

Shadows

Chapter One

Thomas walked into the elegant hotel and casually glanced around. He knew she wouldn't be here yet. Diana Martingale enjoyed making an entrance. She mistakenly believed it gave her an edge. It didn't, not with Thomas anyway. He slid up to the counter and ordered a glass of wine. He really didn't have time for this, but Diana had sounded so desperate. At least the wine would help settle his nerves. He'd had such a terrible day at the office, he deserved a relaxing dinner out. Thomas sighed, chances were low that dinner with Diana would be relaxing.

Out of the corner of his eye, Thomas noticed the hotel manager hurrying his way. He'd hoped to remain anonymous tonight but since his father's death, that rarely happened. "Sir," the impeccably dressed man called. "Let me get that for you. Over here." He quickly took Thomas' drink and headed for a private booth. "Will you be dining alone tonight or shall I watch for a guest?" he queried.

Thomas smiled at the man. What was his name again? Parker? No...Porter. That was it, Martin Porter. "Thank you, Martin," Thomas paused. The man beamed at the acknowledgment. "I am waiting for a guest tonight. It's a woman by the name of Diana Martingale. I believe she is staying here, in the hotel."

"Awe...yes," Mr. Porter acknowledged. "Ms. Martingale is in room 514. Is she a good friend of yours, sir? I wasn't aware the two of you were acquainted. I apologize. Had I known, we would have done something special when she arrived. We had that fruit art come in today, would you like me to have one sent up to her room?"

"That won't be necessary. I don't believe she'll be staying much longer. Apparently she's leaving town," Thomas paused. "Did she happen to say why she was staying in the hotel in the first place? A few weeks ago, she had an apartment of her own."

"Not to my knowledge," the man mused. "I believe she's booked into next week though. That's strange. We haven't been notified of her departure," Porter paused. "Oh, well. I guess plans change. If there is anything I can do for you, just let me know. Pete can take care of your needs at the restaurant." Porter signaled for a young teenager. The kid sauntered up to the table waiting for direction.

"Pete, this is Mr. Thomas Deveraux. If he needs anything, anything at all, please make sure you take care of it immediately."

"Will do," Pete nodded in Thomas' direction.

"Hey Pete," Thomas grinned, keeping things informal usually minimized tension and lightened the mood. He still wasn't used to the reaction he always got from lower level employees.

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Too bad the upper level didn't take notes. "I'm expecting a guest tonight. I'd like to hang out here in the bar until she arrives. Once Ms. Martingale shows up, she'll expect to be seated immediately. I'll apologize in advance for her impatience. She can also come across as rude at times. Could you have our table prepared and ready? She should be arriving any minute now. Maybe we can head off a scene."

"I'll get right on it." The kid rushed off to prepare a table.

"Pete is very reliable. I assure you, he'll give you his complete attention throughout the entire evening." Martin scowled at something in the lobby. "If you will excuse me, sir. It looks like there may be a problem at the front desk."

"Of course," Thomas said. He took another sip of his wine as he watched the man rush off to handle an upset customer. Martin paused just an instant at the check-in counter. Thomas assumed he was telling the greeter what to do with Diana once she arrived.

Thomas settled back into the comfortable booth. He was glad to finally be alone, it had been such a horrible day. Running so many businesses was hectic enough, he didn't need the insubordination and constant nagging he was getting from his managers. Luke had been grooming his children to take over the business for years. Well, actually all their lives if he was completely honest. Thomas and Alex knew each branch of the organization inside and out. They had since they were ten years old. As children, Luke and Marlana would quiz them. It was a game their parents developed to see which child knew the most about current business operations. The one thing their parents hadn't prepared them for was the constant chaos. Luke, like Thomas, believed his managers would accept the change in ownership when Luke was gone. They all believed Deveraux Industries would run just as smoothly as it always had. That was not the case. One by one the managers were testing the waters. They were attempting things they knew they'd never get away with under Luke's control.

