilion. “Here’s five. I don’t care if your informant overdoses provided we have the information.”

“It is not that type of habit.” The wad of hundreds disappeared into an interior pocket of his leather jacket. “I shall contact you when and if I find out anything.” He turned to look at Michaela. “Langdon will pay for killing them.”

Her lips quirked up, but he could still see the anger within her eyes. “With you running the show, I don’t doubt it. Be careful.”

“I shall be,” he assured her. “Michaela, with this new information and the previous attack on Diana—”

“I’ll have a team check on her periodically.”

“Thank you.”

## Chapter 12

“Let me out of here!” Diana grasped the metal bars on the locked gate of Electronic Avenue and shook them. “I want to go home!”

“Okay. Okay. Don’t destroy the gate. You’re in a hurry to leave. Have a bad day?” Dan Patterson walked up behind her, his keys jingling.

“God, yes!” She tucked her hair behind her ears. “It’s not *my* fault that we’re sold out of Wii’s and not going to get anymore before Christmas.”

“Ah, a customer took their lack of planning out on you.”

“Mm-hmm. I hate when they do that. And then the woman had the gall to tell me I was ruining *her* Christmas.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I wanted to thank her for ruining my Christmas by being a bitch. But I told her I was terribly sorry.”

“Good girl.” Dan squatted and unlocked the gate. The motor hummed as the wire mesh slowly lifted. “It’ll be over in another week and a half, besides you’re off tomorrow.”

“Thank God.”

He laughed. “You sure you don’t need me to walk you to your car?”

She hiked her purse further up on her shoulder. “No, thanks. I’m parked fairly close to the door. If you don’t get those registers counted down and get home before midnight, Mary will lynch you.” She patted his arm. “Thanks for the offer, it was really sweet of you, and tell Mary I’m expecting the usual from her for Christmas.”

“Hmpf.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault that your wife makes the best cookies I’ve ever tasted.”

The sales floor manager narrowed his eyes and looked at her. “Don’t go telling that to any of those other clowns who work here.”

“I won’t, I’m selfish with cookies and don’t like to share.” She stooped under the gate into the mall, then waited while he pulled the gate down and relocked the door. “Night.”

“Night.”

Her heels clacked on the tile floor as she walked toward the exit.

Why hadn’t Francisco called? It had been a week since Michaela’s call had almost interrupted them. Her cheeks heated as she remembered that Mike’s first call had been ignored. She shook her head, refocusing on the important issue: Francisco not calling.

To be fair, he had called and told her that he would be out of contact for a few days while he searched for an informant. But it had been a week. She was beginning to wonder if he would call at all. She had really only known him for three weeks.

Maybe she should call him? No, he was working. He would call her when he was able to, like he promised. He did care about her. That she was sure of because he had arranged for Michaela or one of her teams to check on her every night.

*A man only did that for a woman he cared for, right?*

*Right.*

Diana dug for her keys as she passed the carousel near the main entrance. Francisco hadn't failed to do anything he'd said he would in those three weeks. She nodded, he would call as soon as he could. He'd been considerate letting her set the pace. He was even making sure she was safe while he was unable to be there.

Her fingers brushed the keys that had worked their way to the bottom of her purse. She wrapped her hand around them. Her cellphone vibrated, and the keys fell back into the depths.

Diana groaned in frustration as she pulled the phone out, flipped it open, and held it to her ear. "Francisco?"

"Sorry, it's just me." Michaela laughed.

"Mike, hi!" Diana walked to the curb and looked out into the parking lot. Only a few vehicles were still there, making it easy for her to locate her car. She had parked further from the entrance than she'd thought. "Something wrong?"

"Not a thing. I was kind of hoping you had heard from Frank. Which you obviously haven't."

"Should I be worried?" There was no reply for a moment. "Mike?"

"Oh, no—no need for you to worry. Frank's probably having trouble locating his informant." Mike sounded overly cheery. "I need to go check on some stuff. If Frank calls you first..."

"I'll have him call you." Diana walked across the parking lot. If Mike wasn't worried, then she shouldn't. She knew she would, though.

"Thanks. Later."

"Later." Diana dropped the phone back into her purse and began digging again for her keys.

She caught a glimpse of a white SUV moving around her when she looked up momentarily to get her bearings. Thinking it was Mall security, she didn't pay attention when it started to match her pace.

A hand clamped over her mouth, a steely arm wrapping around her waist as she was pulled roughly against a muscled body. She stepped back, planting the heel of her shoe in her captor's instep as she'd learned in her self-defense class. When there was no reaction other than a grunt of pain, Diana bit into the palm covering her mouth.

Her attacker hissed but didn't release his hold.

She continued to fight against the strong grip, using every dirty trick she had ever heard of or learned. Reaching behind, she tried to claw at his face. She clamped her teeth harder into the skin. She placed all her weight on the foot already digging into his instep.

Her captor fell into the back seat of the vehicle, dragging her with him. A hand came from the passenger's seat, and she felt the sharp stick of a needle in her arm. A heavy blanket was dropped over her and the person holding her. Knowing she only had moments to escape before whatever they had given her knocked her out, Diana doubled her efforts to get away. She struggled even as the darkness took her.

## Chapter 13

Langdon Dewey looked down at the vampire crouched on the floor. Already the signs of the savage blood thirst, *Cruentus*, were beginning to show; fangs descended, eyes bloodshot and skin blue from lack of blood. He knelt carefully, avoiding the blood that had congealed on the floor and remaining just out of his captive's reach.

"Are you still sane, my friend?" He was amused watching Francisco Bolle, the calm, logical, chosen Envoy fight to regain control of his mind. "You're getting thirsty, aren't you?" He reached behind him to grasp a wine glass filled with blood. "It's so dry in here, don't you agree?" Langdon took a sip, allowing a single drop to trickle down his chin. "You must be so thirsty by now. It's been—what? A week since you joined us? You are being consumed by the Cruentus, aren't you? I'd imagine that your throat scratches, it has become hard to swallow, and your mouth is as dry as the desert." His victim's eyes filled with anger and hate. "Are your muscles cramping?"

"Shut up."

"Ah, they are. How you must hate me right now. Soon you won't be able to resist the Thirst much longer." He wiped the blood from his chin with his thumb. Langdon laughed as Francisco pulled at the chains holding him to the wall of the old freezer. "I am a compassionate man. When you can no longer resist I shall turn you loose to feed your Thirst." He thrust his blood-covered thumb at Francisco, who stilled, his gaze focused on it. Langdon slowly moved the thumb into his own mouth and sucked the blood off. "Mmm, delicious. Two more weeks and you will become a mindless killing machine, then I will release you into the heart of the city. Grandmother's precious Cleaners will have no choice but to hunt you down. This will leave me free to join Grandmother at the New Year's Eve gala."

"Go to hell."

Langdon laughed as Francisco pulled harder at the chains that bound him. He stood, turned and limped back to the chair. "Ah, this is much better. Now, Francisco, where did you have them move the celebration to? Hmm?" He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "You are much too clever to not figure out my plan. Did you warn Jonathon? I know the location has changed."

"How?"

"How do I know?" He smiled, hiding his curiosity. "Andrea. Such a lovely little vampiress, a bit naïve, but she was an excellent source of information. Unfortunately, Jonathon is personally handling the gala now. Only his most trusted lackeys know the details. Andrea is not one of them. Pity, she outlived her usefulness." He shrugged. "That is how I know the plans have changed. What I need you to tell me is what the new arrangements are."

"If I do not?"

“That is the problem. Killing you would not gain me the information I need and once you are deep within the Cruentus, any information you give will be suspect.”

Langdon saw the pleased glint in Francisco’s eyes. How was the younger vampire managing to maintain his sanity? A week without feeding, daily beatings, two gunshot wounds, and the hundreds of other tortures Lucas had heaped on him should have him teetering on the edge of sanity, yet Francisco was almost sane.

Langdon allowed the man his moment of triumph. Only a moment. “I think I have something that might change your mind.”

He reached behind him to knock on the freezer door with the cane that had rested against the chair. Two men brought in a figure wrapped in a blanket and placed it at his feet.

“They brought this delectable little morsel for Lucas and myself to dine on. Imagine our surprise when we found that she had already been tasted. Neither of us like seconds.” He kicked the blanket. “I believe you know her?” Langdon watched the puzzlement cross Francisco’s face as the blanket fell away, revealing the woman it held.

Recognition flared in Francisco’s eyes. He scrambled back, scraping his palms and knees. Stopping only when his back was pushed firmly against the metal wall of the freezer. “Damn you!”

