

Willing



Lynn Viehl

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For L.,
who wasn't willing to let it go.

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“I respect your artistic integrity, Juliana, but if you want to show in my gallery, I’ll need more than a peek at your portfolio.” Jason Higginsbotham scooted back from his desk and unzipped his fly. “You don’t have a tongue piercing, do you? Renoir doesn’t care for the feel of metal studs.”

I closed my portfolio and watched him take a rather small, flaccid penis out of the front fold of his plaid boxers. “You call your penis Renoir?”

He showed me two rows of perfectly capped teeth. “Much more dignified than Mr. Johnson, don’t you think?”

“Sure.” I needed money, but not this bad, so I stood. “I appreciate you taking the time to see me, Jason, but I think I’ll pass.”

His face fell. “If it’s the piercing issue, you can just take out—”

“It’s not the piercing issue. You and Renoir have a nice day.” I picked up my portfolio and walked out of his office.

I stood outside for a moment to rebuild my wrecked composure. Higginsbotham Galleries had a long-established rep for backing new artists, and now I knew why. I wasn’t ever again going to look at any painter who’d shown there without imagining them on their knees behind that desk.

Jason’s secretary, a thin, thirty-something redhead who wore suits so tailored and perfect that she resembled a display mannequin, peered at me through the latest trend in ugly horn rims. “I see you met Renoir.”

“Briefly.” I shouldered my purse strap.

“He’s a small but vital part of the firm.” Her lips twitched. “He’s also the reason I thank the Goddess every day that She made me a lesbian.”

I chuckled. “Put in a good word for me next time you chat, will you?”

“I think can do a little better.” She offered me a business card. “Daedelus Fine Arts, off Golden Beach. Selma Kessler has been looking for some new local talent. She’s got a twenty-five year old boytoy who keeps her Matisse happily occupied, too.”

I accepted the card, thanked her and left the gallery. Outside twilight drew rose, cheddar and azure-tinted cloud curtains over the sunset, and painted the horizon over the sea a dusky wild plum. My fingers wanted a brush and a canvas, but the light and the colors would be gone before I got back to my cottage on Hollywood Beach.

I needed to paint more commercial pieces, things I could sell in the local gift shops. All I’d been producing lately were dark, twisted abstracts for which no one, not even a shrink obsessed with inkblots, would pay a dime.

“Are you Juliana Jones?”

I turned my head and saw a tall, gorgeous brunette woman straightening from where she’d been leaning against my car.

“That’s me.” Cop, my trouble radar told me, and was proven right again when she produced a badge.

“Detective Samantha Brown, Fort Lauderdale homicide.” The black lenses of her Wayfarers completely concealed her eyes, but she owned the three

B's: brunette, beautiful, and built. She must have been just finished drinking a Cuban coffee, because she smelled of dark, rich espresso. "I'd like to ask you some questions about Eric Locke."

Eric Locke had been my friend, my lover for one night, and my kidnapper. Right after we'd made love, he'd gone psycho, abducted me, and had me beaten to within an inch of my life.

Not that I was going to tell her any of that.

"You're from Fort Lauderdale homicide?" I put on my best bewildered face. "I thought Eric was murdered in West Palm Beach."

"His body was dumped there," she said. "He was actually killed in a private residence in Fort Lauderdale."

A passing tourist slowed down to peer at us, hoping to hear more.

I had a couple of bucks in my wallet, and eyed the Denny's across the street. "You feel like having a cup of horrible coffee?"

Detective Brown nodded and followed me to the diner, where a perky teenage waitress showed us to a booth. After she ordered ice water instead of coffee, Detective Brown took off her shades and exchanged them for a PDA she carried in her jacket pocket.

"You first met Mr. Locke at a Starbuck's off Hollywood Beach, is that correct?" she asked, tapping the stylus on the little screen.

No one knew how I'd met Eric but me, or so I'd assumed. She must have tracked me down from the receipts for all the grande vanilla lattes Eric had bought me. Eric and I had always met at Starbuck's late at night, when there

was hardly anyone in the shop, so the baristas would have remembered me.

“Yes.”

Detective Brown had cool hazel eyes that seemed to put every word I said through some kind of inner polygraph. “Did he ever mention having any trouble with anyone, or receiving threats against his life?”

“No. Eric and I only talked about galleries and paintings and shows, stuff like that.” I glanced down at my portfolio. “I’m an artist.”

She graffiti’d something on the PDA’s screen. “You knew that he was dying of cancer.”

“No, he never mentioned it to me.” Not even when he’d tried to trade me for another man’s blood, which he had been convinced would cure his cancer and save his life. I imagined telling her that, and how long it would take her to Baker Act me afterward.

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“About six months ago.” Truth. “A couple of days before he died, I think.” Lie. “We met for coffee and talked like we always did.” Before the wild sex, the near-death experience, and the murder.

She nodded. “Did he seem worried or concerned about anything?”

“Not that I remember.” I smiled at the kid waitress as she placed a cup of coffee and a glass of water on the table. “Thanks.”

Detective Brown waited until the woman left before she asked me, “Are you Catholic, Ms. Jones?”

“No.” Odd question. “I’m not religious.”

She took a sip of the ice water and sat back. "I already know who killed Eric Locke. What I don't know is why." She watched my face. "I was hoping that you could tell me."

She was smart and devious, but I wasn't stupid and obvious.

"I wish I could." I tested my coffee, which tasted like liquid tar, and tried to etch the enamel off my teeth. "Water was a good choice." I put the two dollars left in my purse on the table and slid out of the booth. "I've got to get home and do some work. I hope you find whoever killed Eric."

Detective Brown followed me out of Denny's and walked with me to my car. She watched me put my portfolio in the trunk before she said, "Eric left his entire estate, including his family's pharmaceutical company, to a Catholic order called *les Frères de la Lumière*. They're known around certain circles as 'the Brethren.'"

