

# **I Was A Vampire Wedding Planner**

## **Alecia Monaco**

**All rights reserved.**  
**Copyright ©2006 Alecia Monaco**

**No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared by any electronic or mechanical means, including but not limited to printing, file copying or sharing, and email, without prior written permission from Changeling Press LLC. Willful violation of this policy will result in suspension of account privileges and will lead to prosecution.**

**WARNING: Illegal files may contain viruses.**

**ISBN (10) 1-59596-456-8**  
**ISBN (13) 978-1-59596-456-4**  
**Formats Available:**  
**HTML, Adobe PDF,**  
**MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader**

**Publisher:**  
**Changeling Press LLC**  
**PO Box 1046**  
**Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046**  
**[www.ChangelingPress.com](http://www.ChangelingPress.com)**

**Editor: Crystal Esau**  
**Cover Artist: Bryan Keller**



This e-book file contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language which some may find offensive and which is not appropriate for a young audience. Changeling Press E-Books are for sale to adults, only, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

**To B.E.M.and V.W.M.**  
**For allowing me to be myself**

## Chapter 1

“Yes, that’s right.” Jade Simons rolled her eyes and adjusted the microphone of her telephone headset. “No roses.” She listened patiently. “I realize that roses are a staple for wedding arrangements, but the bride and groom are *vampires*.” She listened for the florist’s incredulous reaction, and got it in record time. “Yes, I said *vampires*.” She waited for the florist’s squealing reaction to die down. “Well, they *are* legal citizens now, and as such, are allowed to vote, own property... and marry.”

And thank goodness for that. The new vampire citizenry had helped Jade turn Nocturnal Nuptials from a one-employee operation to a fully staffed wedding planning firm.

Now, if some like-minded soul would open a vampire-oriented florist, she’d be in seventh heaven.

“Orchids would be lovely.” She scrawled a few notes. “The bride does prefer white flowers.” As she’d learned during the past year, while some vamps enjoyed playing with the dark and brooding stereotype, plenty of her brides wanted pastel floral arrangements and Vera Wang gowns. “If you could have a courier bring over your portfolio, I’m sure the bride and groom can find something they’ll love.”

Jade made arrangements for the portfolio to be delivered to Nocturnal Nuptials, and penciled in a note in the planner she’d set aside just for the Kintari wedding. She’d show the couple the portfolio at their appointment the next evening. An appointment, she reminded herself, that she’d have to work in sometime between taking her cat, Tuesday, to the vet and picking up a case of synthetic blood so she could offer her clients a beverage.

She ended the call with a sigh. Florists just didn't seem to understand the finer points of vampirism. While not all vampires were allergic to roses, those from certain bloodlines could become violently ill when exposed to a single American Beauty.

The future Mrs. Kintari was one such vamp.

When the rest of the wedding service industry finally caught up with the times, it would be one happy day for Jade. Few businesses kept nighttime hours, so she worked in the late afternoons, carrying on the much needed work of talking to flower shops, caterers and jewelers. Clothing designers seemed to be more flexible. She'd never run into a problem with scheduling a fitting for a gown or suit after dark, which was when she saw almost all of her clients, unless half the couple happened to be human -- a phenomenon, she noted, that was becoming increasingly more common.

All special needs aside, working with vampires was still preferable to her former job as assistant to one of Houston's busiest wedding planners. She had enough Bridezilla stories from working at that place to give Stephen King nightmares. What were a few ancient and extremely powerful vampires compared to dealing with a single overbearing mother of the bride?

That was one great thing about the undead. They usually didn't come with parents.

Her desktop intercom buzzed. She punched a button with a French manicured nail. "Yes?"

"Your six o'clock is here." Her assistant's chipper voice blared through the speaker like an overdose of caffeine.

"Thank you, Avery." She smoothed her curls back by force of habit, hoping the casual upswept style she'd coerced them into that afternoon had held up halfway well. "Send them in."

"Not them," Avery said, his voice dropping into a teasing whisper. "Just *him*. And what a hunka-hunka burning undead love he is."

"Er... thank you, Avery." She pulled the file for her six o'clock from her inbox. "I think."

She glanced at the neatly typed file label. Dimero/Angelle. Opening the file, she glanced at their application. Both were vampires, he much older than she. He'd been in the States for centuries, while she had recently emigrated from France. Nothing unusual there, except for the groom being a low level officer of the Vampire Court.

Jade shrugged, setting the file to one side and opening a fresh new copy of the pink planning book she used for each event. It was certainly unusual for the groom to come to the first meeting alone, but not unheard of. Maybe the bride would be along shortly. She could've gotten caught in traffic. Or she could be a late riser, unable to leave her daytime retreat until the sun was well below the horizon and full dark had arrived. Either way...

"Ms. Simons?" A deep male voice with the faintest undertone of an accent interrupted her musings.

She looked up, her features arranged into the smile she used for clients. But the tall figure before her made it hard to smile. He made it hard to think. Heck, he made it hard to do anything but drool.

He crossed the room to her desk in a few long strides, holding out a hand to her. "Allow me to introduce myself." Eyes the golden brown of priceless amber met hers. She found her hand enclosed in his grip, which was both warm and powerful. "I am Renaldi D'Aria, the best man for Antonio Dimero. I come to you on his behalf."

Her sense of professionalism saved her, stopping her from undressing him with her eyes right then and there. "Of course." She pulled her hand from his with difficulty. His gaze still held hers, not in an attempt to spellbind her -- she'd worked with too many vamps to fall for that particular trick -- but with intense curiosity. It unnerved her. She smoothed her hair again and then gestured to the comfortable overstuffed chairs facing her desk. "Please, have a seat."

He folded all six feet three inches of lean muscle into the chair across from her. "I'm so glad you could work me into your schedule. You seem to be the only wedding planner in Houston that caters to our kind." He said the last two words in an offhand

manner that told her he was one of the older ones, comfortable with himself both as a man and as a vampire.

"It's no trouble at all." She tried not to stare, turning her attention to the file she'd laid out on her desk. But it was hard to drag her focus from him. Vampires tended to be the gorgeous, ageless creatures that centuries of myth had portrayed them to be, but Renaldi D'Aria blew the competition away. Perfectly chiseled features, from his high angular cheekbones to his strong nose and blatantly sensual mouth, added up to a face that would've made Michelangelo weep. Olive skin, luminescent with that glow that only vampires seemed to possess, covered his impressive form. Lush black waves of hair fell to his shoulders in a carelessly graceful style that almost begged to be touched.

But touching him needed to be the last thing on her mind. *Business, Jade. Remember the first rule of professionalism? Never get romantically involved with the clients.*

Not, she reminded herself, that she'd have a chance with such a mouthwatering specimen. She simply wouldn't be his type.

She shifted in the leather covered desk chair, suddenly aware of every ounce of her plus-sized frame. Not only would a guy like Renaldi have his pick of every undead bombshell out there, he probably had a line of human supermodels lining up to fill his metaphorical dance card.

Someone with her figure flaws wouldn't stand a chance. An old familiar pain stung her heart... the pain of being last picked for any team in gym class at school, the pain of not having a date for the spring formal, of being the kind of girl the guys saw as a friend instead of date material.

Sure, she'd had a few romances over the years. But even her profession seemed to declare her destiny. She was always the bridesmaid, never the bride.

And right now, the bride was the intended of Renaldi D'Aria's best friend.

"You see," he continued, and Jade realized that she'd been only half listening, lost in her own thoughts, "he is so busy right now with the upcoming convergence of the Vampire Court, and his intended is new to this country. She doesn't know the

language or the customs. He has entrusted me to make his wedding the most beautiful night of his life." He leaned across the desk, catching her hand in his again. The touch of his skin burned along hers like she'd stepped onto a live wire. She shook hands with clients every day, and none had ever sent a surge through her body the way he'd just done.

"Will you help me, Ms. Simons?" He squeezed her hand, and she could sense the immense strength of him, barely leashed in that casual touch. "Will you help me make this wedding perfect?"

She should've heard warning bells going off. Fire alarms, code red alerts telling her to bow out, that it would be impossible to work with a man she found so devastatingly attractive without losing her heart.

But all she could feel was the caressing sensation of his hand on hers. His honey brown gaze blinded her to everything else, and his dulcet tones drowned out even the most strident of her own misgivings.

"Yes," she heard herself say in a voice that sounded oddly distant. "Yes, Mr. D'Aria, I'll take the job."



## Chapter 2

Renaldi fought the urge to glamor the woman across from him. His sense of honor would not allow him to use any form of his powers to win her favor, but the temptation to do so was overwhelming.

Temptation. Jade Simons was the very personification of the word.

He let her hand slide out of his, savoring the satiny feel of her skin. She'd already agreed to take on the task of planning Antonio's wedding. Why did he feel unsettled, as if matters between them were far from resolved?

She rested her arms on the desk blotter, giving him a blank expression that revealed nothing of her reaction to him. Yet he could sense her attraction to him, the way any master vampire could detect strong emotions. "If you'll give me just a minute to go over the contracts, you can deliver them to the bride and groom tonight."

He nodded, watching as she focused her attention on the sheaf of papers she'd pulled from the file on her desk. It gave him the chance to stare at her without interruption, and he took it, shamelessly looking his fill.

From her burnished copper curls and ivory skin to the ripe curves of her body, she looked like a woman transported from another era... an era he could remember as well as a mortal could remember the previous day.

It was the time and place when he'd been a mortal man. It was an era when goddesses with bodies like succulent fruit were worshipped in temples worthy of their singular beauty.

Jade Simons could've very well stepped out of a time machine, a statue of Venus come to life in decadently curving flesh and what he was sure would be mouth-watering blood.

"I think you'll find everything you need in here." She handed him the sheaf of papers with an uncertain smile.

Oh, yes. He was sure he'd found exactly what he needed.

He'd been searching for a woman like her for centuries.

She was the woman every man of Italian descent heard about his entire life, anticipating her arrival with a mixture of dread and anticipation.

Jade Simons was his thunderbolt.

