

## Chapter One

"I smell blood." The yummy scent hit me like a whiff of CoCo at the perfume counter.

*"You're dreamin', Blondie. Quit thinkin' with your fangs and grab those bags of Christmas lights."* Valdez hummed "Deck the Halls" while he hopped out of my aging Suburban.

"I'm serious, Valdez. Blood." I sniffed the air again.  
"Take a whiff. B positive. Lots of it."

Valdez stuck his nose in the air, his tail brushing my leg.  
*"You're right. Get in the car and lock yourself in. I'm gonna investigate."* He was suddenly all business, his growl making even my nerves twitch.

Valdez looks like a dog, but he's my bodyguard, a shape-shifter with a little something extra I've never quite figured

out. Trust me, we've been together long enough for him to know I wasn't going to just sit in the car checking my manicure. I grabbed Valdez's collar.

"Wait a sec, Terminator. You took an arrow in the hip back here. Remember? Be careful."

He jerked away from me, almost knocking me on my butt. Valdez in protector mode is just about unstoppable. "*Flesh wound. But that doesn't mean this isn't still a prime spot for an ambush.*" He nodded toward the security lights at the back of the building. Out again. "*Next time park on the street.*"

"Shut up, Valdez. Someone's bleeding out." I crept around the car and toward the Dumpster a few feet away. I know blood and this was fresh, from someone close who was still alive.

"*Hey, you creeps! We've called the cops. If you think you can attack us, you're S.O.L.,*" Valdez shouted. He speaks in my mind, but anyone within range can hear him too. "*My boss has a big gun.*"

We both stopped and listened. No running footsteps. A good sign. Because of course I didn't have a big gun. I'm a vampire, for crying out loud. I've got skills. But, wait, I did hear something. Gurgling. Someone gasping their last breath. I hurried around the Dumpster.

A woman lay on her back, her throat torn open. "Vampire did this."

"You sure?" Valdez wasn't even looking at her. He was too

busy scanning the area in case whoever had done this was still around.

"Yeah, I'm sure. I've seen this type of wound more times than I can count." And it never got any easier. I shot up an arrow prayer for the victim's soul. Shocked a vampire prays? Get over it. Not all vamps are demons from hell. But whoever had done this had a roasting pan with their name on it waiting for them. "Check out her neck, Valdez."

*"I'm not checking out squat. I'm in defense mode. That asshole could come back, you know."*

I inhaled. Except for the previously mentioned blood smell, there was just a tinge of another vampire in the air. "Whoever did this is long gone." I shook my head. What kind of out of control vampire had found it necessary to kill like this? Did we have another rogue killing people here in Austin for sport? And her attacker obviously had a screw loose, letting perfectly fine B positive leak all over the concrete instead of draining the lady dry. Why? I'd think about that later.

*"Save her, Blondie. Can't you see she's still breathing?"* Valdez had finally focused on her. *"Heal her like you healed me. I'm gonna take a better look around."*

He was right. The lady wasn't dead yet, but she was a breath or two away from it. I wished... Heal her. Okay, I could sure as hell try. I stepped around a pool of blood, wrapped my hands around her throat and "saw" the mangled flesh become whole

again. Remember those skills? The edges slowly sealed under my fingers until the wound finally quit seeping. But it would take more than a little hands-on healing to keep this woman alive. I breathed in the cold night air. There was something familiar...

Valdez trotted up to check out the woman again. *"All clear. You're right. Whoever did this took off."* He nosed her long dark hair aside. *"Throat looks good."*

"She's lost too much blood, Valdez. Calling 911 would do nothing except get the police here to investigate." The paranormal community in Austin keeps a low profile. Cops are always a last resort. I pulled out my cell phone anyway. It was her best shot at survival.

*"Wait. This scene already looks suspicious since the wound's healed and there's all this blood. I say she's too far gone for paramedics to save. What're ya gonna do about it?"* He gave me a long look.

"I'm sorry, but I guess we got here too late." I wasn't about to admit that I'd already realized there was only one way to keep this woman from dying.

*"Don't be cute with me. You know what you have to do if you don't want her permanently dead. Turn her, Blondie. Make her into a vampire."*

"No freakin' way." I edged back and almost stepped on the woman's fabulous Hermès Birkin bag. Someone had dumped the contents, emptied a nice Gucci wallet and then tossed it all

aside a few feet away from the blood. Stupid thief. Unless this woman carried around bags of diamonds or cash, the bag itself was probably worth more than whatever had been inside.

*"Yes freakin' way. I've hung around you long enough to recognize that the lady had great and expensive taste. Like that purse near your feet. You gonna just let her die?"*

I jerked my gaze away from the woman's barely moving chest. It was an awesome bag, but there was something even more interesting lying next to it.

"Check this out." I picked up a knife covered in blood. One sniff and I knew this lady had gotten her own licks in. Definitely vamp blood on the blade. I looked at the woman with new respect. Great taste and she knew how to use a weapon. I really *didn't* want her to die. I grabbed a pack of tissues and wiped off my hands.

