

## Chapter One

"The vampire council is all for running you out of town, Glory." Damian frowned at me, for once not bothering to put on his sexy vibe.

"No! Austin is my home now. I have friends, my business." Could I be at any more of a disadvantage? I'd just stepped out of the shower when I'd heard that knock on the door. I'd hoped it was Blade, my boyfriend who'd been sulking since we'd almost broken up recently. So I'd thrown on a robe and dashed to the door. Now I tightened the sash on my admittedly ratty robe and jerked off my shower cap.

"That business is part of the problem, Glory. Vintage Vamp's Emporium. You know we like for vampires to stay under the radar here and then you name your little store something like

that." Damian Sabatini always made moves on a woman, even one without makeup and with bed head. The fact that he was pacing around me like I was a piece of furniture and looked serious worried me.

"Vamps are also roaring twenties hotties, you know that. What's up with these council members? Where's their sense of humor?" I grabbed Damian's sleeve. "Help me out here, Damian."

"I know what vamps are. I got lucky with quite a few, back in the day." Damian smiled and suddenly snapped to the fact that I was naked under my robe. "And I did go to bat for you. Explained that my sister had painted that mural of a vampire on your wall as a joke."

"Flo did." His sister, Florence da Vinci, is my best friend. She had spent a long lifetime admiring artists up close and personally. Her mural had caused a burst of publicity that had brought me business, but also some vampire rumors.

Damian's eyes gleamed in a way that reminded me his nickname was Casanova. Okay, I could use that. I locked the door and gestured to the couch. "Sit, talk to me. Tell me what I can do to fix this. You want a bottle of something?" I drink synthetic blood. I happened to have several different brands on hand for a change.

"No, thanks." Damian patted the seat next to him. "You flashed red eyes at Florence's wedding. Several council members saw them. We all know what that means and it's what really got

the get rid of Glory thing moving. We don't tolerate demons in Austin."

"Yes, well, I was possessed. Past tense. And my temper got the best of me that night." I collapsed next to Damian. He was a friend. We'd figured out a long time ago that we weren't going to have a love connection. Or at least I'd figured that out. I plucked his hand off my knee where my robe had parted and smiled. "As I was saying, I had a demon on board, but she's gone now. My friends arranged an intervention and Alesa went screaming back to hell. I'm all better now. Good as gold."

"I'm happy for you. But I'm not sure everyone on the council will be reassured. The best way to prove your goodness to the members would be an act of contrition. Do a favor, perhaps." Damian leaned back and I realized he was trying to scope out my cleavage. They didn't call him Casanova for nothing.

There was a thump in the hall and I jumped up. "What was that? Is there someone out there?" I looked for a weapon and came up with my hot pink umbrella. Lame, but better than nothing. At least it had a point on it.

"Relax. I have other tenants in this building, don't I?" Damian put his hand on my shoulder and took the umbrella, leaning it against the wall. "You're still on edge, I think. That brush with the demon obviously upset you."

"Of course it did! I was on the fast track to hell." I sighed and plopped into the chair across from the couch. "How am

I supposed to make the council happy? I am demon free. Ask your sister. Flo and Richard came back from their honeymoon for just one night. They're the ones who did the ceremony that got that demon out of me."

"That's good, that you have reliable witnesses." Damian sat and leaned forward.

"Blade was here too. And Valdez." I sighed. It had been quite a night. Everyone I loved. Who loved me. Jeremy Blade, Jerry, was the boyfriend and my sire, the vampire who'd turned me. Rafael Valdez was the shape-shifter who'd been my bodyguard until recently. I loved him too and we'd gotten close, too close for it not to hurt my relationship with Blade.

"Glory, is Valdez still living here with you?" Damian looked around, like maybe Rafe would pop out of the back bedroom.

"Quit reading my mind. And, no, he has his own place now." I'd asked him to move out in hopes that would prove to Jerry that I was serious about making our relationship work again.

"Then you have an extra bedroom and are living here all alone." Damian stood and I jumped up.

"Yes, but I don't know what that has to do with you. You have a castle on a hill for crying out loud." I freaked for a moment. I'd never been afraid of Damian but he was an ancient vampire and could overpower me without breaking a sweat. Of course he was a lover, usually, not a fighter. He looked at me and smiled. Oops, should have blocked my thoughts. He was still

reading them and liked what he'd heard.

"Relax, Glory. I have a proposition for you, but it's to help you get in good with the council. Nothing to do with love making. Though if you want to pursue that thought..." He was close in a heartbeat and had his hand on my shoulder. "You smell fresh from your shower and full of that Bulgarian synthetic." He smiled and showed fang. "Did you know it's made with real blood?"

"No. Make that a double no." I straight-armed him, my hand on his broad chest. "What's the proposition, Damian? The one not headed to my bedroom."

