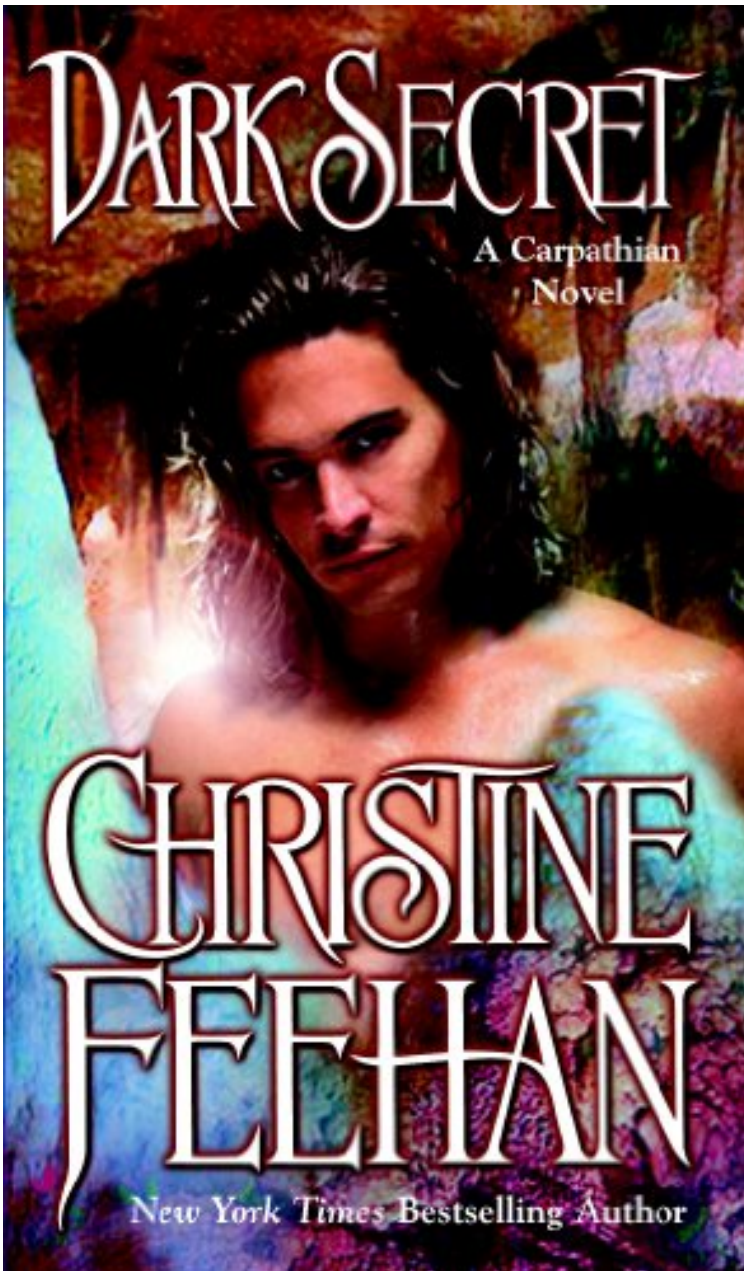


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Dark Secret



*Par Christine Feehan
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Description : Description du produitChristine Feehan has thrilled legions of fans with her seductive, sensual Carpathian tales. Now, she presents the enthralling story of Rafael, a savage hunter from the darkest jungles, and the beautiful prey he would never let escape.

Prsentation de l'diteurMeet a savage hunter from the darkest jungles and the beautiful prey hell never let escape in this sensual Carpathian novel from #1 New York Times bestselling author Christine Feehan.Rafael De La Cruz has spent centuries hunting vampires with his brothers, and with each passing year his capacity

to feel emotions has grown weaker and weaker until finally there's barely even a memory left until only sheer willpower keeps him from turning into the very abomination he hunts. But it'll take more than will to keep him away from the woman who is meant to be his and his alone... For five years, rancher Colby Jansen has been the sole protector of her younger half-siblings, and with fierce determination and work she has kept her family together and the ranch operational. Now, the De La Cruz brothers are threatening that stability. They claim that her siblings belong with their father's family, not with her. Colby vows to fight them especially the cold and arrogant Rafael De La Cruz. But Rafael is after more than her family; he wants Colby, and will not let anything stand between them. After ages of loneliness, the raw desire to possess her overwhelms his very soul, driving him to claim her as his life mate.

