

Dear Readers

July, midsummer and sweltering. This month with temperatures soaring, we at Triskelion bring you a tantalizing mix of suspense, thrilling action and the paranormal.

The Mark of the Blood *Amethyst Inferno* by Cynnara Tregarth is the first book in her new Marauder series. Niam, cursed with an eternal life of darkness and unhappiness, to walk the earth, as a preternatural creature. His only hope, to find his soulmate. Niam resigns himself to long and lonely life. Until one night, he rescues Kirstie from an attacker. Is she the one? The soulmate, he's been waiting for.

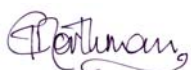
Therese MacFarland debut author of **Mayan Nights** *Amethyst Inferno* brings us a sultry tale set in the Amazonian jungle amongst ancient Mayan ruins and sweltering heat. Sinjin is a brilliant archaeologist, a loner with a painful past and on his way to unravelling the greatest find of his life. Along comes Tamara, the wall he has around his heart starts to crumble. An ancient curse, a modern day predator, and a touch of the paranormal all threaten Sinjin's newfound happiness.

The Man in the Mirror *Amethyst Flame* comes to us from Elaine Charton. Always watched over by her beautiful sisters. A young fuller figure, but pretty woman, declares her independence. When a travelling salesman comes to her town selling a mirror that has supposedly magical powers. The young woman is alarmed at his con. Only there is much more to the mirror, locked within is a man, an extremely handsome man. His only hope of freedom, the curse needs to be broken.

Full Contact by Toby Heathcotte. This is the first novel in our **Operation Pleiades** continuity series. Maya Rembrant's life is perfect that is until she witnesses her best friend's death. Now her life is a nightmare. Maya's work is her lifesaver, or is it? When Maya connects with her computer at work and accidentally shuts down the eastern seaboard, she becomes a target for a rogue military organisation known as 'Orion'. Maya discovers some horrifying events, not only are her parents not who she thought, but then neither is she. Maya has amazing powers that plunges her into a world of danger and intrigue and the only friendly face is a man called Dylan Brady. A man who in all likelihood, is there to kill her.

The first book in our other continuity series **The Curse of the Midnight Star** is **The Discovery** by Lynn Warren. A spooky, creepy tale set around an old Plantation house outside of New Orleans. Missing person's expert, Jack Navarre and forensic specialist, Lynsee Frost, expect to investigate the disappearance of five young women from a popular nightclub. What they get is Scarlet Oak Manor with a terrifying past. A past murder over a sapphire said to contain a voodoo curse. A serial rapist with a craving for violence. When a bizarre clue helps them solve the case of the rapist, it leads them deeper into the mysterious past of the Manor. Now the two agents have to battle for lives against an evil they never thought would exist. The only thing that can save them is acceptance of the electrifying attraction for each other.

Watch out too for our debut of a new line for Triskelion *Amethyst FlashBurns*. These books will be published mid-month starting with **Feel the Heat** by Rachel Carrington on the 15th of July. A delectable, fantasy paranormal tale. When Rhad finds a scantily clad woman on his doorstep, he thinks of hot passionate nights. Rhad is wrong, when Mischa finds herself in Rhad's bed she is adamant that she's not there as his plaything. Mischa has come to kill him, believing him involved in the disappearance of her beloved sister; she knows exactly what he is a blood-sucking killer. As Mischa gets to know Rhad, she realises just how wrong she can be.



Gail Northman: Editor Triskelion Publishing

FEEL THE HEAT

By

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to persons living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Chapter One

Sex arrived at his front door shortly after midnight

Rhad looked down at the curvaceous brunette lying across the front steps of his weather-beaten castle. In the lacy slip and stiletto heels, there could be no other reason for the presentation of such a gorgeous offering.

His body surged to life, responding to the sight with a joyful leap. He knelt down next to the goddess and pressed his palm to her face. Her cheek was icily cold, her lips blue. Frowning, Rhad scooped her into his arms and carried her over the threshold and into the dimly lit foyer.

As he moved down the carpeted corridors, he trained his mind to perform the tasks he needed. Run the bath water. Turn down the blankets in the guest bedroom and dim the lights.

The woman weighed no more than a glass of his favorite Merlot and by the time he reached the upstairs bathroom, he hadn't expended as much energy as it took to walk to the backyard garden.

The steam from the hot water coated the mirror and condensation ran in rivulets down the porcelain tiles. Rhad placed the woman on the vanity stool and checked the temperature in the water.

She stirred and made a mumbling noise. Rhad turned to look at her and immediately noticed the slip she wore had worked its way up her thigh. Her creamy, smooth thigh.

Damn.

With more haste than neatness, he disrobed her and muttering ancient prayers below his breath, he lowered her into the water.

"Master Valentine!" came the horrified voice of his housekeeper.

Rhad stood and whirled around, feeling like he'd just been caught necking behind the schoolhouse. He grinned at the thought. These days, necking had an entirely different connotation. "Mrs. Morgan, I found this woman on the front stoop. She was frozen solid, wearing no more than a scrap of lace."

"And you saved her out of the kindness of your heart," the portly woman snapped in response, two spots of color riding high on her cheeks. Scuffling into the bathroom, she shoed Rhad out of the way. "I'll take over from here."

Rhad tossed a longing look over his shoulder and caught a quick, unfulfilled look of full breasts bouncing atop foamy bubbles.

He conjured up thoughts of cold showers and icy boxer shorts as he mumbled his way back down the stairs.

Mischa woke with a start, her heart slamming against her chest and a dry taste in her mouth. Fear engulfed her and she pressed her palms against her temples. *Think, Mischa, think. Where are you? What are you doing here?*

She scanned the room. Paneled walls. Thick, Oriental rugs and dark, masculine furniture gave the room a distinct, manly look. The overhead fan offered a cool breeze on her naked skin.

Naked skin? Mischa touched her right shoulder. Her bare, right shoulder. Curses welled up inside her head, but decorum wouldn't allow her to breathe them aloud even though she was alone.

She peeked beneath the blankets. More bare skin.

Memory came crashing back. She'd been searching for Riana, her baby sister who'd always been a bit flighty. This wasn't the first time she'd gone on a wild goose chase for her twenty-two-year-old sister. Riana, though a sweet girl, was high maintenance.

The bedroom door creaked open and Mischa dragged the comforter up to the chin and peered over the top. "Who's there?"

He walked into the room and Mischa swore she heard the angels sing. She'd never seen a man like him. She'd heard about him, how beautiful he was, but men weren't really beautiful. At least, she hadn't thought so. . . until now.

Rhad Valentine had cornered the market on beauty. With raven hair flowing past his shoulders, high cheekbones, and eyes the color of Scotland's hills, he was an artist's dream.

A dark blue sweater covered broad shoulders and the Levis he wore clung to his masculine hips and hugged him in all the right places. In spite of herself, Mischa's eyes drifted to those places more than once. Then she shot her gaze back to the perfect face and saw the sensual lips lift in a half-smile.

Her eyes narrowed. "Who are you and why am I here?"

He strolled toward her and Mischa knew she'd never seen a man move with such grace. Like a panther. Just as dark and dangerous.

"You do not remember how you arrived at my front door last evening?"

The smoothly cultured voice reminded her of hot, sweaty nights and tangled limbs . . . in a room so dark she couldn't see her hand in front of her face.

Mischa pushed the tangled mass of curls out of her face and shook her head. "I don't remember much until I woke up in a bedroom I don't recognize." She clutched the comforter tighter. "Without my clothes."

The half-smile became a full one. "Then you really do not recall your arrival."

Mischa was sure she didn't want an answer to her next question, but she asked anyway. "What do you

mean?”

“You arrived wearing very little. Nothing more than a scrappy piece of lace and high heels.”

Her heart increased its rhythm. “”You’re lying.”

Dark eyebrows rose. “I assure you, I do not lie.”

“Why don’t I believe that?”

He seated himself on the edge of the bed. “I have no idea since we have not met before now.” He touched her knee through the thickness of the blankets. “Or have we?”

She drew her feet to one side of the bed away from his reach. “No, we have not met and please don’t touch me.” *Why did she suddenly feel so hot?* She pressed one hand against her cheek and her palm burned. *What was happening and why was Rhad Valentine staring at her lips like that?*

“Look, Mr. Valentine, I don’t know how I ended up on your front step. I can only assume it was an accident.”

