

Chapter One

We'd been invaded.

You can do this. Suck it up. Attack. Use your powers.

Instead I leaped up on the sweater table, shaking and screaming along with the mortals in the shop. No. Get down, Gloriana St. Clair, and face the enemy.

Weapons, I needed weapons and I sure as hell wasn't using my fangs this time. I glanced around. The two women perched on the chair next to the dressing room were no help. Their shrieks could have broken glass. Three more women crouched on the counter in front of the cash register. More mortals, totally useless, though one swung an umbrella at the hoard. Impressive compared to me.

I tossed a sweater at one. Stupid. Didn't even slow it down. I was a failure. A wimp. I couldn't quit shaking and couldn't force myself to get off the table. If a god from Olympus attacked, I'd be right in his face, toe to toe. Or another vamp. Bring him on. But whoever had planned this had

found my weakness. I thought I heard one right there, on the table, and moaned, horrified.

Mice! Dozens of them. Even Achilles had his heel thing. Glory St. Clair has hers. I don't like anything that's creepy or crawly. Now my reputation and the business I'd built from nothing were in shreds along with my pride. Would you shop where you saw mice? I'd have joined the stampede for the door myself if there'd been time.

My clerk Lacy, a were-cat, was running around like a starving woman at an all-you-can-eat buffet in kitty heaven. She whipped past me with a smile on her face, making sounds too gross to think about.

"Oh, God, there's another one!" The brave soul on the counter with the vintage umbrella slashed at the floor, knocking a mouse toward the door. That got the logjam there cleared with a chorus of screams.

I heard a smack near my feet. "Lacy, what the hell are you doing?" I gagged and realized I was going to have to whammy every mortal in the place.

"Glory, relax. I've got this under control." She held up a brown bag that rustled ominously. "There must be dozens of them. I wonder who sent them? An early birthday present from Mom?" She scrambled after a dark shadow that streaked across the floor. "Naw. She knows a stunt like this could get me fired." She glanced at me.

"She'd be right." I didn't want to know what had made that streak on her cheek. Lacy was a natural beauty, red hair, porcelain skin. She dressed in the vintage clothes we sold here and looked like a model in them. Tonight the seventies bell bottoms and tie-dyed tee were taking a beating.

"Well, not Mom. These are the pet store variety. Feeders. For snakes, that sort of thing. Someone brought them in here. Planted them. There goes another one." She dove and disappeared under a dress rack.

I heard a crash and a mannequin bit the dust. The women who'd been balanced on the chair had made a run for the door but were tangled up in a dress display.

"My God! My God! Get it off of me!" Loud sobs then the sounds of my mannequin being used as a sledge hammer.

Obviously I had to suck it up or we'd have mass hysteria on our hands.

"Ladies, please, calm down." At least I wore boots as I jumped in front of them, staring into first a pair of brown eyes, then blue. I had them mesmerized in a second. "You are fine, the store is fine. There are no mice, just a little game we're playing with discount coupons." I shivered as a mouse ran by and I kicked it toward Lacy. "Here's a 25% off coupon for your next visit. We're closing for some minor repairs. Mugs and Muffins next door has great coffee if you want to wait. We'll reopen in about thirty minutes." I snatched coupons from behind

the counter then tugged them both to the door, dodging even more mice. These things had been planted. I had a feeling I knew who'd done it.

I got those two women out then went back for the three hugging their knees near the register. Ignoring Lacy's crows of triumph as she claimed more victims, I got the last customers whammied and out of the shop, coupons in hand. Finally, I hopped on the counter myself and waited for Lacy to finish.

"Whew. That was amazing. I bagged at least three dozen." Lacy grinned, her mouth smudged with something I didn't want to think about. "Whoever pulled this stunt must have cleaned out a pet supply store." She stapled the wiggling bag closed then pulled out a wet wipe from the container under the counter and cleaned off her hands and face. Lacy glanced at me. "You okay?"

"Not really." I sighed. "Had your dinner break?"

"Um, yeah. Sorry about that. I got a little carried away. I need to clean up the floor too." She laughed. "Hey, I'm a predator. Think how you'd act if someone came in and offered you that negative blood type you love."