The huge chestnut snorted, his eyes rolling wildly in his head. Hang on to him, Paul, Colby quickly warned her brother. The horse was sidestepping nervously, jerking his head, stiffening his legs. I can't, sis, Paul cried out as with a surge of savagery the animal swung around, breaking the boy's precarious hold. Paul scrambled to safety, his anxious eyes on his sister's slender figure. The chestnut was crow-hopping, whirling, slamming into the fence with a resounding crash that shook the posts and the ground itself. Paul winced, his olive skin going pale beneath the dark tan. Colby was smashed up against the fence twice more before she hit the ground and rolled to safety beneath the rails. Are you all right, Colby? Paul demanded anxiously, flinging himself on his knees beside her in the powdered dirt. Colby groaned and rolled over to stare up at the darkening sky, a humorless smile curving her soft mouth. What a stupid way to make a living, she told Paul absently. How many times has that worthless animal thrown me? She sat up, pushing at the damp tendrils escaping from her thick red-gold braid. The back of her hand left a streak of dirt across her forehead. Today or altogether? Paul teased, then hastily wiped the grin from his face when she turned the full power of her eyes on him. Six, he answered solemnly. Gingerly she stood up, swiping at the layer of dust on her worn, faded Levis. Ruefully she examined her tattered shirt. Who owns this beast anyway? Whoever it is had better be someone I like. Carefully Paul brushed dust off her hat, avoiding her gaze. Unless a horse was being trained for rodeo riding, Colby allowed Paul to handle all the details. Worst possible luck. De La Cruz, he muttered apprehensively. At sixteen he was taller than his sister. Lean, tanned, already with the muscles of a horseman, Paul was unusually strong for his age. His face held the stamp of someone much older. He held out the weathered flat-brimmed hat almost as an offering of atonement to his sister. There was a small silence while the wind seemed to hold its breath. Even the chestnut stopped snorting and rearing while Colby stared in horror at her brother. Are we talking about the same De La Cruz who came to this ranch and insulted me? The same one who demanded we pack up our things and leave our father's ranch because I'm a woman and you're a child? That De La Cruz? The De La Cruz who ordered me to turn you and Ginny over to the Chevez family and gave me a whale of a headache with his insulting domineering disgusting male chauvinistic behavior? Colby's soft husky voice was nearly velvet, the delicate perfection of her face utterly still. Only her large eyes betrayed her mood. Tell me we aren't talking about that De La Cruz, Paulo. Lie to me so I don't commit murder. Her brilliant eyes were fairly shooting sparks. Well, he hedged, it was Juan Chavez who brought the horses over, sixteen of them. We had to take them, Colby. He's paying top dollar and we need the money. You said yourself Clinton Daniels was pushing us about the mortgage. Not their money, Colby snapped impatiently. Never their money. It's conscience money, for their sins. We'll find other ways to pay the mortgage. She shook her head to clear it of the anger welling unexpectedly out of nowhere. Slamming her hat against her denim-clad thigh, she muttered unladylike things under her breath. Juan had no right to offer you the horses behind my back. She glanced at her brother's miserable face and instantly the anger evaporated as if it had never been. She reached out to shove her hand affectionately through his jet black hair. It isn't your fault. I should have expected something like this and warned you. Ever since that family showed up, that De La Cruz person has been nothing but trouble. I wrote the letter to the Chevez family for Dad nearly three years ago. Isn't it a blooming miracle they're finally getting around to answering it? Colby swung around to face the chestnut, watching it carefully with wary eyes. This horse is probably their way of getting rid of me so they can have you. With me out of the way they might have a chance at taking you and Ginny with them back to their South American hellhole. And robbing you of your inheritance while they're at it. Colby was short and slender with soft full curves, large deep green eyes fringed with lacy dark lashes, and an abundance of long silky hair. Shapely arms deceptively hid strong muscles. White scars marred the deep tan on her arms and on her small hands, showing the years of labor. Paul, watching the dimple melt into the corner of her mouth, felt a surge of pride. He knew how she hated her scars, her hands, yet they were so much a part of her. Unorthodox, free, untamable, so natural, there was no one like Colby. They live on a

