

ONE

I yawned but forced the desire to crawl back into bed out of my mind. Exercise was important in my line of work, and although it was only five in the morning, it was my favorite hour to jog. I grabbed my iPod and glanced down at Blue as he pawed my toes, only to lean back on his haunches and stretch. Guess it was early for him too.

Pushing an ear piece into my ear, I opened the front door of my crappy apartment and inhaled the cold Splendor air. The chirping of insects was as loud as the finale of any symphony and I shivered as a cold wind assaulted me. I wasn't a big fan of November in California—give me hot, sunny weather all year long and I'd be as happy as a pixie on a bliss potion.

I leaned over and grabbed my ankles, stretching my quads and stood up, pulling my arms over my head and stretched my triceps. One should never exercise with cold muscles. Blue started groaning and circled me as if to say "hurry up already." Feeling limber enough, I stepped outside, locked the door and started my jog while Katy Perry sang "Teenage Dream" into my head.

Maybe five minutes into our run, Blue slowed and cocked his head to the side, but I didn't need his canine sixth sense to know someone was following us. I swallowed the anxiety in my throat and went into autopilot or auto cop, as the case may be. Turning the volume down on my iPod, I didn't remove the ear buds, not wanting to alert my visitor to the fact that I knew he was there. Rolling my arms in tight circles, I waited—well figuratively, I was still jogging, still giving the illusion of everything being hunky dory in the life of Dulcie the fairy.

Before I had the chance to think, a shadow flickered from between the trees. My breath caught in my throat, and I paused, bending over to pretend to tie my shoelace. Even though I was doing my damndest not to give anything away, Blue wasn't quite so stealthy. Instead, he stood as if in rigor mortis, his hackles raised and his lips curling back to reveal an impressive set of sharp teeth. His growl interrupted the otherwise still night, and I glanced back at the tree line, watching and waiting for whatever was out there to make itself known. When it did, I'd be ready to take it down with a palm full of fairy dust—my weapon extraordinaire. I stood up and braced myself, feet shoulder width apart.

I didn't have to wait long. My assailant made himself known, jumping out at me with a huge...smile?

"Knight!" I leaned onto my knees, breathing out the angst that just seconds ago would have dictated I use my fairy powers to take my follower out. "You bastard," I breathed, refusing to look at him.

Blue wasn't as quiet. His growl sounded like a large truck driving over rocks. The dog must have thought growling wasn't threatening enough because he then broke into a deep and angry bark. I petted his head and tried to calm him with "it's okay, boy" but the dog wouldn't back down. Instead, he lunged for Knight and much as I was annoyed with Knight myself, he didn't deserve to get bitten. Not that I thought Blue would bite him but better to be safe than stuck in the emergency room. So, I grabbed Blue's collar and held him back with a none too subtle "No!"

“Nice dog,” Knight scoffed as Blue continued to growl. Hmm, maybe I hadn’t socialized him well enough. Come to think of it, I hadn’t socialized him at all which shouldn’t be much of a surprise as I wasn’t a very social person myself.

“What do you want?” I demanded.

“Morning, Dulce,” Knight said, completely disregarding my less than friendly greeting. Unable to avoid looking at him for more than a few seconds, I finally brought my attention to his face.

Knight Vander was a Loki, a creature from the Netherworld who also happened to be an investigator working for the Association of Netherworld Creatures otherwise known as the ANC. And he also happened to be the hottest thing in Splendor.

“What the hell are you doing outside my apartment at five am?” I insisted, and patted Blue’s head so he’d stop growling. He finally obeyed and sat silently at my feet, wearing a happy dog smile.

“Technically I’m not outside your apartment,” Knight said and flashed me a beautiful smile. Holy Hades, the man was sexy.

“So, we’re going to play word games?” Rather than waiting for an answer, I started jogging again. Not that I disliked Knight but he was a cocky SOB and there wasn’t any room in my life for cockiness or SOBs or, for that matter, Knight. “So, what, you just hang around my house waiting for me to come out?”

“I needed to get in touch with you,” he said in his alto voice, as rich as a piece of dark chocolate cake.

