

Chapter One

"Of course I understand. No problem. Have a nice trip." I snapped the phone closed and thought about throwing it against the wall. But at the moment I loved my state-of-the-art cell a lot more than I loved Angus Jeremiah Campbell the Third who in recent centuries has called himself Jeremy Blade. The phone rang. I knew who it was and if I didn't answer, he'd just keep trying.

"Yes?"

"Are you angry? You hung up on me."

"Oh? Ya think? I guess I missed the part where you invited me to come along." I glanced at the three dresses I'd laid out trying to decide what to wear tonight. New Year's Eve. Yep, he'd broken our date for New Year's frickin' Eve. No biggie.

"I just assumed--"

"Of course. I have a business to run. End of year inventory. You name it. Can't get away right now. But, hey, telling you that would have involved a discussion. We don't have those." Why

in the hell did I ever think I wanted the strong silent type?

"Gloriana, calm down. I'll be shifting. You know you don't want to--"

"Right. You're in a tearing hurry. Not that I need to know why of course. Just be careful and don't let a hunter shoot you down." My boyfriend shape-shifts into a hawk to do his traveling. Dangerous. And, even mad, I felt my stomach turn just thinking about Jerry flying alone across an ocean. Damned impossible man. Me, I prefer something with a seat belt and air bags.

"You're mad. But I promise I'll make it up to you when I get back. Drive the Mercedes while I'm gone. I left it in the alley for you."

Okay, that was a nice peace offering. My own car was currently D.O.A. "Do you have any idea when you'll be back?"

"No. Lily could be anywhere. Mara called and said our daughter's running with a pack of dangerous radicals. Her boyfriend's set himself up as leader of the group. I've got to find Lily before she gets herself staked. My first stop will be Paris to see if Mara has found out a more specific location."

Mara. Of course. That's where Jerry's sudden rush to take flight had come from. Mara had been married to Jerry's best friend. But recently, since Mac's death, she'd "confessed" that her daughter Lily was really Jerry's child. Personally I think it's a hoax created by a woman hot to have Jerry for herself.

He'll do the DNA thing, but just hearing the way he'd said

"our daughter" made it clear Jerry was deep into protective father mode. Typical. He'd made me vampire back in the day, early 1600s actually, and has been protecting me, not to mention playing the passionate lover whenever I let him, ever since.

"All right. Go. And happy birthday. I'll give you your present when you get back." I blinked back sudden tears. I do love Jerry and I hated the fact that he was going to have to cross the Atlantic and land in the middle of a bunch of vampires who thought stirring up mortals against us was good clean fun. I hoped this "daughter" was worth it.

"You got me a present?"

I didn't blame Jerry for sounding skeptical. My funds are always pretty limited. But I'd had a fairly decent Christmas season in my shop, Vintage Vamp's Emporium.

"Yes. And not just me naked on satin sheets either." Though he never seemed to mind that gift.

Jerry groaned. "Now you're making me want to come over there and--"

"If you're going to beat the sun, you'd better hit the skies, Jerry." I sighed and looked down as I felt a warm furry body press against my legs, my bodyguard, Valdez, a shape-shifter with a little something extra. "Take care. Seriously. Call me every night."

"I will. I love you, Gloriana."

Now how could I stay mad when a reticent Scotsman busts out

a declaration like that? "I love you too, Jerry. Happy New Year." This time I closed the phone gently. I looked down at Valdez. "What? No snort? We were getting pretty mushy there."

"Sounded right to me. Blade's your guy and don't you forget it, no matter who else makes a move on you while he's gone."

Valdez trotted into the living room. "Since we're obviously staying in tonight, how about a movie? Something with action."

"Might as well. That's obviously all the action either of us is going to get." I scooped up the dresses, the best my vintage clothing shop had had to offer in a size twelve and hung them back in the closet. I took a moment to rub my cheek on the midnight blue velvet which matched my eyes. Nice low cut bodice. I figured Jerry would have had it off me long before midnight. The red was made for dancing, swingy skirt, another low neck. I've got the goods and know how to use them. As for the black... I liked the way it slimmed my hips, enough said.

Action. I thought about putting on my flannel jammies and really vegging out, but my roommate might drop in. Not that she was really living here any more, but she and her new—I couldn't believe it—husband, still had a closet full of shoes to collect. I was picking through my DVD collection and threatening Valdez with The Devil Wears Prada when the phone rang.