multi-million-dollar ranch, Paul pointed out. Posh. Probably a swimming pool, no work. Beautiful women. Sounds like a tough life to me. Maybe its a conspiracy and Im in on it. Are you telling me you can be bribed? He shrugged his wiry shoulders, winking at her with a little mischievous grin. If the price is right you never know. He tried to waggle his eyebrows and failed. You dont have to worry, Colby, Paul offered suddenly, I dont think Mr. De La Cruz knew Juan brought the horses to us. In any case he shrugged pragmatically money's money. So it is, my boy. Colby sighed. At seventeen Colby had shouldered sole responsibility for the ranch, her eleven-year-old brother, and six-year-old sister after a freak small plane accident had left their mother dead and Armando paralyzed. She had done so without a murmur of protest. Two years after the accident, her stepfather had insisted Colby write to his family in Brazil and ask them to come out quickly. He had known he was dying and he had put aside his pride to ask for help for his children. No one had answered, and their beloved father had died surrounded by his children, but without his brothers and sisters. Now, at sixteen, Paul could appreciate what these last five years had cost Colby. He did his best to take some of the load from her, knowing, for the first time in his life, what it was like to really worry about someone else. Each time Colby was thrown from a horse, he found his heart beating overtime. Colby never complained, but he could see the signs of strain, the weariness growing in her. You want to take a break? The suns down, he suggested hopefully. No doubt Colby was bruised from head to toe. His eagle eyes noticed she was cradling her left arm. Sorry, hon. Colby shook her red head regretfully. I cant let this one get the idea hes boss. Lets get back to it. Without a trace of fear she entered the corral and caught the reins of the huge animal. Paul watched her as hed done a thousand times in the past, her small slender figure, fragile looking beside a half wild horse, yet totally confident. She had built such a reputation for herself as a trainer, many of the top rodeo riders brought their newest acquisitions to her from all over the United States. Normally, she spent weeks, months, gentling them patiently. She had a special affinity for animals, horses in particular. Colbys methods were usually harder on her than the horses. It was when she had to break them fast, like now, that Paul worried the most. Their ranch was small, mainly for horses the few cattle and acres of hay were for their own personal use. It was a hard life, but a good one. Their father, Armando Chevez, had come to this country when he was buying horses for his wealthy family in Brazil, looking for new bloodlines for the enormous ranches they had in South America. He had met and married Virginia Jansen, Colbys mother. Their match was not looked upon fondly by his family and he had been virtually disinherited. Colby never told her father she had found the letter from the Chevez patriarch stating he was to leave the promiscuous, money-hungry American woman with her bastard daughter and return home at once or he would be considered as if dead by the entire family. Colby had no idea who her birth father was and could care less. She loved Armando Chevez and thought of him as her true father. He had loved her and protected and cared for her as if she was his own blood. Paulo and Ginny were her family and she guarded them fiercely. She was determined they would have the ranch when they came of age, just as Armando Chevez had planned. It was the least Colby could do for him. It had been a long afternoon and seemed an even longer evening. Paul was clenching his teeth and swearing softly under his breath as again and again the big chestnut broke his grip on the bridle and Colby was sent crashing to the ground or into the fence with bone-jarring force. Ginny arrived and placed a picnic basket filled with a thermos of lemonade and cold fried chicken on the ground, then sat down outside the corral waiting patiently, one fist jammed into her mouth, her large brown eyes, round with anxiety, fixed on her sister. Colby tightened her hold on the reins, her delicate features set with determination. Ducking her head she wiped the thin trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth onto her sleeve. Beneath her she could feel the powerful muscles of the horse begin to bunch, to stiffen. Paul took a step forward, his hand clenched so tight on the bridle his knuckles were white. The animals huge head attempted to drop. Colby fought it up expertly. Even as the struggle took place Paul marveled at Colbys control. Then the horse once again broke free of Pauls grip and threw itself from side to side, rearing, bucking, whirling, and crow-hopping. Ginny leapt to her feet, clutching the railing as she stared in awe at the expertise with which Colby anticipated the chestnuts every move. Twice Paul was certain the horse was going to fling himself over backward. But Colby was determined to remain in control, her entire being concentrated on the horse. Rafael De La Cruz parked his truck near a cliff overlooking the entire valley. Behind him the mountains rose steeply, covered thickly in pine and fir. The woman nestled beside him touched him with a scarlet-tipped fingernail, very reminiscent of a bloody talon. He stared at it a moment then leaned over her abruptly, dispassionately, and pushed her hair away from the pulse beating strongly in her neck. He tried to recall what her name was, someone who was thought important in the small world he inhabited at the moment, but no one to stir his interest. All that mattered to him was the steady

