

NOT A CREATURE WAS STIRRING

By: Cathy Clamp

Working on Christmas Eve sucks . . . even if you like your job. I was keeping to the shadows of the Paris alleys following the mark, because the City of Lights is even more so during the holidays. He'd suspected he was being chased in London a week ago, but probably thought he'd lost me in Lille after he hightailed it off the Eurostar with a stolen BMW.

He was wrong.

The near constant ringing of Notre Dame's bells to signal the nativity mass had allowed me to get closer. Staying downwind made sure that his preternatural nose wouldn't put him on guard. I find it interesting that even though I'm a werewolf now, not all that much has changed in my business as a professional assassin—with the exception that I'm working for the good guys now. It's still weird introducing myself as Tony Giambrocco, Wolven Agent.

I slid a gloved hand inside my pocket to make sure my Taurus .38, complete with silver bullets, was ready to draw at a moment's notice. Dauren Ramsey was known for his viciousness and with him being an Alpha grizzly to my *three-day dog* werewolf, I was at a distinct disadvantage.

Just the way I like it.

While I'd been following Ramsey, a thick cloud cover had blanketed the area, smothering the scents of balsam, cinnamon and the raft of human emotions under a wet mist that reminded me so much of the scent of sorrow that it was no wonder locals referred to winter as *Gray Patee*. Twinkling lights along the Champs Élysée diffused, taking on the appearance of a watercolor mural—all cool and blue, instead of stark white and festive.

I realized that the blue sorrow wasn't just what I was seeing, it was inside my head too. I'd closed myself off from my mate, Sue, as I often do during jobs. While she liked a little better that I was now working for the Sazi police force instead of the Mob—the job is still the same. I kill people for money. She has a hard time with that in the best times, but it's harder for her when we're mind-linked. It shouldn't even be possible that we are, or so say the experts. But we are, and I am . . . so we do the best we can.

“La poesie, ca ne vaut pas un sandwich?” I'd heard the beggar approach me from behind but I ignored him at first, intent on my prey. A moment later, a hand touched my jacket and I turned narrowed eyes as he repeated the words. They sounded better in French than the English translation of, “isn't poetry worth a sandwich?” The old man's smell was rank with unwashed sweat, but there was no malice intended. He smelled beaten down by life, and afraid of me, but desperate. Normally, I'd just brush him off but my goal was to blend in. I reached in my pants pocket and handed him some bills while putting a finger to my lips—the universal request for silence. I still haven't gotten used to the Euro conversions, so I had no idea how much I'd given him. But from the way his eyes lit up and he nodded mutely, I presume it was more than enough for a sandwich.

Another wave of depression slapped at my mind as I moved from shadow to shadow watching Ramsey gather an impressive number of shopping bags. It wasn't likely he was shopping for loved ones, since he'd been on the run for years. He'd disappeared into the European underworld after slaughtering half a village of Sazi in Imljani around the turn of the century . . . the nineteenth century, that is. But even in the supernatural world, there is no statute of limitations for murder. So here I was in Paris of the twenty-first century, bringing down a convicted killer who, from the eyewitness accounts, made Jack the Ripper look like Jack and the Beanstalk.

I wish we could be together tonight. Church bells filled the air again, and I stumbled as I was suddenly in a different place, thinking different thoughts than my own. I was looking out of a hotel window, staring up at the brightly lit Eiffel tower. The image my "eyes" were seeing was from a different angle and closer than the one a moment ago. I knew Sue was in Paris, but hadn't known exactly where. She was also working for Wolven now, doing bookkeeping. The new chief of the agency, Lucas Santiago, must have put her up at the Hilton Paris, considering the opulence of the room when *we* turned away from the window. She didn't know we were connected . . . not yet. That happens sometimes near the full moon. One of us is just suddenly inside the other and we have to struggle to free ourselves. I pulled out and pushed shut an imaginary door to separate us. I'm still learning that trick, so it wasn't easy.

A bird in a gilded cage. It was the last thought to slip across my mind as I separated us, and I realized that she wasn't having much fun here. Initially, the thought of traveling to France and doing useful things had appealed to her, but now reality had set in. She didn't know anyone, and those who lived here would be with friends and family today and tomorrow. I'd been in Paris during the holidays often enough in my career to know that it's not very tourist friendly. The events are mostly religious in nature, with a few scattered concerts and parties . . . if you know where to go and have an invitation. There was probably something going on in the hotel for the guests, but Sue's not exactly outgoing. She's getting better, but it hasn't been that long since she was constantly depressed. In fact, we met because she wanted to commit suicide.