"Hello." I hadn't even glanced at the caller ID. That's how depressed I was.

"Glory, I think you need to get over here. Right now."

"Brittany?" I felt Valdez practically hanging over my shoulder. He has a thing for the shape-shifter who serves as bodyguard for another vamp in Austin, a rock star who was turned recently in a pretty nasty trick. I'd taken on the role of mentor because I felt kind of responsible for his condition. Long story. "What's going on?"

"A party. Typical rock star blow-out apparently. And guess who's getting drunk on his ass."

"Will?" This could be a problem. Will Kilpatrick is a vamp I'd recommended to serve as another bodyguard for Israel Caine. Caine is routinely hounded by paparazzi and girl groupies. Yeah, tough life.

"Of course Will, but worse than that, Ray's drinking too."

"God, no." Ray, Israel, is a made vampire. Like me. Turned by another vampire. We can't eat or drink anything but blood. Alcohol can make us really, really sick. After the fact. Not during. So Ray could be knocking back shots and think he was okay for a while. But later...

"He went on a rant about how he was tired of watching everyone have a good time and how it was New Year's Eve and started hitting the Jack Daniel's. The mortals thought he was just falling off the wagon." Brittany sighed and I could hear yelling in the background. "Now they're all drunk and talking about going out on the lake."

"Do whatever you can to keep them there in the house."

Valdez and I'll be right over." I turned off the phone and jumped up. Mercedes keys. I kept my spare set in a kitchen drawer. Valdez already had his leash in his mouth and was sitting by the door when I grabbed my coat and purse.

I wished I could change clothes. Put on one of those sexy dresses. But my snug black jeans and the low cut blue sweater that matched my eyes weren't too bad. Not exactly New Year's Eve glitz, but when I threw a sparkly silver knit scarf around my throat I felt slightly less pathetic. Besides, I was on a mission here.

"This is bad, Valdez. That idiot could actually succeed in killing himself and he's supposed to be immortal." For the second time that night, I felt tears fill my eyes. For a bad ass vampire, I was turning into a real wuss.

"Aw, Ray'll be all right, Blondie. Probably have the mother of all hangovers, that's all. Let's go. This will be a hell of a lot better than spending New Year's Eve watching one of your chick flick DVDs."

"You would say that. You'll get to be with your honey." I opened the door and we headed down the stairs. As usual, Valdez checked out the alley before we ran to the car and jumped in. I felt a real urgency. I liked Ray and hated to think he'd end up breaking his damned neck on the lake. Vampires can heal from a lot of things, but a broken neck..? Not sure. I'd hate to put it to the test.

I drove through the Austin hills to the area where Ray rented a house on top of a cliff complete with elevator down to a boat dock. I pulled up to a circular driveway filled with cars. Bad sign. Since Ray didn't hang out with other vampires, this meant he was surrounded by his band buddies, rockers who were used to his hard drinking.

Brittany met us at the door. "I kept them here, but it wasn't easy. I hid the boat keys, but--wouldn't you know?--mind reading Ray just found them. Hurry. They're in the den downstairs."

The den was a massive room down a curved staircase. A two-story wall of windows framed a view of Lake Travis with the twinkling lights of houses outlining the water. The men and women lounging on the leather furniture scattered around the room didn't spare the breathtaking view a glance. Music pounded from large speakers and a drummer used his sticks on a black lacquered coffee table. Three couples danced across the tile floor until one of them broke off and headed for the stairs, brushing past me with barely a nod. They were clearly into each other and looking for a bedroom.

I turned to say something to Valdez, but he and Brittany were still by the front door, whispering. Well, hell. I guess I was on my own. I spotted Ray standing on the balcony. I took a moment to just look at him. The sexy heartthrob whose poster had stopped me dead in the middle of an Austin mall one night was

not a happy camper if the way he was tossing back the Jack straight from the bottle was any indication.

I stepped off the stairs heading for him when a hand shot out and grabbed me around the waist.

"Dance with me, darlin'." Will swung me around. He was clearly drunk.

Damn born vampire. He wouldn't even have a hangover. "Out of my way, Kilpatrick." I pushed him and he staggered. "Fine bodyguard you are. Ray's out there on the balcony presenting a target for whoever feels like taking a shot and you're in here getting drunk on your ass." I gave him another shove and he landed on a couch.