“An accident. I see.” Rhad pushed himself to his feet. With his impressive height, he towered over her. “And might I ask how you know my name?”

Damn. She’d never been good at keeping secrets. “I’m not sure.”

He pressed his hands against the mattress too close for comfort. “You are not a very good liar.”

His darkness reached out to her and threatened to drag her under. She clenched both hands into the plump, dark comforter. Suddenly, the air grew thicker, making it difficult to breathe. He invaded her personal space without apology. “Please do not sit so close to me,” she whispered.

He leaned in even closer. “Do I make you nervous?”

She scooted to the opposite edge of the bed. “I’d like my clothes back now and I’d like to leave.”

”As I told you, you did not arrive in proper clothing, but, I have sent my housekeeper to acquire more appropriate attire for you. She should return shortly. In the meantime, breakfast is being prepared and a tray will be brought to you.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Rhad stood with lithe grace Mischa envied. “Do not be petulant, my darling. You need to eat to build your strength. When I held you in my arms last night, I barely knew you were there.” He strolled to the door. “When you have eaten and Mrs. Morgan has returned with the clothes, you will be shown to the sunroom. I will meet you there.”

“I have no intention of staying.” She didn’t draw attention to the endearment he’d used.

His hand gripped the doorknob. “We will discuss this later.”

Mischa recognized a patronizing tone when she heard one . . . like at that precise moment. Her blood sizzled. “No. We will discuss it now.”

Rhad turned his head toward her and red rimmed his beautiful, green eyes. “Do not make the mistake of assuming you make the rules, Mischa.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “How do you know my name?”

He gave her a sly wink. “I’m not sure.” He stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind him.

Mischa scrambled out of the bed and wrapped the sheet around her toga-style. Her toes sank into the plush carpeting as she raced around the room, looking for something to clothe herself in. She didn’t know what she’d been thinking when she’d come here. Rhad Valentine had few friends but enemies by the score, none of which had ever gotten the better of him.

Swallowing her hysteria, Mischa pulled the drawers out of the antique armoire. She stepped over the fallen pile of wood and ran to the closet, but the emptiness echoed when she opened the door. Nothing hung from the hangers and even the shelves were bare.

“Damn,” she whispered and whirled around, clamping her hands on her hips.

Then a shadow fell across her path and Mischa gasped. “You left,” she accused.

Rhad pushed the door shut with a simple flick of his wrist. “And I came back.”

Mischa backed up until her spine connected with the closet door. “Why?”

Rhad held up a bag. “My housekeeper brought these clothes for you. I told her I would deliver them.”

“On the off chance of seeing me naked?” Mischa shot him a dirty look.

“That would have been one of the perks, yes.”

“Too bad I’m prepared for men like you.”

Startlingly white flashed in a grin. “You know nothing about men like me, Mischa, and until you do, you’d be wise not to antagonize me.”

She walked forward boldly until the top of her head was a mere inch below his chin. She tipped her head back to see his handsome face and for a brief second, she lost her train of thought, but the mocking smile quickly restored it.

“I know all about you, Mr. Valentine. You’re one of the last great vampires. You feed off innocent people and instill fear in your victims, making their last grueling hours of life hell on Earth.”

Rhad twisted his watch around to see the time. “That’s quite an imagination you have there, Miss Bonovich.”

“Tell me how you know me.”

“I would presume the same way you know me. Research.” He flicked his finger under her chin. “I let no one come into my home without knowing who they are.”

“I had no identification on me last night.”

His lips twitched. “And you made sure of that, didn’t you?”

She felt his hot breath on her cheeks, the scent reminiscent of fine whiskey. She swallowed. “How do you know who I am?”

His fingers splayed out to circle the lower half of her face. “Because I have been expecting you.”

His soul began to breathe. From the moment he’d seen Mischa, he’d known she was the woman he’d waited for, the one woman who would free him from the torment of his life.

He brought his hands to his face and inhaled her essence. Beautiful. Sexy. Passionate. The woman’s body cried out for his, begged for the release only he could give her.

He poured himself a glass of cognac and swirled it around in the snifter. The fragrance wafted up to him, but he didn’t enjoy the pleasant aroma as he usually did. Something more captured his senses.

He pictured her curves, those graceful long legs, the pert breasts with dark nipples and the proud tilt of her head. Her long, silky black hair hung to her waist and caught the light as she moved and those eyes, he let out a sigh, perfection. He’d never seen eyes the color of a perfect amethyst.

Mischa Bonovich stirred him, made him remember the male side of the beast within him. He curled his hands into fists. Already he craved her and not just the taste of her warm blood cascading over his tongue, but the feel of her body writhing beneath his.

She hypnotized him and the knowledge was heady. His powers were many and seldom did he meet a worthy opponent. Had he known it would be a woman as amazing as this one, he would have given into the call a long time ago.

He sat down in a red velvet settee and took a sip of the cognac. It glided over his tongue, its taste pure and powerful. Just as the woman upstairs.

Night fell and Rhad Valentine hadn’t returned. *Arrogant bastard*, she thought glumly. If not for the food deliveries, she would have thought she was alone in the house. The housekeeper didn’t speak to her. She looked like a pleasant enough woman or maybe she wasn’t a woman. She might really be a vampire.

Mischa pressed a hand to her throat and shivered. She was in a vampire’s castle. His lair and as far as she knew, she could be his midnight snack. Maybe that’s why he wanted her to eat. The shivering intensified. Well, she wasn’t going to fatten up so he would enjoy his meal more.

She sat on the bed, her legs curled underneath her in a lotus position. She tried to meditate, but a pair of turquoise eyes haunted her. She flopped back against the stack of pillows behind her.

Attraction curled in the pit of her stomach. Desire sizzled. Rhad Valentine had overwhelmed her

when he'd walked into the room for the first time. He'd taken her breath away. And no doubt, before all this was over, he would take her life.

She fought back the panic and remembered that she had taken an online course for just such an occasion.

"How to kill any vampire" promised immediate results with a money back guarantee.

Mischa guessed the beneficiaries would be collecting that if the class failed. "Oh, Riana, where are you and why did you come all the way back to Romania to seek your life? Why could you not have been happy in Boston?" She reverted to her native tongue as she spoke and combined her thoughts with prayers, praying benediction for her wayward sister. "Lord, please take care of Riana. She is young and not too wise at times. Just watch over her until I can find her. Then I'll take over." Just as she had since their parents had died seven years ago.

She'd never complained even though she'd given up her dream of being an opera star. This had simply been her lot in life. Riana's dreams were more important now and though her younger sister had made a few mistakes in life, nothing she had done would justify this creature making an entree of her.

Her temper sufficiently fueled, Mischa jumped to her feet and donned the jeans and flowing, white peasant blouse the housekeeper had bought for her. Not exactly, her first clothes of choice, but it certainly beat facing the vampire in a toga again.

She creaked open the bedroom door. Gas lamps lined the hallway, providing just enough light for her to find her way to the top of the stairs. She refused to call for help. She'd find her own way to the master's den.

"Mischa, how nice to see you out and about," Rhad spoke from the bottom of the stairs.

She jumped. "You have a habit of sneaking up on people."

"I cannot sneak in my own home."

She waved a hand in dismissal. "Whatever. We have to talk." She reached the bottom landing and swept past him, trying to ignore the way her heart leaped to her throat at the sound of his voice. She refused to be seduced by a creature of the night.

Rhad swept out a hand, his fingers pointed toward an open door. "As you wish. Here is my study."

Mischa walked ahead of him, her head held high. The scent of leather assaulted her nostrils and she spared a glance at her surroundings. Rich, gold-embossed books adorned walls lined with shelves. Executive chairs with intricately carved legs and wooden floors polished to a shine set the scene for the last mystery play she'd gone to and the thick, heavy drapes added the finishing touch to the room. She could picture Rhad wearing a black cloak and hair gel while twisting his moustache.

She looked over a shoulder at him. “Nice decorating job.”

“Since I know you were only being facetious, I’ll refrain from thanking you. Please, sit down.”

Mischa did, but she didn’t waste time before she launched into her diatribe. “I want to know where my sister is and don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. Her name is Riana Bonovich and I know you were the last person she saw before she went missing. That’s how I know all about you. The minute I learned your name, I looked you up on the Internet. I know everything about you.”

He sat opposite her and assumed a relaxed posture. “Everything?”

“Absolutely.” She scooted to the edge of the chair and leaned forward. “I even know that you’re a vampire.” she lowered her voice as if imparting a secret.