“Where is the gala being held?” Langdon pulled a small knife from his jacket. He moved to kneel beside the woman. He traced it along her cheek and chin, leaving shallow cuts.

\* \* \* \*

Francisco followed the track of the knife down Diana’s neck to the cleft between her breasts. He shook his head to clear his mind of the Cruentus. He couldn’t betray Cassandra, but he couldn’t allow Diana to be tortured. Nor could he let Langdon know he wasn’t as far gone in the Thirst as he pretended.

If Langdon continued to pierce her skin with that knife, Francisco wasn’t sure he could prevent the Thirst from taking complete control of him. Then he, not Langdon, would be the threat to Diana.

Her eyes opened, darting around the room. Her hair was mussed, arms bound in front of her and her legs tied together. The piece of tape over her mouth prevented her from speaking, but as her eyes met his they filled with fear of his condition, relief that he was alive, and a calm certainty she would be safe as long he was there.

He ran his tongue across his swollen and cracked lips as the demon within him screamed for her blood. She shouldn’t trust him. Not now, not when he couldn’t trust himself.

“Fort Conde.” He dragged his gaze away from hers to meet Langdon’s eyes. “I recommended Fort Conde.”

“That wasn’t hard, now was it?” Langdon nodded as he waved his hand and Diana was dragged out of the freezer. He followed, pulling the door shut behind him.

Francisco slumped against the back wall, praying that he could get himself and Diana out of this before Langdon discovered the lie. Right now, he was grateful that she was safely on the other side of the door.

He could smell the blood from the wine goblet. Langdon had left it behind as he had every night. So tantalizing close and yet torturously out of his reach. Francisco had tried futilely the first few nights to reach it, only to have it spill on the floor just out of his reach.

He could hear the traffic outside increase as dawn approached. Langdon and Lucas would have gone to wherever they slept each day. Only the humans that would be guarding Diana would still be in the building. He closed his eyes and sniffed deeply. Under the aroma of freshly baked doughnuts, he caught Diana's scent. She was scared and angry. But was she angry at herself or him?

*I need to get out of this freezer and feed. She is warm and alive.*

*No.*

He shook his head, pushing back the demon of the Cruentus. He had to rescue Diana before Langdon or Lucas decided to drain her. He'd have to incapacitate her guards.

*I will feast on their blood. Gorge myself on their blood. Bathe in it.*

*No! I will not become the monster Langdon wants.*

Francisco pushed back the wrist cuff. He brought his wrist to his lips, took a deep breath, then sank his fangs into it. He let his mouth fill with blood before lowering his arm and swallowing. The raging thirst subsided. He knew it was only a momentary reprieve. He couldn't continue to feed off himself for much longer.

He waited, allowing the small amount of blood he ingested to push back the demon threatening to take over. He leaned his head against the wall, closing his eyes to wait. His mind wandered back to the time Cassandra taught him how to defeat the Cruentus.

*He hissed, pain lancing through his thigh as the grandmotherly figure standing beside him smacked it. She leaned heavily on the cane she had hit him with, regarding him with concern.*

*"You must fight." She knelt beside him. "Drink only a mouthful of your own blood every other day, Francisco. You must fight this with your mind and your blood." Her voice was gentle and coaxing, the tone one would use on a recalcitrant child. In that instant he remembered who she was, Cassandra Dewey. The woman who had single handedly changed vampire society.*

*He fought against the blood lust that was coursing through him. She tapped his shoe sharply with her cane.*

*"Pay attention, boy! You are stronger than this. You must be stronger than this."*

*The madness tore at him as the woman continued to speak; what she said couldn't penetrate his tortured mind, only the tone — hopeful and insistent.*

He jerked out of the memory and grabbed the chain dangling from his left wrist, then followed it to where it bolted into the wall. Grasping the final link, he felt for the ring and the corner bolts. His daily efforts to loosen the brace paid off, it rocked slightly. He pulled the brace out as

far as it would reach and tried to slip a finger behind it. He was able to get three fingers between the metal brace and wall up to the second joint. There couldn't be much more of the bolts left in the wall. He propped his foot against the wall and began to pull. It was going to be a long day.

## Chapter 14

Two of the three men who were supposed to be watching her were arguing over something—again. It seemed to be normal for them. Diana tried to ignore them as she had all morning, but it wasn't working and beginning to give her a headache.

All three wore oversized hoodies and baggy jeans that seemed to be falling off them. The silent one of the three sat in the darkest corner of the room, his hood pulled up. She really didn't care what type of underwear they had on, but their style choice was making sure she knew. One had a cast on his right arm. Remembering the night she had met Francisco, Diana wondered if these were the same three who had attacked her; they were familiar, except the quiet one.

They'd untied her hands and removed the tape from her mouth so she could eat earlier and had forgotten or decided not to retie them. She knew she should try to escape, but seeing Francisco chained like an animal to the freezer wall kept her seated in the uncomfortable folding chair.

She looked around the room, trying to figure out where they were. She knew it was an old restaurant. It was familiar to her with its beige walls and arched windows. The mural on one wall held her attention, stars zipped across its textured surface. That was the key to which restaurant she was in, but which one was it?

The pieces fell into place, she knew exactly where she was! Copeland's. She'd worked there briefly when it first opened. It had been closed for years, and with the windows boarded up this was a perfect place to hold them. Located at the corner of Hillcrest Road and Airport Boulevard, one of the busiest intersections in town, it was convenient to food. The location explained the Krispy Kreme doughnuts for breakfast, since it was right across the street. Her apartment wasn't more than a couple miles away.

The puzzle of where solved, Diana put her mind to an even harder problem. How was she going to get herself and Francisco out of this situation? If she had her cellphone it would be as easy as calling Mike and having her send in the cavalry. Or she could simply try to get out of the building during any of the arguments and run next door to the bank.

She would get Francisco out of the freezer right at sundown, being December it would be around five. Then they would both run out the door and to the bank.

*Yup, that's exactly what I'll do, just as soon as I pull my cape out of my ass.*

She rubbed her forehead, the constant arguing, stress and lack of sleep was beginning to give her a headache.

"Guys? Yo, guys!" Diana was grateful for the silence when they stopped bickering and turned to face her. Now that she had their attention, what was she going to do? "I need to visit the little girl's room."

"Hold it, bitch." One of them glared at her.

She thought quickly—what would make them let her out of their sight? She smiled, hoping she looked embarrassed. “I would. But, umm, I just started and I kind of need to— If you’ve got my purse I need the tampon out of it.”

The three thug’s horror stricken faces at the mere thought of a woman on her cycle almost made her laugh. She wasn’t but if thinking she was would get them to hand over her purse she would use it.

They continued to stare at her like she’d contracted leprosy in the last ten seconds, not moving closer. “Guys, come on. Don’t make me beg. There’s a vampire in that freezer, and he looked really hungry.”

“She’s right, man,” the one wearing the cast piped up. “Dey ain’t fed dat guy once the whole time he been here. You know dat, G.”

“Shut it, B.”

Oh lovely, using initials instead of names. Diana cleared her throat, drawing attention back to herself. “G, there’re no windows in the bathroom. You can stand at the door, but I need to take care of this before it gets really nasty.”

“B, get her purse.” G walked over to her and leaned forward, his nose almost touching hers. “You best not be tryin’ anything.”

An icy shiver of fear ran up her spine to wrap its cold fingers around her heart. She shook her head. “I-I’m not. I just need to go to the bathroom.”

The cold piercing glare G gave her almost quelled her determination. An image of Francisco chained and cowering away from her flashed across her mind. She couldn’t ignore the desperation she had seen in his eyes. Nor could she ignore the fact that she was the only one who could get him out of that freezer.

B handed her purse to G, who opened it and removed her cellphone before giving it to her. Diana clasped it to her chest as G grabbed her elbow and pulled her up off the chair. He marched her to the bathroom, and at the door he released her. Once alone in the darkened bathroom she began to shake. Her stomach cramped and her mouth felt dry. Resting a hand against the wall, she let the fear wash through her. She whispered the litany from the Dune books she’d read many years ago, “Fear is the mind killer.” Concentrating on the words, she fought the overwhelming terror. She was still scared, but the paralyzing panic was gone.

“Hurry up in there!” G’s voice called from the other side of the door.

“Be out in a minute.” Diana felt through her purse quickly. Her best weapon, the cellphone, was in her guards’ hand, not her purse. Pens, paper, her wallet, her compact, lipstick and hand sanitizer met her fingers. Nothing that could be used as a weapon. She pulled the hand sanitizer out, poured some onto her hand, then placed the small container in the pocket of her slacks as she walked out. G snatched her purse from her, and she was glad he didn’t search it as he escorted her back to the folding chair. Once she was seated, he resumed arguing with the other guards.