"Very generous of him." I closed the trunk. "Is there anything else, Detective Brown?"

"There always is, Ms. Jones." She held out a business card. "If you change your mind, call me."

I'd shot Eric Locke in the face to stop him from stabbing Shamaras, a man whose blood Eric had wanted. A man whose friends had apparently saved my life twice. A man Eric had claimed was a vampire.

A man who had bared fangs when Eric tried to kill him.

I took the card. “Good night.” I hoped she believed me. I hoped this would be the end of it. I hoped the sweat collecting on my scalp and the tears filling my eyes would stay put until I drove off.

I got one out of three.

#

I painted that night until two a.m., roughing out the skies and oceans for four beach landscapes and ending up finishing one. I rarely slept through the night anymore, not since I’d killed Eric. As guilty as I felt, though, I never dreamed of him. My dreams, which had usually been of the silly, naked-at-the-grocery-store variety, had gradually become darker and more complicated.

It was weird. I never remembered the details of what I dreamed, but I woke up a mess – shaking, or sprawled on the floor, or weeping into my hands. Once I opened my eyes and heard what sounded like French. It didn’t stop until I clapped a hand over my mouth.

Not terribly strange, unless one considered that aside from *oui* and *merci*, I didn’t know a word of French.

My arms ached by the time I finished the last painting, which in my head I had titled *Stupid Beach Sunset No. Nine Hundred Ninety-Nine*, and I went to the utility room to clean up my brushes. The sharp odor of mineral spirits usually cleared my head, but another scent, the faintest trace of blue hyacinth, spoiled things.

Invisible static called the hair on the back of my arms and neck to attention, and my heart beat thudded a charge cadence against my ear drums. I

dropped my brushes in the bottom of the sink and yanked open the utility room door. I saw no one and nothing to explain the hothouse of unseen hyacinth softening the warm, salty breeze and surrounding my cottage.

I didn't have to see him to know he was there.

Juliana.

My name twanged in my ears, and shivered through my bones. All I wanted to do was go out, find him, see him and know if the paintings in my head were real or just part of my nightmares.

And I'd be damned if I would.

"Leave me alone." I closed the door and flipped the three deadbolts I'd installed last month.

I took a shower, scrubbing my hands mercilessly with pumice until I erased the traces of paint from my fingers. I washed and conditioned my hair, shaved my legs, and gave myself a rubdown with cocoa butter before I dried off and dressed in my oldest, rattiest pajamas. I wrapped my head in a towel, grabbed a bottle of nail polish and a bag of cotton balls, and flung myself on my bed. Painting my toenails would take at least thirty minutes. Then I'd do my hair, and pluck my eyebrows, and—

Juliana.

This time I didn't think. I pulled the towel from my head, left the nail polish on my nightstand, and went outside in my bare feet.

Most of the tourists had gone back to their hotels or gathered at the boardwalk bars to drink. The beach stood empty, the golden sands disappearing

under the foam-edged curl of the gentle waves. I walked down to a fringe of sea oats and stood beside them, waiting for him to show himself.

Almost at once Shamaras came out of the shadows behind the life guard shack. Moonlight verified that he was as big and solid and bald as I remembered, but shied away from his face. He'd removed his tie and opened the collar of his cream-colored shirt, but even that couldn't dim the perfection of his gray hand-tailored suit.

The paintings in my head, the only portraits I'd created of him, paled before the reality. The only thing better than looking at him would be to touch him. To stop from doing that, I bit my tongue, hard enough to draw blood, and slowly my head cleared.

"Good evening, Juliana." Charcoal on oiled silk, his voice drew nameless things in the space between us. "I hope you are well."

He hadn't come here to check on my health. "What do you want now?"

Thirty seconds passed before he said, "I understand that the police questioned you about Eric."

So he'd been having me watched. "You and your friend Gregory are safe. I didn't tell the cop anything, and I won't. Are we done?"

"I must speak with you about another matter." He watched my face without blinking once. "You need work. I have a problem. I wish to offer you a business proposition."

No one wanted to hire me but an oral sex addict and a guy who thought he was a vampire. Who said there was no such thing as universal balance?

“I’m really not interested in your business,” I told him.

“You saved my life,” he reminded me. “You are experiencing some financial difficulties. I should like to help.”

He’d run a credit check on me, too.

“Thanks so much,” I said, adding my warmest smile to the words, “but let me be clear: I’d rather peddle my ass outside a treatment clinic for HIV-positive sex addicts than work for you.”

Not bad for an exit line, I thought, as I started back for the cottage. Shamaras followed me to the back door, and put one huge hand on the door to keep me from slamming it in his face.

I didn’t feel the bizarre urge to put my hands on him again, but I had a feeling that wasn’t going to last. “Do we *have* to keep doing this? Can’t you take no for an answer, and change into a bat, and go chase hemophiliacs or something?”

“I cannot change into a bat.” He had black eyes, I thought, until the moonlight brought out glimmers of color in the irises, turning them opalescent. “Please, Juliana. At least hear everything I have to say.”

I wanted to kick him out. I couldn’t. Being near him made it impossible.

“Sure, why not.” I went into the kitchen to splash my face with cold water. After I scrubbed my face dry with a towel, I called out, “Do you drink anything besides people?”

“Wine, water or tea.”

I brought him a bottle of Zephyr Hills, and caught him going through a stack of my latest canvases. “That’s private. Didn’t your mother teach you any manners?”

“My mother left me in a church a few hours after I was born. Thank you.” He took the water bottle and watched me retreat to my wicker rocker. “You have lost some weight.”

“I’ll find it eventually.” I drank some of my tea. “So what’s the problem?”

“I need a woman.”

I stared at him until the laughter bubbled up inside me. I let it out for few minutes before I wiped my eyes with the heel of my hand. “Beautiful, thank you, I needed that. Do you have a name for your penis?”