Rhad didn’t blink. “If such is the case, then why would you throw yourself on my doorstep? Aren’t you risking your own life?”

Mischa noticed he didn’t deny her claim. Feeling vindicated, she glared at him. “I would do anything for my sister.”

“Including die for her, then?”

A lump formed in Mischa’s throat. “If I have to.”

“I don’t know your sister, Mischa.”

“You’re lying.”

Fury flashed in Rhad’s eyes and he got to his feet. “I believe I’ve already told you that I do not lie.”

She got to her feet to stand in front of him. “That’s a load of bull.”

Though Rhad’s jaw tightened, he ran one finger down her upper arm and dipped his head lower. “You should not take chances when you do not have all the facts.”

Dark and dangerous, he stared into her upturned face and Mischa wondered if she’d pushed him too far. She saw the flash of anger in his eyes and though she wanted to take a step back, she forced herself to remain in place.

“I have what I need.”

His hand traveled to her face and he gently stroked her cheek. “Mischa, if you think to threaten me because a story in cyberspace told you I was one of the undead, then you really don’t know anything about me.”

She hated his mocking tone. What she hated even more was her body’s reaction to his touch. Places tingled which she knew had never tingled before. And his eyes mesmerized her. She’d never seen that shade of green on a man before, but on him, the color was appropriate. It allowed him to hypnotize his victims. She found herself staring into the liquid pools and leaning toward him. Her will power was crumbling like the Berlin Wall.

Forcing herself to hang onto her determination, she gripped a hand full of his starched, white shirt and tried to shake him. “Where is she? Tell me where she is or I swear to God, I will kill you myself.”

Rhad covered her hands with his. “You mean because you took a course online? You think that really will teach you how to handle someone like me?”

Mischa licked her dry lips. “I did have a stake with me, but it must have gotten lost prior to my arrival.”

He dropped his hands down to his sides. “You never have said how you’ve arrived.”

She folded her arms. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Do you even remember how you got here?”

She frowned, her teeth worrying her lower lip. “No. I don’t, but that means nothing.”

He cupped her face. “Perhaps you have been brought here for a reason.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I know I’m probably not going to like your explanation to that statement, but what the hell, tell me anyway.”

“You have been brought to the home of a man you believe is a vampire who knows nothing of your sister’s disappearance. It is possible you were led here because I can help you.”

“God could not be that cruel.”

His thumbs caressed the corners of her lips. “You have a strange sense of humor, Mischa, but I ask you to hear me out.”

She wished he’d stop touching her or maybe she didn’t. “I’m still here, aren’t I?”

“I am very adept at finding people, things, places, even. My ancestors have blessed me with the gift of sight.”

“Are you trying to tell me you’re a psychic vampire, because I’m warning you, my bullshit-o-meter can sniff out a scam in a matter of seconds.”

“Why do your eyes look so wide?” His question threw her off the mark and she blinked up at him. “Do I make you nervous?” The timbre of his voice told her he already knew the answer.

“Yes.” She saw no reason to lie.

He chuckled and guided her toward the chintz sofa as if she couldn’t make the short journey by herself. And the way her knees were knocking together, maybe she couldn’t. He settled her on one cushion before sitting down beside her. “I suppose I shouldn’t have asked you.” The deep voice flowed over her skin like warm water.

“I guess it was pretty obvious.” Without thought, she assumed her normal lotus position, tucking her legs beneath her. “I’m just not used to guys like you.”

He frowned. "Guys like me?"

"In control, imposing, big." She flashed him a hesitant grin. "I guess that's not sounding any better."

"Actually, I sound like the big green man on American television."

"The Incredible Hulk," she offered. "It's not too far off the mark. I think you would make any woman nervous."

Resuming his original seat beside her, he leaned back against the cushion. "Why's that? Because I'm tall?"

No, because you're beautiful. Mischa's eyes popped open and she prayed she hadn't said that aloud. She sliced a look at him from beneath her eyelids and taking in the mildly interested look on his face, she surmised that she was still safe. "I think it's more because of your appearance." Was that any better than beautiful? She wasn't so sure.

"My appearance?" He made the two words a question.

How had they gotten off onto this topic? Wasn't it her fault? Her lack of finesse when it came to talking to men was beginning to wear thin. "Men who look like you can tend to put a woman off-track, even make them forget what they're thinking. I suppose you use that knowledge to your advantage."

His lips twitched. "Ah. So I make you nervous because you find me attractive." His body leaned toward hers.

"I-I didn't say that. I was generalizing," Mischa held her hands up to ward off his intentions, although she wasn't really sure of what they were.

He scooted closer on the sofa. "So you don't find me attractive then?"

"I thought we were talking about your gift of sight, or something like that."

"We were and right now, my gift of sight is telling me to kiss you." His breath bathed her cheek. "You know, you can tell a lot about a person from the way they respond to you. If they melt," he lifted a hand and brushed his knuckles down her cheek, softly, a lover's caress "If they sigh against your lips," his hand moved to the long, smooth line of her neck, "or if they whisper your name. Would you whisper my name, Mischa?"

Mischa's lids slid to half-mast and she heard herself catch her breath as he moved even closer to her. She couldn't whisper his name because her throat closed, making speech impossible. His outer thigh burned against her leg, his hands resting on either side of her hips. She opened her eyes wider and discovered he was lowering his head, his lips seconds away from touching hers. She should stop him, back away, but she was frozen and she couldn't think of one of the many reasons why she should stop him.

His lips brushed hers once, twice and then he backed off, his eyes meeting hers. The silence in the room was almost deafening as their gazes locked. Tension clawed its way up Mischa's spine and she held her

breath, waiting for him to make the next move. She didn't have long to wait.

Hooking his hand behind her head, Rhad pulled her closer, fusing his lips to hers in a kiss that was anything but hesitant. Powerful emotions churned inside of her, emotions like desire, and a longing so intense her heart ached. She was sure he could taste her fear, her hesitancy and finally, her surrender. She wanted him. She wondered if she'd spoken her craving aloud for suddenly, he pulled away, stood up, and put some distance between them. His breaths came in rapid succession and he walked away from her, presenting his back to her line of vision.

"I will not apologize." From the sound of his voice, he spoke through gritted teeth.

Mischa fell back against the cushion behind her, closing her eyes. "Why doesn't that surprise me?" Her own breaths were just as labored.

He turned, fixed her with another surveying look. "I won't deny what I am."

Her eyes popped open. "You mean a vampire? If that's the case, why haven't you taken my blood?"

"Because I will not do so without your permission."

Unconsciously, Mischa rubbed her neck. "And if I never give it?"

He walked back toward her. "Then I shall remain a very hungry man."

His eyelids drooped low, shadowing the heated light in his eyes. Mischa caught and held her breath. "You're either the most considerate vampire I've ever met or you're lying which you said you never do."

"I'd wager that I'm the only vampire you've ever met."

Mischa wanted to hit him. "That makes no difference. I don't want to become one of you," she said sharply. He gave her a longing smile. "Destiny can be a bitch, my sweet." He dipped in and caressed her lips once more before pulling away. "You should sleep."

"Is there a lock on that bedroom door?"

"Nothing will harm you here."

Mischa got to her feet. "No? Not even the host?"

He cupped one side of her face. "Mischa, when I take you, you will feel no pain. Only passion, hunger and a burning need for the feel of my body inside yours." He brought her hand to his face and gently suckled her index finger. "You will want me as much as I want you and when I make you mine, you will need other men no more."

Mischa tugged her hand free and quickly backed toward the door. "This is where the bell really rings on that meter I was telling you about."

"Good-night, Mischa. Sleep well."

CHAPTER TWO

Everything. Anything. He wanted to know what made her laugh, what made her cry and what she wanted most in the world. But most of all, he wanted to know what sounds she would make when he made love to her. Would she whisper his name in a hesitant plea or would she cry it aloud as her climax wrapped around her?

Rhad scrubbed the back of his neck with violent twists of his hand. The clock over the mantel read two a.m. and the night dragged on, making him curse his need for the darkness.

Mischa would be sleeping by now, her ebony hair splayed across the snowy white pillowcase. Her luscious curves would be hidden beneath the dark comforter and were he to go to her now, he would feel the warmth emanating from those golden limbs.