*"Seriously, Glory. You gonna do something or just stand around and watch her give up the ghost?"*

"I don't turn mortals into vampires. Never have. Never will." I'd had a few hundred years of regrets about my own change and I'd vowed never to make that decision for anyone. The very thought made me want to run like hell. Forget I'd ever seen--

*"I get it. Turning somebody vampire is a big deal. But I know you, Glory. You're not cold enough to just walk away."*

Valdez paced around the woman, sniffing at her brown leather

Bottega Veneta boots tucked into skinny jeans. *"If you can't do it, call Flo. She'll do it. And, damn it, hurry."*

"Flo. Good idea." I flipped open my cell and hit speed dial. My roommate Florence da Vinci was probably right upstairs in the apartment we shared. She could zap down here and...Voice mail.

"Try Blade."

Jeremy Blade. My sometime lover, friend and the hunky Highlander who'd made me vampire way back in the day when my brain had been fogged by lust. Speed dial actually got him.

"Jerry, oh God, Jerry, I need your help." I really felt bad about the woman. She couldn't even moan, but I could hear her heart slowing, barely beating. Then there was just the whisper of her breath, a death rattle. I patted her on the shoulder. "Hang on, honey. Help is on the way." Or I sure as hell hoped so.

"Gloriana. What's the matter? Are you hurt?"

"Not hurt, but freaking out. I found a woman. She's dying, bleeding out because a vampire... Never mind the details. Can you come to the alley behind my shop? Like five minutes ago?"

"I'm in Louisiana, sweetheart. Closing on the sale of my casino here." Jerry sighed. "You want to save her, you've got to turn her, Gloriana."

"You know I don't—" I cringed when I heard the woman gasp what had to be her last breath. Valdez just looked at me, like I

was a spineless coward if I didn't take care of this. Oh, crap. Turning somebody vampire... I mean, can you blame me? We're talking a permanent condition with, trust me, *lots* of complications. I'd never wanted to be responsible for someone else. And-

"Gloriana, keep hesitating and you won't have to do this."

"Okay, okay. Damn it, Jerry, tell me what to do."

"Good girl. Now drain her first. Completely. To the point of death."

"Not a problem. She's about there now." I pulled my winter white pencil skirt up to my thighs before I stepped gingerly into the huge pool of blood under the woman's body and squatted beside her. Yeah, yeah, I know. But the skirt was vintage Chanel and if you've ever tried to get blood out of wool, you get it.

"Make sure, Glory. Can you use her neck?"

"Don't think so. I healed her, but it's too soon to mess with it. You should see the really wicked knife next to her body. This lady didn't go down easy."

"Whoever did this could come back. Forget the woman. Get the hell out of there."

Okay, a minute ago I'd have jumped on an excuse like that. But there was the old "Glory's a helpless female" tone in Jerry's voice and, sorry, but I'm *not* helpless.

"The alley's clear. Valdez is on guard duty. I started this, so I'll damn well finish it. I'll try her wrist." I held

the phone with one hand and tuned out Jerry's rant about my wrong-headedness. I picked up the woman's wrist. It was cool, limp, lifeless. Maybe I was too late.

Now I felt really bad. If Flo or Jerry had found the body, this lady would be upstairs by now, ready for her vampire initiation. I ran my tongue over my fangs. They'd been ready for action since the first whiff of fresh blood. I bit into a sad excuse for a vein. Pitifully little action, then zilch. Her skin felt cold and I pulled back. "She's drained dry, Jerry, now what?"

"Force her to drink from you. Cut your wrist and put it to her lips. You should have learned this long ago, Gloriana."

"I don't think so. I wish I wasn't learning it now." I snatched up the knife, slashed it across my wrist and didn't even wince—thank you very much. I held the welling cut to the lady's blue lips. Blue under Mac's Lady Danger lipstick. She did have great taste. I took a second to mourn her blood-soaked suede coat with the lynx collar. That coat would have brought big bucks in my shop, Vintage Vamp's Emporium, which was steps away from us, on the ground floor of my apartment building.

Maybe you're wondering how I could be so...detached while squatting in a pool of blood with a dying woman dangling from my wrist. Hey, I've had four hundred plus years on this planet. I could tell you stories... Never mind. At least I'd just done all I could do to save her. And if she didn't make it? Then I

wouldn't have brought a new vampire into the world which was a good thing actually.

"Jerry, she's not drinking." Not breathing either. Detached? Who the hell was I kidding? I couldn't just let another human *die*. Yep, *another* human. I may be an immortal with a liquid diet, but I'll never accept the fact that I'm not human too, damn it.

Unfortunately, I'd made a big deal out of never wanting to turn anyone. So now it was amateur hour. Jeez, sometimes I can be so *clueless*. I should have at least learned the basics of this thing. In case of emergency. Like now.

"What else can I do?" I blinked back tears and told myself I'd have the meltdown later. The woman's neck was looking good. But with all that blood loss, she was knocking on Heaven's door and the Almighty was just about to roll out the welcome mat. Damn it, I *had* to save her.

"Force her, Glory. Pry open her lips and drip your blood down her throat. Once she swallows even a bit, she'll start to revive." Jerry's calm voice settled me down a little. Hell, of course he was calm. He wasn't here hip deep in blood with the Grim Reaper staring over his shoulder.

But I knew from experience that vamp blood is powerful stuff. I laid the phone in a dry spot on the concrete and went to work. "Come on, honey. This is delicious high octane vampire blood. One sip and your motor will be purring again." I glanced

at Valdez. He'd pawed through the contents of her purse and stared down at a New York driver's license. "What's her name, Valdez? Maybe she'll respond to that."

He snorted and looked at me, his dark eyes gleaming in his furry face. *"You're not going to believe it, Glory. Her name's Lucky."*