Shamaras frowned. “No.”

“Just so you know, Renoir is taken.” I sat back and closed my eyes.

“Tomorrow I am being presented to the suzerain of this region,” he said.

“It is an important meeting. I need a woman to act as my *tresora*.”

I opened one eye. “Your what?”

“My human servant.”

I opened both eyes. He wasn’t kidding. “Why don’t you head back to Carfax Abbey now?”

He put the water bottle down on the polished slice of cypress trunk that served as my coffee table and linked his hands together. “I will pay you for your services. All you will have to do is accompany me for several hours.”

I wondered if he regretted not buying me from Eric when he'd had the chance. "Try a rent-a-maid service."

"I cannot. Our human servants are not maids. They are more like personal assistants. There is no one else whom I can trust." He reached out to me and took my hand in his. "Juliana."

His hand was cool but his touch made my temperature spike. The instant heat came with other feelings, like the one that begged me to climb onto his lap and press as many parts of my body against him as was humanly possible.

"Juliana." He waited until I looked into his eyes. "I will pay you one hundred thousand American dollars to do this for me."

I tasted blood in my mouth and shook my head.

"Two hundred thousand."

Was he bargaining with me, like I was a hooker holding out on him? Or was he that desperate? Why was I wondering about any of this?

"No." I pulled my hand out of his and got to my feet. I put the chair and then half the room between us. "Please leave."

He came after me. "You will have the money in your bank account tomorrow morning, before the meeting."

My rent and utilities were past due. I was washing my clothes with dish liquid and living on the ancient, frost-encrusted microwave dinners in my freezer. At least, until FP&L cut me off, which would probably be on Friday.

I needed money. I wanted money. But not his.

I saw him reaching for me and moved out of reach. "No."

“You owe me this much.”

I skidded to a halt and turned, because I couldn't have heard that right. “I *what?* For what? I saved your life.”

“Lencho, my *tresora*, died saving yours when you were a child.” His pretty eyes changed, the pupils turning into splinters of black that sliced through the rainbow-sheened glowing blue irises. “Our customs require that you pledge yourself to take his place. I ask that you do so only for one night.”

“I won't know what to do,” I said, heavy on the irony. “I'm not a personal assistant. You're the only vampire I know.”

“I am not a vampire, and you are perfect for this.” He circled around and came up behind me to put one of his cool hands over the tattoo on my shoulder. “You bear my mark. You are not affected by our scent. You will not lose control among my kind.”

My heart pounded harder than my landlord wanting the rent check. “Back up a minute. You're not a vampire?”

“I must have blood to survive, but my kind are not like the monsters of your folk tales. We do not kill humans. We are not evil.” He traced the outer edge of the black cameo inked into the flesh of my shoulder. “Our needs are very different.”

The glide of his fingertip against my skin sent a wash of warmth across my back. “If I refuse, are you going to tell the police about me shooting Eric?”

He shook his head slowly. “You must be willing to do this.”

That made it seem better, in a way. And worse. Still, this would be the end of it, and after tomorrow night I could get on with my life. “Go with you, just this once. That’s all I have to do.”

“Yes.”

I had to stop looking into his fairytale eyes. “Will I have to kill anyone this time?”

“No.” His voice softened. “Never again.”

“All right.”

Relief eased the lines around his mouth. “I will deposit the money—”

I slapped him, and I really put my whole arm into it. His cheek slammed like concrete against my palm. As the insides of my fingers swelled and throbbed, I said, “Don’t you put a dime in my bank account. I’m doing this for the old man who pulled me out of the ocean. For Lencho. Not for the money. Not for you.”

“I understand.”

“And keep your damn hands off me.” I shoved past him, went into my bathroom, and splashed my face with cold water until I calmed down. When I came out, Shamaras had left gone.

#

A rain storm and Dr. Gregory showed up the next morning on my doorstep. The storm brought a nice, cool breeze with it. The doctor brought a briefcase and a garment bag.

I remembered the tired look on his face, but not the ponytail of dripping wet blond hair or the soulful brown eyes. He hadn't shaved, and his damp clothes appeared slept-in, but his beard stubble golden against his rain-washed, tanned skin.

Raindrops sparkled on his eyelashes as he looked me over. "Good morning."

There are guys that a woman sees and just knows, somehow, that they're worth the trouble. To my dismay, Dr. Gregory was evidently one of them.

"First the monster, then Dr. Frankenstein." I leaned against my door jamb. "What's in the bags? Halloween candy?"

"Your uniform," he said, answering my smirk with a scowl, "and my name is Neal."

I imagined him saying that against my lips, until my common sense kicked the nymphomaniac out of my head. This was the maybe-vampire's pal, not a normal guy. As soon as this was over, I'd go out and find a nice, non-psychotic boyfriend, and make him the happiest man in Florida. "Well, *Neal*, I don't wear uniforms."

"You do tonight." He stepped over the threshold and walked past me.

"Don't you have patients to see or something?" I asked as I followed the trail of shoe-shaped puddles he left in his wake. "You're getting my floor wet. Why do you smell like a dog?"

"I stopped by the office on the way here to deliver some puppies." He glanced around. "Where do you keep the towels?"

I pulled one out of my linen closet and tossed it at him. “A doctor, delivering puppies.”

He rubbed the towel over his face. “I’m a vet, not a doctor. And before you get angry, I wanted to take you to a hospital that night. We couldn’t risk moving you at first, and then Eric showed up.”

I had the right to be pissed off. Eric Locke had ordered one of his men to beat me nearly to death, and then he had shot me in the shoulder. Neal Gregory had treated me for my injuries after I’d escaped Eric.

“For what it’s worth,” Neal continued, “I tried to talk Shamaras out of doing this. He wouldn’t listen to me.”

“You should have tried harder.” I trailed him into my bedroom, where he draped the garment bag over my bed and began unloading things from his briefcase. “What is all this stuff?”