sound of her heartbeat calling to him. She was prey like all the rest of them. Healthy. Strong. A woman who wanted to sleep with someone rich and powerful. There were so many of them, women who were drawn to the De La Cruz brothers like moths to flames. She tilted her head at him and he immediately captured her gaze, mesmerizing her. It was almost more trouble than it was worth. Rafael sank his fangs deep into her neck and he fed. He drank his fill, all the while fighting down the beast threatening to rise, demanding the kill, whispering of ultimate power, whispering of emotion, of feeling. Just to feel once again, for one microsecond, it would be worth it. The woman was nothing, useless to him other than as prey. Easy to control, easy to kill. She slumped against him, and the movement snapped him out of the enthrallment of the beast. He closed the tiny pinpricks, healing the wound with a sweep of his tongue. He stared at her for a time, then contemptuously pushed her away from him so that she slumped across the seat. She was like all the rest. Willing to sell herself to the highest bidder. To sleep with a virtual stranger because of his wealth and power. Dressed in low-cut, revealing apparel to attract men to them. So many of them, like cattle. She had lured a predator, thinking herself the temptress, thinking she was luring him into her sexual web. He slid out of the cab into the night air. Rafael paced along the top of the cliff, his sensual features stamped with a hard, ruthless confidence. He was used to instant obedience, used to manipulating the mind of his human prey. Rafael and Nicolas wanted to go home, to South America, and the rain forest. Back to their world, back to their ranch where they ruled and their word was law. Back to the neighboring jungle where they could shape-shift whenever they wanted without fear of being seen. Back where life was uncomplicated. But they had one small job to do before they could return, persuading a human female to do as the Chevez family wanted. Rafael and Nicolas, answering the call of their prince hundreds of years earlier, hunted the vampire in South America. It was little enough to give back to their dying race. They wanted to go back to the country that had been their home and way of life for hundreds of years. It was far more difficult for them to remain for long in this unfamiliar country. But the Chevez family, which had faithfully served the De La Cruz family for centuries, needed their help now, and they were honor-bound to provide it. The problem was one small human female. Nicolas had gone to her and ordered her compliance, pushing at her mind with a hard command, but to his surprise and displeasure, it had not worked. She became even more stubborn, refusing to talk with any member of their family. In all the centuries of their existence, such a thing had never happened. All humans could be controlled, could be manipulated. It was Rafael's job now, even if it meant taking her blood to force compliance. When the brothers wanted something, anything, they got it. She would not stand in their way. For a moment a muscle jerked along his shadowed jaw. One way or another, they would get what they wanted. He sighed as he stared up at the stars. There was nothing to ease the unrelenting merciless nights. He fed. He existed. He fought the vampire. He went through the motions of everyday life, yet he felt nothing but hunger. Insatiable hunger. The whispering call of power to kill. To be able to feel. What would it be like to sink his teeth deep into human flesh and drain his prey, to feel something, anything, for a few moments. He glanced back toward the woman in the truck, temptation whispering insidiously. Rafael! Nicolas's voice was a sharp reprimand. Shall I come to you? Rafael shook his head, denying that ever-present enticement. I will not give in this night. Rafael swept his gaze across the dusky sky, noting the bats dipping, performing their evening ballet. The wind brought him untold information. He was uneasy, his senses telling him a vampire could be close, but he was unable to ferret the undead from its lair, if, in fact, it was in the area. It had probably gone to ground the instant Nicolas and Rafael had shown up and was waiting for them to leave before rising. The wind carried the distant sound of voices. Alarmed. Soft. A beautiful cadence that touched something deep inside him. He heard the voice, a melodious voice, yet he couldn't understand the words. He stepped closer to the edge of the cliff. Something caught at the corner of his eye and he looked at the scene below him, his burning gaze fixed on horse and rider. He stared down at the small woman on the large horse in a kind of mind-numbing shock. It was nearly seventeen hundred years since Rafael had seen color or felt emotion. Now, in the blink of an eye, staring at the drama unfolding in the small corral, the horse and rider locked in battle, everything changed. He saw her bright hair, a flame of color. He saw the faded blue of her jeans and the pale rose of her shirt. He saw the horse, a burnished red, tossing its head, whirling and bucking. Time seemed to slow down so that every detail was etched in his mind. The way the leaves on the trees glittered with a silvery sheen, the colors of earth and hay. He saw the silvery tones to the water as it shimmered from a distant pond. The breath slammed out of his lungs and he stood quite still, a part of the mountain he was standing on, frozen for the first time in all of his existence. Behind him, the woman in the truck stirred, but she didn't matter. She was waking, drowsy, certain they had made love and that she had been overwhelmed by his attentions. The

teenage boy and young girl near the corral didn't matter. His brothers waiting at home on their ranch in Brazil, Nicolas waiting here in this crowded country, the Chevez family, none of them mattered. Only that single rider. Colby Jansen. Instinctively he knew the rider was Colby. The defiant one. Fire and ice like the mountains she lived amongst. The mountains she loved and clung to so fiercely. He studied her, his gaze black and hungry. He didn't move for several moments, his mind filled with chaos, emotions crowding in fast and furious. Emotions stored somewhere for hundreds of years poured through him like burning lava, forcing him to sort them out at an outrageous pace. He had four brothers and all of them were telepathic, could touch each other at will. Rafael reached out, on the common path his brothers used, to share the colors, the unfamiliar raging in his body, the rising tide of hunger. Nicolas had no experience with such a thing. She can only be your lifemate, he responded. She is human, not Carpathian. It is said there are some who can be converted. Riordan's lifemate was not Carpathian. The emotion and sexual hunger rising together were overwhelming, a fireball streaking through his gut, burning his blood, sharpening his appetites. He stretched, reminiscent of a large jungle cat. Beneath the thin silk of his shirt, ropes of muscles contracted. Colby Jansen belonged to him and no other. He wanted no other near her, not the Chevez family and not Nicolas who had seen her first. He felt the beast in him rising, fast and ferocious, at the thought of her with another male, mortal or immortal. Rafael stood very still, forcing himself under control. Dangerous at any time, he recognized he would be even more so in the state he was in. It is most uncomfortable, Nicolas. I doubt I can stand for other males to be in close proximity to her. I have never felt such emotions. Never felt such jealousy or fear. It was a warning and both brothers recognized it as such. There was a small silence. I will leave here, Rafael, and go to the high mountains to the east. The hacienda is empty and I will wait for you to sort this out. As always Nicolas was calm and serene, a quiet confident sanity that stirred others in the direction he wanted them to go. Nicolas didn't express his opinion that often, but when he did, his brothers listened to him. He was a dark, dangerous fighter, proven many times over. The brothers were connected and had stayed close down the long centuries, relying on one another for the memories that kept their code of honor intact. Relying on one another to keep the insidious whispering of the power of the kill at bay.