It was obvious the executive managers of Deveraux Industries believed he and Alex were weak. Many of them also thought the two siblings were oblivious when it came to day to day operations. Thomas had been forced to fire one of his top men this afternoon for embezzlement and lying. He would not tolerate dishonesty in his company. The man had the gall to look him in the eye and tell an out and out lie. Not just a little white lie either. It was a whopper. As if Thomas wouldn't notice forty thousand dollars was missing from operating expenses. It didn't take a lot of investigating to track the money. Phil Burton had used his budget to finance a competitor. It still amazed Thomas that anyone would believe they'd get away with such a betrayal. To top it all off, the man had been sincerely surprised when he got fired.

Burton actually had to be escorted off the premises by security. He'd been very vocal about his intent to sue the company over his termination. Thomas wasn't worried about legal problems. He had called Tom immediately and was assured it would be taken care of before the end of the day. Tom Elliott Knox was the best legal counsel in the industry, that's why Luke had hired him.

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Tom dealt with legal issues involving the company, Jake handled personal business as well as the supernatural. Thomas had been surprised and a bit curious when Tom insisted he and Alex attend a ten o'clock meeting in the morning, no excuses. Clearly something important was brewing. Tom wouldn't even give a hint what the meeting was for. That was unusual and not like Tom at all. Thomas just hoped it wasn't bad news. He and Alex had dealt with enough bad news lately to last a lifetime.

Thomas took another sip of his wine. It was almost gone now. If Diana didn't show soon, he was going to leave. He had too many fires to put out. He couldn't waste an entire evening waiting for a woman he really didn't want to see in the first place. Thomas thought back to his earlier conversation. He hadn't talked to Diana for several months. Hooking up with her had been a mistake. She was beautiful and sophisticated, but she was cold. He'd realized that after their first excruciating date. To be honest, he hadn't planned on ever seeing her again. Which is why he was more than a little surprised when she tracked him down a few weeks later. In a moment of weakness he'd agreed to a second date. They'd gone to an expensive restaurant and during dinner he questioned his original assessment of her. She'd been charming and flirtatious. When she invited him up to her apartment, he hesitantly agreed. At the time he wanted to avoid returning home to a house full of warriors. Big mistake. Sleeping with her had been an eye opener. She was the most distant, frigid woman he had ever encountered. He promised himself that night he'd never see her again. And he hadn't.

When he told Jake about his experience, Jake insisted on hiring a private investigator to look into Diana's background. Thomas was even more set on avoiding her when he found out she'd been married three times and had walked away with a large settlement at the conclusion of each one. If she thought he was going to be husband number four, she was sadly mistaken.

Now here he was, sitting in a dark booth waiting to find out why she was so upset. Why was this woman who was completely void of emotion in such a panic? Had she somehow gotten herself into trouble? It wouldn't be the first time he'd broken things off with a woman only to hear from her again down the road. They usually wanted money. Just enough to get them a new start. It was difficult to say no, but he knew he didn't have a choice. Once he started down that path and gave the first one money, women would come out of the woodwork asking for a hand out. Luke and Marlana had taught him that lesson long before he even went on his first date. He wouldn't allow anyone to take advantage of him or his families' reputation that way. He glanced at his watch again. Five more minutes and he was out of here. Diana should know better. Her incessant games were going to backfire this time.

Diana sat in the luxurious room waiting for the call. The bell boy would come through, she'd tipped him generously. As an added incentive, she'd flashed him a seductive smile and lingered just a minute to flirt a little. The kid was smitten. Men were so easy to manipulate. She sighed. Too bad things hadn't worked out with Thomas. He would have been just the challenge she'd been looking for. This time suffering through the intimacy would have been worth it. She hated

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that part. Pretending to be affectionate with someone she despised was always so difficult. Unfortunately it was part of the package. What was that saying about no gain without sacrifice? If Luke hadn't died and ruined everything, she was sure this could have been the last time. A payout from the Deveraux's would have been enough to last a lifetime.