"I get it." I swallowed, not sure I wasn't going to hurl. "Thanks. You saved the shop."

"No problem. But I can sniff out a mouse a mile away." She wiggled her nose. "They weren't here yesterday. I wonder who..."

The phone rang before I could answer her. "Vintage Vamps' Emporium, the best store on Austin's Sixth Street."

"Really? Is it? I heard it just closed." The female voice was full of satisfaction. "Mice infestation. Disgusting."

"Who is this?" I jumped off the counter, pretty sure I already knew.

"Is this the owner? Gloriana St. Clair?"

"Yes. And is this the woman who thinks she can win Jeremiah Campbell back? Mel?"

"How did you like my little gift?" There was a throaty chuckle. "Did you scream? Of course you did."

I bit my lip, refusing to answer. Had she been in here? Seen me make a fool of myself? Damn it, if I'd known... What could I have done differently? Dematerialized and damn the consequences.

"Give him up, Gloriana. Or I'll run you out of business. Leave town and leave him to me. It's the smart play." The line went dead.

I stared at the receiver, tempted to throw the cordless across the room. "Are you kidding me?"

"What?" Lacy had a mop in her hand. "Who was it?"

"A woman Jerry used to be with." I carefully set the phone back where it belonged. Killing it wouldn't help. It was the woman I wanted to tear into pieces. "Clean up and I'll reopen. I'm not going to let that bitch ruin my business."

"It'll take a minute." Lacy didn't move. "Tell me about this woman. Mr. Blade has an old flame? What's going on? She

sent in the mice?" She dipped the mop into a bucket of sudsy water that reeked of pine cleaner. "I might want to write her a thank you note."

"If you do, send it from the unemployment line." I shook my head. There was no reason to take my bad mood out on Lacy.

"Sorry. I know you're kidding. Anyway, she wants Jerry back and thinks running me out of business and out of town will do it. This was just her latest trick. I'm surprised she didn't use magic." I quit breathing. I hated that pine smell. "She's a voodoo priestess, Lacy. Have you seen anyone in here who looks like she might be into that?"

"Voodoo? Don't know. How do they look? Would she be wearing a caftan and a turban, have a scary vibe? Carry around a bottle of Love Potion number nine?" Lacy shook her head and began mopping. "That would be too easy, Glo."

"You're right. All I know is that Jerry says she's beautiful," I made a face, "with dark skin, black hair and unusual gray green eyes."

"Bet you loved that description." Lacy leaned against the mop. "You know her name? I'll watch for her credit card."

"Good idea. Melisandra Du Monde." I sighed. "Of course she's beautiful. I need more info on her. I'm calling Jer right now. This mouse thing is just her latest in the war on Glory."

"Latest? What else has she done?"

"There have been a few accidents." I headed over to turn on the ceiling fans to air the place out and dry the floors faster. "I realize now that they were her work. Remember, I told you that big shelf in the back room fell on me?"

"You think that was voodoo?" Lacy's eyes widened. "Crap. Maybe we should get out the Holy Water again."

I smiled. "Couldn't hurt. But that loaded shelf sure did. It weighed a ton and went over for no reason that I could see. Luckily I have good reflexes and dove under the table back there to avoid the worst of it." I had actually broken my arm but it had healed with a good night's sleep and lots of synthetic blood.

"That woman's crazy if she thinks you'll just give up your business after a few setbacks. We've gone through plenty before, even been firebombed. But we reopened, better than ever. And you and Mr. Blade have gone through a lot. Yet you two have been together for hundreds of years." Lacy finished and headed back to the storeroom. "I'd better take my to-go bag and scoot. Shift's over. Will you be okay until the night crew gets here?"

"Sure. I expect Megan in a little while. Please get that bag out of here. Are you sure all the mice are gone?" I righted the mannequin and straightened her dress.

Lacy sniffed. "All clear. Open the doors. We're good to go. And be careful. If she really wants Mr. Blade back, she'll go for you harder next time."

"I'd like to see her try. A mortal? Bring it on." I headed for the door, surprised that most of the customers had stuck around. But we were close to Halloween and my shop had great vintage clothing and costumes. I flipped the lock.