Obrigado. Rafael's fingers curled into tight fists until his knuckles turned white as he watched the drama unfolding below the bluff. This woman, small and fragile, insisted on doing dangerous, bone-breaking work. There were limits to a man's endurance when he had emotions. He found that he could not take watching her on the back of the pitching, bucking animal. She went down hard, her body small and fragile, the huge chestnut powerful and dangerous, the pounding hooves inches from her. Rafael stopped breathing, his heart stilled. Colby rolled free, said something to her brother, who caught the horse's bridle. Instantly she was back in the saddle. Rafael had had enough. It was Ginny who first noticed the intruders, the new four-wheel-drive truck, sleek and gleaming, as it roared up the dirt road. The driver parked the vehicle on the grassy knoll a few yards from the series of corrals. The two occupants stared out the windows at the struggle between horse and rider. Ginny's low alarmed cry spun Paul around. Every vestige of color drained from his face, leaving him pale and strained. Instinctively he climbed over the railing and put his tall body in front of his younger sister, one hand wrapping around her wrist protectively. The driver was out of the car, crossing the dirt road, moving with fluid grace, power and coordination combined. A rippling of catlike muscle lent the stranger a predatory appearance. He looked a hard, cold, dangerous man. Tall. Broad shouldered, with sinewy muscles beneath a thin silk shirt. He had thick wavy black hair, long and drawn back at the nape of his neck. Harsh implacable features were strong and sensual. He looked elegant and tough at the same time. This had to be Rafael De La Cruz. They had met Nicolas, and he was intimidating enough, but this man seemed to ooze menace from his every pore. Rafael vaulted the fence with all the ease of a jungle cat, clearing the top rail by several inches. He caught at the snorting, bucking horse, dragging its head around and commanding obedience with an authority that even the animal seemed to recognize. Shocked, Paul could only stare. Lord only knew what Colby would do. Paul had a sinking feeling she might throw a punch at the stranger and Paul couldn't see himself winning a fistfight with the man when he was forced to defend his sister. He could see the stranger was the type of male who would hit sparks off of Colby. The chestnut was acting like a lamb now and when Rafael stepped back to give her room, Colby expertly put the horse through its paces. His dark features a mask of indifference, Rafael circled Colby's waist with one arm, lifting her bodily from the saddle. He was enormously strong and he practically tossed her to the ground. Ginny clutched at Paul, gasping aloud. How dare he do such a thing! Appalled, she glanced at the woman watching with an air of annoyance and feigned boredom from the pickup. To humiliate Colby like that! The moment the arm spanned her waist, Colby felt an unexpected connection. A heat from him seeped through the pores

of her skin and spread throughout her bloodstream. Color stained Colbys face as she pulled free of his hold.

Her chin went up, emerald eyes sparkling dangerously. Thank you, Mr. . . . ? Her voice was velvet with exaggerated patience. She knew very well this had to be the other obnoxious De La Cruz brother. Who else?

This was what she needed tonight. More misery! He bowed slightly from the waist, a curiously courtly gesture. De La Cruz. Rafael De La Cruz at your service. I believe you met my brother Nicolas and, of course, Juan and Julio Chevez. You, undoubtedly, are Colby Jansen. Taking the hat Paul handed to her, she slapped it against her leg to remove the dust. Her eyes slid over Rafaels imposing figure once, then returned to his broad shoulders before she seemed to dismiss him. To what do we owe this honor? Even Paul had to wince at the honey dripping sarcastically in her voice. I thought your brother and I covered everything needed in our last friendly discussion. His ice-cold black eyes moved broodingly over her face, rested on her lush mouth, on the thin trickle of blood at the corner of her lips. His gut clenched hotly, and for a moment desire flared in his eyes. Did you think we would give up so easily? His voice whispered over her skin, soft, hypnotic, mesmerizing. Colby actually felt him touching her, his fingertips trailing over her skin so that little flames seemed to dance through her, yet his hands were at his sides. She shook off the effects of his voice and eyes by concentrating on the woman in the cab of the pickup. Is your lady friend ill? At her words the woman lifted her head and glared at Colby. She pushed open the door of the cab and shifted so she could carefully turn on the seat, showing off long legs in spiked heels. She was a tall willowy blonde with white skin and perfect makeup. In her cool lavender dress she looked like a fashion model. She didnt bother to hide the contempt she felt as she approached, her eyes sliding over Colby, taking in her faded dusty jeans, torn shirt, dirt-streaked face, and wild braided hair. Colby, all too aware of the contrast in their appearances, the scars on her hands and arms from bites and wicked hooves, lifted a hand to her unruly hair. Before she could attempt to tidy it Rafael caught her wrist, easily pulling her arm down, his expression harsh. Electricity arced between them, jumping from his skin to hers and back again. That slow burn was back, heating, thickening