“Shoes, jewels, gown.” He handed me a large black velvet box and a smaller one. “Can you do your hair and makeup, or should I call a salon for an appointment?”

I was too busy staring at the contents of the large box. “Whoa.” A double row of diamonds set in platinum sparkled up at me. “Are these real?”

“The Kyn don’t buy cubic zirconium. There are matching earrings and a bracelet in the other case.” He unzipped the garment bag and took out a web of black silk. He shook it out, held it up, and it became a dress that might cover twenty percent of my body, max. “You’re a size eight, right?”

“If I wear that,” I said, “people will think I’m a working girl. Who are the kin?”

“The Kyn, shorthand for the Darkyn.” He spelled it for me. “They’re Shamaras’s people.” He held the dress up to me for a moment. “You can’t wear a bra with this.”

I side-stepped the gown and a short, white-hot flash of Neal’s fingers taking off my bra. “What’s going on with him? Why does he have to have this meeting or whatever it is?”

“He intends to settle here in Florida. Before he can do that, he has to meet and get permission from the local Kyn lord.” He began to say something else, and then shook his head. “Look, the less you know, the easier this will be. All you have to do tonight is stand beside Marco, look beautiful, and keep your mouth shut.” Neal saw my expression and sighed. “If you start talking, they’re never going to believe you’re his *tresora*.”

Marco. The almost-vampire had a first name. Then again, why would I care if he had a first name? “You’re his friend, right? Why can’t you play Renfield?”

His mouth tightened. “I’m not able to resist their scent the way that you can. *L’attrait* – the scent they give off that affects most humans – turns me into a babbling idiot in five seconds flat.”

But not me. Interesting. “You can’t wear nose plugs or something?”

“It’s not the only reason.” He put the little black dress on a hanger and hung it in my closet. “They’d smell Marco on me.”

I could smell Marco on me, even after my shower. If the guy ever bottled himself, he'd own the perfume industry. "So?"

"So I'm not a woman." Neal put the jewelry boxes on my dresser. "The Kyn are very old-fashioned when it comes to that sort of thing."

I hadn't picked up a gay vibe from either of them. The sensible part of me felt relieved. The other ninety-nine percent wanted to weep with frustration.

"Sorry."

His shoulders moved. "I don't like them, either. Now, let's go over exactly what will happen."

What Neal told me sounded like very odd stuff, but I didn't comment. Like Shamaras had said, it was only a couple of hours. I'd play the part, then we'd be even. I'd never have to see him again, and he and Neal could live happily ever after.

The smug bastards, my wounded ego muttered.

Neal wouldn't leave until I showed him what I planned to do with my hair and the type of make-up I used. We were arguing over lipstick color when someone kicked in my front door.

"Fort Lauderdale Police," a familiar female voice shouted. "Juliana Jones, come out with your hands where I can see them."

I shoved Neal in the bathroom closet and closed it before I walked out and faced Detective Brown and a black-haired man. Both wore sunglasses and held very large guns pointed at my face.

I did my best imitation of a statue. "I'm not armed."

“Put your hands on top of your head,” the man told me, his voice rich with an odd Latin accent. “Slowly.”

I did as he ordered, and Detective Brown came around behind me, taking hold of my arms and bringing them down to hold my wrists together at the small of my back.

“We got great prints off that coffee cup from Denny’s,” she told me as she snapped handcuffs on my wrists. “The DNA from the saliva on the rim was a match, too.”

“A match for what?”

“Skin and blood we found under his fingernails, and the fingerprints we found on his eyelids.” She turned me around to face her, and smiled with grim satisfaction of the righteous. “Juliana Jones, you’re under arrest for the murder of Eric Locke.” She took hold of my arm and marched me toward the door. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law . . .”

#

I didn’t make it all the way through the booking process.

Once the two detectives had taken me downtown, I was fingerprinted and photographed, and sent to a room with a female corrections officer. Detective Brown stepped in just after I began stripping out of my clothes to be searched, and told the officer something about the arrest warrant.

“If you say so, Sam,” the officer said.

Detective Brown ordered me to dress and come with her.

We didn't go far, only down the hall to an interrogation room, where she shoved me inside and locked the door.

"Who do you serve?" she demanded.

I almost gagged on the smell of boiling-hot coffee, and wrapped my arms around my stomach. "No one."

She grabbed the collar of my t-shirt and yanked it down, tearing it as she exposed my shoulder. "Who marked you? What's his name?"

I imagined telling her the whole story, and spending the night on a psych ward. "I had the tat done when I graduated high school. I designed it myself. The artist still works at an ink shop in Dania—"

She pushed me toward one of the chairs around the table. "Sit down."

She left, and came back a few minutes later with her partner. The scent of coffee became tinged with citrus as he pulled my shirt aside to inspect my tat.

"I do not recognize it." He looked down at me. "You are among friends, *tresora*. Name your master."

I didn't know how they'd found out about what I was doing for Shamaras. They were cops, though, and that made them almost as bad as the Brethren guys that Eric had been mixed up with. I couldn't think straight anymore. The air in the room seemed to be disappearing, and I thought I might choke on the reek of orange-flavored coffee.

"Name your master," Samantha repeated.

I coughed to clear my throat. "I'm not into S&M."

“She’s resistant.” Rafael breathed in. “There is a trace of him on her, Samantha, but not enough for me to track.”

Samantha pulled a chair next to mine and sat down. “Did you kill Eric Locke willingly, or were you compelled to do it?”

“I’ve told you everything I can about Eric.” I put on my best bewildered face. “Am I still under arrest?”

Samantha swore under her breath.

“She’s lucid,” Rafael said. “And she is concealing something, or she would not be avoiding your eyes.”