\* \* \*

"It's been a pleasure meeting you." Jade stood up, consciously adjusting her lilac suit and silk blouse. She stuck her hand out awkwardly. "I'm looking forward to working with you and the lucky couple."

He took the proffered hand in a motion as smooth as water rippling over stones. "The pleasure," he said as he bent over her hand, "was all mine."

Such clichéd words, but said in tones that made her body tighten in all the right places. When his lips brushed the back of her hand, her pulse skittered into a running gallop. Aware that he could detect the change in her heart rate with his vampiric senses, she tore her hand away from him like someone who'd scalded herself on a red-hot stove.

The golden honey eyes filled with concern. "Forgive me, Ms. Simons."

"Jade," she interjected.

He gave her a slow nod. "Jade," he continued, "I did not mean to make you uncomfortable."

Oh, great. Ten minutes with the guy and she'd already made a certifiable ass of herself. "No, really, I..." She what? Was uncomfortable with how turned on she was by him? Wrong answer. "I'm just jittery. Too much caffeine so I can keep vampire hours." She caught the potential insult as soon as it came from her lips, and clapped her hand over her mouth in embarrassment.

Renaldi threw his dark head back and laughed. "I have a feeling, Ms..." He stopped. "Jade," he corrected himself. "I have a feeling that I'm going to enjoy working with you very much."

She gave him a weak smile. She didn't know if *enjoy* was the exact word she would've chosen, but she sensed that working with Renaldi D'Aria would definitely be a challenge to her... on every possible level.

## Chapter 3

“Good evening, Jade.” Renaldi rose to his feet when she entered the ballroom.

Jade made one last-ditch effort to steel her jangled nerves as she sat down in the teak dining chair across from Renaldi and returned his greeting. “I think you’ll be pleased with the tasting menu I’ve arranged.” She gestured at the white-clad chef’s assistant waiting in the wings of the hotel ballroom where the wedding reception was to take place. “We’re doing the tables all in white, like this.” She indicated the smooth pearl colored damask cloth draping the cozy round table for two where they sat. “As soon as Marie and Antonio decide on a centerpiece, I’ll place the order with the florist, and we can move on to choosing her bouquet.”

Renaldi nodded in approval. “Excellent. You are competent beyond your years, Jade.”

She blushed furiously under his praise. “I do what I can to make each wedding as perfect as possible.”

The chef’s assistant appeared at their table, a tray in each hand. “The chef thought you would prefer to test the cake samples.” He set a china plate covered with tiny squares of cake in an array of flavors in front of Jade.

“For you, sir, we have samples of the finest synthetic blood in a variety of flavors.” He placed a silver tray gleaming with shot glasses and a single flute of champagne in front of Renaldi. “We have Type O.” The assistant swept his hand toward the first shot glass. “A classic. Then there’s black cherry...” He pointed to the next glass. “... dark chocolate, merlot, raspberry, and our house specialty, red velvet.” He took the glass bubbling over with champagne from the tray and placed it to the side of Jade’s plate. “A glass of our finest vintage, sure to please any human wedding guests.”

Renaldi examined the glass with approval. "We'll have many swans at this wedding --"

"Swans being the term for human donors?" Jade interrupted.

"Yes," Renaldi answered. "And we must have a choice vintage for them to drink."

With a brisk nod, the assistant departed, vanishing between the swinging doors that led to the hotel kitchen.

Jade squirmed in her chair, overcome with hyperawareness of Renaldi sitting so close to her. She could feel the warmth of his legs beneath the table. If she moved forward in her seat a fraction of an inch, her knee would brush up against...

"A toast." Renaldi's silken voice interrupted her thoughts. He lifted the tiny glass of Type O.

Jade followed suit, raising her champagne flute, keeping her fingers wrapped around the slender stem. "To the lucky couple."

Renaldi's gaze caught hers like a snare. "To love."

Once again, she felt that hypnotic pull, that magnetic draw that was more than mere vampire tricks. She opened her suddenly dry mouth and managed to whisper an echo of his toast. "To love."

They clinked their glasses together with a perfect *ping*.

She took a small sip of her champagne, letting its smooth fruity taste fill her mouth even as the bubbles tickled her nose. Renaldi inhaled deeply from his glass, apparently testing the aroma of his drink before tasting it. She watched in rapt fascination as he wrapped his lips around the edge of the glass and took a slow sip, savoring the ruby colored liquid with his eyes closed.

He swallowed, breathing out in a deep exhale.

Jade realized she'd been holding her breath the entire time, taking in the spectacle of him turning a simple drink into a full sensory experience. She let it out with a gusty sigh.

The man was sex incarnate. How could she *not* stare?

"You haven't touched your cake."

She forced herself to return to the present moment at the sound of his voice. She was there to choose a wedding cake for the human guests, not to imagine a chocolate covered vampire nestled between her sheets. Quickly, she stabbed the tiny square of carrot cake with her fork, getting her least favorite out of the way first. "How was the Type O?" She shoved it into her mouth, glad for the comforting distraction of food, even if eating in front of the walking fantasy across from her made her a little uncomfortable.

"Quite enjoyable." He lifted the next glass, swirling it like a snifter of brandy. He took a sip, letting out a sound of pleasure that made Jade quiver. "But not as good as this black cherry." He drained the glass and returned it to the tray. "Marvelous how they can add flavors to synthetic blood. It allows me to taste things I haven't experienced in centuries."

She moved on to the chocolate cake. "That must be a real treat for you." She shook her head. "I can't imagine giving up chocolate."

He took a drink from the glass of chocolate flavored blood. "Nor should you."

She snorted, staring down at her half empty plate. "My bathroom scale would disagree with you."

His hand was on hers before she knew it. He moved with the speed only the truly old vampires could produce. "Nonsense. You are a vision of loveliness, like finding a blooming rose among a nest of brambles."

She knew better than to mention her weight-related angst in front of a client. It must've been the champagne lowering her inhibitions.

Lowered inhibitions and a man she wanted to lick from head to toe were *so* not a good mix.

"It's kind of you to say so." She heard the stiffness in her voice. She knew he was only being kind. After all, he'd shown himself to be nothing but a gentleman since the moment they'd met.

"I'm not... kind." The hand resting on hers moved slowly up her arm, caressing the bare skin above her inner wrist.

She dropped her fork to the plate with a clatter.

He leaned forward, his knee brushing against hers, then angling between her legs, parting them slightly.

"Look into my eyes." When she kept her gaze fixed on the table before her, he continued. "Tell me it's only kindness you see reflected there."

She finally forced herself to look up and meet his eyes. They were a shade darker, the pupils enlarged to an abnormal degree, the way vampire eyes tended to do when they were extremely hungry.

Or aroused.

Her breath caught in her throat. "Renaldi..."

He interrupted her attempt at protest. "I find you... entrancing. Beautiful."

This wasn't happening. Any minute now, Mike In The Morning would come blasting through her clock radio, waking her up from what had to be a dream.

His voice dropped to a husky register. "I have not been able to stop thinking of you since the first time I saw you."

She dropped her napkin to the floor, overcome with nerves, embarrassment, a plethora of uncomfortable feelings. No one had ever said such things to her.

"Flirting with the wedding planner won't get you a discount, you know." She tried for a humorous tone, but it fell flat. The shaking edge of uncertainty in her voice sounded anything but comical.

He removed his hand from her arm and slid back in his seat, ending all physical contact in one smooth movement. "I must apologize for my unwanted advances."

*Unwanted?* In what universe would *any* advance from this man be unwanted? "It's not that, it's... I... have... I have..." *Body image issues. Hang-ups. Inhibitions.*

He let out an unpleasant laugh. "How could I assume that you wouldn't have a man in your life already?" He shook his head. "Please, forget my blunder. I was..." He gave her a wistful smile. "... quite taken with your many charms." He raised another

glass of synthetic blood. "Let us say no more of this and continue to work together as partners and friends."

*Friends?* How did she go from captivating him with her charms to being back in "friend" territory?

*He's messing with my head.* What other explanation could there be? No way was the most gorgeous specimen of man she'd ever met, alive or undead, interested in the likes of *her*.

And not just gorgeous, but charming, polite...

She sighed again. "Partners and friends," she repeated. "Sounds like a plan."

A plan for misery.

Why, why, why had she agreed to take this job?



## Chapter 4

Renaldi paced the luxurious basement retreat of his spacious Houston home, waiting for the sun to break over the horizon and send him on to his daily dance with oblivion.

Lately, oblivion was the only thing that stopped him from obsessing about Jade.

What a fool he'd made of himself earlier, letting his lust take control. He'd made overtures to a woman he only knew in a business capacity.

A woman who was apparently attached to another.

He raked a hand through his hair, grinding his teeth. If that was so, the man in question had done a poor job of making her feel like the goddess she was. She seemed blatantly uncomfortable with the compliments he could hardly help but pay her. How could she be unaware of her own beauty and sensual allure? In the world of his youth, she could've taken her place beside Aphrodite. Surely she had men from every walk of life paying her tribute.

Frankly, the woman was driving him out of his mind.

If this man she was involved with had somehow made her think less of herself, then he, Renaldi, would step in and woo her away from this vile creature. After all, what right did this other man have to her? This woman belonged to him, Renaldi D'Aria, and no other. She was his thunderbolt.

He would show her the depth of her worth. If he had to pleasure her for a thousand and one nights, it was a task he was more than willing to do.

His painfully aroused body agreed.

But first, he mused, a little seduction was in order. He would put her to the test and see if she truly loved this other man, or if the relationship was merely a placeholder until a greater passion came along.

But how to arrange matters... that was another question. First, he had to engineer circumstances to place them together in a romantic and intimate setting. He rubbed his forehead, his thoughts tangling and snarling like yarn in the capable paws of a cat.

*But wait.* There *was* the matter of Antonio's honeymoon to settle. He and Marie planned to spend their wedding night in Houston before departing for a cruise to the old country on a vampire-friendly ship the next day. Wouldn't a cursory tour of the finest honeymoon suite in the city be just the thing for the wedding planner and the best man to explore together?

It was the first of many things he hoped to explore with Jade.