"Come in, everyone. We're having a sale. All furs, twenty percent off." That got a reaction, especially since we were having a cold spell. The crowd surged inside. I couldn't believe I had actually laughed about the crazy woman who'd sworn to get Jeremy Blade back as her lover. A voodoo priestess? Okay, maybe I could buy that. Though I'd never actually seen her, I'd smelled the evil spirits she carried with her.

But I could deal with evil. I'd even fought Lucifer and won. You'd think a mortal would be easy compared to him. Right? Wrong. First, Luc and I were both fairly reasonable people. Who knew? But the angel of darkness actually admired my spunk. Melisandra didn't admire anything about me. She just wanted me gone. In her warped world view I was an annoying speed bump on her fast track to bliss with Jerry.

Obviously she thought that once I was out of the way he would realize she was the one for him. She'd tuned out when he'd told her to take a hike. He had even changed his address and name to get away from her. Mel wanted Jerry and would do anything to get him, even if it meant chaining him in a mausoleum somewhere until he felt the love. I shuddered just thinking about it.

Of course picturing Jerry as a victim was ridiculous. My guy was strong, an ancient vampire. But I was more than a little aggravated that he'd hooked up with a voodoo queen in the first place. What had he been thinking? More accurately, what had he been thinking with? Men.

I wasn't about to quit seeing Jerry. Jeremiah Campbell aka Jeremy Blade and I had been through way too much lately for me to call a halt while Mel moved in on him. Instead, I was going to show her just how not scared I was after her little trick.

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"Gloriana, you've got that look again. What are you thinking?" Jerry arrived less than an hour later. We were going to our favorite club for a little dancing, even meeting friends there. Did you expect us to keep a low profile? That would feel too much like giving in to the wicked witch.

"That I've got to do something about Mel." I told him about the mouse invasion.

"I'm sorry." He put his arm around me. "What can I do? I've tried to talk to her but my seeking her out makes her happy, no matter the reason for it."

"You sure you've made it clear you're done?" I could read his mind and he knew it. But I didn't even try. We had to trust each other now. I'd come to terms with the fact that this was the man I wanted to be with forever. Not an easy decision. But this complication from his past was ruining what should have

been a special time for us. I knew I'd made some big mistakes with my choice of hookups in the past, but a wacko like this?

"I said, 'Go away, I don't want you.' Is that clear enough?" He held onto my shoulders, his eyes meeting mine.

"Ouch. Now you're making me feel sorry for the bitch." I sighed and leaned against him. "No wonder she's acting out."

"I made it clear that she's not to hurt you or your business." Jerry rubbed my back. "She swore she'd back off." He stared down at me. "Are you sure she's responsible--"

"Damn it, Jerry. Are you under a spell or something? She called to gloat. And then what about this gift box?" I tapped a present I'd received the day before. A voodoo doll. Cliché much? Of course it looked like me, though she'd padded the hips until I looked deformed. It was riddled with pins. Bitch. "Did I send it to myself?"

"No, of course not. She laughs at those. Calls them tourist trinkets. They don't mean a thing. She's just pulling your chain. Don't let her play mind games with you." He pulled me close again. "Come on. Let's go. Try to have some fun. And I won't meet with her again. Obviously her word means nothing. I'm not sure I can think straight when I'm around her."

I stiffened and pushed back. "That cinches it. I want a face to face with her."

"Glory, you and Mel in the same room? A recipe for disaster. She won't back down and you'll probably lose it."

Jerry pulled me close again. "You aren't the kind of person who can just rip out a throat and walk away."

"She'd probably taste like raw sewage anyway." I'd had a whiff of her when she'd spied on Jerry and me, lurked in the bushes outside his house. Stalker. She'd smelled like burned sugar, evil left too long on the stove. I really didn't want to get close enough to her to touch her. Why didn't she just crawl back to Miami and pick a man who wanted her?

"Let's go. Our friends are probably already at the club. Your pal Israel Caine and Sienna Star are supposed to sing their new duet tonight." Jerry tugged me toward the back door.

"How do you know that? Are you and Ray or Rafe actually communicating?" I rested my hand on Jerry's chest. This was unlikely. Jerry was jealous of both guys because he knew I'd had a special relationship with each of them. They were still my friends, but had been more than that in the past. I'd made it clear to both of them that I was with Jerry now.

