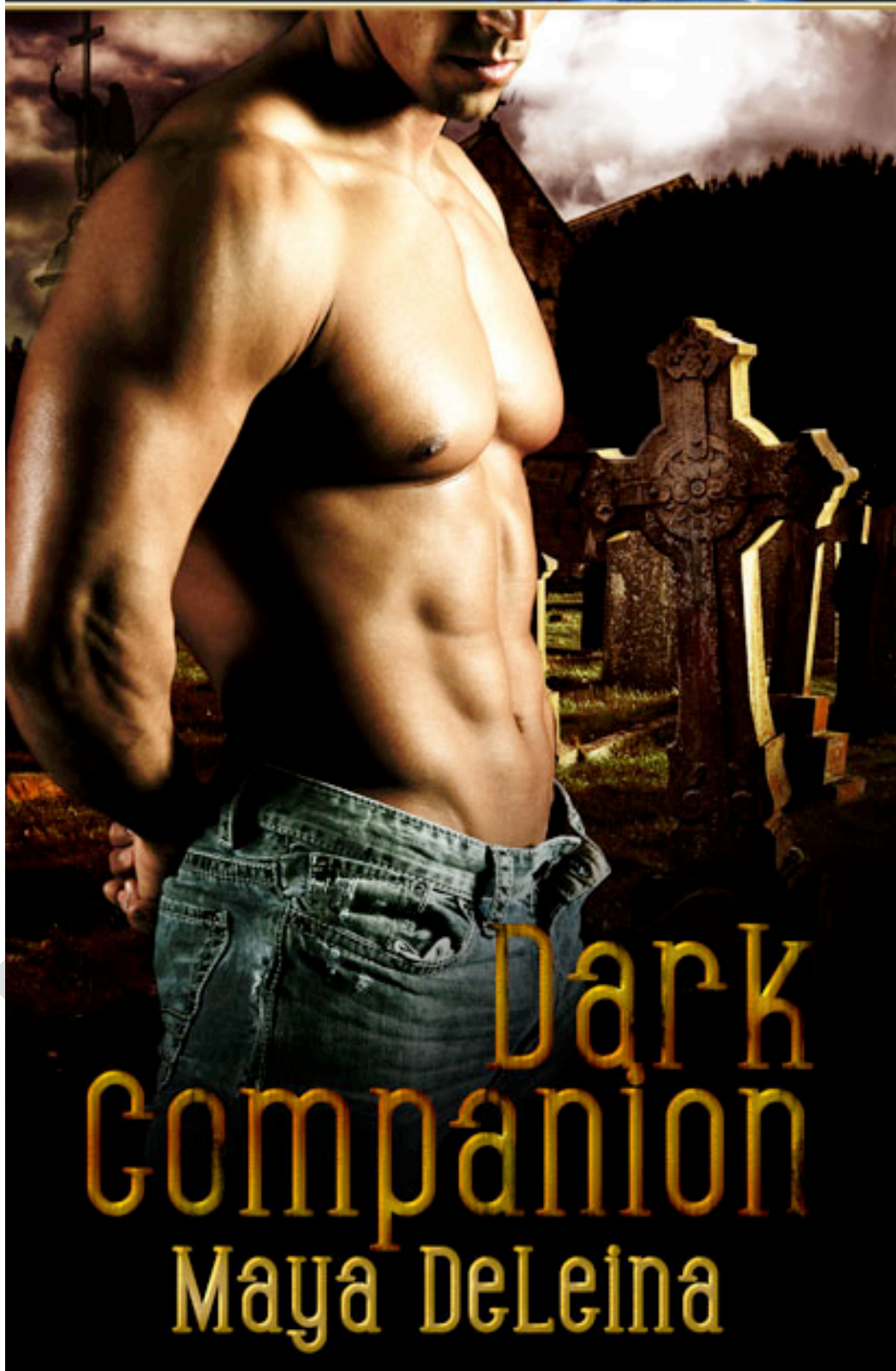


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Dark
Companion
Maya DeLeina

Dedication

For my love of things that go bump in the night.

Thank you to Jessica, for your expertise. Suzanne, Tanya, Amirah, Kim, Shale and Jim for your vision and craft. The Coven, for your continued support. My family, for the love. And Kiki, Koa and Kooper for the company as I write.

K.C., the icing on the cake, the lights on the tree...thank you for your patience and incredible talents.

J.B., here's to late-night messaging...thank you for the opportunity.

M.J....even better than the real thing.

*"Nature has no principles. She makes no distinction between good and evil."
~Anatole France*

Free Read

Prologue I

Forty years ago

"Faster! You need to go faster!"

"I can't see a goddamn thing!" he shouted, his voice ringing in the cabin of the truck, full of apprehension and anxiety.