her blood. For a moment their eyes locked, clashed, a terrible sexual hunger leaping between them, devouring them. Colbys chin went up in that familiar challenging way her brother and sister recognized. She pulled her hand away from him, not liking the way her body seemed to have a mind of its own around him. Louise Everett, the woman introduced herself, laying a possessive hand on Rafaels forearm. You know my brother, Sean, and his wife, Joclyn. The De La Cruzes, their servants, and I are all staying on Seans ranch. She made it sound as if she had arrived with the De La Cruz family. When they heard Rafael and I were coming over to see you they asked me to deliver a message to you. She stared for a moment disdainfully at the dirt on Colbys forehead. Joclyn would like her daughter to have riding lessons. She examined her long fingernails for damage. Although it looks to me as if that horse has thrown you more than once. I want my dreadfully crippled little niece learning from someone qualified, someone competent. Pauls deep breath was audible. Colby was a professional. The best. Her reputation for training horses was known throughout the States. He wanted the snobs gone before he lost his temper and did something foolish. He took an aggressive step forward, his hands curling into fists. He didnt care if De La Cruz was a dangerous man and could beat him to a bloody pulp, no one was going to put Colby in such a position and get away with it, not as long as he was around. And that crack about the De La Cruzes servants the woman meant the Chevez brothers. Paul was a Chevez, so was Ginny. Did that mean if the family succeeded in taking them to

Brazil, they would be servants instead of ranch owners? Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of Ginny. She was glaring as angrily as he was. Theres been some mistake. Colbys voice was, if anything, softer than usual. She crossed to the thermos of lemonade more, Paul was certain, to keep from punching De La Cruz than anything else. She had that look in her eyes Paul knew very well. I dont give riding lessons, Ms. Everett. I dont have time for anything like that. Her green eyes slashed at Rafaels hard features. Evidently

Mr. De La Cruz has so many servants running his ranch for him hes forgotten what hard work actually entails. Crippled little niece. The words echoed in her mind so that she wanted to clap her hands over her ears and drown out the sound, the image of the poor child obviously unloved by her aunt. Rafaels icy black eyes seemed to smolder but the rugged features remained impassive. He moved then, glided, a ripple of muscle and sinew, no more. She blinked and he was beside Colby, crowding her close, leaning down to remove the thin trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth with a brush of his thumb. Her heart jumped at his touch. Her body actually ached for his. It was damned maddening and Colby wanted it to stop. She recognized that he would be dominant sexually. It was bred into his very blood and bones. He would demand everything from his woman, own her, possess her, until there would be no going back ever. And she hated that she was so susceptible to his dark sensuality when she prided herself on independence. Louise