"Richard told me. He and Flo get a newsletter from the club with the coming attractions. I'm surprised you didn't get it." Jerry pulled open the back door, pausing to check out the security like he always did. "Come on. We don't have much time. Caine doesn't float my boat, but I know he does yours."

"You got that right." I laughed when I saw his face. "Oh, come on. We both enjoy good music. I'm way behind on email or I'd have seen the newsletter myself and dragged you there." I

grabbed his hand and we hurried down the alley toward N-V, the club my former bodyguard Rafe now owned. It wasn't far and the shifter stationed at the door waved us in ahead of the line at the door. We settled at a table with my best bud Florence da Vinci and her husband Richard Mainwaring. We ordered synthetic blood with alcohol, stocked here for us by Rafe, and settled back to watch the show.

"Amica, how are you doing? Any more disastros in your shop?" Flo leaned in to whisper.

"Nightly. That bitch won't give up." I told her about the mice and she shuddered.

"That could ruin your business. I know I would never go back to a place where I saw topi." Flo patted my shoulder.

"Me either." I sniffed the air. "What perfume are you wearing, Flo?"

"Nothing. Ricardo says it destroys his defense. He needs to smell the enemy coming." She stroked her husband's arm. "He takes very good care of me."

"I bet she's lurking around here right now. Following us." I glanced around. If he were a woman, Jerry would have pictures of her on his phone, but I'd never seen him snap a photo. Too bad.

"No!" Flo grabbed Richard. "Ricardo! Glory says the bitch is here."

"Where?" He leaned forward. "Blade, do you see her?"

Jerry stood and scanned the crowded balcony. "Not up here." He sniffed the air. "There's a faint whiff... I'm going downstairs to check it out. Richard, you stay here with the ladies."

"No, we're all going." I got up.

"Here? Puttana!" Flo glanced around the narrow balcony. "We will make that creature sorry she bothers our Glory."

"Don't taunt her, Flo." I squeezed Flo's hand. "She's got some mean tricks up her sleeve. I told you."

"Mice, falling shelves. Child's play." Flo's eyes gleamed. "I say we can take whatever she dishes out. Mi credi?"

"Sure." I smiled at her, feeling better than I had in days. The band was taking the stage, the people on the dance floor surging forward as we headed for the stairs. It was Ray's band and I knew the guys from a time when I'd pretended to be engaged to the rocker. Publicity stunt. I'd been Ray's mentor right after he'd been turned vampire. Had even been his date to the Grammys. It had been a magical night. I could use another one about now.

"I heard Ray and Sienna are a couple now." Flo studied me for a reaction as we stopped on the stairs.

"I'm glad. He needed someone." I saw Jerry and Richard waiting for us.

"No sign of her." Jerry held out his hand. "Let's just enjoy the show. I can get us closer to the stage. Follow me." He rubbed the back of my neck. "Are you okay?"

"Sure. Did you know Ray and Sienna are together and not just to sing?" I stayed close to him as we eased around the crowd and the lights dimmed.

"Glad to hear it. Keeps him away from you." Jerry kissed my cheek. "But he's stupid to pick a mortal. He'll screw it up, mark my words."

"Hush, Jer, they're getting ready to start." Very afraid he was right, I slipped my arm around his waist as we found a spot close to the stage. Ray was reckless, impulsive, and a fairly new vampire. Sleeping with a mortal could have consequences and none of them were good. The house went dark except for spotlights on Ray at the piano and Sienna leaning against it. They started singing and you could have heard a mouse squeak in the huge club. The song was beautiful, the lyrics haunting. The way the two sang to each other, it was clear this love song had meaning for both of them.

Jerry turned me into his arms and we danced, making the song ours too. I was sure all the lovers in the audience felt the same way. He held me against him, his hands sliding down to rest on my butt as we moved slowly. I lay my cheek on his chest, my fingers delving into his hair while I breathed him in. We were together and no bitch from hell was going to pull us apart. If Mel was nearby, she could just watch and see how much we loved each other. I was sorry when the song ended.

"Wow. Meraviglioso! It makes me want to take you home and ravish you, Ricardo." Next to us, Flo kissed Richard on the lips. "What do you think, Glory?"

