

House of Night: Tempted

P.C. & Kristin Cast

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A House of Night Novel

Tempted

P.C. and KRISTIN CAST

Book Six of the
HOUSE OF NIGHT
Series



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CHAPTER ONE

Zoey

The night sky over Tulsa was alight with a magical crescent moon. Its brilliance made the ice that coated the city, and the Benedictine Abbey where we'd just had our showdown with a fallen immortal and a rogue High Priestess, shimmer so that everything around me seemed touched by our Goddess. I looked at the moonlight-bathed circle that stood in front of Mary's Grotto, the place of power where not long ago Spirit, Blood, Earth, Humanity, and Night had been personified and then had joined to triumph over hatred and darkness. The carved image of Mary, surrounded by stone roses and nestled within a ledge high in the grotto, appeared to be a beacon for the silver light. I stared at the statue. Mary's expression was serene; her ice-covered cheeks glistened as if she wept in quiet joy.

My gaze lifted to the sky. *Thank you.* I sent a silent prayer up to the beautiful crescent that symbolized my Goddess, Nyx. *We're alive. Kalona and Neferet are gone.*

"Thank you," I whispered to the moon.

Listen within . . .

The words swept through me, subtle and sweet like leaves touched by a summer breeze, brushing my consciousness so lightly that my waking mind barely registered them, yet Nyx's whispered command imprinted itself into my soul.

I was vaguely aware that there were a lot of people (well, nuns, fledglings, and a few vampyres) around me. I could hear the mixture of shouting, talking, crying, and even laughing that filled the night, but it all felt distant. At that moment the only things that were real to

me were the moon above and the scar that sliced from one shoulder all the way across my chest to the other shoulder. It tingled in response to my silent prayer, but it wasn't a tingle of pain. Not really. It was a familiar warm, prickling sensation that assured me Nyx had, once again, Marked me as hers. I knew if I peeked under the neck of my shirt I would find a new tattoo decorating that long, angry-looking scar with an exotic filigree of sapphire—a sign that proved I was following my Goddess's path.

“Erik and Heath, find Stevie Rae, Johnny B, and Dallas—then check the perimeter of the abbey to be certain all the Raven Mockers fled with Kalona and Neferet!” Darius shouted the command, snapping me out of my warm, fuzzy prayer mode, and once I'd been shocked out, it was like an iPod had been cranked too high as sound and confusion flooded my senses.

“But Heath's a human. A Raven Mocker could kill him in a second.” The words burst from my mouth before I could clamp it shut, proving beyond all doubt that being moonstruck wasn't my only moronic skill.

Predictably, Heath puffed up like a cat-smacked toad.

“Zo, I'm not a damn pussy!”

Erik, looking very tall and full-grown, kick-your-butt vampyre-like, snorted sarcastically and then said, “No, you're a damn human. Wait, that *does* make you a pussy!”

“So, we defeat the big baddies and inside five minutes Erik and Heath are banging their chests at each other. How totally predictable,” Aphrodite said with her patented sarcastic sneer as she joined Darius, but her expression completely changed when she turned her attention to the Son of Erebus Warrior. “Hey there, Hotness. You doing okay?”

“You need not worry about me,” Darius said. His eyes met hers, and they practically telegraphed the chemistry between them, but instead of going to her like he usually would and doing some very gross kissing, he remained focused on Stark.

Aphrodite's gaze went from Darius to Stark. “Okay, eww. Your chest is totally crispy crittered.”

James Stark was standing between Darius and Erik. Okay, well,

standing wasn't exactly what he was doing. Stark was swaying and looking extremely unsteady.

Ignoring Aphrodite, Erik spoke up. "Darius, you should probably get Stark inside. I'll coordinate the reconnoitering with Stevie Rae and make sure everything runs smoothly out here." His words seemed okay, but his tone was all I'm-the-big-guy-in-charge, and when he followed up with a condescending "I'll even let Heath help out," he really sounded like a pompous butt.

"You'll *let me* help out?" Heath snapped. "Your *mom* will let me help out."

