

CAROLE NELSON DOUGLAS

BRIMSTONE KISS



The new
DELILAH STREET:
PARANORMAL
INVESTIGATOR novel!
Fall 2008 from
Juno Books

Praise for the first
Delilah Street: Paranormal Investigator Novel
Dancing With Werewolves

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of *The Virgin of Small Plains*

“Carole Nelson Douglas takes you on a wild ride to the Vegas of your nightmares—or maybe of your fantasies.”

—Rebecca York, *USA Today*-bestselling author of *New Moon*

“Carole Nelson Douglas provide fans with an entertaining urban fantasy with that rivals that of Kim Harrison and Kelly Armstrong. The protagonist jumps from the frying pan into the fire as she tries to stay one step ahead of her enemies and those who want to use her. *Dancing with Werewolves* is a mystical delight.”

—*Alternative Worlds*

More Praise for *Dancing With Werewolves*

“[T]his fantastic first of a new paranormal series might not be a shocker for urban fantasy fans . . . Douglas handles the premise with such spectacular style, it feels fresh . . . Douglas spices the action with fabulous characters: Quicksilver, Delilah’s protective dog; CinSims (Cinema Simulacrums), dead celebrities recreated via science and magic; the oldest living vampire in Vegas, once a famous aviator; and Cocaine (aka Snow), a devilish albino rocker. Readers will eagerly await the sequel.” **(Starred Review)**

—*Publishers Weekly*

“With a brilliant eye for detail, Ms. Nelson Douglas demonstrates her creative talents with a captivating storyline and some of the most unique supporting characters around. This is truly a fantastic start to a series that paranormal romance readers are sure to enjoy.”

—*Darque Reviews*

“This is a smartly written, plot driven, original novel that deftly combines the elements of fantasy, mystery, and romance to the well sated delight of the reader. *Dancing With Werewolves* is enthusiastically recommended.”

—*Midwest Review of Books*

“Carole Nelson Douglas’ writing is crisp and edgy. Delilah’s voice came through loud and clear, a perfect mix of hard-nosed reporter and small town girl. She’s a likable character, the kind you would quickly become a best friends with. *Dancing with Werewolves* is a wonderful addition to the paranormal genre and I can only hope that we’ll be seeing Delilah again.”

—*BlogCritics*

“. . . one of the smoothest and most satisfying of the current flood of contemporary paranormal romances or whatever the category is calling itself these days. A second adventure is already in the works and I’m sure it will be a good one.”

—Don D’Amassa

DELILAH STREET, PARANORMAL INVESTIGATOR

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An Excerpt From BRIMSTONE KISS

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For more information on Juno Books:

Contact Paula Guran, Editor

E-mail: editor@juno-books.com

or

Sean Wallace, Executive Editor

E-mail: seanwallace@juno-books.com

9710 Traville Gateway Dr #234

Rockville, MD 29850

301-762-1305

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Timonium, MD 21093

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Dear Reader,

We hope you are already acquainted with the work of Carole Nelson Douglas. She is the author of more than fifty novels ranging from sf/fantasy to mystery and mainstream/romance and has been writing fiction full-time since 1984. The Midnight Louie series features a hard-boiled Las Vegas PI whose part-time, first-person narration reveals him as a “Sam Spade with hairballs.” With her Irene Adler historical series, Carole became the first author to use a woman from the Sherlock Holmes stories as a protagonist, for which *Good Night, Mr. Holmes* was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year.

In 2007, Carole introduced a new heroine, Delilah Street, in *Dancing With Werewolves*, her first venture into urban fantasy. Not surprisingly (at least to us), both readers and critics were delighted with Delilah and her adventures and have been impatiently waiting to read more. Of course, Juno Books is pleased to make everyone happy: *Brimstone Kiss*, a new Delilah Street novel, will be published this fall.

Carole and her husband, Sam Douglas, a former art museum exhibitions director and kaleidoscope artist, are kept as pets by four stray cats and a dog in Fort Worth, Texas. She collects vintage clothing, does a mean Marilyn Monroe impersonation, and, yes, she does dance, but not with werewolves. That she knows of. Find out more about Carole (and her cats!) at www.carolenelsondouglas.com.

Look for *Brimstone Kiss* in October 2008 and—if you haven’t read it yet—catch up with *Dancing With Werewolves*, available in mass market paperback in bookstores everywhere.

You might want to stop by the Juno Books Web site at www.juno-books.com; check the blog and sign up for our newsletter so you’ll be able to keep up with Carole’s books and all the other great fantasy we are publishing.

Paula Guran
Editor, Juno Books

MEET ME, DELILAH STREET

MY FRESH new business card reads *Delilah Street, Paranormal Investigator*, but my old personal card could read *Delilah Street, Unadoptable Orphan*.

I grew up in Wichita, Kansas, and was supposedly named after the street where I was found abandoned as an infant. (I guess I should just thank God and DC Comics it wasn't Lois Lane.) Of course, I've Googled and Groggled (the drinking person's search engine) the World Wide Web for Delilah Streets and not a single bloody one of them is to be found in Kansas.

Whoever my forebears, they gave me the Black Irish, Snow White coloring that it turns out are catnip to vampires: corpse-white skin and dead-of-night-black hair. By the time I turned twelve I was fighting off aspiring juvie rapists with retractable fangs and a body odor that mixed blood, sweat, and semen. Really made me enjoy being a girl.

My growing-up years of group homes are history now that I'm twenty-four and on my own. I had a good job as a reporter covering the paranormal beat for WTCH-TV in Wichita, Kansas—until a jealous weather witch forecaster forced me out. Now I freelance as an investigator in wicked, mysterious post-Millennium Revelation Las Vegas. Vegas was wicked, of course, long before the turn of the twenty-first century brought all the bogeymen

and women of myth and legends out of the closet and into human lives and society; now it is crawling with half-vamps and half-weres and all-werewolf mobs and celebrity zombies and who-knows-what-else.

I still have a few driving ambitions.

One, staying alive. Being turned into an immortal vampire doesn't count.

Two, being able to make love in the missionary position without having panic attacks. (Whoever thought someone would *aim* for the missionary position?) Position hadn't been an issue until recently and neither had sex, but now I've finally found a man I *want* to make love with. Ex-FBI guy Ricardo Montoya—aka the Cadaver Kid—is tall, dark, handsome, Hispanic, and my brand-new horizontal ambition. He has my back, and my front at every opportunity.

And, three, tracking down “Lilith Quince”—my spitting image—to find out if she is a twin, double, clone or whatever. Or even alive. Seeing her/me being autopsied on *Crime Scene Instincts V: Las Vegas* one rerun TV night in Wichita brought me to Sin City in the first place.

Lucky me, Lilith turned out to be the most desirable corpse ever featured on the internationally franchised show. She had an early-exit contract to kill herself, so her star turn as a *CSI* corpse was supposedly a Reality TV dissection. Millennium Revelation pop culture and taste tends towards the dark. When the *CSI* cameras only showed a discreet maggot camping out in a nostril that held a tiny blue topaz stud like my very own, Lilith's corpse was dubbed “Maggie” and a fantasy franchise was born. Maggie is the It Girl of 2013: Maggie dolls and merchandise are hot and so are bootleg Maggie films, out-takes, and my hide, if anyone could snag it—dead or alive. One werewolf mobster almost did already.

Then comes ambition number four: finding out who the embracing skeletons Ric and I found in Vegas' Sunset Park just after I hit town and just before it hit me back, hard.

I have other allies, too. One has heavenly blue eyes and is seriously gray and hairy. That's my dog, Quicksilver. He's a wolf-wolfhound cross I saved from death at the pound. He returns the favor with fang, claw, and warm, paranormally talented tongue.

(I have a soft spot for dogs— especially since Achilles, my valiant little white Lhasa apso in Wichita, died from blood poisoning after biting a vampire. Achilles' ashes rest in a dragon-decorated jar on my mantel but I haven't given up the ghost on him.)

That mantel is located in an Enchanted Cottage on the Hector Nightwine estate. Hector rents it to me cheap because, as producer the many worldwide *CSI* franchises, he's presumably guilty of offing my possible twin on national TV.

When Hector's *CSI* show made Lilith Quince into a macabre international sex symbol, he inadvertently made me, Delilah Street—her twin, double, clone, or simulacrum—a wanted woman. Not for myself alone, mind you, but for the naked and dead image of another woman, who may be dead, or not. I am certainly going to find out which when I get a free moment.

Hector has a profit motive rather than a conscience. He's banking on my finding Lilith or becoming her for his enduring financial benefit.

The only thing Hector and I have in common is loving vintage black-and-white films. The Enchanted Cottage is based on a setting from a late 1940s movie. A shy-to-the-point-of-invisible staff of who-knows-what supernaturals run the place, and I suspect it's supplied

with the mirror from *Snow White*. Maybe it talks like the wicked stepmom's gabby glass, but so far it's been mum with me. I just see dead people in it.

The most complicated beings in my brave new world are the CinSims. The Cinema Simulacrums are created when fresh zombie bodies illegally imported from Mexico are blended with black-and-white film characters. The resulting "live" personas are wholly owned entertainment entities leased to various Vegas hotels.

Hector and Ric are sure the Immortality Mob is behind the brisk business in zombie CinSims, but can't prove it. Hector wants to wrest the CinSims from the mob's control into his. Ric aches to stop the trade in illegally imported zombies he was forced to work in as a child.

