

Circulating among the convention crowd in the light filled Moscone Center, Claire Temple laughed and joked with her cousin Shante. Beneath the buzz of conversation, a The upbeat mood of the crowd made the event seem more like a party than a convention.

People sat at ruffle-skirted tables in the partitioned areas or booths the exhibitors had purchased, sampling food and beverages, taking orders, and simply chatting. Others perused the tables loaded with loot and added free samples and giveaways to their conference goody bags.

Although she had meetings scheduled, she felt ridiculously free and light-hearted after months of planning and work associated with her brother Malcolm's mating and installation as the new head of the Temple Werewolf clan. Now her only worry was the coming pressure from Esther to select a mate. She didn't dwell on it, but she had never been lucky in love. In fact, she'd all but given up on finding the right man.

Shante's sultry giggle drew Claire's attention back to the present. Shante was blasting her considerable charm on the tall, sable-skinned representative for Masterson's Fine Culinary Products. Claire focused her gaze on the handsome rep's nametag and read, Tony Jackson. She recognized him as someone Shante spent time with last year. Stopping alongside her cousin, Claire accepted a sample of marinated beef tartar. It was

delicious, but then she already counted Masterson as one of the top vendors for the French Quarter Hotel and Casino owned by the Temple Clan.

Tony's boss, Randall, recognized Claire and came forward to give her a warm hug. "Good to see you Claire!" His lips brushed her cheek. "And how are you doing?"

"Fine, and I'm glad to be here in San Francisco for some downtime."

Randall eyed her sharply and gently took her hand. "I hope you plan on attending the reception and party we're giving for our best customers."

Claire flashed him a smile and gave his hand a squeeze. "Wouldn't miss it for the world. You guys know how to have a good time."

He retrieved an envelope from the table and withdrew a bunch of tickets. "You shouldn't need these, but if me and Tony aren't around when you arrive..." His voice trailed off. "How many do you want?"

Claire tilted her head. She was in a mood for company and right now she didn't care that it wouldn't be a potential mate. "Give me four. If we don't use the extra tickets, I'll bring them back."

Randall's smile warmed. Claire knew he had a thing for her, but she'd never seen him as anything but a good friend.

"I'll look for you tonight then," he said, releasing her hand.

"We've got some new marinades and sauces I want you to try."

Stepping into the area reserved for Masterson Fine Culinary Products potential customers, Claire took a seat and spent the next fifteen minutes sampling and taking notes on the foods and sauces Randall presented. She even ordered the ones she thought her chefs and customers would like.

Afterward, she stood, licking the last bit of a scrumptious sauce off her lips as she surveyed the surrounding tables and booths. She felt as if she were being watched. Scanning the large hall, her gaze stopped when it encountered an incredible pair of midnight blue eyes, the deep color of the horizon just above the ocean and filled with mystery and intelligence. Capturing her, they held her until interest and something deep inside her warmed and started to burn.

Claire blinked, breaking the contact. She returned her gaze to the dark haired man with the incredible blue eyes. He had olive skin, a straight nose that didn't dominate his face and a full, sensual mouth. Black, wing-like brows and glossy curls topped his striking face. With a Temple past shaped in slavery long ago, she didn't often view Caucasians as potential mates, but something about this man made all her preconceived notions and ideas meaningless. She couldn't have felt more pull

if he had had her and was reeling her in. On instinct alone she began the walk to his booth.

Halfway to the booth, a strong wave of doubts and negativity slowed her steps. What was she doing? She didn't even know the man. He could be a crazy or someone out to harm her or her family.

She arrived, slightly breathless and aware that she'd been holding her breath the entire time.

Mr. Blue Eyes offered a large, well-manicured hand. "Dante De Luca. Can I help you?" he said in a provocative tenor that caressed her ears.

A woody, oriental scent mixed with that of clean, virile male filled her nostrils. She accepted his hand, even shook it in a professional manner, but the entire time she felt an intense energy pulsing and flowing between them. Aware that a lot rode on her next few statements, she flashed a brilliant smile. "I ...saw you watching me from across the room," she began, wishing she'd come up with something more original.

His gaze dipped down to her conference badge then locked on to hers. "You're a beautiful woman, Claire. I've been staring every since you walked into the exhibit hall forty minutes ago."

Eyes widening, Claire found herself laughing. Dante's words flattered and intrigued her. "Do you like what you see?"

Dante grinned. "I'm still enjoying the view."

"Well now," she said softly, "Were you planning to stop at just looking?"

His tone turned husky as his gaze covered her expensive sandals to her white fitted slacks and black Robert Rodriguez cross seam jacket that she'd paired with a tiny animal print camisole. "We've made it all the way to conversation." His lips curved upward and his warm fingers massaged her hand. "I would like to get to know you and give you all of the time and attention you deserve..."

Claire tilted her head, enjoying the sound of his voice and the way his fingers tightened on hers. She wanted more.

His voice dipped lower. "Are you staying at the conference hotel?"

Claire nodded. "Of course. And you?"