Diana wondered what secret Thomas had. All men had one, especially rich men. The wealthy thought they were above the rules. If only his father hadn't died so unexpectedly. The police were still trying to solve Luke Deveraux's murder. That was another problem with the exceptionally wealthy. It was the reason she never went after the big fish. If something went wrong and she had to kill them, it would be too difficult to get away with it. The police wouldn't stop searching until they found their man. Or in her case, woman.

Diana definitely learned her lesson with her first husband. She'd been so worried throughout the entire investigation. The police had come too close to discovering the truth. That experience taught her one thing, she couldn't kill her targets when she was finished with them. If all of her husbands died mysteriously, she'd immediately come under suspicion. Eventually one of the cops would figure it out. She would not go to prison for killing a man, she thought in disgust.

She also hated the added delay. Once she disposed of her first husband, she wanted out. She needed to move on. After two long years of marriage the town was stifling. Instead, she had to stick around for a couple more months. If she had packed up and left immediately, it would have looked suspicious. Once Diana finally escaped, she landed in a fairly small town. This time she changed tactics. She had to admit she'd made a mistake with husband number two. Mayor Edwards wasn't as wealthy as he led everyone to believe. After a few bad investments and several years of lavish living, his family fortune was almost depleted. It had been such a relief to find his dirty secret so early on in their marriage. The rest had been child's play. She didn't have to fake her disgust. Diana smiled at her performance. Edwards thought she was disgusted and horrified over his fondness for teenage porn. In reality, she just found the moron revolting. He'd been more than happy to give her a quick divorce to save his political career. Unfortunately she'd only gotten a couple million out of him.

That's when Diana headed for California. Husband number three was a wealthy lawyer. His secret was more difficult to find. She'd almost given up when she stumbled onto it by accident. The sly lawyer was smarter than she thought. He had a hefty nest egg tucked away for a rainy day. A nest egg he'd acquired by over billing and creative book keeping. She'd walked away with a large chunk of that particular retirement package. He was more than happy to share in exchange for her signature on that ridiculous gag order and a promise to leave town immediately. That's how she ended up in New York where she had set her sights on Thomas Deveraux.

Diana figured Thomas was a spoiled rich kid, living off his father's success. She'd underestimated him. He was more involved in the company than she'd given him credit for. But, by the time she realized it, too much time had been invested in the scam. There was no way she

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would walk away empty handed. Now that he was running the entire enterprise, he didn't have time for her. Well, she was going to change that tonight. She casually reached into her purse and fingered the glass bottle. Once she slipped him the sleeping powder, she'd need to coerce him up to her room. According to the website she would have approximately twenty minutes to get him into bed before he passed out.

Diana wasn't looking forward to carrying a child for nine months, but the payout would be worth it. She'd done her homework this time. The Deveraux's were loaded. At least she wouldn't have to sleep with him again. With Thomas unconscious, she could get what she needed and let science do the rest. She was positive he would take the bait. Her research had revealed Thomas was a family man. There was no way he would let her sell his child to strangers. Strangers that didn't qualify to adopt a kid through legitimate means because of their criminal history. He'd pay anything if it meant saving his brat. She planned to ask for a bundle. Oh, he'd scoff at first. She knew he'd try to play hard ball, but she'd win in the end. Diana squirmed in anticipation. She was so engrossed in her thoughts she almost fell off the chair when the phone rang. She rushed to the door, anxious to get this night behind her.

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Abby sat with her friends at their usual table. They'd been coming here for years. Tonight's outing was a welcome distraction. It was nice to get away from the house for a few hours. Her family was always so serious these days. They were sure the vampires were going to attack again. Unfortunately, no one knew how. All the shifters were on edge. They had been since her kidnaping, but it was far worse after their community had been bombed. Abby assumed the fae and the warriors were preoccupied with the vampire problem as well.