"Hey, which one of them is supposed to be your boyfriend?" Stark asked me. Even in the terrible shape he was in, he caught my glance with his. His voice was scratchy, and he sounded scarily weak, but his eyes sparkled with humor.

"I am!" Heath and Erik said together.

"Oh, for crap's sake, Zoey, they're both idiots!" Aphrodite said.

Stark started to chuckle, which turned to a cough, which changed again to a painful gasp. His eyes rolled back and, like a slinky, he collapsed.

Moving with the quickness that came naturally to a Son of Erebus Warrior, Darius caught Stark before he hit the ground. "I need to get him inside," Darius said.

I felt like my head was going to explode. Sagging in Darius's arms, Stark looked well on his way to being dead. "I-I don't even know where the infirmary is," I stuttered.

"Not a problem. I'll get a penguin to show us," Aphrodite said. "Hey, you, nun!" she yelled at one of the nearby black-and-white-clad sisters who had scurried out of the abbey after the night had gone from battle chaos to aftermath chaos.

Darius hurried after the nun, with Aphrodite following him. The warrior glanced over his shoulder at me. "Aren't you coming with us, Zoey?"

"As soon as I can." Before I could deal with Erik and Heath, from behind me a familiar twang saved the day.

"Go on with Darius and Aphrodite, Z. I'll take care of Dumb and Dumber and be sure there's no booger monsters left out here."

“Stevie Rae, you are the Best Friend of All Best Friends.” I turned and hugged her quickly, loving how reassuringly solid and normal she felt. Actually, she seemed so normal that I got a weird twinge when she stepped back and grinned at me and I saw, as if for the first time, the scarlet tattoos that spread out from the filled-in crescent in the middle of her forehead and down either side of her face. A sliver of unease threaded through me.

Misunderstanding my hesitation, she said, “Don’t worry about these two dorks. I’m gettin’ used to jerking them apart.” When I just stood there staring at her, the bright smile she’d been wearing dimmed. “Hey, you know your grandma’s okay, right? Kramisha got her back inside right after Kalona was banished and Sister Mary Angela just told me she was goin’ inside to check on her.”

“Yeah, I remember Kramisha helping her into the wheelchair. I’m just . . .” My voice trailed off. I was just what? How could I put into words that I was haunted by a feeling that everything wasn’t right with my best friend and the group of kids she’d allied herself with, and how do I say that *to* my best friend?

“You’re just tired and worried ’bout a bunch of stuff,” Stevie Rae said softly.

Was that understanding I saw flicker through her eyes? Or was it something else, something darker?

“I get it, Z, and I’ll take care of things out here. You just be sure Stark’s okay.” She hugged me again, and then gave me a little push in the direction of the abbey.

“’Kay. Thanks,” I said lamely, starting toward the abbey and totally ignoring the two dorks who were standing there staring at me.

Stevie Rae called after me, “Hey, remind Darius or someone to keep an eye on the time. It’s only about an hour until sunrise, and you know me and all the red fledglings gotta be inside out of the sun by then.”

“Yeah, no problem. I’ll remember,” I said.

The problem was it was getting harder and harder for me to *forget* Stevie Rae wasn’t what she used to be.

CHAPTER TWO

Stevie Rae

“All right, you two, listen up. I’m only gonna say this once—*act right*.” Standing between the two guys, Stevie Rae put her hands on her hips and glared at Erik and Heath. Without taking her eyes from them she yelled, “Dallas!”

Almost instantly the kid jogged up to her. “What’s up, Stevie Rae?”

“Get Johnny B. Tell him to take Heath and search around the front part of the abbey over by Lewis Street and make sure the Raven Mockers are really gone. You and Erik take the south side of the building. I’ll go down along the tree row by Twenty-first and check it out.”

“All by yourself?” Erik said.

“Yes, all by myself,” Stevie Rae snapped. “Are you forgettin’ I could stomp my foot right now and make the ground under you shake? I could also pick you up and toss you on your silly jealous butt. I think I can handle checkin’ out those trees by myself.”