His body tightening painfully, Rhad slammed the glass of brandy down on the edge of the roll-top desk his grandfather had used in the early 1700s and stormed to the window. Outside, the night had taken on a dangerous edge as the storm rolled in over the mountains. Lightening split the sky and illuminated the lush green grass. The winds snapped the branches of nearby trees and Rhad had no doubt he'd hear from the gardener tomorrow as if Rhad had control over the whims of Mother Nature.

He whirled back around and for the first time in an incredibly long time, he found himself at a loss. Instincts bade him to climb the stairs to the bedroom where Mischa slept, to invade her dreams and make them a reality. But he would not take a woman against her will no matter how much the animal inside of him screamed for release. Vampire he was; monster he wasn't.

Needing the harshness of the storm to soothe his frayed nerves, he dashed out of the house, escaping into the only life he knew.

Mischa woke to sunlight streaming over her face and the smell of rich, fragrant coffee. She rubbed her eyes and turned her head slightly. Encountering Rhad's stoic form, she brought the comforter up to her chin. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you to wake up."

"Have you been watching me sleep?"

"Yes."

She sat up, making sure all of her necessary body parts were covered. "Don't do that."

"Why not? You are just as beautiful when you sleep as you are when you are awake."

Mischa felt the flush heat her cheeks and she turned away from his scrutiny. "What was so important that you felt the need to hover at my bedside until I awoke?"

“What do you do, Mischa?”

Her sleep-fuddled brain tried to decipher what he was saying. “Do? What do you mean?”

“Are you employed?”

Mischa glared at him. “If you know so much about me, you know the answer to that already.” She plopped back down against the mattress and rolled to her side. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to take a shower and get dressed, provided your housekeeper provided me with more than one outfit.”

“You have many clothes hanging in the armoire.” Rhad stood. “You do not like speaking of your parents, do you?”

“Were we speaking about my parents?”

“They are the reason you do not work, correct? When they died, they left you financially stable.”

She returned to her opposite side to see his face once more. “What is the point of this conversation?”

“Do you enjoy your life, Mischa?”

Before she could answer, Rhad had moved toward her, his knee pressing against the edge of the mattress. “Do you like what you know you have to go home to when you leave Romania?”

Mischa licked her lips and stared up at him. She couldn’t speak and soon, her vision narrowed to the blackness of his shirt and the broadness of his shoulders. “I thought vampires slept during the day.”

Rhad’s lips nuzzled her neck. “Who could think of sleep when something so delectable awaits?”

Mischa tipped her head back and released a moan. Her hands moved to fist in the luxurious length of his hair. It slid between her fingers like warm, black oil. “You really shouldn’t be doing that.”

He licked along her collarbone. “Tell me what you don’t like, Mischa, and I will stop immediately.”

She held his head in place. “It’s not that I don’t like it. It’s just that I still have to find my sister and,” she frowned there’s one more thing.” His lips had moved down to the vee in the neck of her nightshirt. “What was it? Oh, yeah. I still don’t trust you.”

Rhad lifted his head, but only slightly. “I will help you find your sister, my love.”

She placed her hands against the wall of his chest. “Promise me you don’t have anything to do with her disappearance.”

Rhad met her gaze solemnly. “I promise.”

Mischa nodded slightly. It would have to do for now. She needed his help, at least, that’s what she told herself to allay her guilt at wanting him near. She didn’t understand her unquenchable attraction to a vampire. Although, as a suit for the undead, Rhad Valentine, did present a very appealing picture.

“And promise me you won’t hurt her once we do find her.”

He lifted a strand of her tangled hair and brought it to his nose. He inhaled the scent with his eyes

closed. "I could no more hurt her than I could harm you."

Mischa swallowed hard. "Why is that?"

Turquoise eyes slid over her face slowly. "Because you are my *viata*." Mischa's heart hammered against her chest. She would admit that her Romanian could be a little rusty at times, especially when it came to words of love and adoration, but she would stake her next shopping trip to Bloomingdales that he'd just called her his life. Impossible. But maybe . . .

Rhad climbed to his feet and made his way back to the door. "I will wait for you downstairs, Mischa. We will spend the day together then when the sun goes down, we will leave."

Still basking in the glow of his touch, Mischa smiled almost dreamily. Even his words didn't shake her out of her trance. "Where are we going?"

He laughed, low and deep. "To find your sister."

"And you really think it's going to be that simple?"

Rhad opened the door. "What does simplicity have to do with anything?" He closed the door without giving her time to respond.

Mischa continued to smile.

Hunger burned within him. From the short distance that separated him from Mischa, he caught the scent of her blood on the wind. He needed sustenance. He stopped walking.

"Mischa."

She spun around quickly. "What is it?"

"I must leave you for a few moments."

Her eyes grew wild. "We're in the middle of nowhere, Rhad. What do you mean you have to leave me now?" She gripped his arm. "It's growing darker by the minute and while you may have eyes that glow in the dark, I don't. I need you to stay with me."

"Will you offer me your blood then?"

Her hand immediately fell to her side while the other went to her throat as a protective shield. "What are you talking about?"

He took a step toward her and Mischa stepped backwards so quickly she almost fell. Rhad's hand shot out to keep her upright. "You know what I am, Mischa. I will not deny it. I cannot deny it. I must leave to feed my hunger."

Mischa shook his hands away from her arms. "You're telling me you're going to kill someone and then come sauntering back here like nothing has happened?" She blew her bangs out of her face and circled around him. "No way. I can't do that. I won't do that. I've got to get out of here."

Rhad sighed and held out his hand. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have used his abilities against her, but he could not allow her to leave by herself. The night held too many dangers. He watched her feet began to move though she struggled against the power propelling her forward. When she was close enough, he closed his hands around her shoulders and drew her flush against his body. He lowered his head to her ear.

"Mischa, you will stay here until I return. You would not want to risk my anger."

She tried to fight against his hands. "Let go of me, Rhad. This isn't funny. I don't like mind games or mind control and, and, it's ludicrous that you would think I'd stand here while you go pick up an innocent citizen for a late-night snack."

She would not understand and he didn't have time to try to convince her. His blood stores were dropping low and his fangs ached from need. He released her and took a step backwards. "You have heard my instruction. You will not disobey me." With a sweep of his hand, he left her, moving through the mountainous woods with inhuman speed.

Mischa paced a circle around the base of a tree stump several times, her arms folded over her breasts. How much longer was the vampire going to take? She could eat a seven course meal in the time it was taking him to find one slow-moving human. She shivered at the thought. While she was standing here waiting for Rhad, some poor, unfortunate soul was giving his life's blood to sate the monster's lust.

Her eyes searched the darkness, seeking Rhad's broad shoulders. She'd barely known the man a day and already she was waiting for him. She tapped her foot against the frozen Earth and glared into the inky blackness.

"Will you hurry up?" she groused. "I'm freezing my butt off out here while you're enjoying a midnight snack."

She heard the snap of a twig first before a low, threatening voice broke the silence. "Oh, look, the little lady is all alone out here."

On guard, Mischa whirled around, ready to face her opponent. A black belt in Karate, she knew she could hold her own if necessary, but that was with an ordinary man. What she was facing wasn't an ordinary man and there wasn't just one. Vampires. A nest of them. At least five that she could see, probably more hiding behind the trees.

Swallowing hard, Mischa took a backward step. "Hello, fellas. Fancy meeting you here."

The leader of the pack grinned, revealing snowy white fangs. "What's a girl like you doing out here all by yourself?"

Mischa clenched her hands into fists at her sides. "Don't make the mistake of thinking I'm an easy

target.”

They moved forward in unison, eyes glittering, saliva dripping from their mouths. One began to hum, a low, hypnotic tune.

“You will make a fine supper,” another one spoke.

Mischa struck immediately, delivering a center kick to the leader’s stomach. He grunted and doubled over and she whirled to trade blows with the next in line. She knew she wouldn’t win in the end, but at least she wouldn’t go down without a fight.

Her heart racing, fear almost blinding her, she fought with determination, unyielding, relentless.

“It is useless to fight us.”

Two of the vampires ducked behind her and Mischa felt the heat of the fetid breaths on the back of her neck while two more approached her from behind. Though terror clogged her throat, she knew she wouldn’t scream. She would face death bravely, defiantly even. She would never admit defeat.

“Get away from her.” A loud snarl followed the sharp command and Rhad launched himself into the center of the nest. His fangs glistened in the light of the moon and with his face contorted, he looked the like monster Mischa knew him to be.