"Oh, yeah." I sighed, struggling to come back to earth. For a few moments it had been great just to dance and forget everyone but Jerry. I squeezed his hand. Ray and Sienna jumped up to sing together again. They put their arms around each other, bumping hips as they danced and sang a rock song this time, Ray's band backing them up. It was high energy and fun.

"You okay?" Jerry said softly into my ear.

"Sure." I turned and ran my hand over his jaw. "Flo's right. That song put me in the mood to make love to you. What do you think?"

"I could handle that." He grinned and pulled me toward the door. "We're out of here." He nodded to Richard.

"Right behind you." Richard hauled a giggling Flo up into his arms and followed us. "Caine has a hit on his hands."

"Ricardo, put me down." She hit his shoulder. "You're embarrassing me."

"These kids think it's funny. Look at them." He grinned and nodded. Sure enough, his stunt helped clear a path for us to the front door. Once I thought I caught a whiff of that sweet, nasty smell again but I never saw anyone fitting Mel's description. Then we were outside, the fresh October air a welcome relief after the crowd inside.

"See you later." Richard set Flo on her feet then hurried her toward his car, ignoring her protests about manners. He had a look that promised a passionate night for them both.

"Well, now what?" I grinned at Jerry. "You know I have a roommate." And she was a terror. No way was I dragging my man home to that.

"Come home with me. They don't need you in the shop again tonight, do they?" He pulled me toward his car parked down the street.

"Not unless Mel unleashes another invasion. Roaches maybe?" I shuddered then patted my pocket. "I've got my cell."

"Let's go." He glanced around. "If that woman knows what's good for her, she'll leave you alone. This isn't the way to win my heart." He helped me into his convertible, then settled in, hitting a button to let the top down before steering into traffic. The cool air felt good and I let the wind blow my worries away.

"I still don't understand how you ever got involved with a woman like Melisandra Du Monde." My comment made Jerry's hands tighten on the steering wheel. We were stopped at a red light.

"She's a strong woman and there is something about her..." He punched a button and the CD player came on. Trying to distract me? I punched it back off.

"Come on, Jerry, try to explain. This is important to me." I twisted under my seatbelt to face him.

"Right. So can you explain why Israel Caine has your panties in a twist every time you see him?" He gave me a knowing nod, like he'd made a point, before he stepped on the gas.

"I guess so. He has musical talent and I'm a sucker for that. He's handsome, tall, has those piercing blue eyes that make a woman feel--"

"Enough. I really don't want to hear a catalog of Caine's fine qualities. Mel got to me. She has a way of looking at a man that makes him feel powerful. Like he's a sex god."

"I swear you're blushing." And I swear I was getting pissed. Well, I'd asked for it.

"You make me feel that way too, Gloriana." He reached out and snagged my hand. "I've always wanted to protect you because you make me feel like I'm invincible. It's something a man needs--to be wanted, looked up to." He kissed my knuckles. "You and Mel have more in common than you know. But you're two sides of a coin. You're the good side. I discovered too late that she's the bad one."

"Oh, gosh, Jer." I glanced around and realized we were in his neighborhood, almost to his house. "This is bizarre and yet I understand what you're saying. It's like when a man makes me feel that I'm the most desirable woman in the world." I pulled our joined hands to my lips and ran my tongue across his knuckles. "You always do that to me."

"But I don't just see you as a sex object. I hope you know that." He pulled the car up in front of the garage and hit a button on the remote. He turned to face me as we waited for the door to open. "You are much more to me than a way to get my rocks off."

"Back at you." I smiled and popped off my seat belt, leaning over to kiss him. I crawled right over the console to make sure I could reach his mouth and give it my full attention. The steering wheel cut into my back but I didn't care.

"Let's put the car away and go upstairs." He gently lifted me off of him and drove the car into the garage.

I let him pull me out of the car and then followed him to the house. The garage door came down and we stepped into the kitchen. The house was quiet and smelled faintly of the cleaning supplies his housekeeper used. It was reassuring. At least Mel hadn't managed to come here yet.

Jerry lifted me into his arms and was about to carry me upstairs to his bedroom when my cellphone buzzed in my pocket.

"Oh, no!"

"Ignore it." He leaned down to kiss me then strode toward the staircase.