B moved away from the others to stand in front of her. She lifted her gaze to meet his eyes.

“Wha ya want ta eat?”

She remembered the first night she had met Michaela and one of her answers whispered through her mind.

*“Really rare meat, sushi, salads, even yogurt help extend the time between real feedings. It’s like eating at a fast food joint, it’ll fill you up but it’s not the same as a well balanced meal.”*

“Sushi, tuna or salmon and some California Rolls. Fresh Market is the best but Target’s is okay too.” She would figure out how to get the meat to Francisco if she got her order.

“You eat dat shit? Ain’t it raw?”

“Well, the salmon and tuna are, but there are some types that aren’t. Is it a problem?”

“Na, boss man said get ya whaevah you wants.”

*You’re going to regret that.* She smiled. “So, when are you going?”

“B! You gonna get the food or yack with her all day? Just go.”

“I’m goin’ G.”

After B left to get the food, Diana sat watching the argument. After shifting her position on the folding chair periodically, and being unable to find a comfortable position, she stood and walked to the nearest boarded window.

“Sit your ass down, bitch.”

She didn’t turn around to face G. “I’m just stretching my legs. I’m not going to run.” She lifted her foot, showing off the shoes. “Like I could in these heels? I don’t think I could outrun you anyway.” She waited for the sound of his footsteps stomping toward her.

When they didn’t come, she released the breath she was holding. Walking around the room, she stopped at each window to peer out onto the street. The sky was as gloomy as her mood, the predicted rain had arrived.

She realized it would be a perfect day for Francisco and her to take a walk. A chance to go out in the daylight and enjoy the rain. Funny, she’d always hated rainy days. Now all she wanted to do was stand in the downpour with him.

The other two vampires had left hours ago to go somewhere else to sleep the day away. If she could get Francisco out of those chains and out of the freezer they could make it to the bank and get help.

She circled the room, watching G’s reaction as she returned to the chair. His head only turned to her when she reached the archway leading toward the kitchen. She sat, pulled the hand sanitizer from her pocket and began to read the warnings.

She fought the smile that threatened upon reading the first warning: *Do not use in the eyes.* She had a weapon. Not a powerful one, but if one of them grabbed her she could squirt it into their eyes. It might buy her a few seconds.

A shiver ran through her at how callous she was thinking. She couldn’t even kill an insect and here she was planning bodily harm to a person.

*They don’t exactly mean to take you home safe and sound.*

*But possibly blinding someone? I don't know.*

*Would you rather be dead? And what about that sexy Francisco?*

*Oh, hush. I need to think.*

Great, now she was arguing with herself. She rested her elbows on her knees and placed her fingertips on her forehead. The headache was back.

“Here ya go.”

She looked up to see B holding three containers of sushi out to her. She took it from him, smiling. Diana placed the containers on the TV tray in front of her. As she opened them, the faintest hint of a plan began to form.

“I got ya a lot cause those little packages didn't look like much ta eat.” He shrugged, then moved to join the other two.

The amount of sushi had her shaking her head. There was enough there for three people—six tuna, six salmon and a dozen California rolls. She hoped she could eat that much rice.

She looked over to see the men setting up a battery operated television and trying to find a station. She placed one of the lids in her lap, then carefully pulled the salmon and tuna off the rice. The small rice balls she ate. The meat she dropped into her lap. As she placed the final piece of fish in the lid she glanced up to see the silent one watching her.

He smiled at her, then turned back to the TV. She slumped in relief.

She toed off her shoes, grabbed the twelve pieces of fish and stood.

No heads turned toward her.

She took a cautious step toward the kitchen.

No reaction.

Diana took another step. When there was still no reaction, she turned and ran. Her feet slid on the tile floor of the kitchen as she grabbed the pole. She slid around the pickup area into the kitchen itself, around the long cold ovens and past the refrigerators. She grabbed the freezer door handle, skidding to a stop, almost falling.

Behind her she heard the sounds of her guards coming. She yanked the pin out of the handle, opened the door, dashed into the freezer and pulled the door shut. She felt around in front of her within the pitch-blackness of the small room.

## Chapter 15

His day just became longer.

“Francisco?”

“Diana? You cannot be here. Get out.”

She shook her head. “I brought you some food. It’s tuna and salmon.”

The demon thirst screamed for her blood, only to quiet at the mesmerizing beauty of the woman standing so close. Francisco watched as she took a cautious step toward him, wincing as she bumped into the chair.

“Diana, take a step to your left.”

She nodded, followed his instructions then paused, her eyes seeking him in the darkness.

“Take four steps forward.” He stood as she followed his instructions, stopping inches from him. “Hold out your hand.”

In the darkness her eyes tried to find him, her complete trust in him shining in them. As she brushed her hand along his arm, he fought the urge to pull her to him and sink his fangs into her neck. He would not harm her; instead, he took the fish.

“You eat that, I’m going to work on these chains.”

He grabbed her arm, stopping her from moving around him. “Diana, you must leave. I do not know if I can control myself.”

She brought her hand up to cup his cheek. “Just the fact that you are warning me lets me know you won’t hurt me.” She leaned forward and kissed him.

“Diana,” he managed around the lump that had formed in his throat.

“Shh. Eat your fish.” She moved past him to follow the chain.

He ate as Diana worked at the bracket against the wall. The small sounds of exertion as she alternately tugged and twisted the bracket competed with the gradually increasing shushing thump of blood through her veins. The heat that rolled off her body in crimson waves aroused the man and tempted the demon.

Francisco fought the hunger growing within him. The fish was only increasing his thirst for blood. The desire to sink his fangs into her neck to drink the sweet nectar that he had only briefly sampled filled him. Diana innocently tucked her hair behind her ear, exposing her neck where her pulse thumped against the skin.

On the other side of the door, he could hear the frantic calls of her jailers searching the restaurant. He knew he should send her out to them; she would be safer with them than in here with him.

The desires of the Cruentus for blood raged, demanding he grab the woman. Francisco fought against it. He closed his eyes to block the sight of her jugular vein pulsating against the alabaster skin.

He took a deep breath only to be assaulted by the rancid stench of the blood waiting in the glass just out of his reach. The stench was replaced by the scent of Diana; healthy female musk, spicy and alive. He swam in that scent. No artificial floral concoction designed by a chemist in some lab could compare to the natural fragrance of her.

The Thirst screamed for him to pull her to him, bury his face in her neck, pin her struggling arms to her side, and slide his fangs through the skin into that luscious throbbing vessel. Allow the ambrosia of her blood to fill his mouth and trickle down his throat in a warm stream. Francisco shook his head violently, forcing the vision from his mind.

“Diana, you have to get out of here.” His voice sounded strained to his own ears, not the commanding tone he needed.

Instead of doing as he asked, she pivoted on the balls of her feet and rose in a single graceful motion. “Why?”

He silently cursed everything he loved about her. “The Cruentus—the blood thirst wants your blood. I don’t think I can control it much longer.”

She didn’t run. Headstrong, foolishly brave woman that she was she stepped closer, wrapping her arms around him. Holding him as one would an injured child, one hand pulling his head down to rest on her shoulder as she stroked his hair and murmured soft words of comfort.

Francisco trembled at the tender yet dangerous gesture. As he opened his mouth to beg her to leave, his fangs brushed the silken smoothness of her skin. He fisted his hands at his sides in an attempt to refuse the commands of his violent thirst.

Diana shifted her position and one sharp tipped fang scratched her neck.

Reason deserted him as the Cruentus consumed him.

The monster wrapped its arms around her, holding her tightly. Its fangs sank into the tender skin, puncturing the pulsing vein lying just under its surface; warm, sweet blood filled its mouth.

The woman struggled in its hold. The monster who once answered to Francisco tightened his grip. He heard her yelp of pain, then she went limp in his arms.

The faint remainder of the man fought against the monster. Demanding it release her. Demanding it stop satiating itself on her blood.

That small voice was weak. The thirst had been denied for too long. Forced to drink from glasses filled with animal blood or eat food that pushed it back. Now it had a banquet, and that annoying voice of reason was screaming.

The monster raised its head, leaving the banquet to fight against the shackles of control the logical mind was using against it.

It looked down longingly at the woman in its arms—her head rolled back, eyes closed—and felt the human part of him struggle harder. Impossibly that weak voice gained strength. The chains it bound around the monster grew stronger. Still it was not enough to deter the demon from his feast. He bent his head to sample more of the intoxicating liqueur of her blood.

He turned and hissed as the door flew open and another vampire walked in. The small weak voice of humanity broke loose, issuing a quickly cut off cry for help. The monster regained control, backing away.