The moon was still in full effect, and the milky rays glowed against Knight’s white tee shirt. His shorts ended just below his knees, and I couldn’t help but notice how muscular his calves were, muscular and evenly covered with black hair. Realizing I was checking his legs out very obviously, I brought my attention to the road and tried to increase my pace. Knight easily kept up with me which wasn’t hard considering I was 5’1 and he at least 6’2, maybe 6’3. To me, he looked like a giant.

“Have you heard of this pretty cool invention called the phone?” I asked, keeping my attention straight ahead. “Through a series of wires and electrodes, my voice travels to you and you never have to leave your house! Imagine that!”

“Haha, Dulce, I’ve called you countless times over the last two months, and I’ve lost track of how many messages I’ve left.” He didn’t sound angry, merely conversational.

Okay, so I was guilty about not calling him back, so what? “I’ve been...busy,” I said though it was farthest from the truth. Having recently given Knight my letter of resignation (he’d been my boss), I now had lots of free time but not a whole lot to fill it with. Course, Knight didn’t need to know that.

“Busy?” he repeated, his tone just as dubious as his smile. “I see you’ve got a dog but other than that, what’s been occupying your time?”

The sound of our footfalls against the pavement echoed my shallow breathing. I hadn't been on a jog in at least a week and it was making itself known in every section of my body.

"Writing," I answered succinctly. And it was the truth. I'd been spending all my time working on a book, the second in a series. I had aspirations to be a full time writer, and it seemed those aspirations might actually be headed somewhere—recently a literary agent had requested to see the full manuscript of my book, "A Vampire and a Gentleman".

Knight just nodded, and I felt my breath getting more and more shallow. It's not easy to run and talk at the same time. I glanced at my companion, the Loki, and found he didn't seem to be huffing or puffing. Instead, he just wore an amused smile and looked me up and down appreciatively. I frowned and glanced back at the road, feeling the need to slow my pace. But, I wouldn't give in—not yet.

"Where'd you get the dog?" he asked, eyeing the subject all the while.

"He was a gift," I said and felt like I was going to pass out with the effort.

"Who from?"

Hmm, this was a question that wouldn't get an honest answer, or at least not a full honest answer. Blue had been given to me by my ex boss (the one before Knight), Quillan, who was now a wanted potions smuggler. Quillan...just his name left a bad taste in my mouth—he'd been my boss, yes, but also my friend, and I'd sort of lusted after him...just a little. But, when it came down to apprehending him, when I was still a cop, aka Regulator working for the Netherworld, I'd failed. And so far, I hadn't been able to forgive myself for failing, for allowing my emotions to get in the way of my position as Regulator. It had been a sign that I wasn't the Regulator I'd thought I was or needed to be. So, I'd resigned. I didn't like to think about Quillan, and I really didn't like to talk about him.

"Just a friend." I made the mistake of glancing up at Knight. The cock-eyed expression he wore made me look away quickly. He seemed to always know when there was more to a story. Course, I'm a terrible liar.

"A friend?" he inquired.

Not able to continue on, I stopped jogging and faced him, irritation seeping into my gut as I fought to catch my breath. "Didn't your mother ever tell you it's rude to put your nose in other people's business?"

Knight also stopped jogging, that same smile still hanging from his lips. "Can't recall that she did."

I crossed my arms against my chest, trying to ward off the cold night air and wished I'd worn something over my sports bra. Maybe my annoyance with Knight would be enough to keep me warm. "Let's cut the crap, Knight, what are you doing here?"

"I need your help."

That could mean many things but due to the fact that I'd promised Knight I'd be available to work as a consultant whenever he had a tough Netherworld case, the playing field was narrowed. "What do you need my help for?" I asked, watching Blue arch his back and pee against a bush. He still hadn't mastered the art of lifting one leg but I wasn't sure how I was supposed to teach him.

"There's a case that's been baffling us all."

Before I decided to hear anymore, I turned around and started walking back toward my apartment, rolling my arms in big circles. No use in discussing ANC business while we were standing in the middle of the road. Knight was beside me momentarily and threw me another disarmingly handsome smile. With his black hair, blue eyes and tan complexion, immense height and broad build, he looked like a God. And, boy, wouldn't he have loved to know that.