"Ah, Glory. Someday." He backed off and lounged on the couch so casually that I was convinced he'd never meant me to take the pass seriously. "I have a young vampire, a fledgling. She was turned by a vamp who has been disciplined and is no longer with us." Damian's face grew hard and I was reminded that he could be a fighter when he wanted to be. "Anyway, she's stuck now and not happy about it. I need to find a mentor for her and you've proved you can handle that job. Like you did for Israel Caine."

Another new vampire. I sat back in my chair. Yes, I'd mentored Ray, Israel Caine. But he'd been a rock star, my crush, and he still held a place in my heart. To take on some poor girl who'd been turned against her will... Well, it would definitely prove to the council that Glory was a good person, willing to

sacrifice. Because new vamps could be a pain in the butt. I sure didn't want to leave Austin though.

I had a thriving business where I sold antiques and vintage clothing. And I had friends who'd turned into the kind of extended family I'd always craved. Of course Jerry was here too. I had to stay to work on getting our relationship back on track.

"I'll do it. When do I meet her?"

Damian grinned. "I knew you wouldn't fail me. She's right outside. I'm sure she was the source of that noise you heard." He got up, unlocked my door and opened it. "Come in, Penny."

I took one look at the scowling girl who strode into my apartment and knew I had my work cut out for me.

"Glory, meet Penny Patterson."

"Hello, Penny."

Penny glared at me but I kept smiling, deciding anyone who'd been through what she had this week was entitled to a little attitude. Still, my sad sack robe and wild hair were an aberration for me. I pride myself on never facing the public looking less than my best. This girl? She looked like she was the one who'd just rolled out of bed. Her bad makeup was worse than no makeup at all. And her hair needed a decent cut and a wash. Clearly some of this look was pre-fangs.

Then there were the clothes. Penny and I have some of the same figure issues. Demon thing aside, had Damian brought her here to me because she carried too many pounds for her five-

foot-tall frame? I sent him a glaring mental message but he put out his hands and added an innocent face, the picture of denial. Anyway, Penny was a little round. Okay, a lot round and she'd done the unthinkable—she'd worn horizontal stripes. Please. Even zebras knew to keep their stripes vertical.

This girl needed me. And not just because she was now a vampire. She needed a wardrobe intervention and a makeover, stat. I turned to say something to Damian but the man had slipped out while my back was turned and quietly closed the door.

"Well, Penny, looks like you're stuck with me." I smiled and gestured at her bulging backpack. "Is that all your stuff? Want me to show you to your bedroom?"

"Forget that." Penny stepped close to me, a rookie mistake, and grabbed the lapels of my robe. "There's only one thing I want from you."

"Whoa, girlfriend." I jerked her hands off my robe. "Rule number one. Back off the intensity." I tried to read her mind. What the hell? How had this fledgling already learned to block her thoughts?

She smiled, a creepy smile, and looked me over. "You'll learn that I'm a quick study. I'm nineteen and I've already got three degrees from UT."

"Three college degrees? At nineteen?" I knew UT was the University of Texas here in Austin. I was turned vampire in 1604. Back when I'd been school age, I'd been lucky to learn basic

letters. I'd had to teach myself what I knew today which was practical stuff and wouldn't have earned me a degree anywhere.

"Yeah. I'm a geek and a freak. Big whoop." Her smile had changed from creepy to a sad little twist.

I realized that this girl would be pretty if she'd let me guide her. She had nice auburn hair and skin that would be golden if she didn't mask it with pale makeup. She sure didn't need the black lipstick she'd obviously decided went with her new vampire status.

"Hey, being a brain is a big whoop. And lay off the freak thing. Being a vampire isn't all bad. Trust me on that." I sat on the couch. "Now what is it you want from me? I'm going to be your mentor. I'll do what I can to help you adjust to your new life." I smiled and gestured at the chair across from me.

Penny sat then leaned forward. Her eyes were a golden brown and they did have an intelligence that saw too much. I put up a block. If Penny had already figured out how to block her thoughts, she was probably already reading other's too.

"There's just one thing that will make me happy right now, Glory. Damian said that's your name, right?"

"Yes, it's Gloriana St. Clair. I'm a four hundred plus year old vampire, Penny. I've had a few centuries to learn the ropes. So if there's something you need, something you want to learn, I'm your gal." I kept smiling, feeling all motherly, even though to look at me, I'm only twenty-three or thereabouts to Penny's

nineteen. Mortals would think we were sisters. Maybe I'd even introduce her in the shop as my sister from out of town. Yes, that would work. I realized Penny was waiting for me to focus on her, to give her my full attention. I finally did.

"Okay, Penny, what do you need?"

"Help me kill my sister."