The vampire pushed up the sleeve of his hoodie and crossed the freezer slowly, stopping next to the monster to hold out his arm.

The monster looked at the arm and sniffed. Vampire blood would taste sweeter than the human, the voice said. He released the mortal, who fell to the floor with a soft thump. Grasping the arm, he drew it to his mouth to drink deeply.

## Chapter 16

Warm, nourishing blood flowed down his throat. Each deep swallow of the elixir drove the Cruentus back. Francisco's sanity returned, fractured and muddled, but it did return. His memories of the last few days were still a jumbled puzzle of images and sensations.

Carefully retracting his fangs, he pulled away, brushing a thumb over the pale skin of the thin wrist. Watching as the small holes closed.

His gaze traveled up the slim arm. Auburn hair hung to the teen's chin in an oily mess. A gray hoodie made the boy's pale skin even paler. Green eyes, too wise for the apparent age of their owner, studied him, waiting for some sign of recognition.

Francisco blinked twice, bringing the kaleidoscope of colors into sharp focus. "Lord Cheetham?" He doubted what he was seeing. The man in front of him could not possibly be who he thought it was. "But you are in London." He shook his head to try to clear the remaining haze from his mind. "I thought you were not coming in until the twenty-sixth."

"That's what I told Jonathon. I've been here since the first, attending to personal business. What is it with American teenagers and wearing their trousers below their bottoms?" He hiked up his pants and tightened his belt. "I seem to always be pulling you out of trouble, Francisco. What is the last thing you remember before losing control?"

Under the intense scrutiny of his superior, Francisco tried to bring the jumbled memories of the last week to order. "I went to see an informant who might have known something about Langdon. When I was finally able to connect with him, we arranged to meet. Lucas was there holding a pistol..."

"Actually, I was thinking of more recent events." Lord Cheetham smiled sadly as he glanced down at the floor.

Francisco's chest tightened with fear as the mixed up puzzle pieces of the last week fell into place and he remembered Diana hugging him. He looked down to see her crumpled on the ground at his feet. His heart plummeted. He ripped the bracket from the wall, freeing himself.

"Oh God, what have I done?"

Francisco knelt and pulled her limp form to him. He cradled her gently, ignoring the blood seeping from the bite wound on her neck to stain his shirt. He realized the impossible had happened. He was hopelessly, completely and totally in love with her, and he had done the unthinkable. He had harmed her.

The strong, steady beat of her heart banished the worry that he had inadvertently killed her. Yet she lay unconscious, her head lolling back and forth with each motion of his gentle rocking.

He raised his eyes to meet Lord Cheetham's, swallowed down the lump that had formed in his throat and blinked back the burning in his eyes. "I have to get her to a hospital. I will present myself before you, Jonathon and Michaela for judgment after I am certain she is being treated."

He had been a Cleaner too long to not know there was only one punishment for his crime. Francisco stroked her back while he awaited Cheetham's agreement. He knew he had no right to ask for the time to take Diana to the hospital, but he needed to know she was safe.

How could he have done this? He had failed to protect Diana from himself. He would accept his punishment; it would keep her safe from him.

"You know that's against the rules." Cheetham placed a hand on Francisco's shoulder and squeezed lightly. "But—I know you, and you have never broken your word."

Francisco dared hope that his request—his final request—might be granted.

"That is not entirely true, not anymore. I broke my word to her."

He would offer no defense for his actions, as far as he was concerned there was none. It was the monster Cruentus that had taken control and harmed Diana, which was an excuse he would not allow himself to use. Cassandra had taught him how to avoid the monster, and he had failed—failed in a way far more painful than what Langdon had planned or the punishment he would receive.

"It's early afternoon." Lord Cheetham knelt beside him. "You'll die if you try to take her out of the building."

"Do you think I care?" Francisco kissed her forehead. He stood, lifting her into his arms. "It is my fate for feeding off her." He started toward the door. He didn't want the quick ending of being beheaded. No, the pain of slowly burning was the punishment he wanted—needed—to cleanse the pain and guilt from his heart. He just hoped he could make it to Providence Hospital's ER.

"Francisco!" Cheetham's commanding voice stopped him momentarily. "Give her to me."

Francisco continued forward, for the first time ignoring the command of the man who had saved him from a Scotland Yard cell. The screech of metal on metal reverberated as he walked. "Lord Cheetham—"

"William."

He nodded, not turning. "William, I think I know what you are planning—but Diana would not want that. If I am alive after I get her to the hospital and night falls I will—"

"God! Would you stop being all noble and playing the martyr and just give her to me." William's exasperation was pure teenager. "I'm not going to turn her if that's what you're thinking."

The tension between Francisco's shoulders lessened at the reassurance. "Then why do you want her?"

He turned toward William as he waited for the answer. A myriad of emotions crossed the usually impassive face. William didn't want to tell him something. He was about to give up on receiving an answer when William spoke.

“Diana is my five or six time’s great niece.” William ran a hand through his hair, grimacing at the feel of it or at having to reveal that tidbit, Francisco couldn’t tell.

Diana—*his* Diana was Lord Cheetham’s niece?

“My sister, Amanda, had a daughter who married an American. I’ve kept an eye on the family, providing money for college, to start businesses—whatever any of Amanda’s descendants needed. I received a call from her mother informing me that she had been attacked and asking for my assistance. Keeping an eye on her was the personal business that brought me here.”

“Niece?” Francisco managed to get out after several failed attempts.

“Yes. I’m aware you two are an item. Jonathon briefed me that there was a new woman in your life before I left England. Michaela was kind enough to tell me her name.” William chuckled. “Knowing what I do of her last boyfriend, I would much prefer you be with her. Now, give her to me.” William held out his arms for Diana.

Francisco looked at his friend, then down at the woman in his arms. Devotion and affection warred within him. He allowed William to take her from him.

William sat in the chair, his fingertips sweeping over her in examination. White-hot jealousy flared within Francisco as he watched. He fought it back, after his attack on her, he had no right to it.

“She’s fine. I believe she fainted when you bit her. Now, about this ridiculous idea you had of walking her to the hospital in the middle of the day. It was stupid, and that isn’t like you. Get your head in the game.” He stood, placed Diana in the chair, then stalked up to poke a finger in Francisco’s chest at each word. “You will pull your head out of your ass. Do you understand?”

He nodded.

“Because of her foolhardy attempt to rescue you, we have to capture Langdon and Lucas tonight.”

“What do you suggest?”

## Chapter 17

Diana glared at the two men. For the last twenty minutes they had alternately ordered or tried to sweet talk her into leaving. *Men. Correction, old-fashioned men with their stupid ideas of chivalry.* “I’m staying.”

“No, you’re not.” Her great uncle snarled.

She had to admit his accent was cute. But if he thought she was going to obey someone who looked like a teenager, he had another think coming. She was about to tell him so, when he held up a finger and cocked his head. *What now?*

When William dashed up the stairs at inhuman speed, fear shot down her spine. Then he was back, his disgusted expression saying more than any words could.

“Someone has just pulled up?” Francisco asked, placing an arm around her shoulders.

William nodded and looked at her sadly. Diana would have none of that.

“You...” She pointed at her uncle. “Go sit with the two guys in the men’s bathroom. And for God’s sake keep them quiet.” Shrugging off Francisco’s arm, she instructed him. “You hide here in the freezer.” She wrinkled her nose. “I’ll play dead.”

The two vampires looked at her like she’d lost her mind. She snapped her fingers in front of both men. “Go!”

Within moments the three of them were in place. Her curled on the floor of the dark and silent freezer, waiting. Wherever Francisco was, he hadn’t moved or spoken since William had dashed upstairs, headed toward the men’s room to keep their two prisoners quiet. She vindictively hoped that at least G was tied to a toilet. The scent of old blood and sweat filled the stale air around her.

Neither William nor Francisco was happy about her being stuck here or her taking command, but there was nothing they could do about it.

She lay in what she hoped was a believable position of an unconscious person. It was the most awkward position she could imagine. Her head rested on her right arm, the only concession to her comfort. The metal floor of the freezer was beginning to make her hip ache. Her calves were tightening, warning that if she didn’t move soon they would cramp. The knowledge that at any minute Lucas or Langdon could walk through the door was the only thing keeping her still.

A white hot spasm shot through her calf and down to her instep. She sucked a breath between her teeth. It took every ounce of willpower not to whimper. A hand touched her shoulder, and she flinched before remembering the only one in the room was a now sane Francisco.