The vampires rallied together, muscles bunched, grunting and hissing with each step.

“Mischa, stay back,” Rhad ordered.

She jumped into place beside him. “I can help.”

Rhad gave another snarl. “I said stay back.”

Mischa launched a kick at one vampire’s shin. As the creature screamed in pain, Rhad gave her an assessing look. “Okay, you can stay, but be careful.”

Mischa didn’t want to smile at the concern in his voice, but she did anyway. It shouldn’t matter that Rhad was growing fond of her.

Rhad fought like a demon, using super-human strength to rend and snap until all five of the vampires lay stacked atop one another like discarded rag dolls. Breathing hard, Rhad leaned against a tree and watched Mischa. She felt his eyes move with her.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she finally asked.

“You handled yourself very well.”

“You mean for a woman?”

Rhad grinned. “That wasn’t what I was implying.” He jutted his chin toward the pile of limp bodies. “Those are vampires.”

Mischa dusted the dirt from her jeans and shot him a disbelieving look. “Really? No kidding? I didn’t know.”

Rhad pushed off the tree and walked toward her. “Where did you learn to fight like that?”

“I’ve taken Karate classes since I was a kid. I was lucky enough to know a guy in the neighborhood who taught the stuff. We traded skills.”

“Where were your parents?”

Mischa adjusted the buttons on her shirt. “They died when I was young.”

Rhad didn’t apologize. “So what skills did you trade?”

She looked up. “Obviously, not what you’re thinking. He needed help with Algebra.”

Rhad placed one hand at the small of her back and guided her away from the fallen vampires. “We should get going.”

“Where did those guys come from any way?”

A trail of blood seeped from the bottom vampire on the pile and created a pool amidst rocks and shrubs. They stepped around the sticky fluid and continued up the path toward the mountain.

“They’re all around here,” Rhad finally responded.

Mischa shivered. “I’ll have to admit. For a minute there, I was scared.”

“You should be.”

“But I’m not scared of you,” she pointed out.

Rhad slanted her a look. “Maybe you should be.”

She stuffed her hands into the pockets of the jeans the housekeeper had left inside the armoire. She hadn’t thought to ask how the woman had known her size. Maybe she didn’t really want to know anyway.

“You think I should be scared of you because you’re a vampire?”

“Most people would be, yes.”

She fell into step beside him. “Well, I’ll admit I was at first, but,” she nudged him in the side with her elbow, “I’ve seen your softer side.”

His brows lowered, giving him a darker look. “My softer side?”

Mischa smiled. “You don’t think you have a softer side?”

He met her gaze. “No. I don’t.”

“What makes you not want me the way those other vampires do?”

“What makes you think I don’t?”

She swallowed hard. Something told her she shouldn’t have started this particular conversation. She pressed the heel of her palm over her jugular. “You do?”

“I’m a vampire, Mischa. Vampires need blood to exist.”

Her blood ran cold in her veins. “So what are you doing? Just toying with me until you decide it’s

time for lunch? If that's the case, I say stop playing with your food and just make your move. Because as you can see, I can hold my own in any fight."

Rhad stopped walking and pivoted slowly, giving her time to face him. "Do you really think so?" He looked over her shoulder. "Those vampires back there were new. They'd only been turned a few months. They did not have the opportunity to acquaint themselves with their new skills. In another year, you would have already been dead, with or without the black belt."

Now, her blood iced. If Rhad was only trying to scare her, he was doing a damn fine job of it. She dropped her hand to her side and nervously rubbed it against the side of her jeans. "That still hasn't answered my question. Why haven't you made your move on me?"

Rhad walked toward her until his hip bumped hers. "What kind of move would you like me to make?"

"I didn't say I wanted you to make a move," she snapped.

"Then why are you pushing me?"

Mischa tried to push him away, but the difference in their sizes and strength kept him firmly in place. "I don't think I want to have this conversation."

He yanked her closer, cupping one side of her face. "Then perhaps you should think about the ramifications of a conversation before you begin it."

Mischa saw his lips coming closer and she was powerless to stop him. She didn't deny she needed his touch though she had no explanation for the craving. She met him halfway, going up onto her tiptoes to slide her lips across his. She knew the danger; yet, she didn't deny the burning within her. What was it about the man who could make her ignore the vampire? Any ordinary woman would be running for her life.

She slipped her hands around his back as he pulled her closer. Her breasts pressed against his chest and Mischa heard the low moan in the back of his throat. Just as her toes began to ache, Rhad slid his hands to her hips and lifted, bringing her level.

His thick hair beckoned her touch and she fisted her hands in the length. She tasted him and her heart pumped faster. She felt him and her temperature rose. She pushed closer, willingly falling into the web he wove. Without thought, she tipped her head back, her body aching.

Instantly, Rhad pushed her away with a harsh, "no!"

Startled and confused, Mischa pressed her hands against her cheeks. "What? What happened?"

He stepped back, putting more distance between them. "I should not allow myself to touch you."

"Funny. I didn't seem distasteful a few moments ago."

Rhad rubbed the back of his neck and spun around, presenting his back to her. "This is not about whether or not I want you, Mischa. This is about preservation."

"For me?"

He began to walk. "For both of us."

"Wait a second." Mischa had never been one to let a matter drop, especially when the subject involved her. She walked faster and caught up with him. She grabbed his hand. "I said, wait a second." When he stopped walking, she spoke again. "What is going on here? Why are you suddenly so against touching me?"

His eyes raked over her face, her hair, a lover's caress. She knew he wanted her. She read everything she needed to know on his face. He shook his head and removed her hand from his. "Mischa, please. Let us not discuss this further. Though we want, we cannot have."

She clamped her hands on her hips. "So vampires don't have sex?"

His eyes sparkled. "Is that what you're offering?"

She clenched her jaw. "This isn't about what I'm offering."

"No?" He circled around her. "Then tell me you weren't offering yourself to me when you tipped your head back, knowing it was an enticement?"

"Did it ever occur to you that I was in the moment, that maybe, just maybe I had forgotten you were a vampire?"

Rhad whipped back around, catching a hand full of her hair. "Never. I mean never forget that I am a vampire, Mischa. Such a mistake could be detrimental to your health."

She stared up at him, her eyes clashing with his. Though his hand was a little tight in her hair, she didn't try to break free. Instead, she squared her shoulders and thrust out her chin. "Don't try to threaten me, Rhad. You offered to help me. This was your decision, not mine. So if you want to help me, fine, but you will not," she thumped his chest, and I repeat, will not, wave your blood-thirsty ways in my face in an attempt to keep me in line."

Rhad released her as if her hair had just singed his hand. "You know nothing of my ways."

Mischa snorted her derision and plunked herself down on the ground, drawing her knees closer to her chest. "You're a vampire. What's not to know? You sleep during the day, hunt at night and you snack on innocent people. You can be killed with a stake to the heart and sunlight isn't particularly beneficial to your skin." She peered up at him though the shadows hid his face from her eyesight. "As those guys we left back there," she thumbed back down the path, "you survive by drinking human blood. Am I close?"

Rhad grabbed her upper arms and dragged her to her feet, pinning her between a tree and his body. "As I said, you know nothing about me, Mischa. Nothing about my ways. Do not attempt to segregate me into a category simply because I had the choice taken away from me on how I was to live the rest of my life, the rest of my very long life."

Mischa struggled against him. “Let go of me.” She kicked at his shin, but he only held her higher. Then, with only a small twinge of guilt, she resorted to the helpless female tactic. “You’re hurting me.” She injected just the right amount of fear into her voice. Rhad released her immediately, carefully lowering her to the ground. She rubbed her arms. “What is it with you? You’re doing a complete one-eighty on me.”

Rhad ran his hands through his hair and for a brief moment, Mischa thought she saw the sheen of tears on his face, but then she decided it must be the moonlight.

“I do not drink the blood of humans,” he finally said in a low, guttural voice.

Mischa stared at him. “That’s impossible. How do you survive?”

“I did not choose to survive in this body, Mischa, but I can choose how I will live out the remainder of my life.”

“Which, as you said, could be a very long time.”

Rhad inclined his head shortly. “I will not die by ordinary means.”

“But that doesn’t tell me how you live now. Nor how you can choose not to give in to the vampire within you.”

“That’s a story for another day.”

Mischa stood in front of him. “That’s it? That’s all you’re going to say?”

“Do you still want to find your sister, Mischa?”

“You know I do.”