A car pulled up at the curb near the store where Ramsey was just exiting. I moved as close as I could to watch. An excited child's voice shouted, "Papa! Papa! Happy Christmas!" The small girl, not more than five or six, raced toward him laughing, smelling of citrus happiness and melon shampoo. Ramsey was forced to lift up the packages so she didn't collide face first with the largest bag. She wrapped arms tightly around his thigh and he lifted it as well, balancing nicely on one leg. She squealed happily, releasing a puff of steam that smelled of bubble gum, and slid around to the back of the leg before dropping off to land on the sidewalk on her tush. It apparently was a frequent game by his chuckle. He stepped over her and she stood and ran back around to face him, white knit beret askew.

"Happy Christmas to you too, poppet." It was the first time I'd heard Ramsey speak. I'd expected a more eastern European accent, considering the murders were committed in Bosnia. But his voice was pure upper crust Brit, with a slightly Scottish rolling of the 'r's. "I was just on my way home to drop off these packages before leaving."

The girl's face fell and her disappointment was so thick it rode over the mist. "Oh, must you go, Papa? Can't you please stay for Christmas morning? Mama's making crepes—the ones you like, with strawberries." She motioned to the car and I noticed a slim blonde driving that was

obviously the mother of the girl.

“—and complimentary strawberries, *mais ouis*. May I bring you anything else, *Madame Giambrocco*?” I nearly dropped to my knees from the force of the space shift to Sue’s head inside the hotel. I heard—and felt—her weighty sigh as she accepted the tiny magnum of champagne and bowl of strawberries, dipped in thick dark chocolate, from the uniformed French waiter.

“No. No, that’s fine. Nothing else.” She shut the door after passing across a hefty tip and I felt a heavy sensation in my chest as she sighed and took a bite of strawberry. The need to be feeding her that strawberry was so intense that I could barely stop myself from racing into the darkness.

It’s a mating thing. Sazis can’t seem to stand their mates being in pain. Me, I have a hard time when she’s depressed. I do better with pure emotions, like wounds. A knife cut or bullet hole—that’s a pure, clean sort of pain and unless it’s life threatening to her, I have no problem with Sue hurting. But sorrow, anguish, sadness . . . those I struggle with. It’s better than it was when we first mated, but I don’t like to feel her hurting.

Ramsey abruptly dropped the packages and reached for the girl, lifting her into his arms and holding her tight. The jaw-tightening worchestershire sauce scent of fear made an odd combination with the sugar cookie scent of love. “I wish I could, Beatrice. I truly do. But I don’t dare risk it . . . don’t dare risk *you* and Mama.”

So, he knew he was being hunted and worried that I’d take out his family. No, even in the old days, working for Carmine, I wouldn’t take down a man’s family. Innocents got a free pass unless they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Technically speaking, Beatrice and her mom *were* in the wrong place at the wrong time, but geez . . . it’s *Christmas Eve*.

I was probably going to wind up spending the next week working for free and have a strip of my hide taken by Lucas, but call me a softy. I stepped out from the shadows and walked toward Ramsey and his daughter. His nose lifted into the air and he turned suddenly, clutching the girl to his chest with such fierce intensity that she began to struggle.

My shrug and non-threatening scent must have taken him by surprise, because his brow furrowed. As I walked toward him on the sidewalk, I deliberately spun the cylinder on the Taurus, knowing his ears would pick it up. “Forty-eight hours, Ramsey.” I said quietly enough that his daughter probably wouldn’t hear, and kept talking as I passed him by. “Have your crepes and play with your kid. But then I’m coming after you. The council’s signed the order.”

The shock of surprised scent turned to lemon and oranges delight. He suddenly hugged Beatrice even tighter and spun around while she laughed. “Very well then, little scamp. If you insist, I *will* stay home for crepes with you and Mama. But make no mistake. I must leave on Friday. Yes?”

My head turned to watch as I crossed the street. The girl was jumping up and down on the sidewalk while shouting her joy, and the young woman ran around the car to hug Ramsey. I nearly couldn’t make out the few quietly said words over the bells of Notre Dame. “Happy Christmas then, Wolven. And thank you.”

I turned up the collar of my jacket and started making my way toward the Hilton. Maybe I could pick up a present in the hotel gift shop, or maybe I’d settle for feeding my wife chocolate strawberries and strolling hand in hand under the Christmas lights on the Champs Élysée. But either way, it was going to be happy Christmas indeed.