“I know you are hurting, Diana.” The breath of his whisper brushed across her cheek. “It will only be a few minutes until whoever arrived enters. You must run as soon as you hear us fighting. If William was able to contact her, Michaela and a team will be here soon. As soon as you exit the building, if she and her team have arrived, they will get you away from here.”

She nodded to show her understanding. Not that it would make any difference, the way her calves were cramping and now her feet she knew running was not an option. Hell, walking might be out of the picture as well.

As suddenly as he'd appeared next to her, Francisco was gone again. Swallowed up by the darkness, waiting for whoever was coming in to walk into their carefully set trap.

The door flew open, banging against the installed shelves. She fought the desire to cover her ears and block out the echo ringing in the small area, but that would have given away she wasn't unconscious or dead.

Peeking through her lashes, she studied the figure standing in the doorway. The man reminded her of a farmer. He was short, but his arms were muscular and he had broad shoulders. That was all she could make out in the limited light coming from the kitchen area. How was Francisco going to defeat someone that was obviously stronger and healthier than him?

The man took two steps into the freezer and stopped. Time seemed to slow, everything about the scene imprinting on her mind. It jerked forward when a tall lean figure slammed into the farmer and the two fell to the floor.

Diana tried to follow Francisco's instructions and run, but the pain in her calves made it impossible to do more than stand and inch back to the wall. She pressed herself against the wall, a shelf support digging into her back. The low light made following the fight impossible, but the sounds of bones breaking and bodies hitting the floor only to slam into metal encouraged her to at least try and get out of the freezer.

The metal was warm beneath her hand as she slid her arm out to feel for shelves. Step by painful step, she began edging her way around the room. She'd taken three steps when her foot touched something. She slid down the wall into a crouch, then reached out for whatever she'd almost stepped on. Squinting, she saw the two vampires still fighting, now a combined mass rolling on the floor.

Cool metal met her fingertips, a square shape with four threaded projections, on the other side a loop and then chain. Thick heavy chain. One of the chains they had held Francisco with.

A vision of him cowering from his tormentors rose from her memories. No. Not from his tormentors, she realized, but from her. He'd given up information to protect her from himself.

Anger welled within her. She knew she wasn't as strong as a vampire, but she would be damned if she let Farmer Boy win. She attempted to lift the chain, but it was too heavy.

Diana fought the urge to smack her forehead. Of course, any chain strong enough to hold a vampire would weigh too much for her to lift. She placed her hands on her hips and felt something in her pocket.

The hand sanitizer.

It wasn't much of a weapon but it might buy Francisco the precious seconds he needed to defeat Farmer Boy. She pulled the tiny bottle from her pocket, made sure it would squirt in the right direction when she squeezed, then stood.

Her calves still burned from the cramps earlier, but standing had alleviated the worst of the pain, allowing her to move easier around the freezer. She backed up until the shelves were biting once again into her back and started toward the sounds of fighting. Her eyes were adjusting more with each step she took.

Francisco's silhouette flew across the small space to crash into the wall, then slide to the floor. Farmer Boy started toward him, and she knew she had to act. There was only one thing she could do. Diana sucked in a breath and shrieked like a horror movie scream queen.

The high-pitched sound echoed in the freezer. Diana only hoped that with heightened hearing the friendly vampires would hear before Farmer Boy could get near her.

He turned and started toward her, but she kept screaming. Her stomach and throat ached from the effort to keep the sound going. She paused and took another gulp of air. Before she could scream again he was on her. His hand wrapped around her throat, and the loud scream she had intended became a squawk of sound. She snapped her hand up and squeezed the hand sanitizer bottle.

Diana wasn't sure if she hit him in the eyes or in the mouth, but Farmer Boy dropped her. She crawled across the floor, trying to get to her feet as she headed toward the still open door, ignoring the swearing of the injured vampire.

She had to get out of the building. If she could manage that, Mike and an entire team of Cleaners would come rushing to her aid. Diana made it to her feet, but before she could take a step she was grabbed and pulled against a barrel chest. Remembering something from a book, she let her head fall forward then threw it back, wincing at the pain even while smiling at the crunch of a bone breaking.

Diana had hoped that like most, Farmer Boy would have dropped her but the hand pushing her head to the side assured her vampires were made of sterner stuff. She felt his breath on her neck and cringed as fangs raked her skin. There was no way she was going to be his dinner. She twisted and kicked backward, her heels hitting air, but she didn't stop fighting. She couldn't.

Pain exploded in her neck as Farmer Boy sank his fangs in. The loud sound of his sucking filled her ears and silver streaks of light danced before her eyes.

## Chapter 18

*Clack. Scrape. Clack. Scrape. Clack.*

The noise rang in Diana's ears as she fought her way back to consciousness—again. She seemed to be doing a lot of that in the last day or so. The only question she had, well, the only two questions were simple. What was it with her passing out every time a vampire bit her? She'd never fainted before.

*Clack. Scrape. Clack. Scrape.*

And the second question: what the hell was that noise? She moaned, and the annoying sound ceased.

"Oh good, you're awake. Francisco will be relieved." The voice of an elderly woman was unbearably loud and Diana cringed. "Oh," the woman said softer. "I'm sorry, dear. Let me go get Francisco."

She heard another *clack* more muffled than the previous ones as something was placed on the table and then the shifting of fabric as the woman rose. As the door banged closed she cracked her eyes open and shut them quickly against the blinding light.

God, what was wrong with her? Every sound seemed amplified, every scent overpowering. She opened her eyes to slits and realized the blinding light was a single lamp on a round table next to a chair. So why was a sixty watt bulb blinding her?

Even her skin was sensitive. The soft silk of her panties, the harsher fabric of her wool slacks, and then the scratchy yet soft feel of the blanket thrown over her, she could feel each different but completely distinct fabric.

Diana sat up and turned away from the lamp, then opened her eyes. She was no longer in the freezer of a closed restaurant, now she was in an office. Through the window in front of her she could see the Mobile skyline. Surprisingly, above the sky shine multiple stars twinkled, not just the few bright ones but little ones that she'd never seen before.

She rose from the couch and walked to the window, enjoying the way the carpet sank under her feet, the threads tickling the arch of her foot and between her toes. She placed her hands on the cool smooth glass and looked up, a smile curving her lips. Whatever happened to her, she liked it. She liked it a lot.

The sound of someone running down the hall rang in her ears, and she cocked her head to listen close. Not just one person was running down the hall. No, there were three people. She chuckled when she realized the difference in their steps. One was wearing boots; that person wasn't too heavy, but when she focused she could hear the keys and change jangling in his pockets,

definitely male. Another one was also male, heavier than the first man but keeping up with whoever was in the lead. The third was female; she could hear the distinctive tap of high heels. The door flew open and she saw Francisco, Mike and an older man she didn't know reflected in the window.

"What's happened to me?" She didn't turn to face them, just kept watching their reflections.

They exchanged looks, then Mike stepped forward. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"I was in a freezer in a closed restaurant, and I was angry about something." Why couldn't she remember? It was right there teasing her, but there were no details to the memory. "I think someone was fighting?" She rubbed at her neck, something tickling her memory. "Pain?" She turned and looked at Mike.

The white-haired vampiress nodded and stepped toward her. "Very good, that's more than most of us remembered—at first." She motioned to the couch. "Sit down and I'll explain everything."

Completely confused, Diana looked over at Francisco, who nodded. With a sigh, she returned to the couch and sat down heavily.

"Frank, why don't you get Diana something to drink before I start?" Francisco nodded and left the room. "Diana, this is Jonathon Howe. He's the director of the US division of D.C. and H."

The man stepped forward, extending his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss. Matthews."

Diana was certain she detected more in his voice than pleasure at meeting her, but what she wasn't sure. She took his hand. "Mr. Howe." Something clicked. "You are the H of D.C. and H.?" He nodded. "Would the C stand for Lord William Cheetham?" Another nod. "And the D?"

He gave her a tight-lipped smile, but answered. "Cassandra Dewey."

She couldn't stop the smile that sprang to her lips, but she did catch her lower lip between her teeth to stop the chuckle. She swallowed and whispered, "Dewey, Cheetham and Howe?"

Mr. Howe gave a sharp nod and laughter bubbled out of her. Mike looked at her like she'd lost her mind, but Diana couldn't stop laughing. The white-haired woman looked at Jonathon, concern etching her features.

"Am I missing something?"

"Do. We. Cheat. Em. And. How." Diana managed to sputter. She fell over, clutching her stomach that had started to cramp. The looks of shock and concern from the two vampires didn't help her regain control. It only made her laugh harder. "Who knew vampires had a wicked sense of humor?" She swiped at the tears streaming down her cheeks and fought for composure.

Mike waited until she had control of herself before speaking. "As funny as that is, I need to explain what you're going through."