Renaldi strode over to his marble topped wet bar, where a bottle of Vlad's "Death By Chocolate" flavor synthetic blood sat in a warmer, keeping it a perfect 98.6 degrees. He reached for a snifter and filled the base of the glass with the red liquid.

Yes, that was the plan. He'd invite her to examine the honeymoon suite at the Hotel Marmont downtown.

He flopped down in the burgundy leather armchair in front of the fireplace where candles flickered on the hearth in lieu of an actual fire. As a vampire, fire was his least favorite of elements. Unfortunately, his element to control was wind, which usually had the adverse effect of stirring fire and making it worse.

On the other hand, the ability to control wind had the distinct advantage of allowing him to send messages along its currents. A smile crept across his face. He'd start the seduction then and there with a little help from the elements.

He closed his eyes and cleared his mind, then focused all of his attention on Jade. They were not bound in any sort of way, but he could still direct the wind to her by concentrating his energy on her name and the image of her beautiful face floating across the screen of his consciousness.

*Jade*, he thought, raising his right hand slowly, palm up, calling the wind to him. It had no choice but to obey.

*Jade, he repeated to himself, recalling mental pictures of her like a slideshow in his mind. Know this. Thoughts of you are my waking torment. The sleep of death brings my only relief.*

*I dream of you.*

And with that, he sent the breeze winging its way toward her, spiraling through the pre-dawn darkness to wrap her in his invisible embrace.

## Chapter 5

“Your Veuve Clicquot, sir.” The room service waiter gestured to the famous yellow-labeled bottle nestled in a crystal ice bucket.

“Excellent.” Renaldi nodded his approval. Jade had obviously enjoyed the champagne at their menu tasting the previous night, and watching her indulge herself had brought him immense satisfaction.

“And a bottle of chocolate raspberry Vlad’s.” The waiter smiled, indicating the black and red bottle in the custom warmer.

“Everything seems to be in order.” Renaldi examined the crystal bowl filled with ripe strawberries and the accompanying dish of whipped cream. “This is your wedding package?”

“Minus the blood, yes.” The waiter glanced nervously at Renaldi. “But we’re willing to add it gratis when one of the happy couple is of the vampiric persuasion.”

“Very good.” Renaldi handed the waiter a generous tip. “That will be all for now, thank you.”

The waiter backed himself out of the room as if he didn’t feel safe taking his eyes off Renaldi. The vampire smiled to himself. With the advent of synthetic blood, his kind had no need to drink from humans anymore.

Except, he noted, in the heat of passion.

Turning his thoughts in a less amorous direction, he walked around the spacious suite. He’d arranged to have the sitting room filled with flower arrangements. Thankfully, he was not among the bloodline with rose-borne allergies. The bedroom, with its massive round bed and white satin coverlet, was bathed in the warm glow of vanilla scented candles.

He wanted to show Jade unequaled sensual pleasure, the kind of pleasure he was sure she had the capacity to experience, after watching her eat the wedding cake with such apparent relish.

He looked down at the bed, picturing Jade on it, her bare skin against a pool of white satin...

"Wow, who died?" Jade's voice called from the sitting room.

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I did, several hundred years ago." He stood in the doorway that led from the bedroom to the sitting room, catching her in the act of inhaling the fragrant scent of a rose.

"I take it you're not among the rose-challenged." She looked up from the floral arrangement and met his eyes with a smile.

"Fortunately not." He wandered into the sitting room, admiring the way her pale skin and coppery curls contrasted with her carefully tailored black suit. "Do you like the suite?"

She glanced around the room, taking in the details. "It's beautiful... but I don't remember seeing flowers included in the info they faxed over to me today."

"The flowers are my own personal..." He reached out to stroke her upper arm, earning a gasp from her. "...touch."

She closed her eyes, a flush creeping across her cheeks. "Renaldi..." She took a step back from him. "You have to realize what an attractive man you are."

"As you modern Americans would say, I hear a 'but' coming." He let her slip from his grasp with regret.

Her eyes darkened a shade. "But I never get involved with clients."

He crossed the room and sank down onto a white plush loveseat. "While I admire your business ethics, I fail to see the harm in mixing a little business with pleasure." He leaned forward, snaring her with his gaze and letting a trickle of his power flow out toward her. "Why do you show such loyalty to a man who obviously cannot appreciate you?"

Her forehead creased. "What man? You mean Avery? Because let me assure you, he doesn't appreciate *any* women, not in the way you mean."

He dismissed her reference to her assistant with a wave of his hand. "No. It's this boyfriend of yours, the one you spoke of at the menu tasting. The one who has made you doubt your own worth."

Her mouth dropped open. "I never said I had a boyfriend."

He shrugged. "It was implied."

His cell phone rang before she could answer. With a curse of impatience, he removed it from his pocket.

"It's the Court," he said with a glance at the tiny LCD display. "This will only take a moment, if you'll excuse me."

Jade gave him a nod, and he rose to his feet, making his way back to the bedroom in two strides.

"Yes, Melaina?" A call from the empress of the Gulf Coast Vampire Court was never a good thing.

"We have urgent business to discuss." Melaina's voice, honed to a perfect pitch of seduction through centuries of practice, purred through the phone.

"What might that be, your grace?" He held his breath, waiting.

"Your friend Antonio has chosen a wife from among our ranks and is soon to be wed." A low chuckle crackled through the speaker at him. "Now you must do the same. Choose a bride from among Court blood by the next full moon, or forfeit your place among us forever."

Renaldi bit back a curse. This night was not going as planned. Not at all.

\* \* \*

Jade took a deep breath, trying to rein in her runaway thoughts. What on earth made Renaldi think she had a boyfriend?

And what was behind his not so subtle innuendoes? Surely he didn't expect her to believe he found her attractive. There *had* to be some hidden agenda. But what kind of hidden agenda could a master vampire have with a wedding planner?

Unless he just felt sorry for her. Jade put her hand over her suddenly leaden heart. Did vampires have some kind of yearly good deed to perform, like giving the poor lonely wedding planner a pity fuck?

Or was she a bet between Renaldi and the groom? Was this all some kind of pre-stag party entertainment? See who can bed the chubby chick first?

A wave of nausea rolled through her. Renaldi had seemed every ounce the gentleman, and if she could believe that his interest was genuine, she'd fly to the stars on sheer ecstasy.

But she knew better. Painful experience had long ago made her aware of the dark side of human nature. And what were vampires but former humans with the gift of immortality and the curse of an even darker nature?

Shaking off the cloud of despair that threatened to smother her, she squared her shoulders. This had to stop, and it had to stop then and there. Jade Simons wouldn't be made a fool of again. She'd take a cursory look around the rest of the suite and sign off on it for Antonio and Marie's wedding night, and from that moment on, it would be nothing but business between her and one Renaldi D'Aria.

But judging by the racing of her heart beneath the hand still pressed against her chest, it might be easier said than done.

\* \* \*

"I'm trying to understand why you've chosen this moment to make your will known, your grace." Renaldi glanced over his shoulder, through the doorway into the sitting room where Jade stood with her delicate hand pressed to her heart, looking out the window, thinking of that bastard boyfriend of hers, no doubt. Renaldi felt his fangs extend. Jealousy was as potent an appetizer as lust, and at the moment, he was overwhelmed with both.

"As you know, Dracula's ball will be held in Houston this year for the first time in a century." Melaina paused, effectively underscoring the importance of her words. "We of the gulf coast must make an effective showing before our rivals."

“House Minotaur,” he said, referring to the local vampire house that was known to harbor rogues. They also tried to subvert any positive policy enacted by the Court and to undermine the local authorities, both human and vampire, at every turn.

“We must present a united front and show that our bloodlines are closely linked and strong.” She paused again. “Unless you are wed and bound to another, you will be a weak link in our chain.” Her voice dropped to a hiss. “The Minotaur masters will use any trickery at their disposal to force you into bonding with one of their own.”

He was aware of the risk of dealing with rogue vampires. A master vampire who wasn’t bound to a mate was an easy target. An unscrupulous vampire could force an energy-based connection to him, effectively binding him to one of them until they chose to release him.

It would be war, vampire mayhem.

“Perhaps, your grace, the best alternative would be for me to avoid the ball completely.”

“And call attention to yourself?” Melaina made a sound of disgust. “I think not. You may as well paint a target upon your back.”

Renaldi tried to look in on Jade again, but she’d moved out of his line of sight. “I understand the delicacy of the situation.”

“I’m not at all sure you do.” Her voice tightened with tension. “We of the Order of St. Germain must do everything we can to preserve ethical behavior among our kind. Left to the likes of House Minotaur, we will become outlaws again, legal prey to anyone with a round of silver bullets. If they steal one of our own, they weaken us in the eyes of the vampire community at large. Is that what you want?”

“You know it’s not.” He scrubbed his forehead with his hand. “This is all just... rather sudden.”

“Sudden or not, you must find a wife among the Court at the very best, among the Order at the very least. And do it *soon*.”

He heaved a sigh. He’d deal with this tomorrow night, after he’d had the chance to talk to Jade. “Yes, your grace.”



"I'll be monitoring your progress." With that, she ended the call.

Renaldi stood there, the phone dead in his hand.

Where did this leave him? Madly in lust with a mortal woman who apparently was attached to another. Ordered by the empress he loyally served to find a mate among the upper echelon of vampire kind before the next full moon.

Not to mention planning a wedding with the very woman who could bring him to his knees and make him forget the Court and the Order he'd vowed to serve for the rest of his immortal life.

He was, as they said in Texas, in a hell of a fix.

\* \* \*

"Important phone call?" Jade watched as Renaldi came back into the sitting room, a less than happy expression on his face.

"Vampire business." He went to the room service cart and held up a bottle of Veuve Clicquot for her inspection. "Can I interest you in a drink?"

"No, I don't think so." She stood up from where she'd been poised to spring on the loveseat. "I'm going to take a look at the bedroom, and if it's as nice as I expect it to be, I'll go downstairs and register the room for Antonio and Marie's wedding night." She smoothed her skirt down and turned on her heel.

The bedroom was beautiful, a romantic haven done all in white, with what seemed to be a hundred white candles flickering against the darkness flowing through the massive window. The scent of roses filled the air, overpowering her senses for a moment and making her forget her resolve to get out of there and away from Renaldi's confusing signals as quickly as possible.