"Let's talk about it in my apartment," I started.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

"Don't get any ideas," I grumbled, watching Blue scout the bushes and trees before us. I never took him on a leash because we never met anyone on our five am excursions. Guess I couldn't say that anymore.

"Dulce, I've been getting ideas where you're concerned since we met," Knight said, his voice heavy.

"Well, keep them to yourself," I snapped. I'd already made up my mind not to get involved with Knight.

"Why do you fight your attraction to me?" His tone wasn't clipped or otherwise pointing to a hurt self esteem. Course, he was never anything other than sure, and his infallible confidence was one of his character traits that bothered me the most. I mean, didn't everyone succumb to self doubt once in a while? Ha, not if you were a Loki who answered to the name of Knight.

"Who said I'm attracted to you?" I demanded, wishing I could wipe the cocky and proud smile right off his mouth.

"No point in denying it; I'm fully aware of your real feelings for me."

I laughed, but it was an acidic sound because I was suddenly worried that he could sense it. Even though I'd pledged never to develop feelings for him, I couldn't deny the fact that I was attracted to Knight and always had been. But, I tempered that attraction by keeping him at arm's length.

As a rule, I didn't get involved with men. Now, before you question that statement—I also didn't get involved with women—I just didn't get involved period. After a pretty crappy breakup two years earlier, my heart still hadn't fully mended and Knight was the type of man who would break it again, into tiny little shards that would be impossible to glue back together. If he ever got the chance, that is.

"Hmm..." I started, really not knowing what else to say. Even though as a fairy, I had the innate ability to detect creatures just by looking at them, Knight had thrown me for a loop from day one. Course, the reason had been that I'd never come into contact with one of his kind before—a Loki. Furthermore, the

unfortunate thing about Knight's being a Loki was I had no clue what his powers were. Unlike my ability to create magic from fairy dust, Knight's abilities weren't quite so straight forward. I'd actually been keeping a list of the types of powers he'd demonstrated so far. Guess I could add attraction detector to the mix. Unless he was full of it...

"You just know?" I asked doubtfully. "What, is that—another of your Loki character traits?"

"Nope," he said in a self satisfied sort of way. "It's just Vander instinct, 100%."

"Well, your Vander instinct is confused by your Vander cockiness," I snapped.

He laughed, but his eyes were hot, hungry and I felt consumed just by his wolfish stare. I dropped my attention to the ground and mumbled something under my breath, trying to keep Knight from noticing the red flush currently overtaking my cheeks. We reached my apartment and could now talk about ANC business and not the fact that I was lusting after Knight and furthermore, that he knew it.

I jammed the key into the lock and nearly lost my focus when I felt the heat of Knight's body just behind me. The iciness of the air seemed doubly cold in front of me while Knight's heat penetrated my back. I closed my eyes at the feel of his hands massaging my forearms. Thank Hades my back was to him and he couldn't see my reaction. Course, the goose bumps on my arms could be compared to a big arrow sign pointing at me with the words: "she's hot for you" emblazoned on it.

"You have goose flesh," he whispered and caused a seizure in my stomach.

"I, uh, it's...it's cold out here."

He chuckled and lifted the heavy curtain of my honey blond hair over one shoulder, trailing the back of my neck with his index finger. I couldn't help the shudder that raced through me.

"I haven't stopped thinking about you, Dulcie." His voice was a mere breath whispering against my skin, and I closed my eyes, reveling in the feel of him. The touch of his lips against my neck brought a hiss of air from my mouth, and before I lost all sense of reason right there, Blue walked over and pawed my toes, as if reminding me I'd been attempting to unlock the door and more so, that I was acting like an idiot.

I opened my eyes and silently praised the dog for bringing me back to my senses. Cranking the key to the left, I pushed the door open with such strength, I nearly lost my footing. But, I was inside and away from Knight...things were looking up.