She sobered instantly. "There's a reason all my senses are so amplified? Farmer Boy bit me!"

"Farmer Boy?"

"She means Lucas," Francisco explained as he reentered the room. "Perhaps I should explain the situation—alone."

Mike nodded, but Jonathan shook his head. “I’m sorry, Frank. But I can’t allow that, circumstances being what they are.”

Diana frowned at the conversation going on around her. On an average day she didn’t like feeling someone was talking about something concerning her and this wasn’t a normal day. She let out a piercing whistle—instantly wishing she hadn’t. All conversation in the room ceased, and everyone focused on her. She smiled.

“Okay, boys and girls, now that I have your attention...” Her tone was filled with derision. “Francisco is going to tell me what happened.” When the others tried to speak she overrode them. “Because he was there and you weren’t.”

“Miss. Matthews, you don’t seem to understand that—”

“No, Mr. Howe, you don’t seem to understand.” She felt like she was explaining why a Wii wasn’t available to a customer. “I need to know exactly what happened—not what you heard happened.” She pointed at the door. “Now, leave.”

Feminine laughter filled the room, and all eyes turned to the door where an elderly woman stood. “Oh, I like her, Jonathan.” The woman stepped forward, holding out her hand. “I’m Cassandra Dewey. It’s a pleasure to meet you, dear.”

Diana shook the woman’s hand, wondering why she seemed familiar. “Diana Matthews.” Cassandra sat in the chair and picked up the knitting. “You were—umm—I mean, thank you for sitting with me earlier.”

“Oh, it’s no bother, dear. I try to be present when all new vampires awaken.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Vampire! Me? When? How?” She sank bonelessly onto the couch, shaking her head. It wasn’t possible, was it?

## Chapter 19

Cassandra studied Francisco carefully, trying to determine his reasoning. He had to be aware she already knew what he'd done and the very laws she had written made his life forfeit. Even knowing that he met her gaze steadily for the minutes she needed to make her decision.

"Jonathan and Michaela, leave us. What is about to be discussed here, neither of you need to hear." When they started to object she raised her hand. "I will tell you everything you should know."

Jonathan pursed his lips, clearly unhappy with her orders, but she knew he was too good of a soldier to disobey. He spun on his heel and stormed out the door, Michaela close behind him.

Once the door closed, Diana cleared her throat. "I'm waiting for someone to tell me what happened."

Cassandra examined the new vampire carefully; these first moments after awakening were always difficult. The young woman seemed to be handling the change well so far. "Francisco, you were there, I think it best if you tell both of us what happened."

He nodded and took a few minutes to gather his thoughts. "What was the last thing you remember?"

Diana looked at the wall for a moment, her eyes unfocused, then answered. "You were thrown into a wall and didn't get back up. I was furious." Her cheeks reddened, Cassandra wasn't sure if it was from embarrassment or remembered anger. "I knew I was no match for him, strength wise, so I screamed. Farmer Boy grabbed me, and I sprayed hand sanitizer into his eyes."

Cassandra chuckled, the girl had spunk. "I must say, that is original."

Diana smiled. "Then he was biting me and I passed out." She looked over at Francisco, indicating it was his turn to take up the tale.

He nodded and ran his hand through his hair. "Just a few hours before, I had been in the Cruentus—even though I was out of the worst of it, I was still weak. When Lucas threw me against that wall, it stunned me."

He met Cassandra's gaze, and she nodded for him to continue. She now had a better idea why he had bitten the girl. "Go on."

"Lucas released her and she fell, I could hear her heartbeat fading and knew he'd almost drained her completely. I—cleaned him."

She noticed that he used the euphemism, but was it out of respect for her or not wanting Diana to know. "That is the punishment," she agreed. "Now, why did you convert Diana?" That was the most troubling of his crimes. The bite she could forgive, he hadn't been in his right mind when he'd taken it, but converting someone without permission—that was a danger she couldn't afford to let slide.

His hands clenching into fists then relaxing, telegraphed his nervousness to her. "I couldn't let her die."

She waited to see if he would add to that statement, but he kept silent. "Did you realize the consequences of your actions, or were you still in the Cruentus?"

He shook his head. "No, Cassandra. I was fully aware of what would happen."

"What will happen to him?" The solemnity of her question and his response must have registered with the girl.

Before either Cassandra or Francisco could answer, the door opened. William, Jonathan and Michaela entered, all three wearing grim expressions.

"There is only one punishment for vampires..." Diana murmured as if remembering. "Death." Her eyes flew to Francisco's face, and then Cassandra's. Both of them nodded. Rage snapped in her eyes and her nostrils flared, she turned on the three. "No! No, no, no, and no! If anyone has to die, it will be me. Y'all will have to come through me to hurt him."

The girl's tirade ended and a smile curved Cassandra's lips. She now had confirmation of her suspicions. The two of them would risk all for the other.

"Diana," William said softly as he stepped toward her. "Francisco has broken several laws. Laws that must be upheld."

If not for the fact the words came out of a man who looked seventeen, they couldn't have had far direr impact. Diana didn't seem to care as she stalked across the room and stopped inches from her great uncle.

"I don't care." She put her hands on her hips and glared down at him. "What he did was to save my life—so if your stupid laws require that someone dies, then it will be me. Do you understand?"

"Diana—" he tried.

"William!" Cassandra interrupted, bringing all eyes to her. "The bite was due to the Cruentus, therefore no punishment will be given for that. As for turning Diana, that too will be forgiven."

"Cassandra!" William and Jonathan gasped at the same time.

"Michaela was turned to become the United States Mistress of the Change. However, she seems happy in her role as head of the Cleaners for Mobile and will be left in it. That leaves a vacancy that must be filled." She was having none of their testosterone driven objections. She had not taken it from her husband or sons, and she wouldn't from two men who owed her their positions. "This is not a democracy, gentlemen. And may I remind you, my word is law."

She saw her words sink into them. Though Jonathan and William handled the day-to-day operations, she had established a monarchy with herself as queen.

"Good. Now that we understand each other, we need to plan how best to defeat my grandson." Cassandra took her seat and indicated the other chairs with a regal wave of her hand.

## Chapter 20

New Year's Eve at Bellingrath Gardens was beautiful, the Magic Christmas in Lights show lit the gardens. Thanks to her heightened senses, Diana could clearly see the poinsettias that lined the paths, hear the conversations in the rose garden as the others wandered through over the soft Christmas music that filled the air.

In the seven days since she'd become a vampire, Diana was surprised to find it was nothing like she'd thought. There had been no overwhelming bloodlust. She still saw people as people and not as meals on legs. The surprising thing to her had been that though the sight of blood had always before made her faint, now she looked at it and was not affected. The only change had been the heightening of her senses.

What had surprised her the most was her mother's acceptance of having another vampire in the family. Apparently, her mother had grown up knowing about Uncle William in London.

Mike and Francisco had been her teachers on some things, but it was Cassandra Dewey who monopolized her time. Diana's head buzzed with all the minutia she'd been taught. She was the only one other than Cassandra that knew how the night must end for Langdon to be defeated. Her heart clenched at the inevitability of things, but understood there was no other way. That didn't mean she wouldn't try and stop it.

"Is something wrong?"

Francisco's slightly accented voice brought her out of her reverie. She looked up from her seat and gave him a smile, then shook her head, not trusting a voice that would be too fraught with emotions.

"Why don't I believe you, Diana?" He knelt in front of her, cupped her cheek and studied her, his clear blue eyes filled with concern.

She placed her hand over his. "It's nothing," she assured him, certain that her fears were unfounded. Every vampire in the garden knew that Langdon was coming, and was on the alert for him. Mike had posted several Cleaners at the entrance and had assigned two each to Cassandra, William and Jonathan. She stood and smoothed the skirt of her emerald green gown. "Come on, let's go find Mike." She looked at her date for the evening and admired the way his tux accented his lean frame.

The path led them past the Great Lawn outlined with giant candles made of lights, on the lawn there were trees made of lights in blues and greens. It was peaceful, or was it just the calm before the storm?

Michaela was busy when they reached her, and Diana led Francisco toward the mermaid fountain. Over the hedge they could see her Uncle William deep in conversation with a group of vampires from New York. He waved at them before returning his attention to those surrounding

him. Diana knelt and looked at the serene expression on the mermaid's face. That expression had always calmed her in the past, it truly was her favorite part of the garden. But tonight that calm didn't come.

She cocked her head, listening, and heard the slap of oars in water.

"He's here," Diana said as she stood and walked around the hedge separating the South Terrace from the fountain.