He was behind her in an instant. "Is this to your liking?" He stepped around her, moving with the kind of speed only vampires could use, to the side of the bed.

He ran one hand along the white satin coverlet, making her mind wander into places where it had no business going.

She managed to find her voice. "I think the lucky couple will be very pleased with it."

“What about you?” He took several slow steps toward her. “Are you pleased with it?”

Her heart jumped into her throat. She was either going to call his bluff or go crazy wondering for the rest of her life. “What kind of game are you playing with me, Renaldi?”

His eyes widened. “Game?”

She huffed out a breath, feeling blood rush to her face. “You know, all the flirting... the not so subtle innuendoes... what gives?”

“I find you incredibly beautiful.” He held his hands out in a gesture of defenselessness. “Is it so wrong to want to know if I have a chance with you? I realize you have a boyfriend...”

“What on earth gave you that idea?” She shook her head. “I broke up with my last boyfriend over a year ago.”

“But you said...” He paused, confusion knitting his brows. “You were trying to ‘let me down easy,’ as you modern people say. You were stammering something about *I have, I have...*”

“Yeah, what I *have* is a boatload of body issues.” She sat down on the edge of the round bed with a thud. “Not a boyfriend.”

He sat down a cautious distance from her. “But surely, you must have many offers from men who find you as fascinating as I do.” His voice was gentle, and it twisted the knife in her heart just a little more.

She made a bitter sound. “Are you sure you don’t have some kind of bet going with the other guys in the wedding party about who can get me into bed first?”

Silence stretched between them for a long moment. “I would never dishonor you in such a way, Jade.”

She fell back flat onto the bed. “I’m not the kind of girl that usually attracts guys like you.”

He leaned down onto the bed beside her, propping himself up on one elbow and looking heartbreakingly gorgeous in the candlelight. “I find that hard to believe.”

She laughed without mirth. "Oh, you can believe it. The only guy with your looks who ever asked me out took me to a dogfight." She glanced at him, then turned away, blinking back unwanted tears. "You know, one of those parties where the guy who brings the most unattractive woman wins the pot of cash."

He brushed away the tear rolling down her cheek. "And you would let one ignorant fool ruin your confidence for the rest of your life."

She shrugged. "It was my senior year in high school. I was awkward and didn't know how to dress or to work with my body type back then." She let out a shaky sigh. "I'm not that person anymore, and I don't hate my body or the way I look now. But the memory has sort of tainted my experiences with men ever since." She gave him a teary-eyed glance. "I guess you could say I have trust issues where your gender is concerned."

"Well, I don't hate your body." His mouth turned up at the corners. "It fills me with a hunger like none I've ever known." He edged closer to her. "You must give other men a chance, and forget this boy who was too foolish to see how magnificent you truly are."

"Is this your way of telling me that all this..." she made a sweeping gesture, indicating the candles and flowers that filled the bedroom, "...is sincere, and not some kind of elaborate pre-wedding prank at my expense?"

"It is my way of telling you that I have not been able to get you out of my mind for a single instant since the moment I first laid eyes on you." He positioned himself over her, locking gazes with her and rendering her speechless. "It is my way of telling you that I want you so much that I think I'll go mad if I can't have you."

"It was you who sent me the message on the wind, wasn't it?" Her voice sounded thick, husky with desire. She feared waking to find out that this was only a dream. She'd longed for someone to want her in the way Renaldi professed to want her, and never believed it could actually happen.

If anything came along to snatch this happiness from her, she'd remember this moment when she was drunk on his words, intoxicated by the promise of his eyes, for the rest of her life.

She could live on that single golden moment forever, if she had to. But right then, she'd sell her soul to have him for just one night.

"The wind is my element to control." His lips hovered dangerously close over hers. "I wanted it to caress you for me... for it to touch you until I could feel you with my own hands." He balanced himself on one strong forearm and brushed her hair back from her face with the other hand. "To wrap you in its embrace until I could feel your softness beneath me." He lowered himself until the hard planes of his chest grazed her breasts. Her nipples hardened at the feel of his body, and she let out a tiny whimper of pleasure.

His hand slid up her thigh, beneath her skirt, to the place where her stockings ended. When his fingers trailed over the exposed skin, she felt blood rushing between her legs, making her wet and ready for whatever came next.

"Jade," he whispered, unfastening her top button by button, "let me show you just what your body does to me." He lowered himself, nestling between her legs.

He was harder than granite.

She inhaled sharply, her chest suddenly so tight with need that even breathing took an effort. "I want you," she gasped, threading her fingers through his hair, "so much. I've wanted you since the moment I met you." She almost sobbed with happiness.

"And I've wanted you, more than words can convey." He spread her top open, kissing the mounds of her breasts above the satin border of her bra. "To touch these breasts..." He eased the cup of one bra down, flicking his tongue over one taut nipple. "...to taste them, is the fulfillment of my wildest fantasies." He grazed her nipple with his fangs, eliciting a hiss from her. She cradled his head to her breast, hoping he never stopped, hoping it could last forever.

“You, Jade...” He lifted his head, placing it between her breasts to look into her eyes. “You are my thunderbolt.”

Thunderbolt? She would have to remember to ask what it meant later, when her body didn't demand to feel his naked skin against it.

“Does Antonio know you've seduced his wedding planner?” A throaty female voice rang out from the foot of the bed. “Or did he give her to you as a special gift for the best man?”

Jade's eyes flew open, seeking the source of the voice. But nothing could've prepared her for the apparition at the foot of the bed.

## Chapter 6

“Really, Renaldi, you didn’t have to arrange a snack for us... plump, juicy, little morsel though she is.”

Three female vampires stood motionless, their eyes fixed on Jade and Renaldi. Jade scrambled up, turning her back to the unannounced trio and rearranging her clothing as quickly as possible.

She’d just acquired a new “most embarrassing moment” story.

“Is this what you call looking for a bride among the Court?” The vampire in the middle gestured toward Jade, a look of slight disgust on her face.

“Hey, if I lived on a liquid diet, I’d be skinny, too.” Jade shoved her feet back into the pumps that had fallen off her feet near the dust ruffle.

The vampires *were* skinny. The one in the middle, obviously the spokesperson for the group, had straight black hair down to her knees, and was dressed in a royal blue robe made out of rich brocade which Jade knew instantly to be antique. Her eyes, a shade of midnight blue not often seen outside of a display case for colored contacts, regarded Jade with withering scorn.

“How did you find me here, Melaina?” Renaldi managed to look carefree -- not easy, with an erection straining his zipper to the bursting point, Jade observed with a giggle.

“Are you amused, human?” the dark-haired one, apparently named Melaina, snapped at Jade before turning back to Renaldi. “I tracked you here. You know I can teleport anywhere. Besides, your energy signature is rather hard to miss, as you know.”

He nodded. “To what do I owe this interruption?”

Melaina shrugged. “I brought Veronica and Malice to make your acquaintance.”

What perfect names for the Doublemint Twins standing just behind Melaina, Jade thought. Veronica was an icy blonde, with hair as fine as swans' down pulled up into a knot in back. Malice had the same nearly white hair, but hers was thicker, twisted into a coronet of innumerable braids around her head. They both had eyes the cool shade of gray usually reserved for winter storm clouds, and were so thin and wispy that only the vampiric power they radiated kept them from appearing frail.

"I don't recall extending an invitation." Renaldi glanced from one of the pale blondes to the other.

"I don't recall needing one," Melaina retorted.

Jade smoothed her stockings and stood up straight. "As much as I'd love to stand here and listen to you two bicker until the end of time, I'm mortal, and unfortunately I don't have the luxury of eternal life to waste." She glanced down at Renaldi. "It's nearly dawn. I'd like for you to call me and explain *this...*" She gestured toward the three musketeers stationed a few feet away, "...when you rise this evening."

He stopped her with a hand on her wrist. "Don't go." He dropped his voice to a whisper, even though Jade had no doubt that the other vampires could hear every word he said. "We're not finished here."

She raised an eyebrow at him, letting skepticism fill her face. "You sure about that?"

He let heat radiate from him to her like a gust of warm wind. "I'm sure." Using the hand he had still wrapped around her wrist, he lowered her to sit beside him on the edge of the bed, and tucked her hand inside his reassuringly.

"Melaina, please get on with it." Renaldi let out a yawn. "As Jade pointed out, it's not long until dawn, and I don't have a moment to waste."

Melaina sneered. "You consider an audience with your empress a waste of time?"

*Empress?* She'd managed to run afoul of the vampire *empress*? The hits just kept on coming.

“Certainly not, your grace.” Renaldi managed the perfect combination of politeness and boredom. “Pray, continue.”

“As I explained during our conversation earlier, you have only until the next full moon to wed and bind yourself to a member of the Court.” She moved back to take the two other vamps by the hand, showing them off with the pride of a merchant hawking her finest wares. “These two beauties are ripe for the picking.”

Jade digested the meaning of this bit of news in silence before turning to Renaldi. “You’ve been ordered to marry another vampire?”

He didn’t answer.

“What the hell were you doing with me, then?” She felt a familiar mix of resentment and pain rising to the surface where desire and joy had been a few short moments before. “Did you know about this before you... before we...”

“I will explain in a minute.” His eyes had a look of naked anguish in them. “Please, give me time to make you understand.”

“I believe *I* can make you understand.” Melaina looked down at Jade. “You were a final human diversion for him. A last supper, if you will.”

Melaina’s words slammed into Jade like a punch to the stomach. She stood abruptly, anger and shame flooding her like a poison. “She’s the one who called you on your cell phone, isn’t she?” When he didn’t deny it, she went on. “When were you planning on telling me this, Renaldi? After we’d slept together? Or were you going to sneak in a little blood drinking, too?”

“It’s complicated. Let’s go to the lobby, where we can have some privacy.” He rose to his feet and before her eyes could register his movements, he was standing in front of her. “Please, let yourself trust me.” He shot a glance at Melaina. “I’ll deal with *you* later.”