The buzzing was insistent before the call went to voice mail. I gently shoved at Jerry's chest when he stopped at the bottom of the stairs. "Let me check the message. I told them not to call unless it was an emergency in the shop."

"Go ahead." He set me on my feet. "I'll be upstairs in my office checking email. Come and get me when you're done."

"Count on it." I jerked my phone out of my pocket. The voice mail was from a number I didn't recognize. I hit play and pulled the phone to my ear.

"If you want our lover to live, you will meet me tonight. Be in the alley behind your shop in thirty minutes. Believe me, I would rather put a stake through his heart than see him with you forever more."

I recognized the voice instantly, smooth yet determined. So I'd finally get a face to face with Melisandra. Now I'd have to make up something to tell Jerry because he'd never let me meet her alone if he knew about it. I looked up the stairs toward his office. Damn. I really wanted to forget this woman's demands and enjoy an evening in Jerry's arms. But she was just crazy enough to kill him rather than let me have him.

Did I really believe my man couldn't handle her? I leaned against the bannister, suddenly weak in the knees. Maybe he could but I wasn't willing to take that chance. I'd almost lost Jerry recently and it had been the worst time of my life. No way was I going to risk that again. Who knew what kind of tricks a voodoo priestess had up her sleeve?

So I put on my game face and headed up. I hadn't told Jerry but I'd had strange pains in my body in the exact spots where those pins had been in the voodoo doll in the nights before it

had arrived. Crazy? Or was this woman more powerful than we realized. Lying to Jerry was nothing new even though I hated it. Saying good-bye to him? I just hoped it wasn't a permanent thing this time.

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I was on high alert when I flew into the alley behind my shop. The smell hit me immediately. It was bad enough that Mugs and Muffins was baking at this time of night, but added to the sugary muffin scent was that overpowering reek of evil. Melisandra was waiting for me.

"You must be Gloriana St. Clair." The husky voice came out of the darkness near my parked car. I heard the click of high heels as a woman strolled into the light. A breeze brought the unmistakable evidence that she was mortal. She trailed her hand over the trunk, the smile on her face making me shiver.

"I don't have to ask who you are, skulking here in the dark." I'd hoped Jerry had been exaggerating but she was beautiful, her dusky skin the color of milk chocolate. Her long black hair tumbled to her shoulders and her unusual gray green eyes, framed by long lashes, examined me like she could see right down to my soul. I straightened my own shoulders when all I wanted to do was shift again and head back to Jerry's arms.

"Yes, I am Melisandra Du Monde. I've been wanting to meet you for a long time, Gloriana. Gloriana. Ah, yes, the most

interesting Gloriana." My name had become a chant. She gestured with her right hand, her scarlet nails gathering air around her.

I stepped back before I could stop myself when that air swirled and darkened around her. Magic. I recognized it and quit breathing, sure inhaling it would sear my lungs and either muddle my senses or make me pass out. I glanced around, almost expecting some familiar demons to pop out from behind the cars to sing backup for her.

Hey, I was no ordinary vampire. I could take her. Malicious tricks or not, she could die. I couldn't. I smiled.

"I've seen your handiwork in my shop, Mel. Do you really think those stunts are going to help your cause with Jerry? So far you've just pissed him off on my behalf." I couldn't help noticing her voluptuous figure under a sharp black business suit that came from a well-known designer. She would have fit right in at a conference table in any Fortune 500 company. She was just Jerry's type with full breasts and generous hips. Only her eyes betrayed the crazy beneath her professional demeanor. "He really doesn't like to see me upset."

"Ah. Were you? Upset?" She blew on her palm and dust peppered my face, making my eyes burn. "That makes me very happy."

"Didn't you hear me?" I blinked to clear my vision, refusing to rub my eyes which stung like a son of a bitch. "Your dirty tricks are alienating Jerry."

"He'll get over it." She smiled. "When we're back together, Jeremiah will forget all about you. I have ways to ensure it. I know what he likes, you see."

"Get a grip on reality. He kicked you to the curb a long time ago. Where's your pride, woman?" Taunting her probably wasn't my best move, but I really didn't like being reminded that she'd had Jerry in her bed. I was trying not to lose my cool and jump her, rip out that beautiful hair and pound her head against the concrete. That would make me feel better but would probably give her the out-of-control reaction she was hoping for. I drew on every reserve I had and stared at her, trying for cold and disdainful.