A strong hand grabbed the front of my T-shirt. Samantha used it to haul me close to her face. “Do you know what my talent is? I can read the blood of murder victims. You left just enough in Eric Locke for me to see the last moments of his life. I saw you pointing a gun at his face. I saw you pull the trigger.”

“That’s an interesting hobby.” I kept my voice even. “All I can do is garden and paint.”

She back-handed me, and I felt my lip split. “You’re going to tell me why you did it.”

Her questions and the taste of blood in my mouth made my stomach clench. “I’d like to be provided with that attorney I can’t afford now.”

Someone buzzed the intercom and called Samantha outside. She returned a few moments later and addressed her partner. “We don’t have the gun or enough evidence to hold her. Turn her loose.”

“No.” Her partner took her arm. “If she’s—”

“Do it.”

Rafael escorted me out of the room and out into the reception area. I saw Neal Gregory standing and arguing with the desk sergeant, until he saw me and rushed over.

I felt like the girl in a floaty dress who runs in slow-motion across a sunlit, wildflower-speckled meadow towards her lover. It didn’t help when Neal wrapped his arms around me and pressed my head against his shoulder.

“What happened?” Before I could answer, he put me at arm’s length and touched my lip. He glared at Rafael. “She’s bleeding, for God’s sake. What did you do to her?”

“It was an unfortunate accident. You should take her home.” He turned and walked away.

#

Neal drove me home, and hammered me with questions the entire way.

“How could they know you were involved?” he demanded after I told him what had happened at the station. “There was nothing linking you to the murder.”

“Except my DNA under Eric’s fingernails.” I winced and touched my sore lip. I couldn’t feel the split anymore. “And my fingerprints on his eyelids.” I glanced at him. “I don’t remember closing his eyes after I murdered him.”

“You didn’t. Shamaras did.”

“The vampire and I have identical fingerprints?” I asked, heavy on the irony.

“It’s a little complicated. Shamaras will take care of it,” Neal said as he pulled up into my yard. “Do you need help getting ready?”

I stared at him. “Neal, I was just arrested for a murder I committed, and bitch-slapped by a psychic cop who knows I did it. I don’t think I’m exactly in the mood to go to the vampire party.”

“It’s not a party, it’s a presentation,” he said. He got out and followed me to the door. “Jules, it’s too late to cancel.”

I discovered the door was locked and reached up for the spare key I kept tucked on top of the door frame. “Don’t call me Jules. Better yet, don’t call me at all. I quit.”

“Let’s get this over with,” Neal said, tugging me around.

I opened my mouth to ask what, which made it a lot easier for him to kiss me. Not politely, not peckishly, not even gay-boyfriend chastely. He gave me the works. Mouth, teeth, tongue, everything.

He kissed me like the world was about to end. Like we were the only two people left on it.

And then he got serious and kissed me the way a woman is kissed only once or twice in her life, a kiss so passionate it makes actual sex dull in comparison. The kiss that breaks her heart, gathers up the pieces, and steals them out of her chest. The kiss that destroys everything.

He broke it off when I groaned, which was a good thing, because all I could think to do in response was rip off his clothes and wrap myself around him like a python. Once I finished begging him to make me his personal body slave forever.

“Sometimes I hate that son of a bitch.” He stalked off into the kitchen.

I stood there for a minute, panting. When I could talk, I asked, “Why did you do that to me?”

“He told me to.” Things began banging around and water ran. “I didn’t believe him.”

I went into the kitchen and avoided throwing myself at his feet. Barely. “Explain to me what the hell that was, right now.”

“I was testing you. This. I wasn’t going to do it, but I wanted to be right for once.” He filled my sink with hot water, squirted some dishwashing liquid in it, and rolled up his sleeves. “I was happy with the way things are with us. Were.” He turned as he reached for the first plate in my stack of dirty dishes, and I saw on his face the same frustration I felt. “I told him this was bad idea.”

“It felt pretty good to me.” I sat down to hide the fact that my knees were crumbling and I couldn’t make sense of a gay man giving me the best kiss of my life. *Maybe he’s not gay.* “Are you bi or something? Is that it?”

He rinsed the plate and put it on the dry rack next to the sink. “It’s not about the sex. Not really. It’s about him. Us.” He started scrubbing out my copper teakettle. “Do you want a normal life, Juliana?”

“I have a normal life.” Up until Neal kissed me. All bets were off now.

“Then just do this thing tonight and let it go, and it’ll stay normal.” He turned the kettle upside down and ran a dry hand towel around the inside. “We’ll never bother you again, and you can paint and sit on the beach and grow old and be happy.”

Whatever he was talking about, he was dead serious. “What if I want you?”

He shook his head. “You can’t have me.”

I could have him if I touched him again, I felt sure of it. I just wasn’t sure I’d survive the experience. “I might have believed that before you kissed me.”

“You’d have to give up everything, everything that matters to you, your independence, your identity, your whole life here.” He gestured around with a rinsed water glass. “All this, gone forever, and you can never come back to it. And you don’t just get me. You get him, too.”

All that, just for sex? “What if I don’t want him?”

Neal dried off his hands and came over to crouch in front of me. “You have no idea what you’d be getting into, and I won’t let you do it. I can’t, Jules. It would be worse than what Eric did to you.” He pressed a damp hand to my cheek and kissed my forehead before he stood. “The driver will be here at sunset to take you to Marco. I’m sorry.”

Because I’d only seen Neal Gregory three times in my entire life, because I was afraid, and because I couldn’t imagine what would be worse than what Eric Locke had done to me, I let him go.

#

I put on the dress, the jewels, the makeup and the shoes. I kept my hair loose and down and spritzed a little *White Linen* on my wrists. The mirror told me I looked fabulous, which was good, because after what had happened with Neal, I felt like a pile of old dried-up kelp.

The driver, a smiling older man with a European accent, came to the door at sunset and escorted me to a long white limo. I expected it to be empty, but found Shamaras waiting inside.