misunderstood the message, he said softly, his black eyes unblinking on Colbys face. Burning. Devouring. Hungry. He seemed to be looking right into her soul. She had the uncomfortable feeling he might actually be reading her thoughts. She watched as he raised his hand to his mouth and touched the pad of his thumb to his tongue almost as if he was savoring the taste of her. Her entire body clenched. She found herself staring almost helplessly at him. The idea should have repelled her, but he was sinfully sexy, and she was mesmerized by him, the way he moved, the way his eyes were so hungry as his gaze drifted over her face. He had the ability to make a woman feel as if she was the only woman on earth. The only one he saw. He also made her feel as if he would take her, throw her over his shoulder and stride off with her if she defied him. It was unsettling and, God help her, exhilarating. Colby. Ginny caught at her sisters hand, suddenly afraid for her. The stranger was looking at her older sister as if she belonged to him, as if he might be a wicked sorcerer bent on casting a spell on her. Colby shook off the sexual web Rafael was weaving, silently cursing. This man was truly dangerous. He would own a woman, make her a sexual slave with no thought but to please him. He was an erotic temptation no woman could ever afford to succumb to. They had sent the first brother to order her to turn over the ranch and the children to the Chevez family and when that didnt work, they obviously sent the first string in to deal with her. She lifted her chin in challenge. What message exactly were you supposed to deliver? Joclyn would appreciate you meeting her later this evening at the saloon. The voice was so beautiful she ached to hear more. She forced her hands to stay at her sides instead of pressing them to her ears. I believe she wanted to do you the courtesy of speaking to you herself. Colby found herself clutching at Ginnys hand for solace. Rafael De La Cruz was capable of casting spells, a dark sorcerer weaving black magic, and she was highly susceptible. She wanted him gone before she fell into the depths of his black eyes. He was leaning so close to her she could smell his masculine scent. Outdoors. Sexual. Definitely male. It seems to be very important to her. Im very busy this time of year, Colby said a little desperately. She couldnt look away from him, not for a moment. His eyes were so hungry, so needy, so demanding. And damn him, her body actually ached for his. Crippled little niece. She couldnt let the image go. Then I will have to stay and convince you, he said, his accent very much in evidence. Everything in him, every cell, his heart and soul, his brain, even the buried demon roared at him to chain her to his side. He could do it, just take her. There was no one capable of stopping him. He was used to nothing, no one opposing his will. Certainly not a little slip of a woman. A human woman. Eight o'clock then, she said impatiently, trying not to look as frightened as she felt. No one had ever made her feel as confused and edgy as he did. There was something possessive in his eyes, something that seemed to claim her. She had never been truly afraid of anyone before. If youll excuse me, Ive got to get back to work. He was the enemy. Closely associated with a family who hadnt wanted her or her mother. Someone who would consider her brother and sister servants in a land they knew nothing of. She had to remember that. She had to remember how hard their father had fought to give his children a legacy of their own. Rafael De La Cruz had that Latin charm shed heard so much about but had never experienced. The man was lethal. Deliberately Colby looked at Louise. She was obviously drowsy and purring like a domesticated cat. She looked very much as if the two had just made love. Louise was stroking his arm and looking up at him with a singularly rapt expression on her face, one that turned Colbys stomach. Rafael gestured imperiously toward the pickup, and Louise sent him a smile, her face lighting up at his attention, and she obediently went to the truck. The motion set Colbys teeth on edge. Why didnt you just snap your fingers? The De La Cruz brothers had a way of acting as if women were inferior to them and it irritated the hell out of her. That wasnt altogether true. It was more like every man or woman, every human being on earth, was considered inferior to them. Rafael turned his head and looked at her almost as if he could read her thoughts. For a moment she froze, almost afraid to move. She had never seen eyes so hard or cold. If his eyes were a mirror to his soul, this man was truly a monster. He made no move to follow Louise; instead his gaze swept over Colbys slender figure, his merciless features devoid of expression. Why do you persist in this nonsense? This is work for a man, not one such as you. It is obvious you have spent most of the afternoon on the ground. Its none of your business, De La Cruz. Colbys pretense at good manners was thrown to the wind. Colby had no idea why she felt so threatened but she had the impression she was caught in the crosshairs of a powerful scope. I believe that is one of my horses you are breaking. How did you get him? He asked it softly, as if he could not be bothered becoming disturbed by their disagreement. Like a thief in the night I crept into your corrals and made off with a number of them, she mocked sarcastically. Try not to be more of a jerk than you can help. Juan Chevez sent over sixteen head. It must have been a conscience thing. The Chevez family has suffered greatly over this misunderstanding, he replied patiently. They wish for nothing more than to heal the breach in their