"The company has a condo on the bay."

"What do you do for the company?" Claire asked, glancing up at the sign that read, Baxter Food, Beverages, and Exotics for the first time.

Dante was silent for several moments, leaving her to wonder if he'd heard the question or hiding a secret. "Is it a secret?" She asked, amused.

"I don't have a job description or title," he began carefully, "but if I had to choose, I would call myself a slave.

I've developed several of the beverages and exotics and I fill in as needed since our staff is small."

Claire chuckled. "Don't look so serious. I feel the same way sometimes and I work for my family." She saw him incline his head, his eyes starting to twinkle as he appreciated the sound of her laughter.

His question surprised her. "Who are you, Claire Temple?"

"What you see and more," she began, fingering the gold circlet she wore at her throat with her free hand. "My family owns the French Quarter Hotel and Casino on the Strip in Las Vegas. I manage the food and beverage concessions in the restaurants and bars."

"That's a big job," he murmured softly, reluctantly releasing her hand.

"Yes, but I manage," she countered. "So you've heard of the French Quarter?"

"Yes, it's a beautiful, well run place, and I've heard of the Temple Clan."

So he knew she belonged to a pack of werewolves. Claire swallowed. By law, most humans had been vaccinated against the Lupine virus so being with her wouldn't make him a werewolf, but many humans still harbored prejudices against werewolves. And many of the wolves looked on the humans as lesser beings.

Straightening, Claire narrowed her eyes and gazed deeper into his. She kept her tone light. "Is that going to be a problem?"

Dante smiled. "No, in fact it only adds to the energy and excitement of being with you."

She scanned his handsome features once more, from his Italian leather shoes to the designer suit that merely enhanced the strength and vitality virtually pouring off the man. Was she attracted to him for his looks or was it something deeper? She sensed the latter. He was something, but he wasn't a werewolf. "You don't belong to a clan..."

He shook his head. "No, but I'm what you see and more too. Is that going to be a problem?"

Not werewolf and not human and yet his skin was like that of the masters that the Temple Clan had escaped long ago. She really was stepping into uncharted territory. He wasn't a vampire either, she decided. Deep inside, she knew what he was, but couldn't quite close on the thought. "What you are is not a problem, but I'd like to know what I'm dealing with."

Staring at her, Dante was silent but she sensed that he was trying to tell her something. Thinking hard, she remembered the things he'd said about himself, about developing some of the beverages and exotics for Baxter. "You're a Mage," she guessed.

"Yes." He turned his hands palm up as if to show that he was harmless.

As a Mage, she knew that he was far from harmless. The energy she felt at his touch, the sheer magnetic attraction that enveloped much more than the physical told her that he was powerful. Maybe, just maybe there was more going on here than she thought. Claire's temper flared hot. "Did you spell me from across the room? Did you--?"

A flash of anger and disappointment sparked his eyes and then closed his expression as he cut off her tirade. "No. That's not my MO. You're free to walk away. Go." Brandishing an upturned hand with a flourish, he turned his back on her and busied himself with the company's display bottles.

How dare he dismiss her? Claire glared at him for several moments, torn between wanting to stay and proving that she could go. Pride won out. She turned and walked away with her head high and a little extra zing in her walk. Threading her way through the aisles of booths and people, she felt no physical pull, but wanted to go back and talk to Dante. Her pulse was still racing from just talking to him and she wanted to feel that energy that flowed through her when they touched.

She forced herself to check out some other booths. Pushing herself, she even tasted more samples and collected business cards. Feeling the weight of Dante's gaze the entire time, Claire ordered a couple of cases of new champagne. Then she made a realization. For a man at the conference to sell his

company's products, Dante had said surprisingly little about them.

Without conscious effort or thought, it wasn't long before Claire found herself standing at Dante's booth once more. He glanced up from a notebook he was writing in, curiosity lighting his wonderful eyes.

"I want to apologize," she began. "I'm usually pretty traditional in the people I'm attracted to. Humans are about as risky as I get. I've... never met anyone like you and I don't know what to think or how to act."

His expression brightened. He set the notebook aside and came closer till they were almost touching. "Why don't you act like Claire?"

Her skin tingled, just from having him stand so close. Reacting to his comment, Claire managed to chuckle and cough at the same time. "Claire has a temper, especially when she's being protective or thinks she's being duped."

"I won't dupe you, Claire, and I won't hurt you either. But you should know that I have a hot temper too."

"Interesting," she said, trying to imagine him interacting with her brothers. Claire reached into her designer bag and drew out one of the tickets she'd gotten from Randall. "I'm going to be at this party tonight. Why don't you come along as my date?"

The Wolf That Wasn't by Natalie Dunbar :Vegas Bites Three of a Kind, Parker Publishing

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He accepted the ticket, letting his fingers covers hers for several seconds longer than necessary. "I'm there. What time should I show up?"

"Ten-thirty?" She didn't want to arrive too early.

"I'm there," he repeated. "What about now? Are you free? I'd love to take you to lunch or dinner."