

Chapter One

You know, there's something very unsexy about meeting your lover behind a Dumpster. But, hey, at least Gloriana St. Clair still had a lover to meet. There had been some nights recently when I'd been afraid I'd have to give celibacy another shot. You think a woman PMSing is bad? Try taking on a celibate vampire. But no worries. My guy was waiting just around the corner.

I adjusted my black Cher-in-the-eighties wig, slung my purse over my shoulder and navigated the alley in my five inch heels.

"Jeez, something reeks." Valdez, my bodyguard, sniffed.

"You got that right. Even ritzy hotels have bad garbage." I had a leash attached to him, but God forbid I actually tug on it. We gave the Dumpster a wide berth and walked right into a guy

with a camera. Guys with cameras were the reason we were sneaking out the back door in the first place.

Camera Guy looked me over, trying to figure out if I was "Somebody." Then he eyed the dog on the end of the leash. Apparently even the canine failed the test.

"Forget it. I'm getting out of this pit and hitting the front door." The photographer snorted in disgust.

"Good idea. I heard Usher's coming down." I saw him sprint away and glanced down at Valdez. "Your disguise did the trick. Mine is pretty lame. Anyone can throw on a wig and sunglasses. But yours is the bomb."

"What'd I tell ya? I'm brilliant." Valdez grinned and practically dragged me to the street. "Blade's here. He's got Flo and Richard with him."

I still couldn't get used to my shape-shifting dog's new look. A Rottweiler. Cute, with his pink tongue and black mouth, but he looked a lot more dangerous than his usual curly coated Labradoodle self. Then I saw Blade, Jeremy Blade, my four hundred year plus lover and the man who'd made me vampire all those centuries ago. Then he'd been known as Angus Jeremiah Campbell III, heir to Clan Campbell. With his father an immortal vamp too, though, it didn't look like he'd be Laird any time soon. Which was fine by me. It left him free to roam the world. Lately that had included following me to Austin and now on this little trip to Los Angeles.

I stopped and checked him out. He always looked so good to me. Tall, buff, and sexy as hell. But tonight he was in a Hollywood style white silk shirt that made the most of his dark hair and eyes. Add expensive trousers with loafers and no socks and I wondered if some stylist had gotten hold of him.

Before I could ask, he had me in his arms and up against all that hard maleness. Yum. He tasted great and I could feel his fangs when he kissed me. Great start to my evening.

"Nice to see you too, Jerry." I grinned up at him when he let me come up for air.

"You look very sexy. Forget going out. Let's go back to my hotel room, Gloriana." He obviously appreciated the effort I'd taken with my wardrobe choice.

When you've got too much in the caboose like I do, you learn to play up your assets. So I'd chosen a plunging neckline with blue sparkles that matched my eyes. Add a push-up bra and I guarantee male eyes never went below my personal equator. I'd put on a twirly skirt in black with some strappy black heels that were just made for dancing. So no hotel room. I wanted to hit some clubs.

"We're going out, Jerry. I'm sure Flo is with me on this." I pushed him toward the car he'd rented. Do you wonder why we're not staying at the same hotel? Why are we sneaking around Dumpsters? Gee, nosey, aren't you? Okay, it's like this. I'm pretending to be engaged to a newly turned vampire, rock star

Israel Caine. Since I'm indirectly responsible for his "condition", I'm mentoring him, helping him deal with the complications. Like no daytime gigs. You see where I'm going with this? So when the paparazzi, like that guy I just avoided by the Dumpster, kept seeing us together, they assumed we were an item. Ray(All his friends call him Ray) decided to go along with it and next thing you know, we're pretending to be engaged.

Now I know I should have called a halt to things, but, sue me, I kind of groove on the idea of the world thinking I'm a rock star's main squeeze. I mean, me, slightly chubby Glory St. Clair, who is nobody, living in the fast lane? I'm just the barely-making-ends-meet owner of a vintage clothing shop in Austin, Texas and a sort of ancient vampire yet I'm engaged to a rock star. How cool is that?

And Ray is totally hot, sexy and when he sings... I was hooked on his music before he'd ever been dumped on me. Literally. Then he turned out to be a great guy and--would you believe it?--into me. I know, I thought I was dreaming. Sure, it's ninety percent gratitude for saving his life. Whatever.