“You’ll deal with me *now*.” She moved in front of the door, blocking any of them from leaving.

But Jade wasn’t finished yet. Not by a long shot. She faced Renaldi, giving him stare for stare. “You want me to trust you, after this?” She shook her head. “I thought



you were different." She grabbed her purse from the dressing table where she'd left it earlier. "You may be a vampire, but underneath that, you're just another man." Disgust clung to her last word like ice to an igloo.

She whirled around to face Melaina. "Bitch, either move out of my way, or I swear to God, I'll break a leg off that wooden bedside table and stake your ass like Nosferatu at a church social."

"By all means." Melaina swept gracefully aside, suddenly the very picture of graciousness. "The followers of St. Germain do not force themselves upon humans." She gestured to the door like Vanna White turning a letter. "Please, take your leave of us whenever you are ready."

Jade threw the door open. "Oh, and Renaldi? Forget what I said about calling me when you rise." She let her gaze flick from Melaina to the undead duo. "No explanation is necessary." She gave him one last look, forcing herself to ignore the way her heart contracted. "From now on, all the wedding plans will go through Avery." Her voice held an unwelcome quaver. She had to get out of there before the strengthening rush of anger deserted her, leaving only tears in its wake. "You can stay dead, as far as I'm concerned."

She slammed the door, leaving Renaldi D'Aria behind her.

Did it matter that a piece of her heart stayed behind, too? As the elevator doors slid shut and the tears began to stream down her face, Jade had the horrible feeling that it *did* matter.

Maybe more than she'd imagined possible.

## Chapter 7

Somehow, Jade managed to get through the hours until dawn. She went home to her beautifully decorated apartment. Had it ever seemed so empty before?

Even Tuesday seemed to sense something was wrong, hiding under Jade's bed until she threw up a hairball.

Jade sat on her window seat and watched the sun rise in an artist's palette of pink and gold. Somewhere out there, Renaldi had escaped into the sleep of the dead, while she, the living, had to somehow go on, even with her heart shattered like a china cup smashed against a wall.

"I have no one to blame but myself, Tuesday," she said when her pet finally emerged from beneath the bed. Tuesday answered with an affirming meow and jumped up to join her on the window seat. "I let myself believe in things again." She stroked the cat's calico fur. "Things like love and passion... things that were meant for the size two girls of the world." She gazed outside at the sun taking its place in a rapidly brightening sky. "I'll be okay, won't I?" She looked down into Tuesday's questioning yellow eyes. "We'll get through this together." She sighed. "Don't we always?"

When would she learn to stop hoping? She'd spent years trying to snuff out the hope that love would find her, but it was a candle that couldn't be dimmed, no matter how much she tried to douse its flame.

Why couldn't her heart accept that she would always be the wedding planner, and never the bride?

And why had a few minutes in Renaldi's arms made her feel as if she'd finally found her own slice of heaven on earth?

She'd had a taste of happiness that the angels themselves would envy. Somehow, she had to go on with her life as if it hadn't happened, as if it hadn't split her world in two. But how?

\* \* \*

"For you." Avery slapped a stack of pink slips onto the desk blotter in front of her.

Jade shot him a glance. "Do they have anything to do with the wedding?"

Avery's mouth stretched into a tight line. "Nope."

"Then I don't need to see them." She grabbed up the messages and dumped them into the wastebasket at her feet.

"How long is this going to go on?" Avery folded his arms over his chest.

"Until Renaldi gets it through his undead head that we're over." Her mouth turned down. "We never actually started."

"He doesn't seem to share your point of view." Avery perched on the edge of her desk. "He's been calling every night for a week now."

"He can call until hell freezes over and Satan sells snow cones." Jade flipped through her appointment book at a razor sharp pace. "I have no desire to see him."

"Sure you don't." Avery gave her a knowing look. "How many boxes of chocolates have you eaten this week?"

Her gaze shot up to his face. "What do you know about it?"

He shrugged. "Even your special PMS reserve is empty." She gave him a look of surprise, to which he answered, "I checked the bottom drawer of your filing cabinet."

"How could you?" She pushed her chair back. "You know that's my private drawer!"

"I needed a way to assess the damage." He jumped down to his feet. "If this is going to go on for a while, please let me know, because I'm totally going to buy stock in Godiva."

"Save your money and invest it somewhere else." She stood up. "I'm over it. I'm over Renaldi. I'm over the whole damn mess."

“Glad to hear it.” Avery headed toward the door. “You have a fitting with the wedding party tonight at Undead Threads. Nine o’clock sharp.” He looked at her over his shoulder. “Be there or be square.”

He shut the door just in time to avoid being hit with a flying stapler. Great. She got to spend an entire evening watching Renaldi get his inseam measured, and watching Marie and her maids of questionable honor sashay around in formalwear.

Could it get any better? Jade snorted. Maybe she’d find time to work in a root canal while she was at it.

\* \* \*

“She says the bodice isn’t tight enough.”

Jade puffed out her cheeks and counted to ten. Talk about waiting to exhale. Trying to sound more composed than she felt, she eyed Marie’s translator, Julia. “If it gets any tighter, she won’t be able to breathe.”

“Not a problem for our kind,” Julia deadpanned.

“We’re taking it in a little more?” Taffy, designer to the undead, made it a question.

“The bride is always right.” *Even when she’s a total airhead*, Jade thought, circling the platform where Marie stood in her clichéd black wedding dress, still as the proverbial statue. No Vera Wang for Marie. It was Elvira all the way with her.

Jade glanced at the watch strapped to her wrist with a delicate silver band -- insurance against unwanted vampire touches. It was already close to midnight. At the rate they were going, the vampires would all fall to the dawn before they were finished.

Thank goodness, the groom and his party were being fitted by Andre in another room. She’d successfully avoided Renaldi’s seeking glance when he passed through the storefront to the men’s dressing room, but it didn’t stop her body from twisting like a wet rag at the memory of his lips on her breasts, her hands knotted in his ebony silk hair, the hard length of him between...

“Hello?” Taffy snapped her fingers. “Earth calling Jade...”

"Huh? Oh, sorry, I just..." *Took a stroll down an X-rated version of memory lane.* She forced a smile. "What can I help you with?"

"Marie here says we're missing a member of the wedding party." Taffy stood up, tucking dressmakers' pins into the waistband of her pants. "Have you got a profile for Brenda Hutton?"

*Who the hell is Brenda Hutton?* Out loud, Jade said, "I don't recall a Brenda Hutton being listed among the bride's party."

Taffy snorted. "Marie insists she's one of the maids of honor."

Marie spoke rapidly in French, suddenly animated and gesturing wildly. Julia nodded and turned to Jade. "She says Brenda is Arturo's swan."

"Arturo? The groomsman who's being fitted for his tux even as we speak?" Jade had a mental image of a cartoon thermometer with temperature shooting up until the bulbous top burst into an angry red splatter.

"*Oui, oui.*" Marie nodded, then said something else in French. Jade caught Brenda and Arturo's names, but nothing else.

"She says Brenda is in Berlin on business." Julia sighed, a sound rarely heard among the undead. "Being a swan, she's human, of course."

Jade nodded, wondering if Avery had thought to tuck a box of chocolates into her briefcase. "I don't have a profile on her." She glanced at Taffy, who looked at least as frustrated as Jade felt. "I don't guess you have her measurements on file."

Taffy silently strode to the small Empire style desk in the corner of the fitting room, and opened a 3x5 box. She shuffled through the contents for a moment before extracting a card.

"This is all I have." She handed the card to Jade.

Jade scanned the card. "She and I are the same height and wear the same size." She huffed out a breath. "This is it?"

Taffy nodded, twirling her tape measure like a lasso.

*Dear God, what am I about to get myself into?* "Can you get a decent fit using me?"

Taffy managed a half smile. "It'll do in a pinch."

In other words, she was better than nothing. Yay.

\* \* \*

A half hour later, Jade stepped out of the stall swathed in more fabric than her entire wardrobe contained.

And it was all white. Not off white. Not ivory. Not eggshell. Honest to gosh, pure as the driven snow, Like a Virgin, Nice Day for a White Wedding, *white*.

She looked down at the swags of lace -- very nice stuff, Valencian and Point d'Esprit. She still felt like a walking wedding cake.

And not in a good *don't you want to eat me* sort of way.

Julia tottered out of the adjacent stall, holding her skirts up with her hands.

"We have a black gown for the bride, but white gowns for the bridesmaids?" Jade raised her eyebrows at Julia.

Julia shrugged. "It's Marie's idea of an artistic statement."

Jade could have come up with a more appropriate description for it, but she bit her tongue.

"You ladies ready?" Taffy called from the other side of the door.

"As ready as we'll ever be." Jade opened the door and stepped into the fitting room.

Taffy made a slow circle around Jade, looking her over from head to toe with an expert eye. "This is really a flawless fit." She knelt down to examine the hem. "You're a perfect sample size."

"You're kidding me." Jade had dealt with enough wedding gowns to know about sample sizing.

"No, you really are." Taffy stood up. "You have great proportions." She squinted and tugged at the bodice. "We could take it in a tiny bit in the waist if we were fitting it for you, but since it's for Brenda, I think we'll adjust the hem for the heels the bridesmaids are wearing and leave it at that."

"What about my dress?" Julia gathered up her skirts and struggled across the room with Marie babbling in excited French at her side. "This dress is at least two sizes too large."

"The sample was a size four," Taffy sighed.

"Do I look like a size four to you?" Julia huffed. "I'm a zero!"

That was the first sensible thing anyone had said all night, Jade noted, a stray wedding veil catching her eye. It was tossed across an open box of party favors in the fitting room.

"That's the toy box for the bridal shower." Taffy was already pinning Julia's dress. "It's a little extra thing we throw in for our bridal parties. The veil is kind of a gag. Something for the bride to wear to the strip club so the dancers can tell who the lucky girl is."

"I see." Jade put the veil on her own head and struck a pose in front of the mirror. "Oh, if my mother could see me now..."

Taffy snickered. Julia looked annoyed and Marie was back to what seemed to be her usual blank-faced pout.

"On that note, I'm going to change back into something less festive, if you're done with me?"