She made her way through the crowd and toward the house until she was in the small courtyard beside Cassandra. The elder vampire looked up at her and smiled.

"Your new senses are still razor sharp, even without the blood." Cassandra's cultured tones soothed Diana's ragged nerves.

"You are sure there's no other way?" Diana tried one last time to convince her new friend to abandon her plan.

"No, my dear." The elder woman stood and smoothed the skirt of her sedate gray gown. "I'm tired and ready to rest." Cassandra nodded to one of her guards. The man held out a sword, and she took it.

Diana followed her out of the courtyard and into the South Terrace. When Mike and William moved toward them Cassandra shooed the two away but motioned for Francisco to join them. The three started down the Grotto steps to the Boathouse. Behind them, Diana could hear the Cleaners, with the direction of William and Mike, move the other partygoers away from the mansion, forming a perimeter. Perhaps they knew more than Diana had assumed.

She found herself silently counting the steps to stay calm; three steps, landing, five steps, landing, ten steps. As she turned, the Boathouse was visible. A lone figure was tying a skiff to the pier. There was no reason to guess who the tall form belonged to—Langdon. When he straightened, light flashed off the sword in his hand.

Diana's breath caught in her throat. She reached out to grab Francisco's arm but he and Cassandra had continued forward. She watched as he removed his coat and exchanged it for the sword the elder vampire carried.

\* \* \* \*

Francisco pulled the sword from its scabbard and checked the edge with his thumb. He was glad to find it razor sharp with no nicks.

Cassandra placed a hand on his arm, and he looked over at her. He'd never seen such sadness in her eyes.

"I failed that boy somehow."

How could she possibly think that? She, who had done so much for vampire society, thinking she had failed someone like Langdon. "No," he tried to reassure her. "He failed you. I refuse to believe that you in anyway failed him. Your sense of honor has built a society for our kind that functions alongside every government in the world."

She patted his arm. "That is kind of you, but I'm old enough to have realized that I am not the paragon you and the others would paint me." Cassandra sighed heavily. "No, I've made mistakes and my grandson was my worst. I made him entirely too dependent on me. That is why he became a vampire and then changed me. That is why, Francisco, you must not interfere in what will happen."

He began to nod, then realized what she was saying. The very thought that she would sacrifice herself to allow for Langdon's destruction was against everything she had ever taught.

"Diana will take my place." She smiled up at him. "I thought it would be you who would replace me. I trained you and guided you to be ready, but Diana is more suited. She is of the modern world and can guide our society through the changes of the next few centuries. With you at her side, I have no worries about our world." She squared her shoulders and straightened. "Now, it is time for me to face my grandson."

Francisco grasped her arm. "Cassandra, you don't have to do this. Let me fight him, you trained me to do this. Don't risk yourself."

"I have made my decision." She patted his cheek. "Don't let William and Jonathan intimidate you or Diana, and they will try." She looked behind her to where Diana stood. "Not that I think that young lady will allow it."

Before he could form a counter-argument, Cassandra had stepped past him and joined Langdon on the boat dock. He glanced over at Diana and saw, for the first time that night, the sadness and resignation in her eyes. He sucked in a breath, realizing that he hadn't seen it because he hadn't wanted to. If his skills were that rusty, Francisco wasn't certain he could defeat Langdon.

He'd taken two steps when he felt a hand on his back. Diana. She had moved so swiftly and silently he hadn't heard her at all. He turned to face her and quirked an eyebrow. Indulgent concern changed to fear at the tears in her eyes. She swallowed, then wrapped her arms around him to rest her head on his chest. When she spoke, even at this close distance he had to strain to hear her.

"During the fight, Langdon will be winning."

Francisco couldn't hold back the snort at that comment. Then he smiled as Diana stepped back and placed her hands on her hips.

"According to Cassandra, Langdon is an excellent swordsman." Diana's worried expression was in opposition to the anger in her voice. "But when the moment is right, Cassandra will sacrifice herself to give you the opening to kill him." She looked up at him, determination shining in her hazel eyes. "I'm going to try and stop her, but you have to kill him. Mike says you can be ruthless. I think you are afraid for me to see that side of you. Don't be." She reached up and cupped his cheek with one hand. "I can handle whatever you're afraid to show me. I love you."

He knew now wasn't the time for it, but God help him he couldn't stop the words. "And I love you, Diana Matthews." He gave her a quick, hard kiss.

## Chapter 21

“Now go kill—er—clean up that mess,” Diana ordered.

Francisco smiled down at Diana and handed her the katana before stripping off his shirt. Both would interfere with his movement. He briefly debated removing his shoes, the slick soles might slip on the dock, but decided to leave them on, as a splinter would distract him more. He exchanged the clothing for the sword and stuck it through his belt. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

She snorted but didn’t speak. Smart woman. Smart enough to realize he had to focus on the fight.

Langdon and Cassandra were speaking softly and their words didn’t carry over the music from the main gardens, giving him no clue to his opponent’s mood. Francisco also knew that Langdon had rowed from somewhere to the gardens. He would be warmed up for the fight, as opposed to Francisco. Langdon’s muscles would be loose, giving him an advantage. As much as Francisco hated it, there was nothing he could do about it, short of asking for five minutes to warm up. Like that would happen. At least Cassandra talking to Langdon would cool him down some; it was all a matter of how long she could keep him talking. The longer the better, as far as Francisco was concerned.

The rapier Langdon held was another problem. Faster and with more attack positions than the katana. He wouldn’t know how good Langdon was with that damn sword until they fought.

As he started for the boat dock, Francisco unleashed the well-honed instincts he had buried for the past decade and welcomed the familiar battle calm.

Langdon looked over his grandmother’s head and raised the rapier in salute. Francisco returned the salute, stepped to the center of the dock, took the Chudan—no—Kamae position and waited.

He watched as Langdon moved away from Cassandra to stand in front of him. The rapier was held loosely in his right hand en garde, his left hand near his chest. Francisco inclined his head, a worthy opponent. Though a rapier wouldn’t deliver a killing blow for a vampire, it could still do enough damage to slow him to the point Langdon could kill him. This wouldn’t be an easy fight. He knew he’d have to be careful, get Langdon to over extend, giving him the opportunity to slip inside the effective range of the rapier and go for a killing blow. He also knew Langdon would be trying to get him to move off a strong middle guard or try to take out his hands and wrist.

Francisco spun to the left, barely escaping the lightning fast thrust. He hadn’t seen the man move. He barely managed to block the next series of rapid attacks.

Damn, the other vampire was fast.

The sharp clanking of their swords echoed off the boat docked as they both sought the other's weaknesses. Attack. Block. Moving back in retreat, only to move forward in attack. The tip of the rapier slipped over the katana, stabbing into his forearm, causing Francisco to stumble over the slight incline. He almost went down.

A flare of silver and green flashed to his left and he knew it was Diana grabbing Cassandra, but didn't risk taking his eyes off his opponent as he fought to regain his footing.

The rapier slid into his side, a fresh wave of agony sweeping through him. Gathering himself, Francisco went on the attack. With the superior strength of the katana, he pushed Langdon back to the flat area of the deck.

Back and forth across the dock they moved. Blood seeped from stab and slash wounds, its scent increasing the ferocity of the attacks. Francisco allowed Langdon to push him backward until he felt the edge of the dock under his feet. Then began pushing him back with attacks that prevented any lunges from the rapier. Again and again he repeated the retreat to the edge of the dock, only to attack, forcing Langdon back. One more retreat and Francisco spun around the support pole.

He barely kept the smile from forming as Langdon turned and came at him once again with rapid fire attacks. Francisco allowed the attack to drive him back. Closer and closer until he passed the support pole on the opposite side. Spinning, he brought the katana around. In a flash of silver it arced through the night air.

Breathing heavily Francisco watched as the rapier slid from Langdon's hand to clatter noisily on the dock. The vampire stood for a moment before falling forward into the river, his head arching away. Two splashes sounded.

It was over.

He felt himself falling and then Diana was holding him. His head in her lap as tears filled her beautiful eyes.

"Don't you dare die on me." Her voice filled with her tears.

It took every ounce of strength he had to reach up and cup her cheek. "Already did that." He forced himself to smile. "Don't have any plans on leaving you when I just found you."

## Chapter 22

Diana smiled down at him. She was about to agree with him, when she saw his blue eyes going red. Damn!

“Don’t you do this, Francisco. Don’t you dare!”

Behind her all activity ceased and she could feel the eyes of every vampire on her. She couldn’t ask for help, as that would set off the injured vampire. While she was one now too, she wasn’t sure that she had the strength to hold him off if he lost control.

How was she going to handle this?