He took his time inspecting me before he said, "You take my breath away, Juliana."

I refused to admire the beautiful cut of his tux, or the perfection of the white tea rose pinned to his lapel. Whatever he had done to Neal to make him reject me was going to ruin my life. "Let's get this over with, shall we?"

We didn't talk as the driver took us to Fort Lauderdale beach. There we stopped in front of a nightclub named *Infusion*. Some of the younger artists I knew liked to hang out here, but I'd never gone through the black nail polish and spiked leather stage.

"You're meeting the vampire lord at a goth club?" I asked Shamaras.

"He owns it." As the driver opened the door he climbed out and offered me his hand.

I ignored it and got out on my own. The heels he'd had me wear gave me a couple of inches, which made me feel better, until I remembered I was wearing real diamonds at a beach where it was always mugger's happy hour.

"Did Neal tell you how this will be?"

“Yeah, he did.” I didn’t look at him as I stepped to stand at his left side.
“Don’t worry. Fangs flashing won’t freak me out.”

Shamaras smiled a little. “Stay close to me, and you’ll be fine.”

A big, all-business bouncer stepped in front of Shamaras when we got to the entrance. “We’re closed for the night.”

That was my cue for the one thing I was supposed to say. “Lord Marco Shamaras to see Suzerain Lucan.”

I must have pronounced it right because he pivoted and opened the door. I spotted the gun he tucked back into his hip holster as we passed by, but I didn’t say anything. Neal had warned me that there would be a big show of weapons. It still didn’t prepare me for the wall of men standing inside the club, or the dark metal swords they held ready to swing.

I heard myself gulp.

“Be strong,” Shamaras said.

Be strong. I was ready to be anywhere else.

“They say when the world comes to an end, only the cockroaches will survive,” a deep, vaguely British voice said as some of the swordsmen stepped aside. “I think I’ll put my money instead on you, Marco.”

The man who came toward us looked like Brad Pitt on steroids. He wore head-to-toe executioner black, and it suited him perfectly. All he needed was the black hood and a big shiny axe.

I almost stepped in front of Shamaras before I remembered Neal's warning. *Say nothing, do nothing, and stick to Shamaras's side like his Siamese twin.*

"Suzerain Lucan." Shamaras bowed. "May I present my *tresora*, Juliana?"

I was supposed to perform a modified curtsy. Neal and I had practiced it. Only I was too busy staring into the polished chrome eyes and wondering how many more seconds I had to live.

One blond eyebrow arched. "Ah, it seems that we are to be civilized. Forgive me, I am somewhat out of practice."

Shamaras inclined his head. "One does what one must to survive, my lord."

"You have done better than merely survive. Your girl here is as lovely as her name." He lifted a hand encased in black velvet, and ran a finger across the diamonds at my throat. Something made a strange vibration run across my skin, almost as if his touch made the jewels shiver. "Quite fearless, too."

"Suzerain Lucan." I grabbed skirt and bobbed.

He waited until I straightened, and then tugged on a piece of my hair. I almost jumped until I realized he was freeing it from where it had gotten caught in one of the necklace links. "So tell me, Juliana, how do you enjoy serving the oldest male whore in the world?"

I felt Shamaras's hand curl around mine, and that chased off most of my nerves. I got rid of the rest by smiling and staring deliberately into Lucan's ghost-filled eyes.

"I wouldn't know," I said politely. "I don't serve you."

Lucan took a step back and peered down at me for most of eternity. Then he smiled, and laughed. "Fearless and ferocious. An excellent choice, Marco. You must meet my *tresora*, Burke."

"Welcome to Fort Lauderdale, Lord Shamaras." A small, nervous-looking man came around and bowed to Marco before he offered me his hand. "Juliana. I'm Herbert."

As Lucan and Shamaras stood staring at each other, Burke introduced the rest of the men in the room. Most of them had long Hispanic names, and after the twentieth I was glad I didn't have to remember them. Finally all the introductions were made, and Lucan gestured to a table that had been set with wine glasses and candles. "Come, sit down. We have much to discuss."

"My lord, if I may, could I borrow your *tresora* for a few moments?" Burke asked Shamaras. "I would show her the view from the penthouse and catch up on family news."

I knew I wasn't supposed to leave Shamaras alone with Lucan, and I wasn't part of Burke's family, so I was confused. "I can see it another time."

Shamaras bent down and murmured, "It will be well. Go with him."

I followed Burke to a small elevator, and rode with him to the top floor of the building. The doors opened to a beautiful private suite and the best view of Fort Lauderdale beach I'd ever seen.

"Would you care for some wine?" Burke asked as I walked over to the windows.

"No, thanks." I wished I had some paint and a canvas, though. "How long have you been doing this?"

"All my life. Some questioned my choice to come here, but I wanted the challenge of helping to establish a new jardin." Burke came to stand beside me. "When did you choose Lord Shamaras?"

"Not too long ago." If he asked questions I couldn't answer, I decided, I'd ask to use the ladies' room. Then I'd try to find the nearest exit.

He nodded. "Some lords can be more difficult than others, I think, but that is the way of the powerful ones. I have never heard of your master before tonight."

"He's a very private man." I guessed.

He took a sip from his wine glass. "Nor have I or any of the other tresora in America heard of you or your family name." He faced me. "Are you his *kyara*, or did he hire you to play the part?"

I controlled a wince. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You made several telling mistakes. Speaking out of turn, staring directly at my lord, and that moment when you almost stepped between them. The worst was when you returned my lord's insult. Lucan is new to rule, and he has never

occupied a proper Kyn household. He does not yet realize that a true *tresora* would never speak so to a Kyn lord.” Burke smiled. “I thoroughly enjoyed it, by the way.”

I braced my hands on the windowsill. “Are you going to tell him?”