Turning on the light, I flung myself into my computer desk chair, making sure to sit somewhere Knight couldn't sit beside me. I wheeled around and faced him, finding the air in my tiny apartment considerably stuffy. Knight closed the door behind him and lumbered into my living room, seating himself on my couch.

"One of these days, Dulce, you aren't going to be able to deny there is something between us."

Irritation bled through me. I didn't like people telling me what I can and can't do. "Regardless of what you think, I'm not interested."

Knight cocked a brow and chuckled, but said nothing.

"So, let's talk about the reason you're here," I interrupted.

"There have been quite a few cases recently of comatose victims, both here in Splendor but also in Estuary and Moon." His tone was suddenly all business, and I breathed an inward sigh of relief. All business Knight I could handle.

Estuary was in our district—we provided police work for Splendor, Estuary and Haven. Moon, though, was out of our district and had its own ANC force. But, back to the comatose victims... "So, why should I be concerned?"

Knight shrugged. "All victims were otherwise healthy, according to their friends and family. Then one night they go to sleep and never wake up the next morning."

I nodded, feeling a cramp building in my calf. I propped one leg over my knee, leaned forward and started my after exercise stretch routine. "Has anyone died?"

"One death."

I glanced up at him, and he was wearing a smile, looking amused. Stretching my calf, I winced against the pain.

"Cramp?" Knight asked. "I can do wonders on sore muscles."

"I'm fine," I started and, not wanting to appear so out of sorts, added: "Thanks."

Knight, apparently not used to hearing no for an answer, stood up and approached me. "Lay with your back on the floor and I'll show you a good one for leg cramps and for stretching your quads."

The cramp in my calf suddenly started pounding as if it wanted nothing more than to be massaged by the incredibly handsome Loki, and before I knew it, I was lying on the floor, looking up at him. He reached for my right leg and cradled it against his thigh as he massaged my calf, kneading my sore muscles with his large hands. Little by little, the cramp stopped throbbing and eventually went away. Hmm, another Knight Vander Loki ability?

"When did these comas start?" I asked quickly, trying to pull my attention from his hands. He worked up my thigh and then took my foot in his hand and bent my leg at the knee, pushing my knee up into my stomach.

"How does that feel?" Knight asked.

“Good,” I managed. He pulled my leg straight and put it back on the floor, reaching for the other one. A massage of my other thigh followed, and although I didn’t want to admit it to myself, I was getting incredibly turned on.

“We’ve been noticing these sudden comas popping up for over two months,” he said. Hmm, hence his repeated calls to me over the last couple of months. He didn’t say it but it was there in his eyes. I felt a little bit guilty, but quickly banished the feeling. If Knight had really needed to get in touch with me, he would have invaded my happy little jog months earlier.

“So, I guess you want me to review the files?” I asked, thinking I could use some consultant work. My savings account had been dwindling recently, but I just hadn’t been able to bring myself to call Knight for work—it wasn’t that I was avoiding jobs, I was avoiding Knight.

“If you feel so inclined,” he answered with a grin and brought my foot back to the ground, offering his hands. I took them, and he pulled me up.

“Any ideas on what could be causing all the comas?” I asked.

He made his way back to the couch and sunk into it, stretching his arms above his head and claspings them behind his neck. I was convinced he liked showing off his chest and huge biceps. “Healthy victim one day, comatose the next.”

“*Toad Wallow?*” *Toad Wallow* was a potion—one drop and you’d be dead to the world for a week at the most, then you’d wake up with one raging headache, but at least you’d wake up. Course, it didn’t seem the same could be said for these victims.

Knight shook his head. “None of the patients have reflexes, and their EKGs come back inactive.”

“*Somnogobelinus,*” I whispered. “A sleep goblin, a Dreamstalker.”

Knight nodded. “All roads lead to Rome, or a Dreamstalker in this case.”

I shook my head. “There are only two registered Dreamstalkers in the ANC files: one has been locked away in a Netherworld prison for centuries and...”

“You got the second locked away five years ago,” Knight finished for me, with an approving smile.

“Ah, so you have done your homework.” Apprehending Druiva, the Dreamstalker in question, had been one of the most difficult cases I’d ever worked and had cemented my place as a good Regulator. To say I was proud of it was an understatement.