Beside her, Dallas laughed. “And I’m thinking red vamp with an earth element affinity trumps blue drama vamp.”

That made Heath snort and laugh; and, predictably, Erik started to bow up again.

“No!” Stevie Rae said before the stupid boys started throwing punches. “If y’all can’t say anything nice, then just shut the heck up.”

“Did you want me, Stevie Rae?” Johnny B said, coming up to stand beside her. “I saw Darius carrying that arrow kid into the abbey. He said I should find you.”

“Yeah,” she said with relief. “I want you and Heath to check out the

front part of the abbey over by Lewis. Make sure those Raven Mockers really are gone.”

“I’m on it!” Johnny B said, giving Heath a pretend punch on the shoulder. “Come on, quarterback, let’s see what you got.”

“Just pay attention to the dang trees and shadowy stuff,” Stevie Rae said, shaking her head as Heath ducked and dodged and struck Johnny B’s shoulder with a few quick punches.

“No problem,” Dallas said, starting to move off with a silent Erik.

“Make it quick,” Stevie Rae called to both sets of guys. “The sun’ll be up soon. Y’all meet me in front of Mary’s Grotto in half an hour or so. Holler loud if you find anything and we’ll all come runnin’.”

She watched the four guys to be sure they were really going where she’d sent them, and then Stevie Rae turned and, with a sigh, started on her own mission. Dang, talk about annoying! She loved Z more than white bread, but dealing with her BFF’s boyfriends was making her feel like a toad in a tornado! She used to think Erik was the hottest guy in the world. After spending a couple of days with him, she now thought he was a big ol’ pain in the butt with a super-sized ego. Heath was sweet, but he was just a human, and Z had been right to worry about him. Humans definitely died easier than vamps or even fledglings. She glanced over her shoulder, trying to catch sight of Johnny B and Heath, but the icy darkness and the trees had swallowed her and she couldn’t see anyone.

Not that Stevie Rae minded being by herself for a change. Johnny B would keep an eye on Heath. The truth was that she was glad to be rid of him and jealous Erik for a little while. The two of them made her appreciate Dallas. He was simple and easy. He was her kinda-sorta boyfriend. The two of them had a *thing*, but it didn’t get in the way of stuff. Dallas knew Stevie Rae had a lot to deal with, so he let her deal. And he was there for the off times. Easy-peasy, cute and breezy! That was Dallas.

Z could learn a thing or two about handling guys from me, she thought as she trudged through the grove of old trees that ringed Mary’s Grotto and buffered the abbey’s land from busy Twenty-first Street.

Well, one thing was for sure—it was definitely a crappy night. Stevie Rae hadn't gone a dozen paces before her short blond curls were soaked. Dang, water was even drippin' off her nose! She backhanded her face, wiping off the cold, wet mixture of rain and ice. Everything was so weirdly dark and silent. It was freaky that there were absolutely no streetlights working on Twenty-first. Not one car was on the street—not even a cruising TPD squad car. She slipped and slid down the incline. Her feet met road and only her super-good red vampyre night vision kept her oriented. It seemed like Kalona had run away and taken sound and light with him.

Feeling skittish, she backhanded the sopping wet hair from her face again and pulled herself together. "You're actin' like a chicken, and you know how stupid chickens are!" She spoke aloud and then got double spooked when her words sounded bizarrely magnified by the ice and darkness.

Why in the world was she so jumpy? "It could be 'cause you're keepin' stuff from your BFF," Stevie Rae muttered, and then clamped her lips shut. Her voice was just too loud in the dark, ice-filled night.

But she was gonna tell Z about the other stuff. Really she was! There just hadn't been time. And Z had enough on her mind without more stress. And . . . and . . . it was hard to talk about it, even to Zoey.

Stevie Rae kicked at a broken, ice-covered branch. She knew it didn't matter if it was hard. She was gonna talk to Zoey. She had to. But later. Maybe a lot later.

Better to focus on the present, at least for right now.