I'd like to help them both out, because I'm a crusading reporter against human and inhuman exploitation—besides, my own freedom is on the line from several merciless and downright repellent factions trying to make life after the Millennium Revelation literal Hell. Luckily, I seem to have some off-the-chart abilities simmering myself, most of them having to do with the silver from the silver nitrate in mirror backings, black-and-white films, and reflective surfaces.

And I have one more sorta sidekick: a freaky little migrating, shape-changing lock of hair from the albino rock star who owns the Inferno Hotel, and who goes by the names Christophe for business, Cocaine for his Seven Deadly Sins rock band, and Snow to his intimates—of which I seem to be the only one, and no way want to be.

I made the mistake of touching the long white lock in memory of my lost Achilles, and it became a sterling silver familiar with a permanent lock on me no jeweler's saw or torch can remove. It's handy, at times, but I also consider it a variety of talisman-cum-leech.

I've been called a "silver medium," but I don't aim to be medium at anything. I won't do things halfway. I intend to succeed at finding out who I really am, and who's been bad and who's been good in my new Millennium Revelation neighborhood.

CHAPTER ONE

NOT EVERY modern career girl can have her rented house blown away by a jealous weather witch in Kansas one week and end up in post-Millennium Las Vegas sleeping in an Enchanted Cottage the next.

But, as Disney says, fairy tales can come true, it can happen to you, and it had happened to me, Delilah Street, forever orphan and ex-WTCH-TV reporter.

The Enchanted Cottage is a charming little place from the 1940s film of that name. Robert Young played a pilot disfigured in World War II and Dorothy McGuire portrayed a plain, shy spinster. They find sanctuary and happily-ever-after love in a cottage just like mine.

But this is not 1940, and films are no longer made in black and white unless the director is trying to be retro or pretentious, or both. And nobody knows who Robert Young and Dorothy McGuire were, except film buffs like me and my new boss, Hector Nightwine, producer of the internationally franchised *CSI V* forensic TV shows.

For a number of reasons, my life in the Las Vegas of 2013 isn't worth a five-dollar chip from Cesar Cicereau's Gehenna Hotel casino. Fortunately, I'm worth a lot to Hector.

So here I am, in a pseudo-quaint cottage, on the grounds of Nightwine's Fort-Knox-secure Sunset Road estate, surrounded by Hobbit English charm mixed with high-tech convenience. I am tucked under an eiderdown comforter in a high, four-poster bed with gargoyles carved

onto the posts as a Jacuzzi tub in the adjoining bathroom softly gurgles me to sleep.

Surely none of my group-home, half-vampire bullyboy nightmares will come home to roost in this place. It's as safe as fairy tales and Nightwine's state-of-the-art security technology can make it.

Even so, I was not quite sleeping, just snuggling into the thousand-thread-count sheets, when I heard a scratching at my second-story mullioned windows.

Fruit trees and blossom-bearing vines grow around my Enchanted Cottage as thick as Sleeping Beauty's thorny forest. So a stray vine was probably blowing against the window glass. I opened my eyes to stare up at the peaked white-plaster ceiling. A small shifting shadow danced there in rhythm with the exterior scratching.

Had a cat climbed the vines and was now trying to get in?

I was warmer than a toasted English muffin from my formerly cold pale feet to the top of my brunet head. This may be Las Vegas, but I'm cold-natured. My feet and hands never seem to get warm enough at night. Now, though, they finally were.

So I didn't want to get up.

From the stairs came the faint whiff of dinner's garlic chicken. I seldom saw the kitchen witch who came with the property, along with the yard troll and the garden pixies and who knew what else, but she could bake fragrant loaves of crusty bread in the wood stove as readily as she could nuke a frozen Weight Watchers entrée in the microwave

I wasn't crazy about the garlic odor from that night's homemade dish, but I was comforted to hear my awesomely large wolfhound-wolf-cross dog wheezing in sleep from one of the downstairs rooms. This was not one

of Quicksilver's frequent solo nights out on the town that never shuts down.

He's too big and strong to lock up, and I figure adopting him doesn't give me a lock on his nocturnal need to patrol and rock and roll. I don't equate having a home with control.

I wriggled deeper into the warm covers, but the insinuating snare-drum rhythm of that exterior scratching kept me from sliding into sleep. It could be a kitten caught up a tree, which had jumped onto a vine and clung there, helpless . . .

Forcing myself to sit up, I shivered at an inrush of air-conditioned air and put my bare feet to the icy wooden floor. My sleep-T hem snarled in the covers as I got out of bed, almost tripping me. I moved toward the pair of windows.

A Rorschach blot of black was indeed pressed to the window glass. It was as big as my spread hand, with four tiny clinging limbs and a bigger head. It looked like a starfish shadow.

I stumbled nearer and squinted to make it out in the dark. A tiny kitten surely, but not mewling up a storm as they usually did when trapped up so high. Only when a squeal revealed rows of tiny fangs did I realize that my visitor was a bat.

Naturally, I squealed a bit too.

Mind you, I'm a former TV news reporter, an intrepid investigator of rural phenomena like cattle mutilations. One midsummer night's window-clinging bat shouldn't set me screeching.

So I stopped and reminded myself that bats were enormously useful consumers of insects and other pests. I returned to bed, shuddering as my floor-cooled feet found the sheets already chilly. Even the slim silver chain on my wrist felt icy.

I snuggled stomach-down, curled up, and waited for sleep to find me.

Then I heard the rustling. *And silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain thrilled me, filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before . . .* Damn! Why was my subconscious quoting Poe's "The Raven"?

Maybe because the rustling sounded like curtains, and there weren't any curtains on my dormer windows. Or maybe because the rustling sounded like a big bird's wings . . .

'Tis the wind and nothing more!

If that mantra had worked for Poe's uneasy scholar it would work for me. I pulled the covers farther over my head.

The raven-size wing rustling increased to a California condor-size *woosh*, with a wingspread of, say, ten freaking feet. Only an idiot would ignore that kind of indoor tempest. This was no little lost bat or even a misplaced sparrow.

I sat up, turning the covers half down, and faced the windows. "All right!" I challenged the night. *Not all right, baby girl*, whispered my internal invisible friend since childhood, Irma. *We are getting called on by more than Big Bird. We're not on Sesame Street anymore, Delilah.*

No. The room's temperature had dropped to meat-freezer cold, and I was instantly afraid I was the meat. Post-Millennium Las Vegas teemed with things that went bump, stump, hump, and slurp in the night.

I was appalled to see that the small shadow from the windowpane had moved inside to become a pillar of darkness draped in black, severe and funereal. I was almost getting used to seeing apparitions in the tall hall mirror, but not in thin air. Slowly, the head of the entity moved, lifted, and the cloaked sides spread their wings.

Awe mated with my fear and both held me frozen. A pale white face came into partial focus. Only cruel, slanting dark eyebrows and a gray, grinning mouth were fully visible.

The black fell back, revealing an ash-gray satin lining framing a man's black evening suit of elegant, antique cut. The vintage clothing collector in me couldn't help but admire the tailoring even as goose bumps ran races up and down my arms. The figure had no color at all, not even red around the eye whites.

Then I recognized my visitor from his many collectible photographs and posters.

I was beholding the most commercially potent incarnation of Dracula of all time, 1932's Bela Lugosi, slithering onscreen with eastern Euro-trash swagger and Art Deco decadence. I recalled my few typical-pre-adolescent longings to someday meet a classy vampire: suave, smooth and deliciously sinister. I hankered for any one of a dozen pop culture reinventions of the father of all vampires as a sex symbol. Bela Lugosi had a certain predatory hunger, but he wasn't the hunky anti-hero women would willingly welcome, swooning for his seductive suction action.

Lugosi was nasty. Not as nasty as the ancient devouring vamp in Bram Stoker's novel, but far from the lounge lizard, oral-sex fiend Frank Langella's portrayal had made women go crazy over a few decades back. Why did women always go for the bad boys? I sure hadn't liked the variety I fought off in the group homes.

I could think clearly, but sat paralyzed, just like all those passive silver-screen victims, my fingers curled into the sheets. At least this wasn't a debased half-vamp from the real-life group homes. He was the *reel* thing, but not a Gollum-gaunt creature of the night like Nosferatu from the days of silent films. That scrawny, long-clawed leech

and leech was all too reminiscent of the real-life crackpot Howard Hughes in his current undead state.

No, Bela Lugosi's slo-mo, sinister diction may seem hokey today, but in person, gliding to your bedside, he was mesmerizing. He leaned in and down, showed only the tips of his pointed canine teeth, and then lowered his gaze to drink in the sight of my bare neck.

By now my silver chain bracelet had subtly shimmied up my arm. Even as he ogled my throat, it looped itself into a solid wide dog collar around my neck, blocking all ports of entry.

"Bah," Dracula said, recoiling. "Cheesy silver trinket! I only wanted to take a tiny symbolic taste."

"Bad taste is never symbolic," I said, my fingers tracing the smooth defensive form my silver familiar had taken. It never failed to surprise—and defend—me.

"My master wants you."

"Isn't that Renfield's line?" I didn't mean to be a smart-mouth; I was just surprised that Dracula would admit to a master. He *was* the Master.

"Renfield's words may, regrettably, live on, but the bug-eater ended with that blasted film. The message remains: You must come with me."

"Now?" I couldn't believe I was asking that question, like I might consider it some other day.

"No. Never," I corrected myself. "We know all about you these days. You can't reverse your surname and pretend to be some Transylvanian nobleman, 'Count Alucard!' This is not sleepy old England between the World Wars of the last century. This is post-Millennium Revelation America. We're all onto you."

"Perhaps, Miss Street, but you have tried to trick my master. He's had time to discover your name and profession. He could choose to crush you like one of that

pathetic Renfield's bugs. Instead, he is magnanimous. He wishes to employ you. You call yourself a Paranormal Investigator, do you not?"

"Barely. I just called the Yellow Pages today to put the ad in. It'll take ages to show up. How would your master, whoever he is, know that?"

"We . . . he knows many things through many means. Come with me." He extended a graceful, gray hand.

Well, I'd wanted a gentleman vampire, and now here I had one.

Don't go, Irma urged. You don't know where that walking corpse has been.

"Do not be afraid," Dracula said in slow, formal tones. "These days I only drink from those who pay for the privilege. I am *the* resident attraction at the Love in Vein Social Club."

"Then what are you doing here tonight?"

"My master occasionally needs me mobile. The night has always been mine. Sometimes what he wants from me is what I also want for myself . . . a beautiful but shaken young woman, a midnight mission, an opportunity to stretch my wings and my reach, as of old. To be powerful. To be irresistible. You will come with me, Miss Delilah Street, because you must."

He leaned nearer. I inhaled the stale scent of smoke and raw meat and old blood. Then he withdrew. I wondered if the chicken garlic on my breath was slapping him in the undead kisser. Good! But I had a feeling this was an offer I shouldn't refuse.

"Not so fast," I told him. "Not in this outfit do I go anywhere. Turn your back while I change clothes if you want me to go with you."

No! Irma was kicking up an interior storm. *You don't know where and you don't know who. You can't go.*

Irma was my alter ego, the psychological crutch of a lonely kid, I figured. I didn't feel the need to heed her at the moment. The King Vampire in this town had called on me for help, no matter how rudely he had put it and how seedy his operation was. I had to live up to my new business card: Paranormal Investigator, Will Travel.

What kind of paranormal investigator would flinch from a CinSim vampire? Underneath all the props and persona, even Dracula was just an animated zombie these days. A lot of classic horror film creatures had been resurrected by the Immortality Mob to entertain the tourists. At least Mothra hadn't been sent to pick me up.

I thought about Quicksilver asleep below as I pulled a black knit turtleneck down over my black yoga pants. Old Drac must have some spell to put animals asleep, even big, supernaturally strong wolfhound-wolf crossbreeds. Otherwise he'd be at the vampire's throat.

I thrust my feet into a pair of black cowboy boot mules, and grabbed the slim Baggalini uptown messenger bag I'd found so handy during my incarnation as a TV reporter. I slung it across my body and stuffed my cell phone, ID, and cash inside so my hands would be free in an emergency. Unfortunately, it had no space for wooden stakes or garlic garlands.

Of course, if I wound up dead, I hoped somebody would make sure I wasn't resurrected—even if my future as a Lilith stand-in was worth a fortune. Couldn't count on Hector Nightwine for the job; he had an addictive profit motive. I'd need my new beau, Ric Montoya, to see to it I was dead and buried and kept that way. Ric has his ways with the dead but our relationship is anything but lifeless.

Bela was waiting, polite, caped back to me, bare gray hand still extended. The other wore a white glove.

I put my own pale hand into that dead, ashen flesh. Icy. Icky.

Dracula turned slowly to face me, his arms lifting his cloak into wide black wings again. Folding his “wings,” he clasped me to the formal front of his evening dress, the starched white shirt. His cloak curled around me, enclosing me in the scent of mothballs, must, and cold decay.

With a swoop and a *whoosh* I felt us break the ground barrier and fly through the open windows to soar into the warm night air. His arms remained around me, but the cloak folds unfurled, fanning like giant wings as we sped through the night sky. I eyed the gorgeous glitter of Las Vegas a hundred and fifty stories below.

Being in Dracula’s arms felt like waltzing with a marble pillar; his skin and bones formed one hardened, heartless surface. It was odd to fly vertically, as if we stood on an invisible floor, but it certainly eased my horizontal phobia, if not the acrophobia any human being with a brain would feel in this situation.

The wind chilled my ears. I curled my toes to keep my mules from falling off and braining some unlucky tourist below.

I distracted myself from my terror by wondering who could send Dracula as an errand boy. Certainly not mobster Cesar Cicereau of the Gehenna hotel-casino and werewolf syndicate. I wasn’t sure from our last encounter whether he now preferred to forget me instead of tearing my throat out, but I was pretty sure he’d never want to hire me.

The Strip lights below had dimmed. We were dropping toward a square black blot in the lightscape. I squinched my eyes shut, sure we would smack hard into that rectilinear bull’s-eye.

Instead my soles touched roof, the dangling heels first, then the toes. Note to self: Never wear mules for night

flights with the dead. At least Drac and I were once more on solid ground.

But whose solid ground?

Dracula slowly released me from his custody, but kept his hands on me, now both gloved—how did he do that?—in a waltz position. Did every supernatural in Vegas want to cha-cha-cha with me?

Listen, pal, Irma tried to tell him, *these Irish gams only do jigs, not waltzes with weirdoes*. She was wrong about that; I'd waltzed with Snow, the weirdest of the weird in the ancient, demonic definition of word. He was the sexy, long-haired, rock-star owner of the Inferno Hotel, purveyor of the Brimstone Kiss, an after-show perk he bestowed on mosh-pit groupies who became enslaved at one touch of his ice-white lips. Rumor had it he was an albino vampire, the obverse of my current partner. Both of them were deeply unwanted on my dance card, even though Snow's lock of white hair turned silver familiar was still guarding my throat.

Dracula swept me into a stately gliding circle. "A little movement warms the blood after a chilling night flight."

That line was almost worse than his classic "I do not drrrink . . . vine."

"I'm not dressed for the Creature Feature Cotillion," I told him. "Let's go see the Master."

"He is not so civil . . . and dashing as Dracula."

"But he *is* the master, right? You don't want to cut him out."

Dracula's face gleamed with anticipation. Then the calculated look faded. "I live only to serve. For now."

Master, whoever he was, had better watch his front, especially the carotid arteries.

Despite the probable danger, this outing was fascinating to an investigator. I considered CinSims as animated movie posters, in a way, able to walk and talk, but that was it. If I'd

thought about it, they could do a lot more, or they'd never be in demand at brothels. Although I'd heard that some human sex partners could be pretty lifeless. . . .

Luckily, I'd lost my virginity right here in Sin City, with a guy who could tease an orgasm out of a corpse. I might be alive, but I was only slightly harder to win over to the sensual side. During those literally magical moments, Ric and I had accidentally tapped the borrowed emotions of the Sunset Park lovers killed during their most ecstatic moments. A little paranormal passion by proxy had not hurt one bit.

But I didn't know that CinSims could freaking fly! With me along. Apparently, if the CinSim was gifted with paranormal skills in the originating film, those abilities carried over to the zombie reincarnation. That made the rumors of a brewing CinSim insurrection pretty scary. I mean, think: Godzilla loose on the Strip!

"I must leave you," Dracula announced dramatically, bowing to kiss my hand. "My task is done."

With that he walked to the end of the flat roof and jumped off.

"Wait!" I ran to the edge, seeing mostly dead black below, with a smattering of streetlights and signs.

Then I spotted the large humped figure rushing straight down like a beetle—just as Jonathan Harker had described his host's creepy manner of egress from his Transylvanian castle in Bram Stoker's classic novel. I watched Dracula's form become one with the dark street below. And where, pray, was I to go?

The usual answer to that in an uncaring world was, "To hell!"

And in post-Millennium Revelation Las Vegas, it was all too often the literal truth.

CHAPTER TWO

I EXPLORED THE ROOF on foot, vertical and a slave of gravity again, thank God.

The surface tar was overlaid with gravel. Occasional air-conditioning units poked up in knee-high hummocks just the right height to trip me in the dark. They were humming away, leeching cold sweat.

So the building was in use, and occupied. I circled until I found a larger hummock, the sort of inset entry you find to a storm cellar in Kansas. What it was in post-Millennium Las Vegas I hadn't a clue.

So. What does the alert investigator do? She walks down into the dark and finds out.

Mules, do your duty! Irma offered a small cry of encouragement to my footwear. *I am so glad we are not wearing your Wicked Witch of the West spike heels for this outing. I can't look!*

You haven't worn a high heel in your life. You are a sneakers girl, I told her back.

The steps were steep and I hadn't thought to bring along a high-beam flashlight. What woman would expect Dracula to dump her off in the dark like undelivered mail, without even one courtly swipe at her circulatory system?

But once on level ground, my humble mules were able to shuffle me into a vaguely lit area. The metal door to the service stairs was chained shut, with a metal sign reading BUILDING CONDEMNED: DO NOT USE, affixed with

rusted screws. A search revealed no other access but an air conditioning shaft grill. Great. Time for me to crawl on my belly like a snake. Guess me and Drac weren't that different, after all.

The grill was enameled white, now grimed a dusky gray. I was able to shake it loose, then push it in and further loosen the screws with my fingernails.

What shoddy equipment! Probably hadn't been inspected in decades.

I set the grill aside, blew hard into the two-foot square space to dislodge any cobwebs, and crawled in headfirst.

The shaft ran straight, then turned, then dropped four feet and ran straight again.

There was no use cursing the darkness, even if I had no candle along to light instead. The only way to enter or leave this building was via down, deep inside. You'd think Dracula could deliver me more directly to the Master. Unless the Master was too terrible even for him to see.