“I have.”

“And are they still locked away?” I demanded, thinking we’d found our solution if the answer was “no.”

Knight nodded. “Yes, as of yesterday, they are both doing time in Banshee Prison from here until eternity, both under extra security.”

“How can this be then?” I asked, and slunk back into the computer chair, suddenly irritated by the fact that I’d let Knight touch me. I was like mush in his hands—if I was going to keep my distance, I needed to avoid him. Damn it all but I’d been doing a pretty good job before he’d just waltzed back into my life as pretty as he pleased.

Knight shook his head and dropped his arms, thank Hades. A chest that broad should be illegal. “We’re baffled which is why I wanted to bring you into the case.” He stood up and approached me, causing me to shrink back into my chair. “Will you help me, Dulce?”

I just nodded before the vision of his lips against my neck slapped me back into reality. Knight needed to know this arrangement would be purely professional, purely business. “Yes, on a few conditions.”

Knight sighed and started pacing my living room. “Name them.”

“One, you have to be professional.”

He faced me, his mouth open in mock offense. “I’m always...”

I shook my head. “No flirting, no accidental touches, no running your fingers down my neck, no lips on my shoulders...”

He chuckled. “You enjoyed that; don’t deny it.”

I had enjoyed it and couldn’t deny it, so I merely ignored him. “No double entendres, no gifts...”

“Okay, I get it,” he said none too happily. “Is that all?”

“No sex jokes, no invading my personal space, no comments on my appearance, no lustful glances and absolutely no winking.”

Knight threw himself back into the couch and faced me with a perturbed expression. “I should have found someone else to help with the case.”

I laughed. “Don’t be a spoil sport. You know I’m the best.”

He nodded and offered me a boyish grin. “Yes, you are.”

Inwardly, I breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe this would be easier than I’d assumed. As long as Knight kept his distance, I could keep my guard up. “Good, now that we’ve reached an understanding, let’s meet up again tomorrow night. Bring the files with you.”

“What about tonight?”

“Tonight’s not good; I have plans.” And plans I wasn’t thrilled about. I had a date with a vampire. Well, I didn’t exactly think of it as a date—more like two people accompanying one another to a party.

“Plans?” Knight asked, warily.

“Yes,” I started before interrupting myself. “Add that to the list of rules: no being nosy and definitely no being jealous.”

He dropped his pinched lip expression and exchanged it for one of detached indifference. “I’m not jealous.”

“No use in lying,” I said with a broad smile. “I know you are—call it my instincts, 100% pure Dulcie O’Neil.”

With a chuckle, Knight stood and approached the door, the sunlight of morning just peeking through my windows, basking him in a yellow glow until he looked like an angel. Ha, Knight was no angel.

“Until tomorrow night then,” he said and reached for the doorknob.

“Yes.”

He smiled. “It’s a date.” Then he opened the door, winked and walked into the daylight.

Men.

#

As I mentioned earlier, Bram was a vampire and it just happened to be his three hundredth birthday. Every hundred year birthday finds a vampire stronger, quicker, more powerful and in Bram’s case, he’d even gotten better looking. His day old stubble was still in full effect but that wasn’t something he’d ever be able to do anything about, seeing as how he’d had it when he’d been turned. But, there was something about him that was just more attractive—maybe it wasn’t so much his features that had improved but more his control over what other people thought of him.

“Ah, Sweet, you are ravishing,” Bram said in his lofty English accent and kissed my hand as his eyes devoured every inch of me.

I smiled my thanks and accepted his arm as he escorted me down my front walkway and into the leather plushness of a black stretch Hummer. Our driver, a were, smiled politely as I pulled myself into the stretch limo. Bram was just behind me and once he’d taken his seat across from mine, eyed me with undisguised admiration.

“Dulcie, these many months of separation have been difficult on my memory. I do not recall you appearing quite so beautiful.”

I sighed and tried to smile. I was just not good at accepting compliments. Was Bram sincere? Yeah, I thought so. Did he want to get into my pants? Yeppers and always had. But, regardless of Bram’s intentions, I had to admit I did feel...pretty.