She was shocked back to the present when Thomas Deveraux casually walk through the door with a gorgeous blond on his arm. Apparently he wasn't on edge worrying about the vampires. He was clearly on a date. She inhaled sharply as the young waiter began to lead the couple to a nearby table. He was always so handsome and sexy, but Thomas looked exceptional in a suit. Just thinking about that man always took her breath away. Watching him stroll in with another woman was painful. She'd been thinking about him more frequently lately. Well, to be honest she hadn't been able to get him off her mind since her rescue from that cave. For just an instant, she hated the woman draped on his arm.

What was wrong with her? Thomas wasn't interested in her. He'd had plenty of opportunity on their long journey back through the forest. He'd been friendly but clearly unimpressed. Abby had never been jealous before in her life, but she was extremely jealous right now. She wanted to be the one on his arm. She wanted Thomas to invite her to dinner. She wished she were beautiful like his date. Maybe then he'd notice her. Abby's thoughts drifted back to the cave. Thomas had

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been so fierce as he battled Hector. She'd stood there, mesmerized by his strength and his passion. Did he have that much passion for his women?

Abby snapped out of her thoughts immediately as the two passed feet from her table. It was obvious Thomas hadn't seen her. Or maybe he had forgotten her already. Abby studied his date closely. The woman was giving off an unmistakable odor. The blond was on the hunt. Abby could almost feel the adrenaline pulsing through her veins. This woman may be beautiful and sophisticated, but she was also up to something. The smell of a predator ready to pounce permeated the entire room. Abby glanced at Thomas. He was completely oblivious to the danger.

She continued to watch as the couple was seated at a nearby table. The woman was brisk as she said something to the waiter. Abby wasn't close enough to hear the conversation. The boy hurried off and returned moments later with a bottle of Champaign. He poured them each a glass, provided menu's, then hurried off. Thomas immediately picked up the menu and began to study his options. Abby watched horrified as the woman slipped something from her purse and dumped it into Thomas' glass. She didn't think, she excused herself and rushed toward the couple's table. Abby's heart sank when she realized she wouldn't make it in time. Thomas absently reached for his glass and took a long drink as he continued to study his dinner choices. His eyes never left the menu.

Abby pretended to trip as she reached her destination. Thomas' glass immediately tipped on its side. The contents crept across the table, seeping into the elegant white table cloth. Thomas' date glared at Abby, obviously furious. Abby forced herself to look ashamed. Inwardly she was grateful she'd hit her mark.

Thomas didn't notice Abby until she fell against the table. He looked down and realized she must have tripped on the uneven floor board. He made a mental note to have that fixed. He barely noticed when Diana jumped to her feet in a huff. Thomas stood and helped Abby to her feet then smiled at her. "It was nice of you to drop in," he teased. He glanced around wondering where she'd come from.

"I'm so sorry," she apologized. "I was just having dinner with some friends when I saw you come in." She motioned toward the table where she'd been dining. "I'm sorry I was such a klutz. I just wanted to say hello." She focused her attention on Thomas' suit. "I didn't get any on you did I?" she asked sincerely.

"Huh?" Thomas asked, "Oh, no. I think it went in the other direction." Thomas noticed Diana frantically brushing at her dress. He was surprised at the amusement he found in that. Maybe she'd go away. He still didn't know what she wanted, but he was beyond bored with her antics. He'd only spent five minutes with her and she was already grating on his last nerve.

Diana shot a venomous look towards the clumsy woman. She'd ruined everything. Thomas hadn't had enough of that sleeping powder to put him out. What now? She didn't have any more

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available. Her plans were ruined. She wanted to lash out at the bimbo. Why had she interrupted them anyway? “Thomas, I need you to walk me to my room.” She tried to remain civil but it was difficult. She would not walk away empty handed. If she could get Thomas to her room, she’d see what she could get from his wallet. Someone as rich as Thomas would carry several credit cards with him. If she took one from the back, he may not notice it was missing for days. With any luck, she might even have a few weeks.