“It is not my duty to verify your identity, but I thought I would caution you, which is why we really came up here.” He patted my hand. “My lord’s seneschal will be arriving shortly, and I fear that he does know the difference between a genuine *tresora* and an imposter.”

I gnawed at my bottom lip. “Maybe we can leave before he gets here.”

“Or perhaps, Burke,” a familiar voice said from behind me, “you can explain why you’ve allowed a Brethren assassin to infiltrate the jardin.”

#

Detective Suarez didn’t give me time to explain. After Burke tried to tell him that I was Shamaras’s *tresora*, he grabbed me by the arm and marched me back to the elevator.

“My lord Rafael, I believe there has been some sort of mix-up,” Burke said, trying to follow us in.

“No, Herbert, there hasn’t. Stay here and let me deal with this.” Rafael punched the button for the bottom floor and shoved me against one wall as soon as the doors closed. “How did you find the jardin?” he demanded as he searched me.

“I came here with Shamaras. I’m here with him.” All the air left my lungs as he jerked me around and slammed me into the wall. “Ask him. He’ll tell you about Eric. He’ll tell you everything.”

“What did you do, follow this Shamaras here from Europe? That was very bright of you. The first thing a refugee Kyn does is check in with the territorial suzerain.” Rafael braced an arm that felt like a lead baseball bat across my throat and leaned in. “Did you make him believe that you killed Eric Locke for him, instead of for the billions left to the Brethren? Is that how you gained his trust?”

“I’m not working for the Brethren.” I wheezed in some air. “Ask Marco.”

Rafael dragged me out of the elevator and across the nightclub, and shoved me onto my knees in front of Lucan and Shamaras. He took a gun out of his shoulder holster, pulled back the slide and held it against my head. “This woman is a Brethren operative, my lord. She use a dying human to win Lord Shamaras’s trust, and through him gain access to you.”

Lucan rose and looked down at me. “It seems your girl is somewhat more ferocious than either of us imagined,” he said to Shamaras.

“Juliana is a victim, not an assassin. Eric Locke tortured her and tried to trade her for my blood,” Shamaras said. “When I refused and he tried to kill me, she saved my life. I asked her to come here tonight and pose as my *tesora*. She does not know anything about us or the Brethren.”

“That is what she might wish you to believe, my lord,” Rafael said. “We know how fond the Brethren are of using torture to condition their operatives.”

"If she was tortured," Lucan added. "It could have been a ruse, to convince you that she is an innocent."

"Rafael? Why didn't you tell me Lucan was receiving?" Samantha Brown strode into the room, stopping as soon as she saw me. "What the hell is she doing here?"

I glanced up at Rafael. "I'd say I'm about to get shot in the head."

Everyone started talking at once. Everyone except Shamaras, who edged around the table and got behind Rafael. I stopped looking at him and held my breath. If by some bizarre chance I survived this, I'd leave Fort Lauderdale so fast they'd only find flame trails.

Don't be afraid, Juliana.

Shamaras moved, and Rafael jerked. The gun fired. The next thing I knew I was flying across the floor and slamming into some chair legs.

Men shouted, metal clanged, and Samantha Brown appeared over me, wrenching chairs off of me.

Blood spilled down my face from a gash on the top of my head. That hurt, but not as much as my arm. I'd already been shot once, so I recognized the deep, blazing agony eating my arm from the shoulder down.

"Hang on, honey." She knelt down beside me, fumbled her way out of her jacket and bundled it around my arm.

"Don't hurt him," I told her, blinking hard as blood seeped into my right eye. "He didn't do anything to Eric. It was all me."

“Now you confess.” She used the end of the jacket’s sleeve to wipe my face before she pushed the hair on top of my head out of the way. Her palm felt hard against my scalp. “This one isn’t too bad. It just . . . needs a couple . . . stitches . . .”

Her eyes glazed over as she fell silent and held her hand over my head. We sat there like that for what seemed like hours while she stared through me. Then she picked me up in her arms and carried me through a crowd of angry, shouting men and put me on the meeting table.

“The Brethren did torture this girl. Eric Locke gave her to them to see if they could make her talk. It was a test of her worthiness to serve Marco.” Samantha’s voice stayed quiet, but the men stopped shouting and started listening. “It almost killed her, but she passed. She also got away from Eric before he could finish the deal. In the end she had to shoot Eric to stop him from killing Marco. She’s not an assassin, or a spy, Lucan. She’s just an innocent girl who let the wrong guy buy her a latte.”

“How can you read all that from her blood?” I heard Lucan say. “She’s not dead.”

Samantha said something, but Marco was there, picking me up from the table and carrying me out of the nightclub to the limo. He held me on his lap and gave the driver directions in a language I didn’t understand.

I was glad it was over. “Did I mess up everything for you?”

“No, Juliana.” Something shimmered in his eyes. “You protected me, and you almost died for me. No *tresora* could have been more loyal than you were tonight.”

“Are you taking me to Neal?” When he nodded, I closed my eyes. “Tell him I’m sorry I’m not having puppies.”

#

I woke up a day later, but this time not in my own bed. Shamaras had left me in what looked like a beautiful hotel room. I checked the bandage on my arm before I rolled off the sinfully comfortable mattress and found my feet.

Someone had braided my hair and dressed me in a pale green silk nightgown. Someone who walked through the door a minute later carrying a stack of clothes and a glass of water. Neal almost dropped the water when he saw me standing there.

“Hey.” I touched my arm. “Do I thank you for this, or did you sub me out to an MD?”

“You get back into bed, is what you do.” He bullied me until I climbed in under the covers, and sat down while I drank the glass of water. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I got shot again.” I handed him the glass. “What’s with the pricey hotel? You could have dropped me off at the cottage, like the last time.”

“We need to talk about that.” He got up and took the glass into the adjoining room before bringing back a tray filled with fruit, pastries and muffins. “Are you hungry?”

