

Chapter One

“Knock. Knock.”

“Who’s there?” I said it without thinking, then realized there was someone inside my head, playing the old joke on me. I jumped up just as the dead bolts flipped and the door to my apartment crashed open.

“Your favorite nightmare, Glory St. Clair.” Alesa, a demon who could look gorgeous when she wasn’t showing her true nature leaned against the doorjamb, a grin on her hellish face. Tonight, she wasn’t bothering to hide a thing and I shuddered.

“You’re not my favorite anything. Go back to hell where you belong.” I frantically glanced around for a weapon. I was at a serious disadvantage with wet polish on my toenails and a deep conditioner on my hair under a towel turban.

“I wouldn’t toss that polish remover if I were you. It won’t hurt me and it’ll do a real number on your hardwood floor.” Alesa sauntered into the room, morphing into her human form, which was a huge relief. Not that it meant she’d *act* human, but at least I didn’t have to stare at razor sharp fangs or scaly snout and skin anymore. Total freak out.

“What do you want?” I grabbed a nail file with a sharp pointy end. At least I could make her bleed. Oh, wait. Demon blood, black and oily. Infectious. Not a good idea. I’d learned that the hard way.

“That’s right, sugar plum. Don’t want to get my blood in you again, do you?” She smiled, reminding me that she could read my thoughts without breaking a sweat. She was still sporting those evil teeth. “Last time I got inside you, we did some serious partying.” She glanced down and patted her tummy. “Guess what? I got what I wanted out of it.”

I gawked. Oh, no. It couldn’t be. “Is that what I think it is? Say it isn’t—”

“A baby bump?” Alesa came closer and I could smell her sickeningly sweet scent, the burned sugar candy smell of hell gone terribly wrong. “Oh, yes. When you and Rafe made it, Gloriana, you *made* it, if you get my drift.”

“No, that’s impossible. I’m a vampire. I can’t have children. My equipment died when I died. When Jerry turned me.” I sank down on the couch, my hand over my own stomach. It had been one of those unforeseen consequences I hadn’t thought through at the time. I’d been young and so hopelessly in love with Jeremiah Campbell back in 1604 I hadn’t cared what I’d lose as long as I could live forever with him. Only later, when the lust had burned off a little had I realized my hope for children had disappeared along with my mortality. Tears blurred the room.

“Aw, dry up, kiddo. This is great news. In a way, this baby is part yours, you know. You were my hostess with the mostess while I got Rafe to give me what I wanted. I told him when I arrived here in Austin that I wanted his baby.” Alesa sank down on the couch next to me and I gagged at the smell this close. “And I got it.” She looked at me critically. “Quit breathing, dumbass. Vamps don’t have to inhale, you know. Geez, who has morning sickness here, anyway?”

“Sorry, I guess it was just . . .” I took a last shuddery breath. What was Rafe going to do? He hated Alesa and sure didn’t want a child by her. A demon child. Sure, he had some demon blood, but he didn’t want to perpetuate that. “I’ve got to call Rafe.”

“Sure you do. Call the man and give him the good news.” Alesa leaned back and rubbed her swollen stomach again. “Get him to bring in some food. I know better than to expect you to have anything here. Burgers, fries—”she glanced down—“chocolate milk shakes for the little nipper.”

I began doing some mental calculations. It had been a tense spring, but a peaceful summer since I'd rid myself of Alesa. That bump was significant. "How far along are you?"

"Do the math, Glory. Six months. And I'm planning to stay right here until the little demon pops out. Won't that be fun? We can be roomies." She looked around, spotting my current roommate's computer on the kitchen table. "You are living alone, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not. This won't work, Alesa. I have a fledgling vampire living here with me. And I really don't want her around you. She's already met two of your cohorts from hell. That was two too many." I grabbed my cell phone. I did need to call Rafe but I dreaded it. He was doing well with his new club. We'd settled into a nice friendship, though it was still a bit tense since I'd gone back to Jerry, my sire, my always lover. Oh, God, what would Jerry think of this situation? Nothing like reminding him that I'd slept with Rafe while Alesa possessed me.

I stopped with the phone in my hand and gave Alesa a narrow-eyed look. "Are you sure that's how you got pregnant? While you were inside me? That really doesn't make sense."

"Sense? What world are you living in, vampire?" Alesa put her feet on my beautiful black lacquered coffee table. Nobody put their feet on that, especially not while wearing high heels, even if they were this season's Prada.

I stalked over and lifted them off and pushed them over to my tired thrift store sofa. I had a few pieces of nice, new furniture, courtesy of a fight Jerry and Rafe had had in my living room. They'd replaced the stuff they'd demolished and I was trying to keep the quality pieces in good shape. The sofa? I was saving up for a new one. Prada was actually an upgrade.