Squinting and cupping her hand over her eyes to try to shield them from the sting of the icy rain, Stevie Rae peered up into the branches of the trees. Even with the darkness and the storm her eyesight was good, and she was relieved not to see any big dark bodies lurking above her. Finding it easier to walk on the side of the road, she made her way down Twenty-first Street heading away from the abbey, all the while keeping her eyes up.

It wasn't until she was almost at the fence line that divided the nuns' property from the upscale condo beside it that Stevie Rae smelled it.

Blood.

A wrong kind of blood.

She stopped. Looking almost feral, Stevie Rae sniffed the air. It was filled with the wet, musty scent of ice as it coated earth, the crisp, cinnamon smell of the winter trees, and the man-made tang of the asphalt beneath her feet. She ignored those scents and instead focused on the blood. It wasn't human blood, or even fledgling blood, so it didn't smell like sunlight and spring—honey and chocolate—love and life and everything that she'd ever dreamed of. No, this blood smelled too dark. Too thick. There was too much of something in it that wasn't human. But it was still blood, and it drew her, even though she knew the wrongness of it deep in her soul.

It was the scent of something strange, something otherworldly, that led her to the first splashes of crimson. In the stormy darkness of the sunless predawn, even her enhanced vision saw it only as wet splotches against the ice that sheeted the road and covered the grass beside it. But Stevie Rae knew it was blood. A lot of blood.

But there was no animal or human lying there bleeding.

Instead there was a trail of liquid darkness thickening in the sheeting ice, moving away from the street and into the densest part of the grove behind the abbey.

Her predator's instincts kicked in instantly. Stevie Rae moved stealthily, hardly breathing, hardly making a sound, as she tracked the blood path.

It was beneath one of the largest trees that she found it, hunkered down under a huge, newly broken branch as if it had dragged itself there to hide and die.

Stevie Rae felt a shudder of fear pass through her. It was a Raven Mocker.

The creature was huge. Bigger than she'd thought they'd looked from a distance. It lay on its side, head tucked down against the ground, so she couldn't see its face very well. The giant wing she could see looked wrong, obviously broken, and the human arm that lay beneath it was weirdly angled and covered with blood. Its legs were human, too, and curled up like it had died in a fetal position. She remembered

hearing Darius firing a gun as he and Z and the gang had ridden like bats outta hell down Twenty-first to the abbey. So, he'd shot it from the sky.

"Dang," she said under her breath. "That must've been one heck of a fall."

Stevie Rae cupped her hands around her mouth and was getting ready to holler for Dallas so he and the other guys could help her drag the body somewhere when the Raven Mocker twitched and opened its eyes.

She froze. The two of them stared at each other. The creature's red eyes widened, looking surprised and impossibly human in the bird face. They flicked around her and behind her, checking to see if she was alone. Automatically, Stevie Rae crouched, putting her hands up defensively and centering herself to call earth to strengthen her.

And then he spoke.

"Kill me. End this," he gasped, panting in pain.

The sound of his voice was so human, so completely unexpected that Stevie Rae dropped her hands and staggered a step back. "You can talk!" she blurted.

Then the Raven Mocker did something that utterly shocked Stevie Rae and irrevocably changed the course of her life.

He laughed.

It was a dry, sarcastic sound, and it ended in a moan of pain. But it was laughter, and it framed his words with humanity.

"Yes," he said between gasps for breath. "I talk. I bleed. I die. Kill me and be done with it." He tried to sit up then, as if he were eager to meet his death, and the movement caused him to cry out in agony. His too-human eyes rolled back and he collapsed to the frozen ground, unconscious.

Stevie Rae moved before she remembered even making the decision. When she reached him, she only hesitated for a second. He'd passed out facedown, so it was a simple thing for her to move his wings aside and grab him under his arms. He was big, really big—like, as big as a real guy, and she'd braced herself for him to be heavy, but he wasn't. Actually, he was so light that it was super-easy to drag him,

which was what she found herself doing while her mind screamed at her: *What the hell? What the hell? What the hell?*

What the hell was she doing?

Stevie Rae didn't know. All she knew was what she *wasn't* doing. She wasn't killing the Raven Mocker.