While the full moon shined brightly in the night sky, it was no match for the fog rolling eerily along the pavement. With abrupt and panicked movements, he fumbled with the controls as if unfamiliar with his own vehicle. No matter which setting he engaged, the headlights bounced off the swirling mist like a mirror, making visibility near impossible.

"Ahh!" she cried out in agony.

From the corner of his eye, he saw her hand shoot up to grip the assist handle above the passenger window. Her other hand searched for his. He took it, lacing their fingers and stealing a brief second from the road to look in her direction.

"C'mon, breathe. Hee hee hoo! Hee hee hoo!" he over-pronounced.

She simply whimpered.

"Baby! Breathe, just like me. Hee hee hoo! Hee hee hoo!"

"Ah!" Another screeching, banshee-like scream broke free in all its intensity.

He lifted her hand and pressed his lips solidly to her skin.

"Baby," she cried.

"I know, I know." Grasping her hand even tighter, he refocused on the road.

"Baby!"

"Hee hee hoo! Hee—"

"No! *The baby!* Pull over!"

His eyes widened in surprise, staring blankly into the rolling fog and light rainfall. His foot eased from the gas pedal. With bated breath, he turned to look at her.

"Landon," she gasped as her face scrunched in pain, "we have no choice. The baby is coming. Now! We're not going to make it."

He let go of her tight grip.

Placing both hands on the steering wheel at the nine and three o'clock positions, he calmly turned his attention back to the road and searched for a safe area stop. All the while, a sharp pain exploded in his chest, traveling through the hollows of his body like a bolt of lightning. His stomach cramped. Thoughts and images ran rampant in his mind.

He didn't know the first thing about delivering a baby.

Slowly, he maneuvered the truck to a spot that appeared wide enough to pull off the road. The truck's heavy tires rolled along the uneven earth, crunching the mixture of rocks, dirt and patches of grass until it came to a complete stop.

Landon turned his attention to his wife. "Isana?"

"Hee hee hoo!" She side-eyed him without breaking her pronounced breathing pattern as she sank lower in the seat.

"I don't know what I'm doing. What if something goes wrong?"

"We don't have a choice!"

"This can't be happening." Landon ran a hand through his hair. His heart pounded in his chest as his eyes searched the cabin of the old truck in a panic. He went into action as an idea came to mind. Reaching into the tight space behind the driver's seat, he retrieved a tattered flannel blanket. He began to spread it on the seat when she gripped his wrist with authority.

"Not enough room. Truck bed."

Landon tucked the blanket under his armpit and exited the truck to race to Isana's side. Opening the door, he took her hand and gently helped her out of the vehicle.

In a split second of dread, the entire birth flashed in his mind. With all the preparation that had gone into this very moment, he'd never planned for this scenario. Being stranded in the fog, in the dead of the night, without any medical attention, was the last thing he was prepared for.

He took a deep breath.

This was real. This was happening. It was all up to him to help Isana through this.

Placing one hand at the small of her back and one at her belly, he guided his wife to the truck bed.

"Shit! Holy shit!" she screamed as she took slow, small steps. She cradled her swollen belly with two hands.

Suddenly, the light sprinkle of light rain turned to heavy drops.

In disbelief, they stopped in their tracks and looked up at the moonlight sky.

"Fuck!"

"I don't care about the rain, Landon! I just want to push!"

"No, you and the baby could get sick if we stay out here."

He'd stopped the truck next to a short expanse of open field, which separated the road from the dense forest. Landon focused his sights to the surrounding landscape as he contemplated.

The moonlight rippled along the canopy of trees, illuminating the tips of the pines before sinking into the darkened depth. Faint moonbeams infrequently penetrated the gloominess, highlighting the fog that rolled between the trees. But the play of shadow and light didn't make the woods any more inviting. In fact, it looked like something out of a dark fairytale or horror movie.

He sighed.

The trees offered protection from the rain that they needed, but the sheer thought of stepping foot into that thick blackness made him ill at ease. Back and forth, he wrestled with his thoughts.

“Landon!” Isana wailed in misery.

Without hesitation, Landon sprang into action.

He handed the blanket to Isana and lifted her from the ground. Cradling her very pregnant body in his arms, he carefully crossed the small ravine that separated the truck from the open field. Knee-high fog and tall grasses made the trek through the narrow field a bit difficult.

But adrenaline was an amazing thing.

He was wild and wide-eyed, his heart pounding with such vigor that it felt as if it could literally jump right out of his chest. The rain intensified just as he hit his stride. He shook his head, flipping his wet hair back and out of his eyes without so much as a blink or a break in his pace.

“Oh my god!” Isana screamed as she threw her head back. Her grip around Landon’s neck tightened and her fingernails dented his skin.

“We’re almost there...just a few steps!”