"Look. I'm not buying your story. I think you got yourself knocked up by someone else. Either after you left Austin or before you got here. Now head out. Take your tale to the real daddy. Or let Lucifer take care of you."

Her lips trembled and her eyes filled with dark tears. "Lucifer? Are you kidding me? He won't help. He's furious with me. Because I came back to hell pregnant. He didn't want me to ruin my figure. Doesn't

want brats running around down there either. It's an adult playground, he says. Babies spoil the mood." She wiped her wet cheeks. "Bastard. He could care less about *my* needs."

"Yes, well, he's the Devil, Alesa. What do you expect?" I almost felt sorry for her. Except she was such an evil person herself. What kind of mother would she be? And what kind of mother would want to bring up a child in hell anyway? I shuddered. "Who's the real father, Alesa?"

"I told you, it's Rafael. I'm thrilled. He'll be a wonderful father." She sighed and leaned back on throw pillows. "This is a miracle. A dream come true."

"No, it's not. But I'm calling him anyway. He can help me get the truth out of you." I hit speed dial for him. When he answered, I was suddenly speechless.

"Glory? What's up?" His voice was calm and I could hear music in the background. I glanced at the clock. It was still early and the club wouldn't be too busy yet.

"Can you come over, Rafe? I have sort of an emergency here." I turned my back on Alesa's grin. Oh, but she was loving this, that she'd get Rafe involved with her again and that I was the one putting them together.

"Food," she whispered.

"Sure. Can you give me a hint? What kind of emergency? Life and death? Or just one of your mini-crises. If it's one of those, call Blade." Rafe was all business. Which was the way he'd been treating me lately. It broke my heart.

"Work with me, please. This isn't something Blade can help with. I need you. I have company. Someone who wants to see you. Could you stop and pick up a sack of burgers and fries on your way? Oh, and a chocolate shake?" I was getting mental messages for dessert but ignored them. The baby was probably already going to be born reeking of sugar. Who knew what pouring more inside it would do. Bad enough that it had Alesa for its mother.

"You sure you didn't take one of those drugs again? That lets you eat? You remember what happened last time."

“No, I learned my lesson.” I put my hand on my tummy that could have passed for a minor baby bump itself. “Please hurry. This is someone you need to see.”

“From the amount of food, sounds like you have more than one person there.” The noise around Rafe stopped, so he must have stepped into his office. “You okay?”

“For now, but I’ll feel better when you get here. See you soon?” I gripped the phone tightly, wishing we were back to our old easy friendship.

“On my way.” He ended the call.

I turned to Alesa. “I swear.” I cleared my throat. “I swear that if you hurt my friend I will make sure there aren’t enough pieces of you left to go back to hell for Lucifer to fry. Are we clear?”

“Wow, Glory, get radical, why don’t you?” Alesa widened her eyes. “And, remember, I’m going to be a mommy. Think of my baby.”

“I am. The biggest favor I could do that child is to make sure he or she never sets eyes on you.” I stomped into the kitchen and plucked a bottle of supercharged synthetic blood out of the refrigerator. I twisted off the top and took a gulp. It wasn’t as good as fresh, but took the edge off. Then I hit speed dial and called my fledgling.

“Penny, are you working all night?” I’d seen her off to her job at a lab just an hour before Alesa had arrived.

“Supposed to. Though Ian’s talking about letting me off early. Trey and I may hook up later.”

“Great. Can you stay with him? I’ve got some company. An old, uh, friend.” I hated calling Alesa that, but didn’t want Penny to worry. My fledgling had a relationship with Trey, the shifter who worked for Rafe at his club, and had been spending a lot of time with him lately. I wasn’t going to feel guilty now suggesting she stay with him for her death sleep. She’d done it before and was basically an adult. We’d recently celebrated her twentieth birthday.

“No problem. You sound funny. You sure you’re okay?”

I sighed. Penny Patterson is a genius. No kidding. A prodigy with a doctorate and a bunch of other

degrees at her young age. Of course she'd picked up on my stress.

"Not okay, but Rafe is on his way over to help me with this person who isn't actually a friend. We'll manage but thanks for asking. Just stick with Trey so I don't have to worry about you too, okay? I don't want you to meet this character. We have a bad history." So much for not worrying Penny. But I really didn't want her popping in, not even for a change of clothes. "Seriously, don't drop by. I mean it."

"Whatever you want, Glory." Penny sighed. "But I could help, you know. Don't underestimate me in a fight. Ian's been working with me. He's got some amazing weapons here."

"I just bet he does. Thanks, but not this time." I hung up. Penny worked for Ian MacDonald. The vampire was another genius and had probably come up with some stuff I could use against a demon. But a pregnant one? That had to give me pause.