“Then we should go. The night draws on and we will need to seek shelter soon.”

“You mean you will need to seek shelter soon.”

Rhad didn’t respond to the snide remark and Mischa instantly regretted voicing it. She’d encountered a curve ball with this different side of Rhad Valentine. She’d come to Romania to search for him and had somehow ended up on his doorstep. She’d spent the night in the house with a vampire thinking she was taking her life in her own hands only to discover that Rhad didn’t imbibe human blood. More confused than ever, she shook her head and started to walk.

“I’m going to figure you out, Rhad Valentine.”

Towering over her, he walked beside her. “You can try, *meu dragoste*.”

My love. The words echoed through her heart. How could a vampire want her as much as Rhad wanted her and yet not drink the blood flowing so furiously within her veins? It made no sense to her.

Mischa cleared her throat. “Why are we walking?”

“Because we cannot fly,” Rhad responded in a droll tone of voice.

She made a rude noise. “I mean, why aren’t we taking a car. I presume you do have one of those, don’t you?” She stopped walking and spun around to face the broken path they’d just traveled. “We’ve been

walking all this time and I'm sure there's a better way to get to where we're going."

"No. There is not."

"There are no roads?"

Rhad sighed and stopped to face her. "Mischa, I know what I'm doing."

She drew in a deep, steadying breath. God save her from arrogant vampires. "Then enlighten me because I don't know why we're trudging along when we could be motoring."

"The roads are rural and unkempt and the village we seek is practically uninhabited."

Mischa clamped her hands on her hips and tilted her head toward the sky. She muttered something derogatory under her breath before she fixed Rhad with a fulminating stare. "And tell me again how you know this village is where we will find my sister?" She held up one hand. "No, on second thought, don't. I don't think I want to hear anymore about your second sight." She made another scoffing noise and walked past him. "Of all the people to get stuck with, I have to find the only clairvoyant vampire."

"You came to me, Mischa," he reminded her.

She didn't look back. "Excellent. Keep reminding me that you found me draped across your front steps."

"I do not believe I ever told you how I found you."

Mischa froze, one foot hovering in the air. "You're right. You didn't. So how do I know that?"

He approached her at an even pace, coming to a halt when she was within arm's reach. "Perhaps your memory is returning."

"I don't think I had amnesia."

"You can be sure of this?"

She hated the superior tone of his voice. "Look, can we just get on with this mountain hike and for your sake," she wagged a finger in warning, "we'd better find my sister in this God-forsaken village or I'm going to be putting that Internet course to work."

Rhad laughed and the sound startled her.

"You have a nice laugh," she said suddenly.

He ran his knuckles down her cheek. "I am glad you came back to Romania, Mischa Bonovich."

Ten years in the past

"You should not take this lightly, my son." The shaman's voice captured and held Rhad's attention.

It mesmerized and demanded an audience.

The aging man sat in the center of the tent, his legs folded beneath him. Wearing a brown, tattered robe, he rolled his shoulders forward as he tended the fire in front of him. His gray beard reached almost to the center of his chest and when he waved one hand toward Rhad, his knuckles were gnarled and painfully swollen.

Rhad answered the unspoken invitation and sank to the ground opposite the shaman. He'd traveled for many days to find the one medicine man who would hopefully put his life to rights.

The shaman folded his hands together as if in prayer and lowered his head. "Are you aware of what is involved in this process?"

Rhad had read much about it, but he knew words on paper would not do the agony justice. "I am, Shaman."

"Why not end your life rather than live it out as a creature of the night?"

The words stabbed Rhad in the center of the heart, which used to beat. "This was not my choice. I will not give into death because my life has now changed."

The shaman's lips parted, revealing teeth startlingly white for such rural surroundings. "Ah, yes. You have always been a determined one. You remind me much of my granddaughter." For a moment, his eyes glazed over before he brought himself back to the present. He lowered his lids and fell into silent contemplation.

Rhad knew better than to rush the medicine man, but inside, the need to feed his hunger grew by leaps and bounds. Even the shaman was not safe as long as the creature prowled within him. "Shaman, this is something I need to do."

The elderly man held up one hand. "I am aware of that, my son." He opened his eyes and Rhad saw the sheen of tears. "There will be pain."

Rhad gritted his teeth and nodded his acceptance.

"Then we will begin."

Rhad woke up before the sun had fully sunk behind the mountains, his breaths coming in quick, unrestricted pants. He sat up on the ground and draped one arm over his knee.

"Are you okay?" Mischa's soft voice reached him out of the dusk.

He attempted to control his breathing before he answered her. "I'm fine."

Rustling noises reached his ears and then Mischa crawled toward him. He eyed her warily. "What are you doing?"

She wiggled in between his body and the wall. "You don't sound like you're going back to sleep any

time soon and I already had a nap.”

He smelled her skin. Not her blood. The intoxicating scent of her woman’s skin. His pants became painfully tight. “You should try to sleep more.”

“Why? Do you want to go back to sleep?”

Rhad’s breath escaped his lungs in a low, painful hiss of air. “No. Night will be upon us soon. We can leave then.”

Mischa touched his arm and the muscles jumped. “Was it a bad dream?”

He feigned innocence. “What are you talking about?”

“You were screaming.”

Rhad frowned. “I don’t recall screaming.”

“You always recall your responses to your nightmares?”

Rhad chuckled and relaxed back against the stone wall. They’d taken shelter inside a cave carved inside the wall of a monstrous mountain. Its ancient walls bore secrets it would take an archaeologist years to uncover and its floor told the tale of other visitors. Badly constructed fires, candy paper wrappers and empty beer cans littered the ground. Rhad had moved them farther inside to protect them from the elements and the possibility of any vampire hunters. Romania was rife with them at this time of the year and he doubted they’d care about his aversion to human blood.

“Hey.” Mischa bumped his shoulder with hers. “You still in this conversation?”

He placed his hand on her leg, surprising both of them, but he didn’t remove it. Though she still wore her jeans, the heat of her skin felt good beneath his palm, taut and muscular. “Are you hungry?”

She gave him a look tinged with amusement. “Why? Are you?”

His lips twitched. “I woke up hungry.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why is something telling me that we aren’t talking about food?”

He slid his fingertips along her neckline. “Do you want to talk about food?”

Mischa smiled at him and he had his answer. With simple, deft moves, she slipped her blouse off her shoulders, allowing it to fall to the stony ground. Rhad’s breath stalled out. He thought about stopping her, but then the creamy, lace bra which had barely shielded her full breasts followed the blouse. His hands shaking, Rhad touched her abdomen, his fingertips resting atop the button of her jeans. “Mischa.” One word. The only one he could say before Mischa pushed herself to her feet and stepped out of her jeans. Unabashed and without modesty, she stood in front of him, her body an offering to the gods. The night he’d found her on his doorstep, he’d thought her a goddess. He realized he hadn’t been wrong. His skin burned when Mischa finished undressing by shimmying the ivory panties over her toned thighs.

She stood back from him, using the wall to support her shoulders. “So what did you have in mind for this feast?” She let one hand slide over her breasts, across her flat stomach until her fingertips reached the narrow patch of hair that covered her mound. She closed her eyes and tipped her head back, dipping one finger into the moistness. “Because if you don’t have any ideas, I think I can come up with a few.”

The hard flesh between his thighs pounded with aching intensity, but Rhad didn’t immediately move. He wanted to watch the show as her finger slid in and out of the dampness between her legs. “Lie down,” he instructed hoarsely.

Mischa obeyed the command immediately. She dropped to her knees, spreading her thighs and moved her hand across the coarse hair at the apex. With her left hand, she parted the slick lips of her sheath and slid the fingers of her free hand deep inside the opening of her body. She moaned low in her throat and arched off the floor.

Rhad rolled toward her, every muscle in his body shaking. His breaths came low and deep as he watched her fingers, now wet with the fluid of her own body, sliding back and forth across the tiny bud that made her twitch with pleasure. He came to his knees in front of her, his gaze mesmerized by the continuous movement of her fingertips. He heard her breath hitch in her throat and he swallowed hard.

Mischa stilled the movement of her fingers, her eyes still closed. “Touch me, Rhad. I want to feel your fingers against me.”

He didn’t need a second invitation. His long fingers took over the pace, moving across the moist skin of her flesh, finding her most sensitive spot. He felt her body spasm beneath the rotation of his fingers; her hips lifted off the stone and she cried out his name as she climaxed.