It made Jerry super jealous. And that's not such a bad thing in a long term relationship. Guys can get to taking you for granted after the first few centuries. Anyway, Ray's up for a Grammy. And the awards are in a week. So we're here in Hollywood. Israel Caine and Gloriana St.Clair, the happy couple. I promised Jerry I'd break up with Ray when we get back to

Austin. After I get to wear the fabulous dress a designer is whipping up for me as we speak. For when we walk the red carpet. You see why I couldn't dump Ray just yet?

Now, can we get back to me sneaking out to meet Jerry? Ray's at press briefings, or rehearsals or something. He doesn't need me so I arranged to go out, discreetly, of course. Ray knows I'm really with Jerry. No big deal, darn it. My best friend Flo and her husband Richard came along on Jerry's chartered jet(yeah, Jerry's rich). Now I want to have fun. And not just one on one in a hotel room. We can do that and have done that, many times, in Austin. All over the world for that matter. And, after some dancing, I'm sure we'll do it again—I gave Jerry a hot look—and again.

"You sure you want to wait?" Jerry had read my mind and his own mental message promised all kinds of special services while his hand slid over my backside.

Valdez tugged on his leash and I snapped back to the here and now.

"Anticipation makes everything better." I grinned and patted Jerry's cheek. "Hi, guys. I love this car. You rented this, Jerry?" A vintage white Cadillac convertible with red leather interior sat at the curb. The top was down and three vampires lounged in the back seat. "Cool."

"Flo talked me into it. She said the Mercedes I was going for was stuffy." Jerry grinned. "She picked out the clothes too.

What do you think?"

"I think Florence da Vinci should be on your payroll as your stylist." I ran my finger in between Jerry's button holes to the smooth skin of his chest. "You look unbelievably hot." I leaned in and ran my mouth along his jugular. "I'll show you how hot later. She tell you to go commando?" I felt Jerry swallow against my lips.

"Flo, you're hired."

"Of course I did. See, Jeremiah? You must always listen to me, caro." Flo jumped up on her knees. "Glory, that wig is not your color. You should have gone for a deep auburn."

"I had to take what I could get, Flo. Barry, Ray's publicist, brought it to me. Maybe you can find me something better for tomorrow night." I smiled at Richard, then at the man on Flo's other side. "Damian, didn't know you were coming."

"I decided you needed a guide. I know this area. You want to explore the vampire scene here? I'm your man. There's a club on Hollywood Boulevard you must go to." Damian Sabatini, Flo's brother, winked. "Jeremiah isn't crazy about the idea, but I say, what's the harm?"

"Too many vampires in one place is asking for trouble."

I slipped into the front passenger seat, laughing when the grumbling in the back started. Because there was nowhere else for Valdez to go. The front had a console and there was a seatbelt law. So the three vamps in the back seat had to make

room for my pooch.

I don't go anywhere without my dog slash bodyguard. Not my rule—Jerry's. Since he's paid for a succession of Valdezes for centuries, even when Jerry and I aren't a couple, I go along with it. It's a safety issue. Valdez makes me feel protected. A single girl can't be too careful you know. And I've had some close calls lately. Not everyone loves me. Can you imagine that?

Jerry drove and Damian gave him directions. It was a cool clear night and traffic was heavy but moving. Flo and I had fun spotting famous boutiques along Rodeo Drive. Many of them were open late and we promised ourselves a shopping trip another night. Not that I could afford anything in those shops, but I did have enough credit on one of my cards to splurge on something if we could find a resale shop.

When Jerry pulled up in front of an art gallery, Flo and I looked at each other.

"What's this? I thought we were going dancing." I leaned over the back seat. "Damian?"

"It's here. But in back. Behind the gallery. We'll enter through the alley." Damian told Jerry where to park and we were soon on the sidewalk.

There was plenty of people-watching here. Interesting. And not just humans in the swim. There were the usual Goths, vamp wannabees and tourists clicking away with their digital cameras. But there were other entities too. The real deal who looked more

human than the humans. They exchanged knowing looks with us as we window-shopped various galleries and headed for a narrow gap between buildings. The fearful wouldn't have ventured down the dark walkway. We zipped along at vamp speed.

I was glad to be in the gloom and eager to see what a real vampire club looked like. I'd avoided them in the cities I'd been in before, not sure I'd be safe as a woman without a protector. Now, surrounded by Blade, Richard, Damian and Valdez, I figured that I had an army at my back. And, hey, Flo and I could kick butt ourselves.

The door in the alley was painted gray and had an old-fashioned hatch in it. Like a speak-easy I'd been to once, back in the roaring twenties. Damian dialed a number with his cell phone, proving that this was twenty-first century stuff, and the hatch opened. A man's face appeared, his nose quivered then he glanced at us before he nodded and threw open the door.