I’d worn a knee-length, strapless black evening gown in a diaphanous material that graced my skin like a whisper. Even though the gossamer material hinted at the curves of my body, it was just that—a hint. My lace thong panties were my only undergarments, the dress not lending itself to a bra. Not exactly

comfortable exposing so much skin, I'd covered the dress with a fitted black leather jacket. And to finish off my evening attire, I'd worn the highest heels I owned—four inch Jimmy Choos with so many straps, they would have pleased any dominatrix. I wore my hair down which wasn't a surprise since I wasn't exactly thrilled with showing off my ears. As a fairy, my ears came to points at the top and they were my least favorite of my physical attributes. I'd considered getting an ear reduction but threw the idea out because it was just too risky. Fairies didn't do well with human sedatives. That and my old boss, Quillan, had said I didn't need it, that I was beautiful just as I was.

A sadness descended on me at the thought of Quillan, so I brushed it aside and focused on my handsome vampire date. Over six four, he had the physique of a swimmer—broad shoulders tapering to a trim waist with a pair of legs that seemed to be as long as I was tall (not that I was tall). His black hair was on the longish side, just curling over his ears. His boyish smile was...sexy. But, like my relationship with Knight or lack thereof, I wanted to keep things strictly platonic with Bram. Although I had started dating more recently, I still wasn't completely comfortable with it and rather than running for cover with my tail between my legs, I just decided to take it one step at a time. The fact that I was even out tonight was a step in and of itself.

"Thanks for the compliment," I said with a small smile.

He returned the smile and appeared to be studying me. Feeling entirely too uncomfortable under his libidinous stare, I fought to find something to say. "So, are you feeling any different on your birthday?"

He nodded but didn't expound.

I cocked my head and considered him. "And? What's different?"

"I'm faster."

"Faster?" I started but Bram had suddenly....disappeared. Just dissolved into the air as if he'd never been, as if I'd been imagining him all along. As a vamp, he'd always been fast—moving like a blur from point A to point B but as a blur, that's exactly what you'd been able to see. This was different.

"Bram?" I repeated, shifting my gaze from one end of the limo to the other. Just like that, I felt an icy cold penetrating my back. I whipped around to find Bram sitting beside me, smiling smugly. "What was that?" I demanded, shock straining my voice. "You can disappear now?"

He shook his head. "No."

"But," I started.

"I merely moved too quickly for you to follow with your naked eye."

"Bullshit," I bit out, wondering if he was going to backpedal and try to talk his way out of it. It would do no good. I knew what I'd seen...or hadn't seen in this case.

He laughed. “Your mind tricked you, Dulce. I have been sitting here all along but you were relying on the incorrect sense.”

“Incorrect sense?” I asked dubiously and crossed my arms against my chest as I regarded him coolly.

He leaned into me until his icy breath fanned across my naked collarbone and brought goose bumps to my skin. But, I held my ground and didn’t move away.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered.

“You’d better not try anything,” I started, eyeing him suspiciously.

“I know you too well, Sweet, to attempt anything. You would have me flat on my back with a stake over my heart before I could blink.”

He did know me well. I closed my eyes and then I heard him. It was the tiniest, most insignificant disturbance in the otherwise still air. I opened my eyes and looked in the direction I imagined him to be and there he was.

“You see?” he asked.

I nodded and watched him disappear as if the air had swallowed him—right there in front of me. I didn’t have enough time to think to rely on my other senses rather than my eyesight and suddenly felt myself falling, pushed backward by unseen hands. The leather of the seat met the back of my head, and I inhaled sharply as adrenaline pounded through my veins. My dress slinked up my thighs but I wasn’t concerned with propriety at the moment. What I was concerned with was the fact that Bram had materialized and was now on top of me.

“Back the hell off me,” I hissed and pushed against his chest, suddenly angry with myself that I’d ever agreed to be his date in the first place. I could never truly trust Bram. Sure, he’d helped me with certain cases when I’d been a Regulator but he definitely wasn’t a lawfully abiding citizen. If he had one hand in the morally upstanding cookie jar, the other hand was in the process of stealing all the cookies.