Before she could move, Rhad’s fingers moved to grasp her hips and he lowered his head, tasting her heat and passion. His tongue moved around her, his teeth nibbling her flesh.

Mischa tensed and threaded her fingers through his thick locks, holding his head in place as his tongue darted in and out of gate of her mons. She moaned his name. He felt her muscles quivering beneath his ministrations.

Rhad’s hands held her thighs open while his tongue worked up and down the slick valley, drinking her juice and lavishing her with hot, wet strokes. His teeth caught the edge of her nub and he heard the quick, sharp intake of her breath and her pleas for release. Her body bucked beneath his face, pressing his tongue deeper into the opening of her body. His strokes became faster, harder and he slid the fingers of his left hand inside her, using his thumb and mouth to bring her to a shattering climax.

Mischa screamed and clutched at him before collapsing against his chest in exhaustion. “Oh my God,” she exhaled, running her hands over his shoulders before gripping the sides of his face. “That was...” she broke off, searching for the right adjective. She settled for an underrated, “incredible.”

Rhad slid up her body, lowering the zipper on his jeans. He stopped inches short of her face, his throbbing shaft close to her parted lips. "Take me, Mischa. I need to feel your mouth on me."

Obligingly, Mischa's hands lifted, closing around the base of his cock. Her lips closed over the head and she sucked gently, rolling her tongue over the smooth skin. Her fingertips gently kneaded the skin covering his testicles. Moving her head back and forth, she tortured him with her teeth, lips and tongue, nibbling, sucking and licking him.

Rhad's hands reached back to caress her breasts, massaging the firm mounds of flesh as every muscle in his body strained for release. Perspiration coated his skin and his abdomen clenched as he reached his release and his juices flowed into her mouth.. He leaned forward, dropping his hands down on either side of her face while he willed his breathing to return to normal. "Now, that was incredible," he breathed. He pulled away from her and slid back down her body.

They fell into one another's arms, their breaths uniting in quick explosions of air. Neither spoke, both startled by the direction the early evening hours had taken them. Mischa's head fell to his shoulder and Rhad felt her lips touch his neck.

"Mischa, don't," he whispered.

"This wasn't supposed to happen, was it?" He heard the sadness in her voice.

He kissed the top of her head. "Sleep some more. I'll wake you when it's time to leave."

And while Mischa's breaths slowed to an even rhythm, Rhad lay awake torn between relief and frustration. His life was not a normal one. He had nothing to offer a woman. He could promise nothing. Not even his heart.

CHAPTER THREE

Ten years ago

The stone slab cooled his naked back and with his arms strapped at his sides, Rhad couldn't move. He closed his eyes as the shaman approached, reciting healing words over and over in his head.

The shaman had warned him of the pain, the blind agony that would transport him to another realm, sweeping away his memories, his focus. But the medicine man hadn't prepared him for the darkness, the helplessness and the paralyzing fear as the first needle invaded his body.

The pain began as a slow, torturous journey into agony. His soul balked at the foreign body invading its space. Torn asunder, the thin veil, made him who he was rippled and swayed, its edges frayed and irreparable.

Rhad screamed aloud, his body bucking off the stone, his molars grinding together until his jaws ached. His hands clenched at his sides and every muscle in his body strained. Blue veins bulged in his neck and Rhad could see himself, the ripples cascading from his chest to his abdomen.

Standing outside his own body, he watched the shaman moving around the table, inserting needles and touching the heated pokers to his skin time and again until Rhad's voice grew hoarse from his own cries.

"You will never be human," the shaman's words echoed eerily. "But you will not drink the blood you abhor. Life will not be the same for you, Rhad Valentine, but you will live it as best you can." Then, he began to circle the table, sprinkling sparkling dust and chanting as he moved.

Dripping sweat and shaking uncontrollably, Rhad felt himself begin to float up toward the ceiling before spiraling, higher and higher and then, the world went blissfully black.

Rhad woke up in a sweat, his heart racing. It was an unfamiliar feeling. Damn. He hadn't had that particular dream in years. He pushed himself up on his elbows and concentrated on a spot on the stone wall, anything to relax him.

"Rhad? Mischa's soft hand coupled with her gentle voice almost proved to be his undoing.

He captured her wrist and brought her hand to his lips. "It is time to get up, my love."

Mischa smiled. "That's the first time you've called me that in English."

He brushed the hair back from her face and kissed her cheek. "Is it?"

"Were you dreaming again?"

He thought about lying to her, but the concern on her face made the truth come forward. "Yes."

Mischa stroked his arm. "About what?"

He laid back down and took her with him, tucking her head on his shoulder. "The night I gave my soul to be a man again."

She kissed his chest. "Tell me about it."

"Why do you want to hear this?"

"Because it's part of what makes you who you are."

His hand dropped to her hip. "I'd rather make love to you."

She pushed back from his chest to see his face. "Who says you have to choose? Tell me about the dream and then I'm all yours."

Rhad closed his eyes for a minute, enjoying the feel of her words as they wrapped around his still heart. "You do not know what you ask of me, Mischa."

"This thing haunts you. I only want to help."

"Why?" More harshly than he intended, he pushed himself to a sitting position and dragged his hands through his hair. "Why do you need to hear the details of a past I'd rather forget?"

Mischa sat up beside him and he felt her small hands moving over his bare back, stroking, reassuring. The movements were almost mesmerizing. "I'm sorry." She pressed a kiss in the middle of his spine. "I didn't mean to do that." She kissed his shoulder then his neck. "Forget I asked."

Rhad didn't know what made him start talking. Perhaps it was Mischa's willingness to walk away from the subject or maybe it was his need to tell someone. He'd kept the secret for ten years. If he could tell it now, it was possible, he could heal.

He began speaking in a broken tone of voice and by the time he finished his story, he was weak and exhausted. And tears ran down Mischa's cheeks.

"Tell me more about the shaman," she whispered, her words startling him.

He straightened and slid around to look at her. Though the cave was dark and the moon outside the entrance provided little light, he could still see the wetness shimmering in her captivating, amethyst orbs. "Mischa, what's wrong?" His palm touched the wetness on her face. "Why do you want to know more about the shaman?"

"Because my family knew one once. He lived here." She drew in a shaky breath. "He was the most powerful shaman in this country."

"You knew him?"

She shook her head. "I knew of him."

He sensed there was something more, but already he recognized the closed look on her face. Mischa didn't want to continue the conversation and he wouldn't push her.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“For what?”

“For helping me.”

Rhad heard the hesitation in her voice and he took her hand. “You’re welcome.” The end of the story would come soon enough.

The air grew thinner the higher up the mountain they went. Mischa thought it was for the best. They hadn’t even pretended to talk since they’d left the cave two hours before. Perhaps they were both in thought, considering the information Rhad had shared. Mischa didn’t know if Rhad regretted telling her, but she was glad to finally know the truth. Within an hour of meeting him, she’d known they were somehow connected and now, everything made sense. The castle, her late night arrival and Riana’s disappearance. All fingers had pointed her to Rhad Valentine.

She swallowed hard and shivered against a blast of cold wind. Immediately, Rhad peeled off his own coat and wrapped it around her shoulders. She tried to protest, but he responded with a quiet, “I don’t require it.”

She allowed the heat to infuse her body and she breathed in the scent of the man who’d worn it seconds before. She didn’t know why Rhad wasn’t asking more questions. He had to sense the tension within her, but he remained stoically silent. Was he not worried, too?

Mischa thought she’d lost all of her family when her parents died, everyone except for Riana and now, to learn that the shaman was alive, was a burst of energy and a little overwhelming. She’d never met the man, but her father had woven tales about the man he’d called father, the most powerful ancient in this country. Late at night, Mischa laid awake listening to the reassuring hum of her father’s voice as he recited story after story of the shaman’s abilities until finally, Mischa’s mother had shooed him away and bade her to sleep.

Now, Mischa’s desire to find Riana intensified. Her sister needed to know about their grandfather. They would add another member to their family.

Riana was dead. The knowledge came to Rhad at the base of the mountain. He didn’t know who sent the message, but the gruesome news reached him nevertheless. He closed his eyes and thought about how to tell Mischa. She would be devastated. Would she want to return to the States now?

He looked behind him to find Mischa standing still, staring up at the light at the top of the mountain. “That’s Devil’s Peak,” he informed her solemnly.