"Welcome." The man was dressed in L.A. evening wear. Expensive, casual and mostly black. He was tall, slim and vampire. "I'm afraid the shifter will have to wait outside unless he wishes to assume a more human form."

Not a conventionally handsome guy, but I wouldn't toss him out of my bed. Hey, figure of speech. I glanced at Jerry and smiled. Fortunately, he wasn't reading my mind, he was busy assessing the environment, checking for dangers, that kind of thing. Once a warrior, always a warrior.

"No, the shifter will wait out here." Jerry signaled Valdez, who grumbled, but settled next to the door outside.

Inside, there was music with a good beat loud enough to encourage dancing and a lighted floor crowded with couples. Some were same sex, some weren't. A bar in the corner was also crowded and I could see martini glasses being drained. Either they were selling synthetics or they had a supply of the real deal. My nose told me there was some fresh on hand and I was suddenly very thirsty. There was lots of chrome and glass and shiny gray walls that seemed to glow until the lights were dimmed as the music slowed. The effect was very urban chic, not the dark creepy crypt thing that a mortal would expect from a vampire club.

Our greeter was still by Jerry's side. "I'll need a credit card from one of you to run a tab. There's a cover, plus if you want to use one of the donors, we have private booths. I can get you a menu if you're interested."

"We want to see what you've got." Damian handed him a Platinum card.

The vamp smiled and showed fangs. "I'm Stephen, your host tonight. Let me know if you need something or someone you don't see on the menu." He snapped his fingers and a woman in a skimpy costume ala Star Wars handed each of us a laminated card. "And if you need an explanation of any of our choices, just ask your waitress. Let me lead you to a table." He took off across the

crowded room and I, for one, wasn't going to let him out of my sight.

Wow! Talk about a menu. What was a "Train Wreck?" And what about a "Three Alarm?" Since my shop had been fire bombed, I really didn't have the urge to check out anything to do with fire or could that mean three donors? Damian grinned and winked at me, obviously reading my mind. Hmm. Guess I was being too literal.

I did see that they sold fresh A-B Negative by the glass, hopefully from a blood bank somewhere. I'd sworn off hunting from humans. Stephen got us a round table near the dance floor and introduced Mandy, another barely dressed space cadet, as our waitress. Soon we each had a glass of our favorite blood type in front of us and I was ready to dance.

"Come on, Jerry, they're playing our song." I pulled him to his feet. I dropped my wig and sunglasses on the table.

"I don't think I've ever heard this song before."

I laughed. Of course he hadn't. Jerry's not exactly into rock bands. I stay very current. Because I believe in blending with my environment. As a rocker's girlfriend, I'd been really into this kind of music lately.

"Humor me, Jerry. Just stand there and look good and I'll dance around you." I leaned into him and gave him an encouraging kiss. That got him headed in the right direction and we were soon moving to the music.

When things slowed down and the lights dimmed to almost complete black except for the glowing pedestals under each table and the base of the bar, he pulled me into his arms. He'd taken some dance lessons not too long ago, but forget those. This was all about bodies and a rhythm that had more to do with sex than dancing. I held onto him and breathed in his yummy male essence. The music had just sped up, the lights brighter and I'd just about decided that Jerry's hotel room was the right place for us after all when I felt a hand land on my back.

"Gloria Simmons! I swear to God, I never thought I'd see you here in L.A."

I turned, ready to deny the alias, though that had been the name I'd gone by in Vegas for almost two decades. But when I saw who it was, I forgot all about denials.

"Sheri!" I threw my arms around her neck. I'd had one good vampire friend in those days and Sheri had been it. I'd told her I was leaving town and intended to keep in touch, but the emails had dwindled lately. "It's Glory St. Clair now. This is Jeremy Blade."

"Tell me this isn't the Scotsman you were pining for all those years." Sheri looked Jerry over from head to toe. "Girl, you were crazy for avoiding him."

"That's what I keep telling her." Jerry pulled both of us off the dance floor toward our table. "So you knew Glory in Las Vegas. She didn't really dance topless, did she?"

Sheri winked at me. "Why wouldn't she? She's got the perfect equipment." She threw back her shoulders, stunning in a short red dress cut low in front. The clingy material made it clear her dancer's body was perfect. I'd always used tricks to make mine look good.

"Thanks, Sheri. It really is great to see you. Remember, what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas." I winked back at her and smiled at Jerry.