His fangs descended, and he was panting. His eyes, though, were far more scary. There was a depth to them I’d never seen before, something deeper, something wiser and older. If I hadn’t been a fairy with my level of magical ability, I’d now be under the vampire’s spell, allowing him to do whatever he wanted to with me. As it was, I was finding it difficult to fight. “Bram, I’m giving you three seconds to back the fuck off me.”

Bram suddenly sat up and adjusted the tie at his neck while his fangs retracted. “Apologies.”

I pushed myself aside and pulled my dress down, throwing him an angry glare. “What the hell is wrong with you? Are you trying to make me hate you?”

"I was curious to learn if my increased age could make you submit to me," he answered tersely, casually, as if he hadn't just attacked me. But, somewhere in his comment was disappointment. He'd been hoping I'd be weak enough to submit to him. But, to what end?

"You're lucky I didn't taser you, bastard!" I retorted although it was an empty threat. I hadn't brought a taser with me. But Bram didn't need to know that.

"I would not have injured you, Sweet," Bram said and pasted an artificial smile on his handsome face. "It was merely a test."

"Well, I don't like tests so don't do it again," I snapped, feeling the pounding of my heartbeat start to slow. Maybe it *had* merely been a test and not something more sinister. "If we're going to be friends..."

"I do so enjoy our friendship," he interrupted.

"Then don't screw it up." My eyes narrowed as I reconsidered his earlier statement. "If your powers of persuasion had worked, what would you have done?"

"Kissed you, Sweet, as I am still dying to do." He leaned forward like he thought he'd give it a try.

"Keep away from me," I said angrily. To reinforce it, I quickly moved to the seat across from him. I crossed my arms against my chest and wondered how I'd get through tonight.

"I apologize for offending you. I seem to lose my wits where you are concerned."

I was spared the need to respond as the limo came to a halt and moments later, our driver opened the door. I hopped down and glanced up at the restaurant before us, The Chateaus. It was the same place Bram had taken me when I'd agreed to a first "date" with him. I had half a mind to leave him at the curb and walk inside without him but forced myself not to. This was Bram's big night, and I didn't want to embarrass him. Granted, he'd just tried to molest me but hopefully he'd learned his lesson. And I'd learned my lesson to pack heat no matter where I was going or who I was seeing—you never knew when some jackass vampire would try to nibble your goodies.

The jackass vampire in question was beside me momentarily and offered his arm as he leaned down and whispered. "I apologize, Sweet, I will never impose myself on you again. Do you accept my apology?"

"Yes," I grumbled and took his arm as we started up the marble walkway of the grand restaurant. A doorman greeted Bram by name and pulled open the ornate ten foot high mahogany door, revealing the crowd within. That was when I realized we must have been pretty late. Not that it was a surprise—Bram definitely labored under the misguided notion of his own self importance. Of course he'd be late to his own party.

As we entered the overcrowded room, I felt like I was on exhibit—"Bram's date, who can she be?" going through everyone's minds. I dropped my attention to the click of my heels against the black marble floors. When I could still feel the flush of embarrassment on my cheeks, I forced myself to take in the dark red of the walls, the open ceiling, warehouse like with its rows of exposed metal piping.

Candelabras topped with slender red candles stood proudly at the center of each table, throwing a yellow glow against the plates, soup bowls and the silver of utensils that decorated each table. My eyes fell to one table, dead center in the room, separated from the other tables by a girth of about two to three feet all the way around. And, guess whose table that would be? I swallowed down my anxiety and allowed Bram to lead me to the small table currently playing the part of island. There were only two chairs. Holy Hades...

As soon as we reached the table, Bram's posse descended on us, smiling and offering congratulations. Many of his female acquaintances embraced him, there were even some kisses, from which he quickly pulled away and eyed me speculatively. I just shook my head and took a seat at the table, pretending extreme interest in the cutlery.

"Looks like you've got the best seat in the house."

I glanced up into Knight's smiling face and felt my stomach drop.