"Did he tell you how we met, Gloriana?" She leaned against my car, drawing a line with her nail on the trunk.

"No." I wanted to hear this.

"I had rented a ballroom at his hotel in Miami. It was a sell-out. People pay small fortunes to hear me speak, get motivated." She smiled, her red lipstick perfect. All of her makeup was perfect. Damn.

"I can't imagine. What do they say? A sucker is born every minute?"

"I am worth every penny. As a life coach. People hear me speak and they are reborn. They leave my seminars and become successful, do great things." She flicked a disdainful look at the back door to my shop. "Some people are satisfied with a

little life. My clients are not. Check out my website. Read the testimonials."

"You know nothing about me or my life." Why didn't I just rip out her throat now? But that would make me as evil as she was. And then there was that cold, malignant wall surrounding her. I'd be stained by it, my soul tarnished, if I gave into my urge to kill her.

"You have worked your vampire wiles on my Jeremiah. But I will put an end to that. Then he will realize that I am his soul mate. The only woman to make him truly happy." She ran a fingertip down her throat. "You should see him when he drinks my blood, Gloriana. The pleasure, the passion--"

"Shut the hell up!" I vibrated with the need to tear her apart. Her smile was so sure, triumphant. Had Jerry actually kissed that mouth? I wanted to retch, or launch myself across the alley and obliterate her face so that she'd never kiss anyone, ever again.

No.

I forced a laugh. "Seriously? Don't you realize vampires will do and say anything to get mortal blood? Jerry played you, bitch. Used you as a donor and then moved on." I took a step toward her. "You were handy when he was in Miami, but that's over. He's lusty, I can attest to that. Obviously you were easy." I gave her my own cold smile. She didn't take it well, her teeth snapping together. If she'd been a vampire, she would

be snarling, her fangs down. "Now he's got his number one lover back. Me. You are old news, Mel. He's throwing you out with the trash."

"Old news? I'm not the one with hundreds of years invested in a failed relationship, Gloriana. Pobrecita." The air around her swirled and pushed at me, frigid and menacing. "You are a bad habit that Jeremiah needs to break. But once you are gone, he will be all mine."

"Get a grip. Jerry's not some trophy you can pass around, the prize in your pissing contest. He's a man who knows what he wants and it's not you. Now why don't you go back where you came from? Find some other man to terrorize." I shoved at her creepy air and met resistance. I hated that I was even arguing with her, sounding desperate. Damn it.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? For me to just leave him to you?" She raised her arms and howling creatures appeared around her. Spirits? Ghosts? Whatever, they gave me the creeps. "As long as you are between me and happiness, Gloriana St. Clair, you will never have peace of your own. This I vow." She muttered an incantation and the restless things around her wailed louder, rising and falling as she got more agitated. They zipped past me, tearing at my hair and snatching at my clothes.

Okay, I admit it. I hit at them like they were real and got nothing but air. It was all I could do not to dematerialize, just vanish the hell out of there. I reminded myself that I was

dealing with nothing more than a mortal playing with the dead. Yeah, dead. How much could they really hurt me? The ghosts I'd dealt with before had been benign, helpful. But the chilled air brushing against me when one of those howling creatures darted past made me jump in spite of myself.

"All right, you want to play hardball? It's on." I showed fang. "I don't think you know who you're messing with."

"We will see." She threw her arms wide and my ears rang as her followers screeched a final time, twirling into some kind of otherworldly dust devil before they disappeared. "He will be mine, Gloriana. It is decided."

Decided? I couldn't stand it. I threw myself at her, finally giving in to my hatred. I landed on empty concrete. She'd disappeared, just poofed. I jumped up and took a quick look around. She must have had an escape route figured out because she was really gone, nothing left of her but that stench of bad news.

I leaned against the back door into the shop, my stomach doing a pitch and roll as I hit the code for security and practically fell into the storeroom. I needed a bottle of synthetic blood. The first gulp helped, the second felt even better. A voodoo priestess. What next? I should know better than to ask that question.