Thomas studied her. He didn’t want to go to her room. “Actually, I need to go. I have some pressing issues to deal with at work. Maybe we can talk some other time.” Fat chance. He wasn’t going near this woman ever again.

“Thomas,” Diana pouted trying to sound desperate. “I really need to talk to you before you go. Please, just walk me to the door. I don’t have much time and I need to get out of this wet dress.” She held her breath. Would he take the bait? She was counting on his compassion. If he turned her down, the pesky intruder would pay dearly. She might pay anyway. Diana could barely look at the woman without strangling her. The unwelcome girl had ruined everything.

Thomas glanced at Abby. He’d rather have dinner with her. He shifted his gaze back to Diana. She looked so desperate. What did she want anyway? Thomas decided to get it over with. If he blew her off tonight she’d just call him again tomorrow. He wanted to be done with this. “Alright,” he finally said quietly. He refocused his attention on Abby, “It was nice to see you again. Tell your family hello,” he paused then gave her a friendly hug. “I’m sorry we don’t have time to catch up. Apparently Diana has something pressing she needs to talk to me about.” He rolled his eyes. “And she thinks she needs to change.” He smiled at Abby as he slipped past her and headed for the elevator,

Diana breathed a sigh of relief. Nice guys were easy targets. She followed Thomas toward the elevator. Once she had him in her room, she’d keep him there until he became drowsy. She didn’t think he’d pass out completely, but with any luck he’d be incapacitated enough to get to his wallet and disappear. She didn’t notice the small mouse slip into the corner just before the heavy doors slid closed.

Abby caught her breath. Being that close to Thomas was electrifying. She wished she could enjoy the moment, but she was worried. The woman, Diana, was angry and obviously up to no good. Abby could feel it. She studied Thomas as he walked away. There was no way to know what Diana had slipped into his drink. Abby also had no idea how the human drug would impact a warrior. From what she understood, any kind of chemical made warriors extremely ill. She rushed down the hall and looked around. It was empty. She quickly shifted on the fly and slipped through the doors just in time.

Thomas felt dizzy. What was going on? He’d felt fine just a few minutes ago. He swung his glance to Diana then grabbed the railing. He was going to pass out. He fought the darkness with everything he had. What was happening? It didn’t make any sense. Was Diana somehow

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responsible for this? Was that why she insisted he walk her to her room? What game was she playing? At this point it really didn't matter. He was going to black out. Whatever she wanted, he was too weak to stop her. She was going to win.

Diana studied Thomas. He looked like he was going to pass out. Why was he so white and clammy? Was he having some kind of allergic reaction to the drug? She was sure he hadn't ingested enough to knock him out. Maybe luck was on her side. She smiled an evil, triumphant grin. This was better than she'd hoped. If Thomas had a serious allergic reaction, that would give her more time. It might take days before anyone found him. By that time she'd max out the cards and disappear. She'd need to make sure she covered her tracks well. If he ended up dying, everyone would be looking for her. She might have to take care of the girl too, just to be safe.

The elevator door slowly slid open. Diana placed an arm around Thomas' waist and awkwardly stumbled to her room.

Abby hesitated for the slightest instant then shifted again. A mouse would draw more attention up here than a pet on the loose. She glanced at Thomas. He was in trouble. He looked like he was about to black out. Diana didn't notice the orange tabby slip through the door as she entered her room. Abby quietly hid under the bed, a silent observer for the moment. She couldn't help Thomas until Diana left or her family secret would be revealed. Abby continued to watch as Diana unhooked Thomas' watch and slipped it into her bag. The woman then began to rummage through his pockets until she found his wallet. After sliding out two credit cards Diana rushed through the door, shutting it tightly behind her.