family. As I consider their family a part of mine and under my protection, it is of equal importance to me. His black gaze didnt blink once as it bored into her green eyes. She felt hunted. More than once shed had to track cougar after her horses, and they had looked at her with just that same focused stare. Go back to Brazil, Mr. De La Cruz, and take your family with you. That will go a long way toward healing the breach. His teeth flashed, very white, his smile wolfish. For no reason at all it made Colby shiver. She went to move away from him, to give herself breathing room, a delicate feminine retreat, but he glided with her like a jungle cat stalking prey. His hand curled around the nape of her neck, his fingers almost gentle, yet she felt his immense strength, knew she couldnt break his grip, knew he could snap her neck in an instant if he chose. A shiver of apprehension raced down her spine. She stilled beneath his hand, her gaze jumping to his face. His black eyes were suddenly hungry, a dark intense hunger that robbed her of her breath while he stared almost fascinated at her pulse. Why had she thought his eyes flat and hard and icy cold? Now they were burning with so much emotion, alive with need and hunger and an intensity that scorched her all the way to her very soul. You are not going to get away from me, pequena. No matter how far you run, no matter how much you fight, none of it will matter. The words shimmered in her mind, shimmered between them, yet Colby had no idea whether they were real or not. He hadnt spoken; he was only looking at her with his smoldering black eyes. She paled visibly, suddenly very, very afraid. Of herself. Of him. Of the dark promise of passion in his eloquent eyes. You arent welcome here, De La Cruz, Paul burst out, his face bright red beneath his tan. He took a step toward the larger man, his fists clenched, but Ginny caught at his arm and held on to him like a pit bull. Let go of my sister right now. Rafael swung his head slowly around, his gaze reluctantly leaving Colbys face so that he could look at Paul. The boy noticed at once that Rafaels black eyes never blinked. Not once. For a moment Paul couldnt think or move. He stood frozen in place, his heart pounding. Rafael smiled at him then, no humor, just a flash of white teeth and then he was striding for his pickup truck. They watched him move, mesmerized by his fluid grace. No one spoke until the truck had been swallowed up in a cloud of dust, then Paul flung himself onto the grass. I must have been out of my mind! Why didnt you gag me? He could have killed me with his little finger. Ginny laughed nervously. Fortunately I saved your life by holding you back. For which I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Paul said, staring up at the darkening evening sky. Colby flung herself on the ground beside her brother, dragging Ginny down beside her. They clung together laughing at their audacity, slightly hysterical with relief. Colby was the first to sober up. Pride is going to cost us big bucks this time. With Daniels pressing us on the balloon payment for the mortgage, Im afraid this is a serious setback. Ive only got two months to come up with the payment and hes told me in no uncertain terms he wont give me an extension. He didnt say we have to give the horses back, Ginny pointed out pragmatically. Just keep them and bill him for the work. Well sue if he doesnt pay, Paul burst out indignantly. Youve worked hard on those horses and theyve been eating our supplies. De La Cruz couldnt find anyone better here in the States, or Brazil for that matter. He cant expect to get your services for nothing. Thats probably how they got rich in the first place, Colby said snidely, then was immediately ashamed of herself. She thankfully accepted a piece of fried chicken from practical Ginny. Blast that man for coming over here! Although, to be strictly honest, I never would have accepted those horses had I known they were his. Paul grinned at her unrepentantly. Thats why I didnt tell you. Colby turned the full power of her emerald gaze on her brother. Thats not something you should be admitting to me. Rafael De La Cruz is worse than his brother and I never thought that was possible. She touched the nape of her neck where the warmth of his touch seemed to linger. I wish theyd all leave, Ginny stated clearly. She looked at Colby with frightened eyes. Can they really take me away from you, to another country? I dont want to go with them. She sounded young and forlorn. Colby immediately circled Ginnys shoulders with her arm. Why would you ask such a thing, Ginny? She glanced at Paul with a slight frown. Did you hear that somewhere? It wasnt me, Paul defended, it was Clinton Daniels. We saw him at the grocery store and he told Ginny the Chevez family was going to take the two of us to Brazil and you couldnt stop them. He said youd never win custody in a court of law and the De La Cruz family had political pull and too much money to fight. With the De La Cruz family backing the Chevez family you didnt have a prayer of keeping us. Colby counted silently to ten, listening to her heart pound out a strange, irregular beat. For a moment she could scarcely breathe, scarcely think. If she lost her brother and sister she would have nothing. No one. Pequena? The word was a soft inquiry in her mind. A gentle soothing caress of reassurance. She heard it clearly, as if Rafael De La Cruz was standing beside her, his mouth against her ear. Worse, she felt his fingers trail down her face, touching her skin, touching the inside of her until she felt her body react in a purely sensual way. Colby was shocked and frightened by the way his voice seemed familiar and right. Intimate. By the way her body tightened and

heated in response. She managed to smile her reassurance at Ginny even while she tried to build the wall in her mind to keep Rafael out. Clinton Daniels always seems to find the time to gossip about everyone, doesn't he? I think that man needs a full-time job to keep him occupied. She hugged Ginny to her. You are a legal citizen of this country, honey. The courts aren't just going to turn you over to someone you don't even know.

It will never come to that. Daniels was just trying to get a rise out of you. These people will go back to Brazil and everything will be back to normal. They had to go back to Brazil and Rafael had to go back with them. Soon. Immediately. Yeah, Paul added, digging at his sister's ribs, the normal thing, hard work, more hard work, working from early morning until late at night. Getting up in the middle of the night and working more. Don't we all wish you did that, Colby teased. Seriously, you two, forget this problem with the De La Cruz brothers. They don't like me any more than I like them. Those men are positively archaic. I can see them as some kind of dungeon masters in the fourteenth century, where women were owned by their fathers and husbands. Really? Ginny looked dreamy for a minute. I picture them as kings in a castle, great lords or something like that. They're good-looking. Colby wrinkled her nose. Do you think? I hadn't noticed. She managed to keep a straight face for all of three seconds before she dissolved into gales of laughter along with her younger sister while Paul looked on in complete exasperated disgust. Booklist In what may be the most horrific of Feehan's Dark series, featuring the vampire-hunting Carpathians and the lifemates who save them from doom, a rancher fights to retain custody of her young siblings. Colby Jansen has been raising Ginny and Paul since her beloved stepfather, Armando Chevez, died, while running the ranch he left them. Disaster after disaster strikes; then, members of the Brazilian -Chevez family, along with two of the powerful De La Cruz brothers, for whom their family has worked for centuries, arrive to take the children and dispose of the ranch. Colby finds the handsome Rafael De La Cruz threatening but irresistibly attractive, and when an ancient and powerful vampire appears, Colby and Rafael combine forces. The erotic heat between Colby and Rafael turns scorching; Colby's unusual telekinetic and telepathic abilities open doors for future Carpathian adventures, and readers who love the horror aspects of the Dark series will revel in the scary demons and toothy serpents. Diana Tixier Herald Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved