Lover's Bite

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Extract

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1

Mirabella DuFrane exited the beachfront adobe mansion as if she were floating, rather than walking. The skintight gown—paisley print, plunging halter neckline, slit up to her slender hip—clung to every perfect curve, despite the fact that she'd given birth only three months ago. No one would have known it to look at her.

Speculation about the identity of her baby girl's father was rampant, but no one except Mirabella knew for sure. And Mirabella wasn't saying. It just added to the mysterious allure of Hollywood's brightest star.

She was the silver screen's flavor of the year. An exotic blend of Italian and Spanish, with copper skin, almond eyes, a figure most women would die for and many men would kill for—she was the ideal. And that she was so elusive—never married, and promising that she never would be—only added to her massive appeal. She was fond

of telling the press that she was too free a spirit to ever be tied down, that no man could ever own her, possess her, or even hold her for very long. She would never be tamed. The tabloids were constantly pairing her with one man or another. Politicians, businessmen, actors. Any photo of her with a male was fodder for gossip in the rags. She never denied or confirmed any of it, just smiled her mysterious smile and answered questions with more questions when the reporters cast their lines into her waters on their fishing expeditions.

That was Mirabella.

And yet, there was something else about her. Something frail and otherworldly that rarely showed. It lingered beneath the surface, like a fragile seashell resting on the ocean floor and hoping no rough currents stirred it up to the surface.

Mirabella floated toward the black stretch limousine that waited at the curb, her gown's hemline skimming just above the sidewalk, creating that airborne illusion she so loved. Paparazzi swarmed, held at a distance by Bella's ever-present bodyguards.

Once it had been unusual for the press to be in Santa Luna in such droves, but this small coastal town, twenty-five miles south of Los Angeles, had become a haven for the rich and the famous. Too

expensive for common folk, too remote for fans, it had become the hot spot for celebrity getaways—quick ones, when there was no time to go on a real trip. Mirabella had been a guest at an exclusive party at the mansion known as Avalon. Its fanciful and somewhat pretentious name had been thought up by its former owners, a Hollywood pair who'd peaked in the fifties before retiring here. The Avalon Ball had become an annual event, and Hollywood's elite hungered to see their names on the guest list. Because being invited was such a coup, no one complained too much about the press.

Cameras flashed in the night as Mirabella made her way along the clear path to the waiting car, smiling and waving all the way.

Then there were different kinds of flashes. Three of them. Bella's smile froze in place as her body jerked in perfect synch with those bright eruptions. Her milk-chocolate eyes fluttered, lashes lowering as she looked down. Blood flowers blossomed in slow motion like a Hollywood depiction of an acid trip over the front of her designer gown. She lifted her head, the huge gold hoops in her ears jangling. One hand rose, as if reaching out for help, and then Mirabella's heavily lined eyes fell closed, and she folded over her-

self and sank to the sidewalk, graceful, even with three bullets in her abdomen.

The press swarmed as her bodyguards fought to hold them off. Police on crowd control duty closed in to help, and within a minute, sirens could be heard as more police and an ambulance arrived.

"It was too late to save Mirabella DuFrane," a vaguely familiar male voice said.

It was some retired news anchor, Jack Heart thought, hired to narrate documentaries once he was replaced by a younger model at the news desk. He couldn't remember the guy's name.

"She died in the hospital that very night. But that's far from where this story ends. The starlet's body was stolen from the hospital morgue, and to this day, it has never been found, leading to numerous reported sightings in the years since. And her murder? Never solved."

There was a knock at the motel room door. Jack looked up, irritated at the interruption. Then he sensed who was on the other side. Topaz.

Jumping to his feet, he popped the DVD out of his portable player, returned it to its case—a case that bore Mirabella's image, and the title *DEATH OF A GODDESS: The Mirabella DuFrane Story*—and closed the lid. "Just a minute."

He quickly stuffed the documentary into his backpack, zipped it closed and tossed it into the closet. "Come in, Topaz," he said as he opened the door to greet her.

She stepped inside, and for just an instant, Jack's gaze was stuck fast on her face. The resemblance was subtle, but it was there in the delicate bone structure, the cheekbones, the jawline, even the eyebrows. Her skin wasn't as dark, and her ethnicity wasn't as obvious as it had been in her mother. But she was every bit as stunning.

No. More so.

"What are *you* staring at?"

"I was just thinking it's a shame your insides don't match your outsides."

"Oh, *I'm* the one who's not what I pretend to be? As I recall, you're the one who professed your undying devotion right up until you vanished with a half million of my hard-earned dollars."

"Inheriting is not earning."

"It was in my case." She narrowed her eyes. "And how do you know I inherited it, anyway?"

He averted his eyes. Topaz was under the impression that none of her vampiric friends knew who she had been in life. And maybe none of them did—other than him. But he knew. Now.

"Lucky guess," he muttered.

"Yeah, well. I don't suppose the other half of my money appeared to you in your sleep, did it?"

"I gave you back the half I had. I told you, Gregor has the rest. I'll get it from him somehow, as soon as we track him down. I promise."

"Sadly, I know just how much your promises are worth, Jack." She shrugged. "And I'm pretty sure we've reached a dead end when it comes to tracking your former boss down."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he got away. Reaper's calling a meeting in an hour. I'm pretty sure he's going to disband the gang—send us all our separate ways. At least until he can get a line on Gregor again."

He let his gaze move down her body as she spoke, barely listening to her words and instead tracing her curves with his eyes. Tight jeans, tiny silk blouse, her breasts straining against the fabric. Even while he stared at them, her nipples stiffened, as if they could feel his gaze like a physical touch. He got up and walked toward her.

She tensed, her brown eyes wary, watchful, but she wouldn't back away. No, she was too proud for that.

Jack traced her cheek with a fingertip. "I kept some of my promises—when I promised to make you scream, to play your body like no one ever

had or ever would. I didn't break any of those vows, Topaz."

Her eyes fell closed, and her breath slipped from her lips in a slow, soft sigh.

He bent his head until his lips were only a breath away from hers, and he whispered, "If you stick around a little while, I'll keep them all over again."

He felt her body respond. Felt it tugging at his, felt her yearning, her desire. Even heard it in the breathy quality of her wavering reply, saw it in the way her lips trembled as she gave it, while his eyes fell closed and he swayed closer, about to kiss her.

"I could do that. Or you could just eat shit and die," she whispered.

He frowned and opened his eyes.

Hers were coated in a sheet of solid ice—one that concealed a riot of emotions, he was certain.

"I hate you, Jack."

"You want me," he said, straightening away from her.

"One doesn't negate the other."

"Okay. Fine. I'll be ready for Reaper's meeting."

He backed away a few more inches, mostly to give himself relief. Yes, she was just a mark, al-

beit the only one he'd ever regretted. But he wanted her like he'd never wanted another woman. And he was determined to get her out of his system once and for all.

"Why are you here, Topaz?"

"To give you this." She fished a slip of paper from her jeans pocket and handed it to him. "And to say goodbye."

He opened it, glimpsing an address, then quickly refocused on her. "You're going somewhere?"

"I'm going *there.*" She nodded at the paper in his hand.

"And you couldn't leave without coming to say goodbye, letting me know where you would be, in case—"

"In case you manage to keep a promise for the first time in your life and get me back the rest of my money. I wanted you to know where to send it. And you'd *better,* Jack. Because if you haven't repaid me by the time I finish my business in California, I'm gonna track you down, and I'm gonna hurt you. And *not* in the good way."

She turned on her heel, reached for the doorknob.

Jack gripped her shoulder and spun her back around to face him. "That's bullshit and you know it. You couldn't leave without saying goodbye to

me, because you still have feelings for me." His arm slid around her waist, hand cupping her ass, and he jerked her against him. "Admit it."

"Oh, I have feelings for you, all right," she snapped. "Contempt. Disgust. Fury."

"Lust. Passion. Desire."

"Desire to do murder, at least," she agreed.

He ground his hips against her, and she closed her eyes, unable to suppress the shiver that passed through her. "Back off, Jack."

He released her, staring into her face in search of confirmation that she still felt the things he did—the physical things that made sense, not the other ones. Before he could find it, she was out the door, slamming it behind her.

Sighing, Jack pushed a hand through his hair in utter frustration. But then reason returned, and he lunged toward the door and peered through the peephole.

Topaz was standing on the other side, her hands pressed to her bowed head. She looked as if she wanted to scream.

He just wasn't sure whether it was with anger or desire. Hell.

Jack wondered why she was really leaving. To get away from him, he would wager. But why go all the way to Califor—

He turned slowly, gazing at the closet door, but seeing, in his mind's eye, snippets of the film he'd just been watching, hearing echoes of the narrator's voice. He gazed down at the piece of paper she'd given him.

Avalon Mansion.

Santa Luna, California.

Good God, she was going to the very place where her mother had been killed. She was going to try to solve Hollywood's most compelling mystery.

It could be dangerous.

Maybe he should tag along. If only he could think of a plausible excuse. Reaching for his backpack, he unzipped it and reached inside. The bag full of money he'd claimed he didn't have was still there, still intact. He might need to give it back to her sooner or later, he supposed, as a way of convincing her of his sincerity and good intentions. The very reasons he'd given her back the first half. It hadn't worked entirely, but it *had* seemed to knock a chink or two in that brick wall she'd erected around her heart to keep him out.

He might need to return the rest to win her trust.

He probably shouldn't waste his time. But then again, he had to stick closely to one of the mem-

bers of the gang, because he had bigger fish to fry this time around, and having access to Reaper would be crucial. Sticking like glue to the big guy would be too obvious, though. And since the gang was splitting up, for the moment, he was going to have to pick one member to latch onto. Why not Topaz?

And so what if he had to give her back the rest of her money? He was pretty sure there was a lot more than 500 K to be made this time.

He fingered the manila envelope that rested inside the bag with the cash and the DVD. It was stamped with the words *CLASSIFIED: PROPERTY OF THE U.S. CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY.* He'd found it in his former boss's safe, along with Gregor's half of Topaz's money.

Maybe—just maybe, if he played his cards right—Jack could make whatever there was to be made of what he'd found in that envelope *and* keep half of what he'd conned from Topaz.

That notion made his collar feel a little tight, his stomach a little queasy. He cleared his throat and shook off the unaccustomed sensations. Guilt was nothing but wasted energy.

He pulled out the DVD and told himself he really ought to slip it back into Topaz's belongings before she discovered it was missing. If she found

out that he had been snooping through her stuff, she would really be unhappy to see him when he showed up on her oceanfront doorstep.

After she left Jack's room, Topaz held her head in her hands and waited for the hunger that had suffused her veins to ease, for the trembling that had possessed her body to stop. She wanted him. God, she wanted him so badly it was like an addiction.

She knew he was no good. And yet she wanted him. No good for her, and no good, period. And yet she ached for him. He was a con man. And yet she hungered for his kiss. If she fell back into those strong arms again, knowing what she knew about him, then she was the most pathetic, self-destructive, stupid woman on the planet. And she was determined to be none of those things.

"You okay?"

She lifted her head and met Roxy's eyes. Roxy. The wild, irreverent, redheaded mortal whose age was fathomless. The belladonna antigen in her blood, the hallmark of the only humans with the potential to become vampires, made it unlikely she would live nearly as long as she already had, but she showed no signs of slowing down. Roxy. The most trusted mortal Topaz could imagine.

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