"My night off, sugar. Tell it to Brittany." The idiot grinned and grabbed the woman sitting next to him. She didn't seem to mind and I turned on my heel in disgust.

I dropped my coat and purse on a chair then stepped out into the cold night air. I closed the French door and stood beside Ray.

"Rough night?"

"Not at all." He smiled his famous guaranteed-to-seduce-you smile and winked. "In fact, it just got even better. Looking good, Glory." He took another swig from the bottle. "You here to kiss me at midnight?"

Would you believe it? I felt myself flush like a grade school groupie. "No, I'm here to keep you from doing something

stupid." I gestured at the bottle. "That working for you, Ray?"

"Hell, no." He held up the bottle. "It tastes the same, but I'm not even feeling a buzz. What's that about?"

Ray might not be feeling a buzz, but I sure was. Inside, someone had put on one of his love songs. There were some groans, but then the lights dimmed and I could see couples pairing off, slow dancing to the seductive tune. Good distraction from talk of midnight boat rides. While Ray sang with the kind of passion that made a woman turn to liquid right where it counts, the men obviously figured it was time for some indoor sport.

The last time we'd been alone together Ray had even made some moves toward me. If I wasn't involved with Jerry... Well, Israel Caine was and is temptation wrapped in a delicious package.

I deliberately blocked out all sexy sounds, thoughts, whatever and focused on the problem at hand. Ray was still making serious inroads on that bottle. He was my responsibility.

"Listen, Ray. You want a buzz?" I glanced over my shoulder, but, with the glass doors closed and general lack of attention from inside, I was sure no one could hear me. "Bite one of your mortal buds in there." That got Ray's attention. I make no secret of the fact that I'm strictly a synthetic blood drinker. No biting mortals for me.

"What the hell?"

"I mean it. You'll get the buzz. But I have to warn you. If

you suck down enough blood from a drunk, you'll have a hell of a hangover later. Booze is like poison to you now. And that really wicked hangover will last days, maybe weeks. And seems like you've got obligations after the first of the year, don't you? Can you afford to feel like death warmed over that long?"

Ray looked away from me to stare at the water again. "Yeah, obligations. Always. People depending on me. Fans wanting a piece of me. And now that I'm a freakin' vampire, I have to do it all at night." He barked out a laugh. "Man, welcome to my piss poor pity party, Gloriana St. Clair."

"You're entitled. Lucky played a damned dirty trick on you." Lucky. A vampire who'd turned Ray in her own little revenge drama, then dumped him on me. I looked at Ray's perfect profile. At the long dark hair that drifted over his shoulders. His white silk shirt blew in the slight wind off the lake and showed off his buff bod. He was tall and lean in worn jeans, his feet bare. Long, narrow feet. My heart thumped and I reminded myself I was supposed to be immune. Because of Jerry. Of course I was.

"You know I always denied I had a drinking problem, but I was really thinking about checking myself into rehab before this happened." Ray set the bottle on the wooden rail, grimaced then tipped it over. We both watched it tumble down until it hit the rocks below and shattered into dozens of pieces.

"I'm sorry, Ray." And not a bit surprised. I devoured

anything the tabloids printed about Ray. His drinking had been a hot topic. "Didn't you promise me a boat ride?" Yeah, I was a sucker for a sob story. Besides, Ray wasn't drunk. And I figured it wouldn't hurt to offer him a distraction.

"You want to go? Seriously?" He smiled, suddenly looking alive again, as if the pity party had never happened.

"If you meant it when you said you weren't even feeling the buzz."

"Yeah. Let me prove it. Believe me, I've been through the drill dozens of times. You can ask my lawyer." Ray walked a straight line, then did the fingers to his nose thing. "Want me to count, too?"

"No, I believe you. Valdez says you have an elevator down to the boat dock."

"It's right over here. Let's ditch the bodyguards. Just you and me. Are you up for it? Or don't you think we'll be safe?" He grinned, probably expecting me to be my usually cautious self.

"I can swim, sort of. You can swim." I'd seen the butt shot of him skinny dipping in Star Snoops. "What kind of trouble can we get into out in the middle of a lake late at night?" Would you like a list? Sometimes I can be such an idiot.