"I hear ya. But, Glory, honey, you should come back. I've got a part in the new vampire show. You'd love it. They want you to wear fake fangs, even troll through the casino in them." She laughed and tossed her dark hair. "They figure I'm one of their best erotic angels. Cause I wear my fangs everywhere."

"Sheri, you've got to meet my other friends." I didn't see Flo and Richard but Damian strolled up to the table, a full glass in his hand. "Damian, meet my old friend Sheri LaDouce. Sheri, this is Damian Sabatini."

"Honey, this year it's Sherry Landolt. You know how it is." She turned and got an eyeful of Damian. "Well, hello there."

In typical Damian fashion, he picked up her hand and pulled it to his lips. "Bon jour, mademoiselle. Parlez vous, Français?"

"Mais oui." Sheri fluttered her eyelashes. "Let's cut the foreign stuff, Glory never could get her mouth around any of that. But it makes for wonderful pillow talk, don't you think, cheri?"

"Ah, I think we already speak the same language." Damian grinned at me. "I love your friend. Will you dance, Sheri?" He gestured at our waitress, pressed some bills in her hand and in moments, the lights dimmed again and there was another slow sensual song playing.

"Oh, boy, I think I'm going to have my hands full, literally." Sheri laughed and let herself be pulled toward the dance floor. "Nice meeting you, Jeremy. See ya, Glory."

"Shouldn't you warn her about Damian?" Jerry looked like he wanted to go after the couple.

"Should I warn Damian about her is the question." I laughed and sat at the table. Damian's a Casanova type, but I knew Sheri was more than a match for him. "You should have seen her operate in Vegas. Sheri never has money problems because she always has a sugar daddy. Damian better get that Platinum card ready. Before Sheri gets through with him, she'll have shopped Rodeo Drive from one end to the other, courtesy of his plastic."

"Good for her. He can afford it. Now about that topless thing." Jerry stared at my cleavage. "I know you'd look good, Glory, but the thought--"

"Here's Flo and Richard. I wonder if they found out what a 'Train Wreck' is." I wasn't about to let Jerry know if I'd danced topless or not. I figure a little mystery in a relationship is a good thing.

"Glory, you'll never guess who we just met." Flo sat next

to me.

"It's bogus. Don't get her stirred up about this nonsense." Richard sat and tapped his fingers on the table. He looked as handsome as Jerry did, but Richard is white blond and tanned with bright blue eyes. Obviously Flo had picked out his wardrobe too and he had a Beverly Hills hottie look to him that had other women in the room licking their lips. I'm sure Flo had been busy sending mental messages to those vamps to back off or die.

"You never know, Ricardo, it might be true. I owe it to my best friend to let her know, amante, that what she thought is impossible could be possible." Flo grabbed my arm.

"What are you talking about? What's impossible?" I winced. Flo's got a grip on her.

"There's a man here tonight. He's famous among the Los Angeles vampires. He claims he can make anyone, even vampires, lose weight." Flo frowned down at her thighs and I wanted to slap her. Excuse me? They were barely a six. What did she want? A four?

Wait. Had I heard her right? Not possible. Back in 1604 when Jerry had turned me vampire after I'd begged him to--so we could be together forever--I'd been "healthy." I mean, women who carried some extra weight back then were voluptuous and proud of it. So I didn't think ahead. If I'd known then what I know now, I'd have fasted a few days before the big turning. Lost ten pounds or so first. But, no, Glory was bloating, or at least

that's my story and I'm sticking to it. So I was stuck forever with hips that would have been great for delivering twelve pound babies if I'd ever had that option. And thighs... Well, God knows if I were a Thanksgiving turkey, entire Pilgrim villages could have feasted on one of my thighs.

"Florence da Vinci. Are you telling me that there's a man here who says he can help a vampire lose weight?" I stood. Ready to ambush this guy and use every bit of my credit limit for a shot at skinny.

"Gloriana, stop this nonsense. You're perfect. Why would you want to lose weight?" Jerry stood beside me and patted my rump. Wrong move.

I turned slowly and looked him in the eye. He must have seen something there because big brave warrior Jerry actually backed up a step.

"Don't ever pat my butt in public again." I said this past the fangs that had shot down into my mouth like maybe I was thinking about ripping out Jerry's throat. Overreaction? Maybe. But, come on. Do you like having your fat ass patted in public? Why not just shine a spotlight on it? Or hang a sign? Hey, world, look at my lady's big butt. I just couldn't take it at that moment. Not when I suddenly, against all reason and rational thinking, had a glimmer of hope that maybe, just maybe, I might finally be able to do something about a problem that had weighed me down for centuries.