"Glory, you know I can read your thoughts and hear your conversations, don't you?" Alesa stood in the doorway. "Come back to the living room and tell me what you've been up to lately. Who is this Penny?"

"Like I'd confide in you? Forget Penny. Sit on the sofa and wait for your food." I finished my synthetic and rinsed out the bottle for the recycle bin. Good thing I didn't need to inhale, because the sweet stench of hell would have put me off my drink completely. When I heard the knock on the door, I realized I still had a turban on my head and no makeup. Swell. The only upside of this is that Alesa's news was bound to take my looks completely off Rafe's radar. At least my jeans were clean and hugged my butt and my T-shirt was a flattering red color.

I walked to the door, aware of Alesa's eyes following me. She had a smirk on her face that made me want to slap her. My stomach knotted as I threw the dead bolts.

"I could smell demon from the bottom of the stairs, Gloriana. What the hell is going on here?" Jeremy Blade, my lover and my maker, strode into the room. He stopped at the foot of the couch and stared at Alesa, who stretched as if to show off her plump breasts in her low-cut violet sweater. He didn't seem to notice, busy pulling one of his knives out of his boot.

“Jerry, stop. You know you can’t kill a demon with a knife.” I put my hand on his arm. I wasn’t sure what it took to kill a demon. Everything we’d tried had failed. They seemed indestructible. The most you could hope to do in a fight was to send them back to hell and it took a priest or other type of holy man and some other powerful stuff for that.

“Maybe not, but I could enjoy trying.” Jerry wasn’t about to put his knife away. “What’s this bitch doing here?”

“Causing trouble, what else?” I pulled Jerry toward the kitchen. “Alesa, don’t say a word. Please. Let me handle this.” I gave her a look that she actually heeded. She just sat back with a smile and a wave.

“Handle what? Me?” Jerry looked down at my hand on his arm. “I thought we were finally done with demons.”

“So did I.” I sighed and leaned against him once I had him in the kitchen. Jerry and I had been through some really rough times. He’d managed to forgive me for betraying him with Rafe, who was part demon. I’d blamed my infidelity on Alesa being inside me. Demon tricks. Then other demons had come back and made more mischief in our lives. Through it all, Jerry had been there for me.

I held onto him. He’d positively hate this latest development, but he’d see it as nothing to do with us. Rafe had a problem, end of story. I was going to have a fight on my hands if I wanted to help see my friend through this. And I was determined to do just that.

“She’s pregnant, Jer.” I looked up when I said this. To gauge Jerry’s reaction.

“The hell you say.” He slid his knife back into his boot. “Why’d she show up here?”

“She claims it’s Rafe’s child. Made while she was inside me.”

“That’s a cock-and-bull story if I ever heard one.” Jerry shook his head. “She wasn’t corporeal. And you . . .” He hugged me. “Sorry, lass, but you’ve got to know you can’t conceive a child.”

“I know that. I said the same thing to her. But here she is, stomach swollen, claiming Lucifer kicked her out for being pregnant and saying it’s Rafe’s.” I pushed back. “He’s on his way.”

“Let them hash this out, demon to demon.” Jerry watched me with narrowed eyes.

“You know I can’t do that.” I sighed. Now it started. Jerry would never understand the depth of my attachment to Rafe, the man who had guarded me for five long years. He’d risked his life for me and shared secrets that I’d told no one else. I loved Rafe. Just as I loved Jerry. Well, maybe not just as. Jerry and I had a long and turbulent history, four hundred years worth. Rafe and I were friends, briefly lovers and equals in a way Jerry and I could never be.

“You *could* leave them to it, but you won’t.” Jerry turned to stare into the living room. “I see no way for this to be resolved without you getting hurt.” He faced me again and shook his head. “Demons play dirty, you know that. Alesa will make sure you have naught to do with Rafael if she wants him for her babe’s father.”

“You’re right. Yet here she is. At my home, asking for my help.” I bit my lip. Was I being set up? Alesa hated me. I’d humiliated her in her world, keeping her trapped in my body far longer than most hosts would have managed, according to the other demons I’d met. And Lucifer wasn’t crazy about me either. Had he sent her here to get even with me? I’d managed to best him the last time we’d met. I knew he’d been pissed off about that. And when you pissed off the Devil . . .

“Tell her to leave. To take her brat and deal with Valdez elsewhere.” Jerry grabbed my shoulders. “It’s the only way you’ll be safe.”

We both turned at the knock on the door. I really needed to breathe. I’d missed the smell warning of Jerry’s arrival and now Rafe had managed to sneak up on me.

“Well, he’s here now. Let’s see how this plays out.” I touched Jerry’s cheek. “No matter what, please don’t pull out a knife again. That will only make things worse.”

“You’ve got two demons in your home and another one on the way. How could things get worse, Gloriana?” Jerry strode toward the door.

He just had to ask, didn’t he?