Taffy nodded. "You're good to go. That dress should fit Brenda well enough to make it through the ceremony, at least." She glanced up at Julia. "As you can see, I have my hands full here."

Jade stifled a laugh and went back into the dressing room. She had her hand on the stall door when she felt someone grab her by the arm.

She gasped.

"The silver watch must go," Renaldi's voice said near her ear.

She tore her arm from his grasp. "What are you thinking, sneaking up on me like that?" She took a step away from him.

"We have to talk." He closed the gap between them. "Let's get out of here."

She threw her hands up. "I can't just waltz out with the best man in the middle of a fitting!"

"Who said anything about waltzing?" He took her by the hand before she had time to think about it, and instantly a shimmer of his power flowed over her like rushing wind.

The dressing room vanished around her, like a movie scene fading to black. The parking lot outside of Undead Threads appeared around her, like some CGI special effect made reality.

"Did we just teleport?" Jade looked around the parking lot uncertainly.

"I have limited abilities in that realm, but enough to get us out of the building without being asked a hundred questions." His gaze fell to her wrist. "Could you please put the watch somewhere else? Just until we've had time to sort this out?"

"It didn't seem to bother you before, when you touched me in the dressing room."

He gave her a half smile. "I'm somewhat immune to the effects of silver. A side effect of my age." He glanced at the watch again. "But not so immune that I can touch you without discomfort."

Jade opened her mouth to argue, but then stopped. Whether she cared to admit it or not, she wanted to hear what he had to say. Without another word, she unfastened the watch and slipped it into the pocket concealed within the underskirt of her dress.

"Happy?" She heard the thread of sarcasm lingering in her voice.

"Only when I'm with you." His eyes were like melting amber glowing in the darkness.

*Don't think about the way he looks.* As if she could think of anything else, with him standing there looking utterly mouthwatering in a tux. The crisp white banded-collar shirt set off his golden olive skin, making him look like a honey coated treat she couldn't wait to take home and lick. The black jacket and pleated pants showcased every inch of his tall, lean physique to perfection. His hair hung in loose waves to his



broad shoulders, creating an image that was somewhere between a GQ cover model and a walking orgasm.

“Do you have any idea how ridiculously good looking you are?” She looked at him, feeling the way she had when she was a little girl with her nose pressed against the toy store window, admiring an insanely expensive dollhouse she could never hope to possess.

“Does anyone ever really understand the effect they have on others?” He searched her face, his voice holding a note of tired patience.

She folded her arms over her chest, not ready to soften to him yet. “You wanted to talk, let’s talk.”

He shook his head. “Not here.”

She cast a glance around the deserted parking lot. “Where do you want to do this? I’m sure some vamp bars are still open this time of night. We’re just a few blocks from Crimson Hungers.”

“I’m thinking of something a little more private.” He looped his arm through hers. “Hold on tight.” When she opened her mouth, he silenced her with a finger over her lips. “And for once, don’t ask questions.”

She did as he asked, holding on to the hard muscles of his upper arm as tightly as she could. When his power began to swirl around them, she shivered.

“I told you my powers are limited when it comes to teleportation.” He extended his free hand, palm up, and she could see a shimmer of energy rising from it like a heat mirage coming up from scalding asphalt. “You’re about to see the area in which my powers excel.” He shot her a teasing glance. “My second best area, at least.”

A warm wind wrapped around them, and they were propelled effortlessly into the air. They rose steadily into the stillness of the night sky, until the buildings and cars beneath them looked like toys.

She gazed down at the landscape of Houston spreading beneath them. “If this is only second place, I can’t imagine what takes top prize.”

“I plan to show you.” He pulled her closer, guiding them west. “Over and over again.” His face was against hers, and she drew in the heady scent of him. “Hang on, Jade.” His whisper stroked her skin like a caress. “The ride has only just begun.”

\* \* \*

He carried her through the sky above the city, over the skyscrapers of downtown, past the lights of the Galleria and Post Oak, then farther north, over houses and apartment complexes with swimming pools gleaming like aquamarines.

She held on for dear life, saying nothing, not wanting to break the spell. She was with Renaldi, flying through the dark night sky in his arms. There was no need for words, no desire to do anything but burn every second of this night into her memory, to take reel after reel of mental pictures to savor for the rest of her life. Come what may, she'd always have this.

Let the brides have their wedding days. This night was *hers*.

## Chapter 8

Renaldi delivered them safely to a stone balcony on the second floor of an impressive home. Jade felt her feet make contact with terra firma and let out a sigh.

"I don't know whether to be sad that it's over, or relieved that we survived."

"Was there ever any doubt?" His eyes told her that he knew better.

"Of course there wasn't." She looked through the French doors into what appeared to be a decadently furnished bedroom. "Where are we?"

"My home." He reached around her to open one of the doors. "Please, come inside."

She followed him into a bedroom that rivaled the suite they'd rented for Antonio and Marie's wedding night. The sweet strains of Beethoven's "Pathétique" Sonata trilled through the air, and the scent of roses hung in the atmosphere like spilled perfume.

A king-size bed that would've dominated a smaller room stood against the far wall, covered in lush emerald green bedding.

It was impossible to avoid picturing Renaldi on that bed, his nude skin a warm honey glow against all that deep green. Heat surged between her legs, urging her to continue the fantasy and follow it with action.

Silence crowded the room like an uninvited guest. Jade knew Renaldi could sense her desire, the blood pulsing lower in her body. She looked up to find him watching her closely.

Too closely.

"Here we are." She padded across the velvety thick cream colored carpet and sat down on the edge of the bed. Why did she constantly seem to find herself in rooms with beds whenever this man was around? "Let's talk."

“Wouldn’t you like to have the grand tour first?”

Her chest tightened. “No. Let’s get this over with.” If they had to ruin the magic of the night with true confessions, better to do it now, before she spent one more second getting attached to him.

He shrugged. “Very well, then.” He crossed the room and knelt down in front of her. “Melaina did order me to take a bride before the next full moon, a bride from among our Court or the Order of St. Germain.” She began to speak but he stopped her. “Only for the sake of presenting a united front when we confront our enemies at Dracula’s ball in a few months.”

“Enemies?” She widened her eyes.

He explained the inner workings of the Court and the Order, filling her in on the problems presented by the rogue vamps of House Minotaur. “You see, a master vampire who has not bound himself is a walking target for an unethical member of the undead. They could hijack me, forging an energy-based connection with me to force me to their side.”

She shook her head. “I had no idea.”

He gave her a faint smile. “How could you know?” He chased his words with a sigh. “But what Melaina didn’t know is that I have no choice when it comes to you. The matter has already been decided for me.”

She narrowed her gaze. “What does that mean, exactly?”

He tipped her chin up with his hand. “You, *mi amour*, are my thunderbolt.”

Trying not to fall under the hypnotic power of his eyes, she found her voice. “You said that the other night.”

“It’s an old Italian legend.” He took her hands in his. “Once in every man’s life, he sees a woman who strikes him like a bolt from the sky. Time stands still, his heart stops beating, and the world stops spinning on its axis.” His hands squeezed hers. “Nothing matters, nothing, until he makes this woman his.” He inclined his head toward hers. “I waited centuries to find my thunderbolt, and no order from a vampire empress is going to keep me away from you.”

"I don't see how you can avoid an order from her." Jade's heart raced at his nearness. He invaded her senses, laying claim to them until it was hard to remember anything existed outside of the circle of his arms.

"There are ways around it... but only if you consent to them." His lips brushed hers. "I don't know if I can help myself tonight."

Her hands found the lapels of his jacket, as if they moved of their own accord. "What do you mean?" Although she had a feeling she knew, as she pushed the jacket off his warm body and heard it hit the carpet with a rustle of fabric.

"If you let me kiss you, I'm going to make love to you." He pulled the pins from her hair and ran his fingers through it, freeing the upswept curls until they tumbled to her shoulders. "And if I make love to you, I'm not going to stop until we both collapse from exhaustion or until I fall to the dawn, whichever comes first."

"Does it look like I'm going to stop you?" She fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, desperate to run her hands over his bare chest, to memorize his body with her fingers like a book of Braille. "Make love to me until dawn. Tonight, I belong to you."

\* \* \*

Renaldi swept his hands over her breasts like a starving man coveting priceless fruits. He shook from head to toe with a need so strong that it eclipsed everything else he'd ever felt. Every other woman and every other experience of his long life were nothing more than dress rehearsals, leading up to this moment.

He watched as her eyelids fluttered shut, desire etched on every feature of her beautiful face. He wanted nothing less than to devour her, to bury himself inside her and make her his forever.

He grasped the fabric of her bodice and pulled, ripping it open down the front.

"Sorry, Brenda." Her voice was a gasp.

He leaned back. "Brenda?" Laughter erupted from his throat.

"It's a long story." She reached out, bringing him closer. "Don't stop."

He pushed the dress off her shoulders, revealing her luscious breasts nestled in a bra that pushed them up. He let out a curse in Italian.

Her eyes flew open. "What's wrong?" Her body tensed, instantly on high alert.

"Nothing. The sight of your breasts makes me want to come, right here and now." He cupped them, running his thumbs over her nipples, watching them tighten through the satiny fabric of her bra.

"This dress has got to go, even if you do look like a virgin bride, waiting to be unwrapped like a wedding gift." He pulled it down, helping her wiggle out of it until it pooled around her ankles in a heap of white satin and lace.

He looked up to see her standing before him, clad in only her satin bra and matching panties and a pair of high heeled shoes. Suddenly being inside her wasn't enough. He wanted to taste her, to drink her in like wine, like blood. "On the bed, please."

She eased onto her back, never taking her eyes from him. He could read uncertainty in their depths. He had to win her trust if they had any hope of being together for more than one night.

The problem was he probably had only one night to prove himself worthy of her.

He joined her on the bed, positioning himself between her thighs.

So many places to explore and only one night to taste them all.

He began with her lips, brushing his against them. She responded, wrapping her arms against him and lifting her hips until his cock was firmly embedded against the juncture of her thighs.

She opened her mouth to him, and he swept his tongue between her lips until it found hers, coiling together, stroking each other in a prelude of things to come.