He reached the edge of the forest, crossing the distinct line in the landscape that separated the darkness and light. Moving deeper into the trees, Landon was relieved they were safely shielded from the rain, as he’d hoped, but the inky blackness was consuming, transporting them to another world.

Landon slowed his pace as his eyesight adjusted to his surroundings. Dry leaves and pine needles crunched under his feet until he came to a dead stop. A rush of heavy organic scents – bark, moss and rain – filled his nostrils.

Isana buried her face in his chest.

Except for his labored breathing and his wife’s muffled moans, all was quiet.

With apprehension, he took in the forest.

The towering treetops swayed slightly, allowing trickles of moonlight to escape through the foliage at sporadic intervals. A light wind blew, stirring up the loose leaves on the ground to scatter along the mist-laden ground. The slight chill in the air made Landon’s face tingle and eyes water. He took a deep breath.

Suddenly, a twig snapped.

The unmistakable sound of footsteps on the forest floor sounded nearby. Feverishly, he turned with Isana in his arms.

Nothing but darkness.

The crunching footsteps echoed once more.

He whipped his head in a different direction this time and held his breath.

Still there was nothing.

He exhaled and now kept his eyes peeled on the space in front of him. Anxiety coursed through his veins. He searched for any sign of movement, but all he could see was his own breath expelled into the air.

Isana lifted her head from his chest and released an unnerving moan, piercing the silent night.

Landon flinched and stumbled on his footing. He'd never heard such a raw, animalistic sound leave his wife's body.

Above, the forest came to life. Chaotic sounds of wings flapping and birds cawing filled the air, masking any traces of the once prominently crunching footsteps and bringing the vast forest down to size.

"Put me down!" Isana moaned.

Landon scanned the surroundings, his sights searching deeper into the forest. Then he found what he was looking for – a steady beam of moonlight.

His legs carried him with purpose.

Landon placed Isana's feet on the ground under nature's spotlight. The flannel blanket tumbled down from her lap and he quickly retrieved it, creating a makeshift bed where the moonlight was brightest.

Isana lifted her long nightshirt up and tied it in a knot to rest above her belly. She grunted and moaned as she situated herself in a half-seated position against a majestic tree trunk that lay on its side.

Recognizing the birthing position from class, Landon quickly moved into action. He kneeled before Isana.

She pushed off from the trunk, wrapped her arms around Landon's neck and moved into a deep squatting position. Muffled moans—low, almost mantra-like chanting—resonated from her body as she worked through a new wave of pain.

Looking deep into her eyes, Landon whispered words of encouragement. His voice was steady and consoling, not revealing an ounce of the anxiety and uncertainty that he harbored. "You can do this. Push."

Isana pushed.

From the corner of his eye, movement caught his attention. He lifted his forehead from Isana's and searched the landscape around, fear hiking his already heightened adrenaline.

He saw nothing but darkness.

Isana wailed, her voice piercing the hush of the night.

The treetops reignited in pandemonium and Landon directed his focus back to his wife.

"Oh my! Oh my! Oh my!" she cried repeatedly before belting out a high note like an opera singer.

"Keep going! You're doing good."

"No, no, no, no. It hurts. It hurts too much!"

Suddenly, the flash of movement caught Landon's attention once again. His gaze shot in every direction—behind him, to the side, behind Isana, overhead. And while the darkness overwhelmed every bit of space save for theirs, he caught a faint stream of shimmering light just before it dissipated into thin air like a mirage.

"What the fuck?" His voice rang loudly in frustration.

"I can't! I can't stretch any more. I'm gonna tear!" Isana cried, breaking Landon's concentration on the dark.

He mimicked what he'd seen doctors and midwives doing in birthing films, but he had no clue if it was correct. Quickly reaching under Isana, he felt liquid drenching his skin as his fingers explored her body.

Immediately, his uncertain heart raced with raw excitement and overwhelming joy. "My god! The head's right there already!"

"I know!"

"Push, baby. I'll help you through this. Push!" Landon fixed his eyes on her, steady and encouraging.

Isana fell silent. Her face contorted as she focused all her energy on pushing. Her hands pressed on his shoulders with a force that almost toppled him.

Then she growled like an animal.

"Head's out! You did it. Keep going!"

She exhaled as she leaned her head back. Her breaths were sharp and quick.

Fearing the look of defeat and tiredness, Landon fumbled for reassuring words to spark that last bit of energy in Isana. "Mind over matter, honey. Mind over matter. Just one more push!"

"You don't know how this feels!" Isana cried. Her face shined like a piece of silver from the moonlight glowing on her sweaty, tear-ridden flesh. "I can't."

"My love. You *can*. You're doing it right now! Our baby is almost here!"

Isana shook as she pushed once more.

"Push. One more time, push!"

Isana bore down with a force that twisted and swelled her features.

This was it.

All at once, the baby's shoulders came through, the body sliding down quickly into Landon's waiting hands in a gush of fluids.