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Fear would only cloud her mind, she needed to be calm, cool and collected. Not only to figure out what to do, but to keep Francisco from tearing out the throat of anyone who got too close.

If he was entering the Cruentus again, then she needed to stop his bleeding from the sword wounds and get some blood into him. Armed with a plan, she kept her eyes locked on Francisco’s.

“Mike,” she called, keeping her voice calm. “I need bandages and blood. I can keep him calm, but you have to do exactly as I say.”

“Bandages and blood, got it.”

Heels clacked noisily on the deck and with her heightened hearing she could hear Mike barking orders at the Cleaners. She could smell Cassandra, Jonathan and William standing near, watching. All three would step in and kill Francisco if she lost control of him.

She wasn’t going to let that happen.

“Francisco?” She waited until some of the madness left his eyes. “Do you remember when we first met? You wanted to buy an iPod, remember?” When he nodded, she smiled at him. “I kept having to tell myself that you were just a customer. But you’re more than that now.”

He smiled back at her, his longer than normal fangs visible. Good, he was calm and still somewhat in control. She had to keep him that way.

Just that quickly she made a decision. He’d managed to keep it under control during a week of torture and temptation. If she told him what was going on, maybe he could hold it together.

“Francisco, you are going into Cruentus again. I need you to stay calm and focus on me. I won’t allow anyone to hurt you.” His smile faded, and a growl rumbled from him. “No, I’m not in danger. But you will be, stay with me.”

His eyes closed briefly then opened, and he nodded.

“Good.” She moved her wrist closer to his mouth. “I want you to bite me.” He moved like lightening, grabbing her wrist and pulling it toward him. Somehow she managed not to panic. “No, Francisco. Gently.”

She watched as he struggled to control the blood lust racing through him. The grip on her arm lessened, and he kept his eyes on her face as he brought her wrist to his mouth. She nodded and he placed his lips on her, sucking lightly at the pulse point a moment before his teeth slid in with a slight pop.

The erotic pull on her vein traveled up her arm then down to her stomach, and desire flared within her. Her breath became ragged as the sensation grew, making her wet. Somewhere in her fog of desire, she knew that every vampire could smell it, but she didn't give a damn.

A tray slid across the dock to bump her hip. Blinking, Diana forced her gaze to it and grabbed one of the goblets, downing it in one gulp. Then another, replacing the blood he was taking from her.

How long they continued, she didn't know. Only that as soon as one tray was empty another appeared. Slowly, the red left his eyes, replaced by the steely blue she loved. Her body ached with the need for release, but she knew she wouldn't stop him from taking what he needed from her. It felt too good.

She shifted, moving to straddle his hips, centering his erection against her needy flesh. Moving in time to his swallows she rocked, pressing firmly against him. The friction built the need within her higher and she chased after the needed release.

Francisco's blue eyes became even more vibrant as his hips rose to her. Seeming to realize that she wouldn't pull her wrist away, he moved his hands to her hips. Long, strong fingers stroked up her sides to cup her breasts through the thin fabric of her dress.

She arched into the caress as he stroked a thumb over each of her taut nipples. A keening cry echoed down the river, and she barely recognized it as her own before she was swept away in an explosion of light and pleasure.

Slowly he withdrew his fangs, lapping up the few drops that slipped sluggishly from the holes before they closed, then pulled her down to lie against his chest.

"Thank you," he whispered, for her ears only.

"My pleasure." At his quirked eyebrow she laughed. "Like you and everyone in the gardens couldn't tell." Her cheeks heated with mortification at the realization she'd dry humped him to orgasm in front of everyone.

His smile turned rakish as he nodded. "So they can."

He rolled them so he was on top, then stood, pulling her with him. Diana straightened her dress, feeling the soft fabric slide against passion sensitive skin. Francisco kissed her lips softly, a kiss filled with promise, then walked over to the three rulers of vampire society.

Even knowing he was safe, she worried, but knew her legs wouldn't support her if she tried to continue standing. She sat back down, not caring about the damage the rough wood would do to the dress. She focused on the far bank, listening to the soft lapping of the river and the distant Christmas music, forcing a calm she didn't truly feel.

Someone laid a hand on her shoulder and she turned, following the slender arm up to see Mike standing there, concern tinged with amusement written on her face.

"I'm okay, or will be."

Mike sat beside her on the dock. "I've never seen anything like that." The awe in the woman's voice brought Diana's thoughts into sharp focus. "I've never even heard of anything like that. The blood thing, not the..."

Diana dropped her gaze, wondering if she'd ever live the last few minutes down, and shrugged. The blood thing was no big deal, better that Francisco bite her than seek out an unwilling human and gain another death sentence. She didn't know if she could talk him out of another one. "I couldn't let him attack anyone else. It would kill him."

Mike bit her lip and looked away, her shoulders shaking in suppressed mirth.

"Oh Lord!" Diana shook her head, realizing the terrible and unintentional pun. "I can't believe I said that."

"Don't worry about it. At least it wasn't intentional," Mike consoled her. "But, I didn't even know that was possible. How did you? I mean, you've only been a vampire a week."

Diana shrugged. She wasn't sure how she knew it would work, she just had. Knowing that there was only one person who might know the answer, she pushed herself to her feet and walked over to the arguing foursome.

"Excuse me," she tried, but Jonathan and William were too intent on berating Francisco to notice.

Sighing, she brought her fingers to her lips, then let out an ear piercing whistle. That got their attention. All three of them turned to her and she smiled sweetly.

"I was trying to get Cassandra's attention, but you three were making so much noise she couldn't hear me."

Jonathan and William opened their mouths to argue but stopped when she placed her fists on her hips and glared at them.

"Don't either of you dare take Francisco to task for something he couldn't control. Let me bleed one of you out as much and see if you could hold off the blood lust. As for what happened to me and the display of myself..." She focused solely on her uncle. "I wear big girl panties now, and I'll deal with the embarrassment. I don't need some relative I've never met 'til a week ago, no matter how well meaning, defending my honor."

She would have continued but the sound of slow clapping drew her attention to where Cassandra stood. The older woman was smiling as she clapped her hands.

"I couldn't have done better myself, my dear." She reached out and patted her shoulder. "Gentlemen, meet the new head of our society."

Diana stared at the grandmotherly woman, stunned. "But..."

“Oh, I fully intended to die tonight, but you stopped that, risking your own life to do it. Then you instinctively knew how to save Francisco from the Cruentus, which even I didn’t know could be done.” Cassandra smiled at her. It was a smile filled with relief and pride. “I’ve ruled Vampire society for centuries and am tired. You are what our society needs and with Francisco at your side I’m certain that you two will lead it well.”

“What if he doesn’t want to be at my side?” she muttered, suddenly uncertain. She looked down, and a knothole in one of the planks suddenly became very interesting. What if he didn’t want to be linked to her for centuries? Her stomach flipped, and a lump grew in her throat. She wasn’t sure she could handle it if he didn’t feel the same.

“I believe Diana and I need to talk,” his cultured accented voice broke the silence that had followed Cassandra’s statement.

She heard the others moving away and a pair of male black dress shoes covered the hole she had been wishing would swallow her. He lifted her chin gently, forcing her to meet his eyes. He looked as terrified as she felt.

“You don’t have to,” she blurted before he could say anything. “I mean, yes, I’ll need your help running things but—”

“Diana,” he cut her off. “I would never force you to do anything, but I must tell you that nothing would give me greater pleasure than to stand by your side for centuries. I love you, Diana.”

She shuddered, but the truth of his words was staring out at her. Still, she couldn’t believe it. “It’s just that I’ve saved you twice from...”

“And I am grateful for that. But I realized I loved you even before you knew what I was.” He brushed her hair behind her ear. “I think I fell in love with you when you slammed my laptop into my chest and berated me for defending you.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Really.” She watched stunned as he knelt in front of her. “I had planned something a bit more romantic, but we seem to have an affinity for wooden docks.”

She smiled down at him, remembering their first and only date. The kiss they’d shared on the dock at the park.

“Diana Matthews, would you do me the honor of being my wife?”

She couldn’t think. Hell, she could barely breathe. Somehow she managed to find the energy to at least nod. Then she was in his arms as he spun her around, his smile infectious.

She was in love, getting married and pretty much immortal. Could life get any better?

## About Delilah K. Stephans

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There's always time for romance.

As a lover of the romance genre, I can always find time to read one. As an author, the best thing is taking the journey with your characters. Some books are more your “baby” than others and for me that one is *The Envoy*, so much of my life is wrapped up in its pages—retail sales, working in the mall during Christmas, Bellingrath Gardens, Mobile Municipal Park and even the old Copeland's restaurant.

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