His hands opened her bra in one expert motion. He tossed it aside, baring her breasts to him.

The smooth mounds of pale flesh beckoned to dual impulses inside him. The male impulse to lick, to take a nipple and suck, warred with the vampire's instinct to sink his fangs in and drink his fill of the fragrant blood he could smell through the delicacy of her skin.

The male instinct won. He stroked the tip of her nipple with his tongue, watching it bead beneath his touch. Her heated moan was the only encouragement he needed to continue.

He wrapped his lips around the taut peak, sucking, grazing the tip with his fully extended fangs. With his hand, he rolled the other nipple, stroking it, kneading the yielding softness of her breast with his fingers.

He moved slowly down her body, planting a row of kisses between her breasts, over the curve of her belly, and going lower, until he reached her panties.

With a single rip, they were gone.

Her face was slack in the drowsy haze of arousal as he parted her legs. He ran a hand over her mound, stroking her outer folds and running his hand through the trace of copper colored curls he found there.

“Renaldi...” She murmured his name in a voice drunk with ecstasy.

“Shhh.” He lowered his head, breathing in the perfume of her desire. He wanted more.

Parting the cleft between her thighs, he bared her to him completely. Her swollen clitoris, the delicate flesh guarding her core... everything was slick with her wetness, ready and waiting for him.

And he was more than ready for her.

“Renaldi.” She sounded more forceful this time.

“Yes, *mi amour?*” She’d propped herself up on her elbows and was watching him, a slight frown on her face.

“Can we turn the lights off?” She had the edge of the sheet in her hand. “Maybe get under the covers?”

He waited the space of a few heartbeats. “Why?”

She averted her eyes. “I don’t know... I’d just feel more comfortable.”

He understood all too clearly the reason for her request. “You must realize that I’ve already seen all of you.” He kissed her inner thigh for emphasis. “And everything I’ve seen is beautiful.”

She turned her face from him, hiding her expression. "You're not going to give in on this, are you?"

He sat up, letting his gaze wander her body. How could he make her see that he found her to be the most desirable woman he'd ever known?

How could he get her to see what *he* saw?

"Get up." He stood up and shed the rest of his clothes, finally freeing the erection that had been begging for release.

She sat up and gave him a look of confusion. "Are you going to throw me out?"

"Not even close." He took her arm and pulled her to her feet.

"Then what..." She let him steer her toward the master bathroom.

"For once in your life, Jade, you're going to have to trust someone." He threw the bathroom door open and switched on the overhead light.

She froze in the doorway, and he followed her gaze to the opposite wall, where floor to ceiling mirrors reflected them both in all their naked glory.



## Chapter 9

Jade saw two things.

The first was Renaldi, his golden olive skin glowing, and every line of his naked body displayed in its perfection.

The second was herself, mussed hair, swollen lips, and very naked, with all her expansive flesh exposed.

"There will be no lights out tonight." Renaldi pulled her closer to the mirror.

She glanced around the room, taking in the plush carpet, the overstuffed chair in the corner, and the row of marble sinks in the vanity.

Renaldi was a man who did everything with style.

"I want you to see yourself through my eyes." He stationed her in front of the mirror and positioned himself behind her. Her heart hammered, excitement fighting embarrassment inside her. She'd never been with a man who argued when she wanted to have sex in the dark.

But then, she'd never been with a man like Renaldi.

"Look at yourself," he commanded. "Look into the reflection of your own eyes. They're wild with desire, dark with need." He met her gaze in the mirror. "Can you see it?"

She gave him a furtive nod. "But..."

"No." He placed his hands on her bare shoulders. "I will talk, and you will listen."

Somehow, she knew that he wouldn't suffer any arguments. She let her focus wander from his reflection back to her own.

"Your hair." He took his hands from her shoulders and ran them through her tousled curls, combing them with his fingers. "It's mussed from tossing on a pillow.

Any man who looked at you would see these wayward curls and instantly think of sex."

Her breath was coming faster, and a demanding pulse throbbed between her legs. Was this some kind of vampire magic at work? Need was building inside her in what would've normally been one of her top ten nightmare scenarios.

What had he done to her?

His hands moved lower, skimming over her shoulders until they reached her breasts. Remembering the way he'd pleased her breasts a few minutes earlier, she let out a moan.

"That's right." He cupped her breasts, letting the weight of them rest against his palms. "Give into it."

She closed her eyes for a second, basking in the feeling of her breasts in his hands.

"Look at your breasts." She looked back into the mirror. The sight of his dark hands holding her breasts, the contrast of his skin against hers, made liquid fire pool between her legs.

"See how they fill my hands?" He lifted them slightly. "The softness, the smooth skin... how could I not want to touch them?"

She let out a shaky sigh. "Touch them all you want, I won't complain."

His low-pitched laughter touched her like a velvet glove. "Don't worry, I'm not about to stop." He ran his thumbs over her nipples, earning a muted cry from her. "Look at your nipples and tell me what you see."

She did as he asked. "They're hard."

"More than that." He stroked them again, causing them to tighten. "See how they respond to my touch? Growing harder... more sensitive..."

She moaned, at a loss for words.

"I want to put my mouth on them, and suck them until you come." He rolled them between his fingers. "I want to make you come... to watch your face when you finally go over the edge."

At the moment, it sounded like an excellent idea to her.

He released her breasts abruptly. She wanted to cry out in protest, to scream in rebellion, but the sight of his dark eyes regarding her in the mirror quieted the impulse.

His hands traveled down to the indentation of her waist. "Look at the way you curve in here." She'd never known her waist was an erogenous zone, but the feeling of Renaldi's fingers tracing her curves heightened her arousal to the boiling point.

This man could probably turn her pinky toe into a tool of ecstasy.

"And the way you curve outward here." He slid his hands over her hips. "So round, so luscious... I could never tire of the way you feel beneath me."

She was panting, so wet with need that she felt like a fountain.

"And here." He cupped her backside. "Whenever I see you from behind, all I can think of is burying my cock inside you until we both come."

"I'm ready." She was on the verge of losing control. "I want you to make me come." She met his gaze in the mirror. "Renaldi, please..."

"Not yet."

She watched as he dragged the chair over to where they stood, then took one of her legs in his hands, propping her foot up on the arm of the chair.

"What..." She craned her neck to look at him, baffled.

"Trust me." He resumed his place behind her. "Eyes on the mirror, please."

She obeyed him, her thoughts fuzzy and her eyes unfocused. She could feel his erection pressing against her, adding to her sensual overload. If she didn't have an orgasm soon, she'd fall to the floor in a quivering heap.

"We saved the best for last." He reached down, deftly spreading the folds of her sex with one hand.

She'd never seen herself exposed that way before, and couldn't believe she was standing up in a bathroom, letting a male vampire do these things to her.

Even more, he was making her enjoy it.

"See how wet you are?" He rested his chin on her shoulder. "How swollen."

She nodded, watching his fingers wander dangerously close to her clit. One touch and she was sure she'd shatter into a million pieces.

"You're ready for me to put myself inside you, aren't you?" He slid a finger into her, and her knees nearly buckled. "Do you want that? Do you want my cock inside you?"

"Yes." Her voice had all the strength of jelly. "Please?"

"See how red and hard your clit is?" He spread her further, forcing her to look in the mirror. "I bet if I touch it like this..." He stroked his finger over the sensitive bud in a slow circle.

She collapsed backward against him.

"I could make you come again and again, just by doing this." His whisper seemed to travel through her. "Do you want me to do that?"

"No." Sweat began to trickle down her body. How much longer would he torture her?

"Tell me what you want, then." He continued to stroke her clit, as if they had all the time in the world at their disposal.

In a way, she thought, he actually did. But she didn't, and the need to finally have him inside her had become one continuous refrain of demand.

"I want you inside me." She pushed her backside against his pelvis for emphasis.

"Lean forward." He cuffed her wrists with his hands, placing her palms against the mirror. "You must watch every second of this. Do not take your eyes off our reflections."

She gave him a nod of assent, willing to promise him anything, as long as he didn't deny her any longer.

He grasped her hip with one hand and his cock with the other. She felt him probing her entrance and looked at their reflection, watching him slide the entire hard length of him into her.

The sensation was incredible. Her body gave way to him, stretching to accommodate his size. He filled her completely, reaching further inside her than she'd dreamt possible.

"Look at the way we fit together." He slid out of her inch by torturous inch, then slammed back into her, making her writhe with need. "The way your breasts move when I thrust into you..." He held out his right hand, palm up. "How could I *not* want you?"

She could feel his power gathering somewhere outside the sexual haze of their lovemaking. A breeze blew across her, lifting her curls and cooling her skin.

"See yourself the way I see you." He rubbed her clit slowly, still buried inside her. "You look like my wildest fantasy come to life."

She gazed into the mirror, and for the first time, saw something besides extra pounds. She saw a woman with windblown curls, cheeks flushed with desire. She saw a woman with statuesque curves, full breasts and round hips.

She saw a woman being thoroughly pleased by a man who was beyond compare, a man like no other she'd ever known.

"You see it now?" He locked gazes with her in the mirror. "Can you see what I see when I make love to you?"

She nodded. "You've made me feel beautiful."

He kissed her neck, letting his fangs graze her pulse point. "You *are* beautiful."

"Take me back to your bed." She spoke with difficulty. "I won't ask for darkness or cover this time."

He withdrew from her and turned her around to face him. "Your wish is my command, *mi amour*." With that, he lifted her into his arms with ease.

"Okay, this is a new one for me." She marveled as he carried her back into the bedroom.

"There's a lot to be said for vampiric powers." He laid her gently on the bed. "The least of which is strength." He flashed a fanged smile. "You're light as a feather."

She didn't argue. She was too busy feeling wanted to speak a single negative word.

He joined her on the bed, arranging himself between her legs. "Remember the thing I told you was my greatest power?"

She nodded, reaching down to grab his backside, urging him inside her.

He joined his body to hers in one smooth stroke, filling her again with every delicious inch of his hard length. "I can do this all night." He balanced his weight on his forearms, brushing his lips against hers. "No recovery time."