"It's a girl!" He wept as he cradled her in his arms. He looked her over, counting all fingers and toes. Gently, he placed her in her mother's waiting arms.

Isana cried.

Landon watched as his wife cradled their baby girl for the first time. He carefully cut the umbilical cord with his pocket knife, then lifted a corner of the blanket and wiped their child, removing slimy white film and blood from her skin with each swipe.

The baby was still and quiet.

Isana placed the baby's chest against the palm of one hand and rubbed vigorously on her back with the other. With a feeble and faint cry, the infant broke her silence.

"Yes, that's it! Cry for Mama!"

Soon, her cries grew louder – clear as a bell and strong as steel.

* * * * *

Flecks of gold danced in the air.

The shimmering particles speckled the dark forest like stars in the nighttime sky. Some burned bright and steady, while others winked in the darkness with a fleeting intensity.

Nestled among the fallen leaves and pine needles that blanketed the ground, a thick black book with elegant gold-leaf edging lay open. Unwritten pages filled the inside. A beam of light projected from the inner spine like magic, expelling the gold dust to paint the night in a mystical enchantment.

Four men dressed in black, hooded cloaks surrounded the book. From within the confines of their darkened hoods, their eyes reflected the golden glow as they fixated on the gleaming projection.

"*Mandatum malum*," one of the men whispered solemnly. His voice was rich and smooth, warming the crisp night air.

"It's been some time since we've seen this selection," spoke another.

"The Dark Lords must be celebrating," said yet another.

The last man in the group remained silent.

"Celebration indeed, but one that will be short-lived," the first man responded as he bent down and slowly extended his arms. His hands cut through the light as he reached for the book and closed it.

The golden particles that were once alive with magical energy froze, locked briefly in a suspended state. Then all at once, they fell to the ground like a gentle rain. He picked up the book and stood tall. One by one, he looked at his companions and spoke with an air of supremacy. "We will take on this soul's case. We shall intervene."

With a look of admiration, he gazed at the book as he handed it to one of the men. "Ryker, you will be her Prophecy Keeper. The book is now in your hands."

"I accept this mission." Ryker nodded as he took the book and held it close to his chest.

"Joey, you will serve as her Lead Tracker. Assemble your team. This will not be an easy one, so choose the team wisely."

"I accept this mission," Joey responded in a ceremonious fashion.

The man turned to their silent companion, facing him eye to eye. He folded his hands together in front of his chest, "I questioned your Elite status when you came to us. You lack discipline. You lack control. You're arrogant and selfish. However, the council assured me you were indeed born Elite, so I offered my acceptance. But make no mistake—I also delight in proving myself right."

"Dorian...you're not choosing *me* are you?" The man's scratchy, low voice projected from within the shadows of the hood, breaking his bout of silence.

"Yes, I am. You will be her Protector."

"On a *mandatum malum*?"

Dorian held up a hand, not allowing him to voice his opinion or concern further. He paced, traveling a slow path that encircled the man. "Just as I know which mortals deserve to be saved, I know which Protectors to choose. I feel your connection to the child."

"But I'm not ready for this big of a case. You know that."

"We win some and we lose some. Think of what we do as a business. There are always operational losses that must be absorbed."

"So, you're choosing to see me fail?"

"I want to see you *prevail*. But I am realistic. After all, we don't have a perfect success rate in saving every mortal we protect."

"I've never led a case before and you give me a *mandatum malum*? Don't use her as a pawn in our feud."

Dorian stopped. "What feud? I may question your Elite status, but there is no feud. In fact, this gives you a chance to prove me wrong."

The man remained silent.

Dorian continued his pacing. "You will watch over her, learn about her and understand every fiber of her being. You will know her better than she knows herself." Completing another full circle, Dorian stopped and stood face-to-face with the man once again. He cautioned in a firm and unyielding voice, "But you will abide by the rules set forth for Protectors and all Architects. When the time comes, she must seek you out of her own free will. You must find a way to get her to accept her reality. And above all, you must ensure she holds no emotional connection to you that could taint the Prophecy."

A long pause fell over the group of men. Anticipation built as they awaited the final response that would change their futures.

"I accept this mission."

Dorian nodded. "And so it begins."

Want to continue?

Purchase at:
Amazon
Barnes and Noble
Ellora's Cave
Google Books

Watch the trailer
http://youtu.be/4pIX9F_gLTs

Reader Review

I bought this book and read it from front to back. I simply couldn't put it down. This is a totally unusual and unique vampire story that has you wondering what in the heck is going on at the end. Easily one of my favorites from this author. –BARNES AND NOBLE

About the Author



Maya DeLeina is a multi-published author of paranormal erotica. Maya delves into sexual fantasies of the blood and fang fetish that have readers tingling in all the right places.

www.mayadeleina.net