I gulped, cheered by the absence of cobwebs pushing over my features like an unwanted, unseen veil. Then I stopped. And wondered *why* there were no cobwebs. Oh. Maybe I wasn't the only intruder.

Investigation work was already losing its glamour.

Then I heard voices.

No. I am not Joan of Arc. I am a simple Kansas girl turned loose in the big, bad city. And I am a PI. So, forward toward the voices. Another ten feet, and I could hear the giggles echoing off the hollow aluminum shafts. Giggles?

Definitely female voices, those cloying, phony tones I hated from the girls at Our Lady of the Lake Convent School. Girls who had power and tried to pretend they didn't. Voices I'd heard, once out of high school, directed almost exclusively at men. At powerful men they aimed to seduce.

Seduction had been against my religion . . . until I'd met Ric here in Vegas. And he'd been the seducer. No, we'd both been seduced, by love and death and lust and dust six feet under in the desert.

I paused, wishing I had my dowsing partner with me, only Ric dowsed for the dead. I was afraid he'd find some where I was headed now. Those voices echoed as if in a vault. A burial chamber. Great. I wished Quicksilver was with me. I almost wished Dracula was with me, but he, wisely, had split.

When in doubt, advance.

At last some light leaked into my square metal tunnel. I crawled right into another grate, my nose flat against the metal.

I could look down. A little. I saw a lot of white, and finally began to recognize the location.

Oh, no! The 1001 Knights Hotel! Not here! Not *him* again! What had I done to deserve this?

At that moment a tremor ran through the shaft, rather like a boiler deep below going postal, probably the periodic hiccough of the condemned building. The grating gyrated off its loose screws. I was shaken into it, past it, and down the rabbit hole into the white light.

Luckily, unlike Alice, I landed on a bed. Unluckily, there was someone repellent in it. Several someones.

Scarlet-painted, worm-lipped women in white scattered at my descent.

The desiccated, scrawny figure of an old man in cerise satin pajamas stayed put to aim his death's head, lecherous grin at me.

"Howard Hughes," I said, scrambling off the hospital bed and its stiff white linens. "What an unexpected . . . meeting."

"*Hmm*," he said, "I liked you better in white."

His “nurses” regrouped around the hospital bed, licking their lips at me.

I had nowhere to go. Howard’s mandarin-long fingernails scratched his slightly haired chest, drawing blood. The vampire nurses sighed and drew nearer, fangs descended.

He waved a cadaverous hand. “Back! You had your share during the turning. Now if Miss Street cares for a friendly lick from me—”

Ick. The sanitary issues alone were stomach turning. Historically, he’d been famously verminophobic. You’d think he’d still have serious inner conflicts about germs in his new state.

“I’m here on your business this time,” I said.

We’d first met a few days ago, when I’d finagled myself in disguised as the sexy, fantasy sort of nurse found in *Playboy* magazine. Howard Hughes and Hugh Hefner had more in common than initials. Hughes was supposedly the most powerful vampire still left in town, which doesn’t say much for Vegas vamps.

“Too bad.” Howard’s watery dark eyes studied my face. “I could have made you a star.”

When he’d been a playboy movie mogul, star-making had been the name of his game. He’d tried it several times, but his single success was busty Jane Russell, for whom the engineer-aviator had designed the world’s first pushup bra. Come to think it, maybe the old coot had earned a crack at immortality. He certainly was a renaissance man. Pilot, inventor, unreal real estate tycoon, letch.

“Hector Nightwine’s already taking a shot at it,” I told Hughes. “I’ll be doing featured cameos on his next TV series.”

“Nightwine!” he snorted. “A minor, a very minor player. Still, my condition has certain limitations and I

require agents to act on my behalf. I would like you to become one of them, Delilah Street.”

“How do you know my name?” The last time I was here, I had ducked out without any introductions.

His smile revealed teeth so ancient they all looked like fangs. “You are already gaining a reputation in this town. I assume anyone the Cicereau mob wants to assassinate is someone worth knowing. Or at least using.”

“Ever the straight-talking billionaire,” I said. “How do you know about my near-death experience at Cicereau’s mountain lodge?”

“Cesar Cicereau thinks he’s a rival, but I’m merely giving him the space to screw up. I have sources inside his organization. You look lovely in a python unitard with a Rome Beauty apple in your mouth. Delicious! Cicereau was a fool to let you run away on him.”

Holy Hugh Hefner, catwoman! Irma whispered, *this undead leech knows about your secret birthday-suit command performance at the Gehenna. He must have better intelligence and organization than you’d think.*

“So you have Cicereau’s operation wired. Why do you need me on your payroll?”

His scraggly-haired head nodded regally. “This may take more legwork than my in-place operatives can do. I want to know who shared that Sunset Park unmarked grave with Cicereau’s daughter.”

“You know who the dead woman was?”

“Yes, my tasty little runaway winesap. In today’s Vegas, even the spider webs have ears. The creatures of the night’s hearing can outdo the most advanced electronic bugs. Better, they can return to me with information.”

Bats and wolves were associated with Old World vampires, but spiders? *Wolves*. Did that mean that Quicksilver had a gene that was susceptible to vamps?

He was at least as much wolf as wolfhound. That might explain why he'd slept while I was being airlifted up, up, and away by Dracula.

And then there was that spider-fey familiar of Madrigal, the house magician at Cicereau's Gehenna Hotel and Casino, Sylphia . . . Thinking of creepy-crawlies made my pale Irish skin break out in gooseflesh.

"Nice." Howard ran a yellowed nail down my arm. I wasn't sure whether the mogul, the playboy, or the vampire in him most got off on spooked women.

Time to stop being terrified and deal.

"Okay, Hughes. You know that Cicereau's own daughter was in that grave, but you don't know who the guy was. We're assuming he was a vampire. Is that why you're so interested?"

"I wasn't a vampire myself at that time. No one believed in vampires then. But I did believe in the future of Las Vegas, although I didn't openly act on my interest until thirty years later. Obviously, there was a lot going on here in Vegas in the nineteen-forties and fifties that no one had a clue about until after the Millennium Revelation. I want to know who that slain vampire was. I want to know who put thirty silver dollars in the grave, and why. The answers are worth a nice sum to me, Delilah Street, and I will keep my creatures' fangs off you if you achieve my objectives."

"Off me and mine."

"Not including Nightwine."

I shrugged. Hector was my boss, but something of a voyeur and an epicurean ghoul. He'd done quite well here since the Millennium Revelation and I suspected could protect himself equally well.

"I don't know what you have against him, but he's not on my personal five fave call list."

“Nor anyone’s. So, who is?” Hughes eyed me slyly. “I suppose that big bad doggie of yours.”

I nodded. “How do you know about him?”

“He trashed the Lunatics. They’re still whining about it. You think a domestic dog taking out a motorcycle gang of half-weres in a parking lot doesn’t get on the weird-news Internet network? And I suppose you’d want me to spare that big bad ex-FBI man.”

I nodded. How the hell did he know about Ric? I wasn’t going to satisfy him by asking.

Meanwhile, the nurses had crowded closer, sighing while sucking air through their fangs. “Fox Mulder,” they wailed hungrily.

Honestly, women in all forms are just too inclined to be groupies!

“Forget *The X-Files*,” I told them. “That was fiction and is now only reruns and DVDs. Ric is real life.” I eyed them all and then Hughes. “And I want him to stay that way.”

“That certainly is something to bear in mind,” Hughes noted.

“So . . . do you have any clues who the dead vamp might be, or who he might have been allied with?”

Hughes folded his age-spotted, blue-veined scrawny claws on the immaculate white bed sheet. It was like viewing leprous orchids in the snow. “I didn’t come here to buy up the Strip until the seventies. So I have no clues. Not a one. That’s your job, Delish Delilah. And keep in mind, if you fail to find out anything useful, all those no-fang concessions are off. Including on you.”

He loomed up from the bed like a striking cobra, the IV stand at his side crashing over to spray both the nurses and sheets with watery blood.

I jumped back and off, streaking away through the outer chambers containing germicidal lights and sprays.

The startled human-for-now attendants jumped out of my way. I banged through doors until I was in the truly deserted, run-down part of the derelict hotel building.

Just what I needed: a notorious, undercover vampire as my first client.

CHAPTER THREE

FROM MY PREVIOUS fact-finding mission here, I knew I had to get down ten floors and through a ring of decadent vampire druggie-guards to reach the main floor and exit the building.

My silver familiar, which had remained dormant around my throat all through my adventure with Hughes Tool and Vampire Company, crept down my right arm to curl around the bases of my fingers. The silver metal thickened into rings and then grew two-inch diamond-dusted spikes on each finger: the glitzy Vegas version of brass knuckles.

Well! How had Snow's unwanted gift known to produce the glittering knuckle spikes that echoed the diamond-dust-embedded nail file points I'd used to hold off group-home, half-vamp bullies years ago? Eerie. Snow had sent me the lock of his albino hair as a play on my name and his enigmatic powers. I couldn't resist petting it in memory of my lost white Lhasa apso's flowing coat. Like a striking serpent, the soft tendril of hair had morphed into a hard silver bangle on my arm with a permanent lock on me. Whether the silver familiar taunted me by migrating as jewelry to various body parts or transformed into instant weaponry, I resented being protected at the cost of being invaded.

Once again the mobile parasite had worked its bizarre mind-reading magic. Silver knuckles were even better than brass for punching my way through the house vampires at the 1001 Knights Hotel.

It was just like a heartless businessman of Howard Hughes' ilk to have me dropped into his lair, then force me to fight my way out of it. Cesar Cicereau, the werewolf mob alpha boss, wasn't very likeable, but he had a heart as big as the Tin Man compared to Howard Hughes, on intravenous Type O Negative or not.

I decided to take the stairs. I'd have the advantage of height when I ran into the vamp patrol. The cowboy heels on my mules were nice and thick for kicks and full-body shoves.

I knew from my last visit that these were deliberately lame, tame vampires as derelict as the building to allay suspicion. Still, even debased vampires were unhumanly powerful.

Of course there was no way to avoid announcing my descent as my shoes clattered down the dozens of concrete steps. The 1001 Knights Hotel was supposedly abandoned and ripe for razing. I wondered if it was just Hughes' economic clout or some eerie supernatural mojo that kept this prime property at the south end of the Strip off the rebuilding market and looking deceptively empty.

A savage cry announced a vamp in a burned leather coat charging up the stairs. I grabbed a railing with my left hand, kicked out my right foot, aiming at his throat, and flashed my spiked silver brass knuckles across his brow bone.

The blood ran down in sheets, blinding him as he tumbled backward . . .

. . . into a second vamp, who pushed him aside and down like deadwood.

I hadn't expected the blinding flood of blood, but I suppose well-fed vamps are like ticks, gorged and ready to burst.

This new guy's fangs were already rusted by an evening meal, too. He grabbed my kicking foot and tried to twist my leg. I grabbed the railing with both hands and pushed out that leg with all my strength. That knocked him back, but I was going to land supine on the concrete steps, the edges slamming my spine in a couple places, both blows likely to hurt like hell, not to mention paralyze.

I peddled my legs to give my feet some sort of grip on the stairs. A mule went flying off and upward, right into the snarling vampire mouth. I saw teeth fly, maybe even fangs. The vamp howled and covered his bleeding lips, backing up too far and falling. The stair edges wouldn't wound his immortal body.

I was almost upright again and ran down after the tumbling defanged vampire. It would have been a smooth descent, except something hit me hard in the back. I was stumbling down the stairs faster and faster, out of control, my hands ripped from any grasp I got on the railing:

I heard a disgusting slurping sound behind me, and realized the pursuing vamp was licking my blood off the metal railing. I wished this was happening in the middle of a Kansas blizzard and his blood-sucking tongue would stick to the icy metal . . .

No, this was a warm spring Vegas night. And blood would be hot

At the bottom of the stairs, the blood-blinded vamp was waiting for the others to catch me as I tumbled into them.

I got both feet, one bare, on the same step, bent my aching knees and jumped as high and far as I could. I almost cleared them, feeling their filthy, clawed hands clutching at my legs as I sailed over. Then something incredibly fast and powerful slammed me back . . . oh, no!

Back *into* my attackers!

I landed on them hard, sinking into their bones and muscles, their clawed hands closing on my arms and scratching my throat.

Before the lifting hands could capture me, something bit them off at the wrist. Blood, who knows whose, filled those undead veins and spewed over me like warm syrup on a buttered pancake.

White fangs snapped as I heard bones breaking.

Not my own.

That realization got me going, arms and legs flailing, trying to grasp hold of something, struggle upright, and get running again. I used my last bit of energy to pull myself up, then sprung forward, away from the building's covered driveway and toward the street.

I finally collapsed at the curb, panting like a winded marathon runner, too exhausted to move.

Something was coming up behind me. I could barely manage to turn my head. I did not want to become a half-vamp, which the rumored single bite would accomplish. Two more and a reciprocal sip from my killer's immortal veins, and I'd be turned, so they said. I figured that three vamps were still ambulatory and fanged enough for the job.

I reared up as best I could, teeth gritted, fist extended. Wait! Where was my silver set of brass knuckles? The damn Snow familiar had run out on me! My wrist sported a wimpy charm bracelet now. *Damn Snow to Hell!*

My redundant curse forgotten, I gazed into two burning blue eyes and a jaw full of grinning white fangs.

The jagged teeth were clamped on something disgusting, black, and burnt and dead as . . . as shoe leather.

I pulled farther back, took a deep breath.

Quicksilver was sitting there, panting hotly, smiling that wolfish grin, my lost leather mule firmly in his teeth. Cinderella had never had a handier Prince Charming.

Good doggie, Irma said.

Quicksilver dropped the shoe when my right hand reached for it, and began laving my bleeding palm with his huge pink tongue. Dog saliva heals doggie wounds over time. Quicksilver saliva heals human wounds instantly, as Ric had found out.

In seconds, we were both on our feet, me fully shod, my hand on Quick's wide leather collar. I realized the bracelet familiar now boasted canine figures and that a matching silver-studded dog collar had been coiled protectively around my neck for some time. Cool! This was the first occasion that my silver familiar had revealed a split protective personality.

Dracula's sleep spell on the wolf part of Quicksilver had probably evaporated the moment Drac dropped me on Howard Hughes' roof. My dog could track me through a swamp or a thunderstorm and probably thin air. He was an awesome animal. I'd seen him lick Ric's barbed wire-shredded hands whole in a couple minutes. Now my once-scraped palm was flexible and smooth. Nice trick.

"Good dog! Good boy."

Meanwhile, I jumped with my two shod feet into the roadway, tried to grin as innocently as Quicksilver, wipe the blood off my pants, and hail a cab.

No way was I walking all the way back to Hector's estate.

CHAPTER FOUR

I'D FINALLY HAD TO CALL a cab from the office of the Araby Motel, a cheesy place opposite the 1001 Knights Hotel that was Howard Hughes hidden headquarters.

The driver was snotty about giving a dog a ride, so Quicksilver had a good run home. Luckily, we'd been on the south end of the Strip and Hector Nightwine's estate wasn't that far away.

In fifteen minutes the four charging bronze horsemen of the Apocalypse that guarded the gates loomed into the headlights.

The cab driver was happier driving around to my more modest entry area down Sunset Road to let me out. Quicksilver was waiting for me to disengage the security system and open the gate. He was just being polite. He could scale the wall but didn't like to alarm the main house.

After our unexpected nocturnal adventure, I made sure he had fresh water and some doggie treats and left him with a puppy biscuit sticking out of his awesome muzzle like a small green tongue-tip.

Upstairs, on my way to my interrupted beauty sleep in my bedroom, the meager light caught my image in the long mirror at the hall's end.

I nodded at myself and moved on, absorbed.

Wait!

The self I'd nodded at was nude!

I ducked back into the hall.

Yup, me nude in the mirror was as whitewashed as my pale Black Irish skin was in the light of day. The tangle of black on my head repeated at the crux of my legs.

Sure, I'd seen at myself nude in a mirror before, but always critically: this pale skin that would burn but not tan, the fairly tall frame with too much breast and hip. I was an unfashionable hourglass, not a straw. That's why vintage clothing looked cool on me. They had faces back then. They had busts and hips, S curves and sensuous thighs.

But this image wasn't me. It was me in a separate semblance. This was Lilith. Maybe I could tell by her faint topaz-blue aura. Or the tiny topaz stud in her nostril. Look at her, and see me, once removed.

I blushed to view my body objectively. I was used to seeing myself as deficient: lacking relatives, lacking a home, an identity, a positive body image, a Blue Fairy with a star to wish upon.

I forced myself to confront what usually made me cringe.

"Are you me?" I asked.

My mirror image didn't answer, but her mouth moved as if she was interrogating me.

"Lilith?" I hadn't meant to sound either tentative or desperate. But I did, both.

Seeing this double of me on network TV is what brought me to Las Vegas to put up with such things as Count Dracula as an alarm clock.

Her mouth mimicked my word. *Lil-ith*.

"Are you dead?" She winked at me. Assumed a fashion model pose.

"You'll never make it in the rag trade, Lili," I told her. "Too busty."

She stuck her tongue out at me.

Nothing in the magic mirror had ever interacted so boldly with me before.

“Why don’t you speak?”

She shrugged, lifted her dark eyebrows. Eloquently, she asked without words. *Why speak?*

“I need to know I’m not alone.” I sounded way too needy, even to myself

Honesty seemed too much for her. She looked aside, showed me her profile, which duplicated mine, and vanished.

“Wait! Lilith!”

I rushed the mirror, pressed against it. My fingers retreated. The surface was not only warm, but there was no distance between my splayed, groping fingers and their reflection.

The Enchanted Cottage mirror used front-surface glass, like Madrigal’s magic-act mirrors! Although any mirror bowed to my presence, front-surface mirror seemed more powerful. That was a fact I could use, and build on. Madrigal, the magician at the Gehenna, would know where to get more of it. Besides, he hadn’t been surprised by my Alice-through-the-looking-glass antics in his stage mirror. I wanted to know more about how and why.

“Mirror, mirror, on the wall,” I murmured, my hot cheek pressed to the cooler glass, thinking of Lilith. “Who’s the faintest of them all?”

It didn’t answer, which was a relief.

WHAT WERE THE ODDS that the bad old dreams from my orphan days wouldn’t resurface that night, Enchanted Cottage comforts or not?

Where the Millennium Revelation reality offered the resurgence of supernatural figures dating back centuries

and even millennia, my personal nightmares always had a modern and even a science-fiction edge.

The group home half-vampire bullies who hassled me were only another twist on a common male adolescent type . . . gang members. They were minor annoyances.

My most frequently rerun nightmare was “alien abductee.”

Now that was really out of this world.

Yet I’d always be there again, flat on my back under powerful overhead lights that made my captors into featureless, white-clad shadows. I’d be naked as a *CSI* corpse with the memory of a flimsy white sheet being stripped away.

I never quite knew what bound me down. Maybe it was just the paralysis of nightmare, but I was incapable of moving, or of speaking.

As I was now again, in the relentless grip of dreamland.

The figures leaned closer, blocking some of the light. The needle in the navel cliché felt as real as memory. I glimpsed a long, thick silver instrument at the foot of the table. It was coming toward my torso, held in white hands with fingers as smooth and boneless as a stingray wing, more cartilage than muscle and flesh.

The giant stingray motif hovered over all these dreams, looming beyond the blinding overhead light like an albino bat with a wingspread of twenty feet.

I couldn’t breathe, as if the atmosphere was water-heavy. If I couldn’t breathe, I certainly couldn’t scream, even when the approaching instrument vanished as it neared my torso. Not even when the hovering heads drew in until all light was gone except for a searing luminous halo behind them

Something seized me and slammed me upright against a wall.

My eyes batted to close and filter out the punishing light.

They slowly adjusted to the new nightmare scenario: another ring of hounding beings These had faces. Snarling, fanged, pimped, and scarred. The local half-vamp hoods were after me again for “blood and booty.” Rape and a liquid supper.

I knew how to fight them off, and raised my trusty diamond-dusted nail file to the nearest blood-shot eye.

My fist was empty! I was unarmed. Only a long thin chain wrapped my knuckles, a flimsy piece of jewelry, not a weapon.

I struggled, but four of them held me pinned upright against the wall. I couldn't move or scream. Something hard and metal prodded between my legs. They were going to rape me with a knife!

A scream struggled to stutter its way out of my throat, but one contorted face came too close to focus on, the bared canine fangs already dipped in fresh blood and dripping more

The dreamscape changed, and the wall behind me pounded with a salsa rhythm, echoing my rapid heartbeat, massaging my spine because I was pressed hard against it by another body.

A tongue was flicking back and forth along the selvage edge of my lips, tickling, teasing them open for a direct inward thrust. That forward motion was followed by more lateral moves, by lips encompassing mine, lower and upper in turn, caressing.

The man's weapon was hard as knife steel and pushed vertically against my crotch. His hands were on my bared hips, the hips his hands had exposed on the dance floor when he jerked my skirt down from my waist until it was a low-rider model slung below my navel.

He was breathing hard, and so was I.

My thighs were slick. Was my body wounded from the previous dream? Menstruating? No, it was welcoming this man, my dream lover.

The man's hands and mouth were hot and persuasive, teasing my body into a matching rhythm with his subtle hip thrusts, making it thirst for conjoining.

Now I fought to hold back a . . . sensual moan.

I'm not the kind of girl to go limp against a hall wall in a dance club. Hell, I don't even dance well. But the man knows how to lead me and I want him to.

I open my eyes to see Ric's dear, dark-eyed face, to hear his Spanish murmurs of love and passion, and it's all right. We're at Los Lobos salsa club, where the werewolves change under the full moon.

I have changed. What was once threat is now temptation, teasing, pleasing, consensual, deeply wanted. I smile at Ric, tongue-kiss him back, rock my hips hard into his . . . and wake up.

Ooh la la, what a bitchin' place to let an invisible friend down flat, Irma croons. Um, that man was soooo habañera hot for us! Even I could feel the fire. Go back to sleep. I want to get to the necking session in the car and the first fuck in the bathroom mirror later and our second orgasm.

That's my business. I don't need to be reminded, and I'd never put it those crude terms.

You are almost twenty-five, girlfriend, and I am right there with you. You can't afford to give up even one rerun of a feminine thrill, not even in your dreams. And ain't Ric's Latin lover act so way better than dodging half-vamp bully boys or alien probes from Hell or Aldabaran in the Hyades in your dreams? Let him at me! Play it again, Samantha. And again and again.

I ignored Irma's irritation, letting myself drift back into the moment when nightmare had segued into wet dream. My nightmares had never had a happy ending before. Ric had awakened pleasure in me where I'd been conditioned to feel panic.

The deep gratitude I felt for that might have been love. I didn't know. An unwanted orphan doesn't much feel the love. I knew my body loved him. I knew the joint psychic link we'd felt when we dowsed together for an innocent cache of water in Sunset Park and found the dead supernaturals had sealed our sensual connection, had lent us a bolt of the murdered lovers' long-gone mutual infatuation. It had lent us a sublime mutual orgasm by proxy. Bonded us.

Umm. I'd forgotten the rocking motion of his hips against mine in that dim nightclub hallway. The slick liquid glide of his lips against mine. The glint of his gold wristwatch on his olive-skinned wrist. The luminous whites of his eyes against the swollen-pupil black of desire in his eyes. That narrow gold belt snaking around his hips.

I snuggled in the smooth sheets, opening my mind and heart to the possibility of Ric. Irma purred in the back of my mind. I was just more up front about it.

CHAPTER FIVE

DREAM OF THE DREAMBOAT . . .

Ric called me the next morning for a date.

“At the county morgue?” I asked. “You have something kinky in mind?”

“Always, but this is business. Grady Bahr, the coroner, called me yesterday with info about the Sunset Park corpse couple. I mentioned I might bring a colleague. They’ll make you a visitor’s badge, so I gave him your name. And he said you’d already met.”

“Someone suggested I check with him earlier, so I did.”

I didn’t mention that the “someone” was Snow. I doubt Ric would want me consulting, or consorting, with a rock star whose hobby was addicting infatuated women to mosh pit kisses.

“Anyway, he likes you enough that he’ll put you on the consultant’s list like me. When can you meet me there?”

I liked that Ric wasn’t offering to pick me up. My independence seemed as important to him as it was to me. Damn, that man just wasn’t making one wrong, off-putting move.

“Ten?” I suggested.

“Fine. Maybe we can catch an early lunch afterward.”

I laughed. “The law enforcement pro. Making a lunch date after a visit to the morgue.”

“Shouldn’t be gruesome. This pair has decayed down to the bones, remember?”

How could I forget? Yet those bones had communicated intimately enough with him and me, even before we'd guessed Ric's dead-dowsing abilities had hit a double jackpot in tranquil Sunset Park.

I was dying to hear what "Grisly" Bahr had for us, but needed to grab an energy bar and take Quicksilver for a forty-minute run in the park across the street, then shower before leaving for the morgue.

Usually the desert air dried sweat before it could form drops, but I did have to slather sun screen on my pale skin. And wash it off and slather it on again after a shower. If I went out early enough, I could take Quick off leash and let him take great, galloping loops around the far bounds of the park before coming back to me. His gait was loose and powerful, as beautiful as a thoroughbred's to behold. It made me wonder who had let this magnificent specimen get away from them.

I'd probably never know, like I'd never know who had dropped my infant self off on some Delilah Street somewhere twenty-four years ago. Or what exact day was my birthday, give or take a few. Me and Lilith? Abandoned together, or apart? I needed to look into my options for tracing my "roots" as an abandoned baby, if any bureaucratic system would let me.

Not that I didn't have enough on my To Do list.

Right now I needed to find out more about who—or what vampire, that is—had died with mob boss-hotelier Cesar Cicereau's lovely teenage daughter, Loretta, in Sunset Park almost seventy years ago.

Was he her prince charming, or not?

CHAPTER SIX

RIC WAS WAITING for me by his vintage 'Vette at the bland, boxy coroner's building, waiting for me and my '56 black Cadillac, Dolly.

Dolly could have crushed his Sting Ray and maybe even outraced it and would be worth plenty on the collectible car market, but she was my fortress, my mobile home, my soul sister, and no one was getting her and her chrome bumper bullets except over my dead body.

Which body, by the way, was feeling very lively as I took in Ric's usual business outfit: expensive vanilla-colored tropical weight suit, silky shirt and tie. I guess the look was great for corporate consulting work. No one would ever guess he was an FBI agent, already legendary in his late twenties as the "Cadaver Kid" for his knack of finding corpses.

Now he is ex-FBI, and we were heading into corpse central to find out more about bodies we'd already found.

I say "we" because I'd contributed to this particular find. He could dowse for the dead since childhood, but walking skeptical me through the dowsing process had raised more than a pair of buried corpses. It had put us into close proximity, my back to his front, creating a sensual overload (okay, it was a mutual, zipless orgasm) and my scary new psychic visions of the dead amplified Ric's inborn corpse-finding ability.

Ric opened Dolly's heavy driver side door for me, mainly to eye the pristine red leather upholstery. I knew

he'd love to take Dolly out on a lonely highway outside Vegas and run her up to full speed, but he knew I wouldn't like that. He'd just have to settle for taking me out on lonely highways at full speed.

"Jeez," Ric said, slamming the door shut with the sound of a meat freezer locking, "the troops could use these in the Middle East."

When I stood up in my going-to-meeting high heels, we were nicely parallel in all the right places. We just stood there, silent, savoring the heat between us.

Ric took my elbow. "So you went out and traduced the coroner on your own. It took me a year to get an in with the old goat."

"You don't have my advantages."

"Definitely not," he agreed, grinning.

We stopped, gazed, smiled.

We were so crazy about each other. I'd never felt that odd combination of lust, love, and looniness. Ric was much more sexually experienced than I, but I doubted he'd ever felt this way either. Me twenty-four, he twenty-eight, both orphans in the thrall of first love, like the bodies we'd found. Or had they found us and passed on the fatal infection?

Why did I think love was a lethal disease?

He shook my elbow a little to pull me out of my trance. "Come on, but don't lose the dewy look, Del. Bahr likes lovely young women, especially if they're alive. We want to play on our source's weaknesses."

"Is investigation work always this cynical?"

"Always," he told me, opening the door and washing us with a wall of icy air-conditioning as freezing as a casino's. Ever the gentleman. "I'll let you lead so you can cement your rapport with Bahr. I'm already on his A list."

I nodded, glad I'd dressed in the professional on-camera clothes of my former TV reporter persona. I was even gladder Ric was secure enough to defer to me. Circumstance had made us momentary partners; only we could make that partnership permanent and professional. The personal side of it was even trickier.

Miss Ortiz (I read her ID) gave Ric the glad eye and raised her eyebrows to see me with him.

"*Ola*, Yolanda. The boss is expecting us. I think you have a new ID for Miss Street here?"

She passed him both IDs, ignoring me.

Ric clipped mine on my aqua linen lapel like it was a corsage. Our every gesture with each other conveyed a certain subliminal heat, whether we wanted it to or not.

He grinned companionably at Yolanda. "She's new to the coroner business, not a pro like you. Be gentle with her."

I'd never seen a guy both lead on and turn off a woman so smoothly. Yolanda couldn't help sighing. Ric might not have the Brimstone Kiss, but he sure as hell had a sterling silver tongue.

She dialed her boss and then nodded us in.

"I see why you wear suits, even in this heat," I told Ric, eyeing the plastic rectangle dangling from his own lapel. "You must get a lot of temporary ID tags in the consulting business."

He nodded, then smiled as Grisly Bahr came out in his lab coat to greet us. Even he wore an ID tag.

"Great to see you, *amigo*," he greeted Ric. "I should have known you'd have snagged Miss Street. She's a comer."

"I thought she'd snagged you," Ric said.

"Don't I wish. Well. You both will like this new mystery. I want to run it past you, C.K., before I lay it on Captain Malloy."

C.K.? Oh. Cadaver Kid.

“The captain likes her crime facts cut and dried and down to earth,” Ric agreed.

“This is down to earth, all right, kiddies. Way down to earth.”

By then we’d walked through a door or two, down a featureless hall and into a refrigerator -cold room littered with sheet-covered gurneys. Some sheets were alarmingly flat, others way too lumpy in all the wrong places. I knew the air would be icy, but that didn’t completely eliminate the stench of death, so I’d treated my nostrils with Vicks VapoRub.

Bahr led us to one side of the room and pulled back two of the really shallow sheets to reveal the bare bones of our Sunset Park couple.

I winced to see what was left of the gently rounded flesh of the Loretta Cicereau I had seen in my Enchanted Cottage mirror. Yet the brown bones were mostly whole, and the facing skulls seemed to be smiling rather than grinning.

“You’ve placed the gurneys so they’re still face-to-face,” I noted, surprised.

Grisly Bahr actually stuttered a bit. “Yes, well, *ahem*, it duplicates the crime scene, doesn’t it?”

“Don’t let him fool you. He’s a sentimental old dog,” Ric told me.

Bahr gestured at the right side bones. “She was a healthy young woman in nineteen-forty-six. About seventeen years old.”

I nodded, knowing and mourning all this.

Ric surreptitiously took my hand. He knew that too.

“But this guy,” Bahr was saying. “This young buck of nineteen from the length and development of the bones, he was a healthy young man of six hundred or so.” He

eyed Ric under the shrubbery of his eyebrows and over the glint of his half-glasses. “You got any ideas on that, C.K.?”

Ric sighed. “It could only be . . . vampire.”

“So you say. Still, you know our authorities are having a hard time dealing with supernaturals showing up now in all ways, shapes, and forms. They still want to believe it’s all the result of autoimmune disease or pollution or even global warming, God help us.

“I told Miss Street earlier that the male’s cause of death was one used centuries ago to kill vampires. The head was cut off and a coin put in the mouth. But that’s folklore. The age of the bones is scientific fact. I fear our friends in law enforcement are going to lay it on that disease that ages kids prematurely.”

“Progeria,” Ric said while I was still taking in the subtext of their comments. “That’s ridiculous. These bones are full-size.”

Did they mean that officialdom was a tad behind on recognizing the sweeping influence of supernaturals on the history of this planet? I’d noticed that the Wichita authorities were in a state of denial, but thought that was just small-city slowness in catching up with major national trends.

Now, I wondered if all the standard authorities—police, politicians, coroners, medical and health officials, and religious leaders—were behind the curve on this. In that case, any investigations I could do for Hector or even Howard Hughes would add to the human knowledge pool.

And I could report on these issues online: *The Delilah Dispatch*. I hadn’t been hustled out of the news biz, I’d been freed to start my own enterprise and enter the blogosphere.

While I'd been daydreaming big time, the two guys were still discussing those dry bones.

"Just as well, maybe," Ric told Bahr, "if your superiors are slow to see the supernatural cropping up here. The Cicereau mob is deeply involved in these kills. If the case can be solved to our satisfaction, privately, we might all be safer. I can always get Captain Malloy to sign off on it."

"Yes, you can, *muchacho macabre*."

So Bahr thought blond Captain Kennedy Malloy was utter putty in Ric's fingers, too. Didn't like to hear that.

"No use agitating the public, or the police, on some of these dicier killings," Ric agreed.

"All part of the job," Grisly told me, winking. "Don't you worry, Delilah. This fellow's saving the attractively efficient Captain Malloy for me."

So much for the "Miss Street" act.

I asked my first question. "The man's manner of death. It was enough to keep him dead for eternity?"

Bahr nodded. "Decapitated, coin in mouth. Unless someone or something with some extra strong mojo we don't know about comes along." He glanced at Ric. "I'm keeping the corpses in separate stainless steel lockers heaped with garlic. Just in case."

Ric nodded.

Grisly Bahr shook his head. "My wife is used to the orange after-odor of the formula that banishes the workplace air of decay around here, but this new garlic overtone is driving her crazy."

CHAPTER SIX

“SIX HUNDRED YEARS,” Ric mused as we returned to the now-welcome heat and our cars. “Where do you want to go for lunch?”

“Someplace where they don’t serve six-hundred-year-old food.”

He suggested we stop at a deli en route to Sunset Road and picnic in the park; then Dolly and I would be the next thing to home.

By the time we settled under the concrete awning on the concrete picnic table, with our feet resting on the attached benches, it was well past high noon and the joggers were long gone. We’d laid our jackets to the side and probably looked like a couple of office workers on a lunch break.

If anyone had overheard us, they would have gotten over that assumption.

“A six-hundred-year-old male adolescent,” I said between munching on low-fat turkey and rye. “Indubitably a vampire, Dr. Van Helsing.”

Ric nodded. “We’ve seen a few recent converts to the clan in Vegas, but not any established vamps. What about Kansas?”

“Same thing. Half-blood vamps, usually punk kids, and even some fake ones.”

“Some humans like to mimic the vampire lifestyle. Artificial fangs and carotid artery cocktails.”

“Icky.”

Ric drank from the longneck Dos Equis at his side. He'd bought a six-pack, so I had my own and plenty to spare.

"If it's consensual all around, though," he said, "there's nothing traditional law enforcement can do." His dark pupils swelled. "And you seem to like keeping my vampire bat bite site active. Is that 'icky'?"

"Let me see." I slipped my fingers under his shirt collar on the left side of his neck. Stroked softly along the thin silk shirt fabric. Ric's eyes closed and his lips parted. I moved my hand down to feel his pounding heartbeat and strum his hard nipple with my fingernail.

"Delilah," he said. I think that was all he was capable of saying at the moment.

"You just happened to imprint on a bizarre stimulus when you had your first wet dream as a kid," I pointed out. "So I've got some buttons I can discreetly push wherever we are. You bet I like that, Señor Montoya."

He leaned close to kiss the taste of the beer from my mouth.

"I've got my weird buttons too," I pointed out. "But there's more than wannabe vamps going on. Look at the half-weres who stay in a semi-human wolf state permanently. It's like someone's been messing with the traditional mythology."

"Someone *has* been messing with *all* traditional mythologies."

"What Hector Nightwine calls the Immortality Mob," I suggested.

"Catchy name, but I doubt it's just one entity. A lot of big corporate money is invested in making Vegas the most hip and future-forward place on the planet. Which is hard to keep up with nowadays, with 'manifestations' all over the globe."

“Keeping up with the Joneses could mean playing ring-around-the-world.”

“You mean finding and claiming supernaturals nowadays is like the Space Race back when? An international competition that’s part politics and part profit? Cool idea, Del, but why would the appearance of the unhumans be anything more orchestrated than them popping up from pockets of superstition here and there?”

“I’m serious, Ric. I looked this up once as part of my job reporting the paranormal beat in Kansas. The first reports of supernaturals appearing followed the path of midnight through all the time zones. Midnight when the second millennium started.”

“That’s an odd thing to check on.”

“Watching the dot-of-midnight celebrations progress all over the globe on TV was the key night of my life.”

“I thought *I* was the key night of your life.”

“Well, *now*. But back then, I was only eleven. Seeing the global celebrations and sense of world unity made me decide to be one of those reporters holding a microphone, spreading the good news.”

Ric, smiling, tucked my hair behind one ear. Nobody had ever played with my hair. Maybe that was *my* vampire bat bite.

“And you did indeed get to hold a mike back in Kansas. Why’d you give up your TV reporter job?”

Explaining about Lilith’s *CSI* cameo role as a corpse was too complicated a subject for our flirtatious picnic. Besides, if Ric knew that my “twin” made me a universal object of abduction, or worse, he’d get over-protective and never want me running around town.

“Oh, one of those phony vamps, the anchorman, stole my paranormal news beat. Then his weather witch

girlfriend blew my rented bungalow away. I figured I needed another scene.”

“And Hector Nightwine ended up your landlord, how?”

“He can use a good reporter. *CSI* is the biggest TV franchise in the world. He needs case ideas.”

“So you marched in there and talked him into a job.”

“Sort of. Quicksilver marched in there with me.”

“And the cottage?”

“Rental housing is so high in Vegas and what place would take a hundred and fifty pound dog?”

“He weighs that much?”

“He’s my big bad wolf, you better believe it.”

Ric frowned. “Possessive, too.” He leaned in to kiss behind the ear he had bared. “But you still need very close watching by me,” he murmured. “So Nightwine wants you to find out who both of the corpses are?”

Nightwine and someone else even creepier.

“Right,” I said. “I’ve suddenly got this weird ability to see the girl victim whole and alive in my cottage mirror, just like I suddenly got a weird ability to get it on in the park with a hot guy with a weird ability to dowse for the dead. So I now know she’s Loretta Cicereau. Or was sixty-some years ago.”

“Whoa!” Ric drew back, all business. “Cicereau’s daughter. That’s big news. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I only confirmed it when I sneaked an old photo out of his office computer. Then I got caught by him and his right-hand muscle, Sansouci.”

“That’s how you ended up at his mountain lodge as werewolf pack bait. Jesus, Del! If that CinSim butler of Nightwine’s hadn’t tipped me off to where you were, you’d be buried out there. I need to nail the identity of the dead

Sunset Park guy fast. You'll get the Cicereau syndicate on your tail any day now for knowing his daughter is one of the two corpses. Once the police can announce *both* identities, it's out in the open and you won't be worth going after any more."

He gave me a steamy look. "You won't be worth going after in *that* way."

I leaned into his shoulder. He buried his mouth in my hair.

"Sorry to be slow on the uptake, Del. I didn't have much time right after that night to think about how and why, only what."

"I know." I took his hands in mine. They'd been barbed-wire-torn raw meat after he'd used the razor-sharp fencing material to dowse for the dead beneath Cicereau's hideaway. "How did you actually raise zombies, instead of just locating corpses?"

"As I mentioned. Blood. My blood. You have to shed a bit of blood to raise rather than find the dead. At least I do. I don't do that anymore if I can help it. I raised enough zombie slaves for those vile *coyotes* who'd owned me since I was four years old. I'd sworn never to do it again."

I cringed to hear this again, Ric's determination to never raise zombies for anyone's purpose, abusive or even merely using them as curiosities. I'd thought growing up in group homes was rough. Now, to save me, Ric had revisited his years of childhood enslavement and done the one thing he'd sworn off forever. I had to change the mood.

"Okay, *hombre*," I said, reaching under his tie to undo a button of his shirt. "Tell me how the poor Mexican desert boy learned to be so slick and sexy."

I'd distracted him, as I'd hoped.

“You’re pretty sleek and sexy yourself.”

“I was a later bloomer. You obviously managed to sow your wild oats, as they said in olden days, when I was still in knee-highs.

“Knee-highs, huh? Very sexy in the right context. Catholic schoolgirl look.”

“I did that high school uniform bit. An all-girl’s high school. Catholic, natch.”

“Good girl. I attended an all-boys prep school run by Christian brothers. We had uniforms too.”

“Ooh, you must have looked delish in a uniform. No wonder the girls were all crazy about you.” I undid another button and he caught his breath.

“As a matter of fact, they were.” He was teasing back, waiting to see how far I’d go. “I was the hot new kid. I’d made the news a couple years back as feral boy, but my adopted mother had put me through every behavioral test in the book, taught me English, plus a few other languages; civilized manners; put me through an accelerated learning program. After that, the hotties from the nearby girl’s prep school were ready to put me through every test drive they could think of.”

“It must have been . . . guy heaven.”

“Yeah. I couldn’t believe my luck. They were all on the pill and they planned to get all the thrills they could before settling into a semi-arranged marriage with some WASP Stepford husband.”

“Didn’t the other guys get jealous? Wasn’t being from Mexico a problem?”

“This was Washington DC. Lots of foreign ambassadors’ kids and wealthy elite kids attend such schools. Besides, my adopted mother had taught me all the romance languages. Castilian Spanish, French, and Italian. I have a gift for languages.”

“Wow. You aren’t only good-looking, but smart. “

He recognized the line guys usually give girls, and laughed. I undid another button and slid my whole hand inside his shirt to get him back on the right track. “So what were these preppie girls like?”

“Like? For one thing, they’d never paw me in a public park, just to make me forget that I broke my vow never to raise any more zombies.”

I drew back, caught.

“Not that they wouldn’t paw me in a public park just for the heck of it.”

I slapped him lightly on the chest for leading me on while I was leading him on. “I’m jealous.”

“Don’t be,” he said. “I found out their game by senior prom. I was the hot ethnic flavor of the year. A way to defy their parents, have some kicks, and not get bored. I was just a diversion.”

“That you are.” I toyed with his nipple again.

“Delilah, stop that! You wanted to know. Listen, some wanted their parents to know they were seeing me, just to jerk them around. Others never wanted anyone to know but their very best friends. Guess how I found out?”

“Very best friends can be treacherous. ‘Them,’ Ric? You were a serial gigolo?”

“Yeah. I was young, they were ready, and so was I. It was too easy to be right.”

“And I’m hard.”

“Yes. What really turned me off was why I wasn’t good enough to date for real.”

“Which was?”

“It wasn’t my Mexican blood. It wasn’t my lurid background. One of the other guys told me why, finally, meaning to piss me off. It was that my adopted parents weren’t high enough on the Washington social register.”

“What did you do to get back?”

“What makes you think I did something?”

“*You* don’t allow those you . . . owe something to pay for the privilege.”

“There was this townie gossip blog. I hacked in and altered a really vicious column before it time-posted. It hit the Web and a lot of trust fund babies lost their graduation trips to Europe.”

“Europe, really?”

“Especially Spain.”

“Think they guessed it was you?”

“Naw, they thought they’d fooled everyone.”

“So how’d you end up in the FBI?”

“My adopted father wanted me to go into the military, like he had. I would have obliged him, except I knew having men ordering me what to do in that no-questions-allowed way would . . . I’d kill someone first. So he got me some internships with the suburban police, a DC crime lab. I had all the right qualifications for Quantico and was accepted by the FBI as soon as I was eligible. They value Spanish speakers now.”

“And your special talents—?”

“I just wanted to forget about that. It’d been years. I was a privileged white-collar kid. Then they took us to the body farm—you know, real bodies in various states decomposition in the ground. My fingers twitched for wanting a twig. It started happening again when we were examining possible death scenes. I finally picked up a dead stick and let myself “discover” a disruption in the earth. I had to go off by myself to do it, so I got a rep for being a human bloodhound on some trail only I scented. With the Millennium Revelation, lots of strange things were happening. They were uneasy about me, but also pleased by my usefulness.”

“Why didn’t you stay?”

“Got too hard to conceal what I was really doing. Dowsing for the dead is nothing a seriously scientific crime-solving organization wants to claim even these days. It was better I consult out of town. I’m taken for a science geek, not anything cheesy like a psychic, and I make sure to make it seem that way.”

“Nobody would ever mistake you for a science geek,” I said. I ran my hand over his muscled, bare skin and then up under the shirt collar, stroking the side of his neck. “So what were they like, those society witches?”

“Nothing like you.”

“Nothing?” I challenged.

“They weren’t about me or even the sex. It was all about them. They were shallow and artificial.”

“But good-looking.”

“Sure. They’d had plastic surgery since their pre-teens. They didn’t care about me, and I didn’t care about them when I learned to see through the American princess facades. Not one of them could fight off a werewolf.”

“But you were dazzled at first, admit it.”

“No argument. I was a teenage boy: nine parts testosterone and one part horny. You should be glad, *paloma*, that I didn’t break my heart over anyone else, so it’s all in one piece for you.”

“*Hmm.*”

I stroked the bat bite again, hyped to feel his carotid artery bound at my teasing touch. I could almost understand the vampire’s predatory enjoyment in sensing signs of vulnerable human circulatory systems that thrust so near the surface.

“Are you going to take me home and to bed,” Ric asked, “or just drive me crazy in the park?”

“Yes. Both.”

My feelings for him were incredibly fierce, both possessive and protective. Was it because I'd never felt much affection at all *from* and therefore *for* other people?

Or because something of Lilith sang through my blood? In lore, the original Lilith was an Eden-exiled femme fatale, a devouring goddess, a succubus, a "night hag" who haunted men's dreams and beds, a psychic vampire who drained men sexually.

It scared me, how deeply I wanted Ric, but I wasn't interested in draining him. Quite the contrary.

"Home," I said.

We hope you've enjoyed this "sneak peek" at **Brimstone Kiss**, the next novel in the Delilah Street, Paranormal Investigator series. Look for the book in bookstores everywhere in October 2008.

Don't forget Delilah's first adventure, **Dancing With Werewolves** is still available, too!