“No, not really.” I sat up and scooted back until my back was propped up by the pillows. “I’m sorry I screwed up. I know Shamaras said it was okay, but I ruined everything. I hope that Lucan guy doesn’t blame him for it.”

“No, he doesn’t.” He put the tray on the side table and picked up my hand. “I need to tell you about something that happened while you were sleeping.” A phone rang in the next room, and he sighed. “After I take that call. Excuse me.”

I got out of bed, put on the clothes Neal had brought, and found a pair of slippers in the bathroom. Once I was dressed, I looked around the door into the next room. He had his back toward me and was talking to someone in French. Silently I walked across the suite and slipped out into the hallway.

I took the elevator to the lobby, where a nice doorman hailed me a taxi. I gave the driver my address and sat back, exhausted. I felt a little guilty for running out on Neal, but I was done with him, and with Shamaras. I did want a normal life, I discovered, one where I didn’t get shot on a regular basis.

I only remembered I didn’t have any money on me when the taxi pulled up to the curb. “If you’ll wait a minute, I’ll get my purse.”

“Your purse better not be in there, lady.”

I looked through the window and didn’t believe my eyes. I got out of the car and walked the ten feet to the edge of my property. I picked my way through the still-smoldering piles that had once been shingles and siding and fascia but were now charred rubble.

My cottage, my paintings, every single thing that I owned in the world. Someone had set fire to it. Someone had burned it all up.

I heard the taxi driver swear as he got out of the cab, and then lower his voice to an unhappy mutter as someone talked to him. I went to the place where my front door had been, and sat on the sagging remains of my steps.

Neal came and sat down beside me. "I paid the cab fare."

"Thanks."

"When Samantha arrested you," he said, "the desk sergeant put your name on the police blotter, along with the charges against you. No one thought about it until it was too late. The local news picked up the information and ran with the story. That was how they found your house. When they didn't find you inside, they decided to send a message."

I heard what he said, but it didn't seem to register. "The local news did this?"

"No, the Brethren." He kicked a piece of scorched window shutter. "When they find Kyn, or humans who serve Kyn, they set fire to their homes and burn them out."

I rested my chin on my knees and watched the long white limo park in the spot at the curb where the taxi had just been. "I don't serve the Kyn." I turned my head. "Can I have my life back now, Neal?"

He put his arm around me. "We'll build another cottage for you. Not here, but somewhere safe. You'll paint and be happy again, Juliana. I promise."

“Until they track me down, and set fire to that cottage.” I stood and brushed the cinders off the seat of my jeans. The limo’s interior was all white leather, and I didn’t want to leave black butt prints all over it. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.”

“About what?”

“Becoming involved with you and Shamaras.” I looked back at the remains of my life one last time. “You were right. This is worse than what Eric did to me.”

Neal caught up to me before I got inside the limo. I didn’t struggle when he turned me around, or when he kissed me. I held onto him. I didn’t let go. My fears and hopes were gone.

Neal was all I had left.

. . .you don’t just get me. You get him, too.

Neal, and Shamaras.

About the Author



Since 2000, Lynn Viehl has published thirty-eight novels in five genres. On the internet, she hosts [Paperback Writer](#), a popular publishing industry weblog which she updates daily. Lynn's StarDoc science fiction series has been a genre bestseller for seven consecutive years. Lynn's first three novels of the Darkyn, *If Angels Burn*, *Private Demon* and *Dark Need* all made the USA Today bestseller list, and her fourth Darkyn novel, *Night Lost*, debuted in May 2007 at #21 on the New York Times extended bestseller list.

Readers are always welcome to send feedback on this free e-story by e-mail to LynnViehl@aol.com.

Note to Readers

If you've enjoyed this free e-story, please let other people know about it, as word of mouth is the best advertising a writer *can't* buy. Also, if you're interested in reading other books I've written, here's my public bibliography:

Science Fiction (*writing as S.L. Viehl*)

StarDoc SF series:

StarDoc January 2000 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451457730
Beyond Varallan July 2000 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451457935
Endurance January 2001 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451458141
Shockball August 2001 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451458559
Eternity Row September 2002 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451458915
Rebel Ice January 2006 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451460626
Plague of Memory January 2007 Roc SF/F ISBN#9780451461230
Omega Games to be published August 2008 Roc SF/F
Crystal Healer to be published in mid-2009 Roc SF/F

Other SF novels:

Blade Dancer August 2003 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451459261
Ring of Fire (Anthology; short story: A Matter of Consultation)
 January 2004 BAEN ISBN# 074347175X
Bio Rescue August 2004 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451459784
Afterburn August 5, 2005 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451460294

Romance (*writing as Gena Hale*)

Paradise Island April 2001 ONYX ISBN# 0451409825
Dream Mountain August 2001 ONYX ISBN# 0451410033
Sun Valley June 2002 ONYX ISBN# 0451410394

Romance (*writing as Jessica Hall*)

The Deepest Edge February 2003 ONYX ISBN# 0451207963
The Steel Caress May 2003 ONYX ISBN# 0451208528
The Kissing Blades August 2003 ONYX ISBN# 045120946X
Into the Fire March 2004 ONYX ISBN# 0451411307
Heat of the Moment October 2004 ONYX ISBN# 0451411587

Dark Fantasy (*writing as Lynn Viehl*)

If Angels Burn April 2005 Signet Eclipse ISBN#0451214773
Private Demon October 2005 Signet Eclipse ISBN# 0451217055
Dark Need June 2006 Signet Eclipse ISBN# 0451218663
Night Lost May 2007 Signet Eclipse ISBN#9780451221025
Evermore January 2008 Signet Eclipse ISBN#9780451222848
Twilight Fall to be published in Fall 2008 Signet Eclipse

Note to Readers (cont.)

Christian Adult Fiction Series (*writing as Rebecca Kelly*)

Grace Chapel Inn Series/GUIDEPOSTS

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Happy reading!

Lynn Viehl