She giggled, returning the kiss with equal fervor. A man who could make her crazy with desire, *and* make her laugh? What more could she want?

As if hearing her thoughts, he slowly withdrew from her and thrust back in, entering her at an angle that allowed his body to rub against her clit for maximum friction.

*There it was.* That was the one more thing she could want.

For this pleasure to last forever.

She twined her fingers through his hair, bringing him lower for a kiss. His fangs teased her lips, nipping at them. She suddenly knew what she wanted more than anything, what could make this night complete, one other way to forge their connection. She'd worked with enough vampire brides to know.

"Renaldi." She spread her legs further, wanting to take him deeper still, feeling the tension in her body rising with each thrust. "I want you to drink from me."

He stilled himself with apparent difficulty. "What?"

She turned her face slightly, baring her neck to him. "Drink from me when we come." She tightened her inner walls around his cock, feeling a rush of female power when he moaned in response. "It would mean so much to me... please?" She tightened again, contracting her channel around the thickness of his increasingly swollen erection.

"I can refuse you nothing." He withdrew with torturous languor. "Least of all this." He pushed back into her, grinding against her clit, eliciting a broken cry from her.

His skin was dry against the damp heat of hers, and he slid along her body with each thrust, taking her higher, closer to the pinnacle of pleasure. She could feel her orgasm building, a steady drumming of imminent release. The world had stopped, time stood still. There was no space, no gravity. The laws of nature had been suspended, leaving nothing but Renaldi, nothing but the two of them joined together in mutual bliss.

His thrusts increased, propelling her to the edge. Her climax took her, bringing him along, and as her body was borne away on a tide of rapture, she felt his fangs enter her neck with a sweet pain that only increased the power of her release. He drank from her even as he filled her with his essence, an exchange so perfectly intimate that it brought tears to her eyes.

He finished, retracting his fangs from her with a minimum of discomfort. "Why are you crying?" His eyes were filled with concern. "Did I hurt you? If I caused you any pain..."

She silenced him, a finger over his lips. "These are tears of happiness." She broke into a wide smile. "You've made me so incredibly happy... I could never find the words to tell you."

His eyes burned into hers. "I can think of three."

She pulled him closer. "I... love... you."

"Those were the three words I had in mind." He bent his head, taking her lips in a kiss. "And I have four of my own."

She looked up at him, breathless. "What?"

"I... love... you... too."

She laughed again. She'd found completion in Renaldi's arms, and somehow she knew that this was just the beginning.

The beginning of all her dreams coming true.

## Chapter 10

It could've been hours later. It could've been centuries later. It hardly seemed to matter. When he was with Jade, the long years of Renaldi's immortal life melted away into nothing. She brought him back to life, back to the moment, back to the human man he'd been so many years ago.

A mortal man with dreams of a home and a wife, of a love that would last forever.

He'd found that the moment he walked into Nocturnal Nuptials.

"What can we do about Melaina and this whole Court mess?" Jade snuggled close to him, resting her face against his chest.

"Remember when I asked you to trust me?" He twisted one of her curls around his finger.

"Yes." He could hear the pout in her voice.

"I had a plan, or I never would've tried to make you mine." He angled her face up to look at him. "But it would require a sizeable commitment on your part."

"Run it by me." Her mouth turned up in a teasing smile. "I'm in a surprisingly agreeable mood."

He laughed. "All right." He phrased his next words carefully. "There is one way that a vampire can make himself invulnerable to attack without bonding to another vampire."

"Which is?"

He paused. Everything he wanted hung on this moment. "He can take a swan."

"You mean... a human donor?" She rose up slowly.

"There are differing kinds of swans." He met her eyes. "If you became my swan, I would want nothing less for you than to be my pearl swan."



"Like Brenda." She bit her bottom lip.

"Sometime, you must explain about this Brenda that keeps popping up during our most intimate moments. But anyway," he cleared his throat. "A pearl swan is the equivalent of a human..."

"A human what?" She tilted her head.

"A human wife." He cleared his throat again. "A human who has been bitten three times during lovemaking forms a lifebond to the vampire in question. They are the highest form of swan, and become members of the Court through their alliance with their vampire partner." He watched her face carefully, waiting for her reaction as if his very life depended on it.

In a way, it did.

"We're already a third of the way there." She reclined back onto the pile of pillows behind her. "Why don't we go for it?"

He chuckled. "Is that your way of saying yes?"

"That's my way of saying that I'm ready to trust you." She reached for him. "I want to be with you, and no one else."

"So you consent to being my swan?" He wanted her to be certain. "With all that it would entail?"

"I more than consent." She gasped when he entered her again. "I joyfully accept."

He held himself motionless, savoring the tight, wet sensation of her around his cock. She arched her hips up to meet him, mutely urging him to thrust, to push them both toward another mindless release.

Instead, he rose to a kneeling position, allowing him to see where his cock disappeared into her hot, damp channel. He skimmed his hands over the ripeness of her hips, her smooth thighs, reveling in her body, luxuriating in the visible shivers of pleasure that swept over her with his every touch.

Gripping her thighs, he slid out of her gradually, watching as his cock emerged, slick from being inside her.

She ran her own hand down her body, nearly making him come then and there from the sheer eroticism of watching her touch herself. She slipped her hand between her legs, touching him, circling him with her fingers.

He slid back into her, the sensation of entering her doubled by the friction of her fingers wrapped around his cock. He groaned, pushing into her as far as he could go. She slid her fingers from his wet shaft to her clit, circling it with a fingertip. He felt her inner walls contract around him, milking his cock.

Thank goodness he was already a vampire. Otherwise, this woman would've been the death of him.

She reached both hands around to knead his backside. "Deeper, Renaldi," she panted. "Please."

He would be only too happy to oblige. With one stroke, he withdrew from her. "Kneel with your back to me."

She did as he asked, giving him a nice view of her spectacular rear end. He took her wrists and placed her hands on the headboard. "Brace yourself."

She held the upper edge of the headboard in a white-knuckled grip and looked over her shoulder at him, a mute question on her face.

He answered it by holding her hip with one hand and his cock with the other. In one long stroke, he slammed into her, so deeply that he was certain he'd touched her womb.

She panted a string of incoherent words, her core quivering around his cock in a heated frenzy that let him know her orgasm wasn't far away. Feeling a rush of masculine pride at being able to bring her to the brink again, he eased out of her, and thrust back in.

The sounds of their bodies joining mixed with her fevered breathing, filled the room with the unmistakable sounds of sex. Wanting to experience her release, to bask in the glow of her pleasure, he found her clit with his fingers, rubbing it in time with his steady thrusts.

She took his hand, bringing it up from her sex to run it over her breasts. He could feel them undulate with his every thrust, the nipples hard and tight. His cock jerked inside her, and he knew that coming was imminent. He had just a moment more to claim her as his own with the ultimate act of pleasure for any vampire.

Apparently sensing that they were both near the brink, Jade bared her neck to him, offering it up for his bite.

Riding wave after wave of bliss that rocked through his entire body, he sank his fangs into her neck and drank the hot, sweet rush of her life essence. Her blood filled his mouth even as he came, filling her with his own release.

As she came, her orgasm more enjoyable for him than his own, he thanked fate for giving him such an undeserved reward. He'd had the best that immortal life could offer, and with Jade, all his mortal hopes were complete.

It no longer mattered how many years he'd spent on earth. His life had just begun.

## Epilogue

"Yes, I made sure there's no silver in the wedding bands." Jade paced the polished wooden floors of the Chapel of St. Germain, her high heels tapping out a rhythm as she spoke into her telephone headset. "I give you my word, Melaina. I won't lose my temper and stake anyone."

Boy, one threat of staking a vampire empress and she was suddenly on their "ten most wanted" list.

"Everything seems to be in order here." She paused, listening to Melaina's theatrical voice. "I promise your wedding will be my top priority after today." She heard the organ strike up the wedding march and glanced at the gold watch around her wrist. "Melaina..." She tried in vain to interrupt the empress. "Melaina, the ceremony is about to start." The vampire went on as if she hadn't heard Jade speak. "Okay, it's been great talking to you. Call my assistant next week and we'll set up an appointment." She ended the call and shook her head in disbelief.

Had she really agreed to plan a wedding for the empress of the Gulf Coast Vampire Court? Love must've made her temporarily insane.

Speaking of love...

She made her way to the sanctuary, where a nervous Antonio stood, waiting for his bride. Arturo stood a few feet away, having miraculously produced the mysterious wandering Brenda at the last moment. Thank goodness, Taffy had repaired the ripped bridesmaid dress, no questions asked.

And finally, there was Renaldi, giving her a smile that he saved just for her. A smile that promised that the real party would begin after the reception, when they could finally be alone again.

She could only hope that Tuesday hadn't decided to use Renaldi's bedspread as her personal scratching post again. With any luck, her beloved pet would learn to love their new home as much as Jade did.

As Julia and Brenda slowly made their way up the aisle, Jade checked her watch again. A dazzling glint caught the light, grabbing her attention and momentarily making her forget about the wedding.

Her engagement ring. She'd never stop marveling at its beauty. Renaldi had designed it personally, and it was everything she could've hoped for.

*He was everything she could've hoped for.*

As Marie made her way to the altar, Jade smiled in pure contentment. She could open her heart and wish all her brides happiness now, hoping they found the kind of love she'd been fortunate enough to discover.

*The kind of love she'd given up on finding.*

Marie joined Antonio at the altar, and Renaldi gave Jade a knowing look. Their turn was coming. She'd finally be the bride, and not just the wedding planner, thanks to a vampire who had turned her world around and changed the way she saw herself forever.

And later that evening, when she caught the bouquet, Jade could only laugh, knowing she didn't need good luck.

*She had love.*

## **Alecia Monaco**

Alecia Monaco has been writing since she dictated her first story at the age of three. Now she happily writes paranormal and erotic romance while living in Houston with her family and pets. She loves to hear from readers and they can email her at [AleciaMonaco@aol.com](mailto:AleciaMonaco@aol.com), or visit her site at [www.aleciamonaco.com](http://www.aleciamonaco.com).