She nodded once. “I remember. My father brought me here when I was five years old. He told me never to go there alone. Powerful curses could destroy a man’s soul.”

Rhad breathed out long and hard. “Or restore it.”

Mischa wrapped her arms around her waist. “Is that where you met the shaman?”

“It was his choice.” Rhad walked back to her and took hold of her arm. “Would you like to rest for a while?”

“No, I’m fine. Let’s just keep going.”

He didn’t move. “Mischa, we aren’t going to make it to the top of the mountain tonight. We have another two nights ahead of us.”

She looked up into his shadowed face. “Okay. Fine. Then, we’ll rest. Know of another cave?”

He smiled at her. “There are caves everywhere.”

Mischa fell into step beside him as their feet crunched over packed snow and frozen Earth. “Will you tell me more about the shaman?”

Rhad took hold of her hand. “Why are you so interested in him?”

“I’ve just heard a lot about him from my father. My father met him personally, but he’s the only person I know of who has. Until you.”

Instincts were telling him he needed to tell Mischa about her sister, but the human side of him, the part that remained a man, didn’t want to share devastating news with her in such dismal surroundings. Though he saw the night as his friend, he knew Mischa missed the daylight and the sun on her face.

“Rhad?” She called his name again, effectively pulling him out of his inner conversation.

He pointed straight ahead. “There’s the cave.”

“Why do I feel like you’re trying to avoid talking to me about the shaman?”

Rhad didn’t immediately respond to her. He waited until they’d reached the mouth of the cave and the blast of cool air bathed his face. “I don’t like talking about that point in my life.”

Her voice reached out to him from the darkness. “You’ve already told me about what you suffered, Rhad. I would never ask you to go through it again. I just want to know about the man who helped you.”

Before Rhad spoke, fire ignited in the center of the cave and he knelt down next to it, blowing on the flames. “Very well. But first, you must eat. I will return shortly.”

Mischa wrinkled her nose. “You’re not going to kill something, are you?”

He pushed himself to his feet and leaned one shoulder against the cracked rock. “Would you rather have a live dinner?”

She shivered. “I don’t want to eat something you have to kill, Rhad. I don’t think I could.” She looked over at him. “Why don’t I go with you?”

“Do you think I’m going to go to a drive-through?”

She brushed off the seat of her pants and took two steps toward him. “No, but . . .”

His eyes narrowed as knowledge struck. “You think I would do that?”

Mischa blew her bangs out of her face and looked down at the ground. “Do what?”

“Feed you the animal I have used for sustenance.”

She lifted her shoulders in a half-hearted shrug. “I didn’t say I was thinking that.” She tipped her head back and gave him an almost haughty look. “Besides, even if I was, you couldn’t blame me. You’ve had numerous years to get used to being a vampire. . .”

“Stop,” he almost shouted the words.

Mischa clamped her hands on her hips. “Don’t yell at me.”

Rhad waited for the count of ten and tried again. “You speak without thinking.”

He watched the fire rise in her eyes. “What are you talking about? Because I said you were used to being a vampire?”

“That is not something one gets used to, Mischa.”

She tossed her hands up in the air. “You know, for a guy who doesn’t have a beating heart, you sure do have a sensitive side.”

The words were like a slap to the face. He spun around and stalked out of the cave, throwing two brisk words over his shoulder. “Stay here.”

Mischa didn’t run after him and the relief was almost tangible. He needed her to stay inside the cave, to give him time to recover from her words, the knowledge that no matter what transpired between the two of them, she would always see him as a vampire, a creature without a soul, without a conscience.

The wind skated over the mountains, blowing the snow from the capped peaks. The moon sank slowly, easing its way out of the sky and the creatures of the night settled in for the long afternoon.

In the mountain valley, an eerie silence settled over the landscape as the apparition moved through the leaves of the trees. Floating and winding higher and higher, the ghostly creature reached above her head, holding her arms aloft. She sailed through his dreams, beckoning him to wake and see her, to acknowledge her presence.

“Rhad Valentine.” Her voice rang out, loud and strong.

He heard her calling, reaching for him and as much as he fought against the spell, she wove. “Who are you?”

“You know who I am,” she replied in a tone that echoed like she was speaking from an empty room.

Rhad pushed himself to his feet. Sweat dripped down his chest, pooling around the waistband of his jeans. The night air slapped against his skin as he stumbled over icy patches to answer the call of the voice.

“I don’t know you. Show yourself.”

The ethereal vision floated in front of his eyes, her transparent feet settling on a rock big enough in diameter to hold a family of five. “It is good to finally meet you.”

She was beautiful. Innocent-looking with big, brown eyes and chestnut hair down to her waist. The waves accented her porcelain face and gave her an untouchable look, which almost made Rhad laugh considering she was a ghost, and ghosts were generally untouchable.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and stared at the woman once more. “As I’ve said before, I don’t know you.”

“But you know my sister.” Her face grew sad. “You need to help her now.”

Rhad leaned one hand against a nearby tree. “How do I know you really are her sister?”

The ghost smiled. “Tomorrow morning, when she wakes up, ask her if she has a nickname. It’s Mickey. Then you’ll know it’s me.”

Rhad exhaled loudly. “How did it happen?”

Rianna glided off the rock to approach him. “By it I take it you mean my death.”

“If you don’t want to talk about it . . .”

“A vampire with a conscience. Different.” She smiled again to take the sting out of her words. “Let’s just say I crossed the wrong person. Amazon-type woman. I mouthed off before I knew she was carrying some very dangerous weapons.”

“She killed you for being a smart-ass?”

Rianna shrugged. “Well, that, and for sleeping with her guy.” She winked.

Rhad felt like he was in an incredibly bad nightmare besides the one he ordinarily lived since that fateful day of his new birth . . . or death, rather. Why are you here?”

“You have to help my sister.”

“She wants to find you.”

Riana grimaced. “It’s too late for that now.”

The cold air from her body frosted over him as she drew even closer. “Mischa won’t stop until she knows what happened to you.”

“That’s why you have to help her. She will think she’s failed.”

“You should talk to her.” Desperate for another way, Rhad appealed to the ghost’s sense of compassion. “She’s your sister. She’d want to see you again.”

Riana smiled sadly and slowly began drifting back toward the mountain, her arms at her sides. “When the time is right, Mischa will see me again, but, at present, she needs you now more than she needs

“She barely knows me,” Rhad continued to protest, but the ghost disappeared, leaving only a breath of fog in the air.

Mischa grasped both of Rhad’s shoulders and shook him awake. “Rhad, wake up. You’re having a nightmare.” Her palms slid across the dampness of his skin and she leaned closer to his ear. “Rhad!”

He came awake suddenly, his eyes wild. “What? What is it?” He pushed himself to a sitting position causing Mischa’s hands to fall away. He checked his watch. “It’s late. We should have been out by now.”

“I’ve been trying to wake you for ten minutes.” She scooted closer to him and touched the small of his back with her fingertips. He jumped. “Are you alright?” She softened her voice, feeling the tension in the muscles rippling along his back.

He climbed to his feet and stood with his back to her. For a long moment, he didn’t speak. Mischa used the time to stand up and walk to his side. When he finally looked at her, she saw a momentary flash of panic, but she quickly corrected herself. Vampires had no need to panic. Did they?

She reached for him, but he shied away, stumbling across the rocks beneath his feet. “Rhad, what’s the matter with you?”

He raised one hand to ward her off. “Nothing. Nothing. We should get going.”

She clamped her hands on her hips. “I’m not going anywhere with you until you tell me what’s wrong. You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

He stared at her then with a grim smile, he snatched hold of her wrist and yanked her behind him. “We’re leaving.”

Mischa dug in her heels and Rhad stopped short. He turned around to glare at her. “We need to leave, Mischa. We have a lot of ground to cover or have you forgotten that?”

The iciness of his tone surprised her. She tipped her head back to see his face in the gathering darkness. “Are you still upset about what I said earlier? Because if you are, this is going to be a long journey.”

Rhad’s brows lowered and Mischa wanted to smooth the taut skin with the tips of her fingers. She clenched her hands into fists to resist the urge.

“Mischa,” he said her name through gritted teeth. “We need to leave.”

“So you’ve said, but you need to tell me what’s gotten you so upset.” Then, suddenly, she sucked in a sharp breath. “Rianna.”

Rhad’s head whipped around. “What? What are you talking about?”

“I heard her voice.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You couldn’t possibly have heard her voice. We’re a good day and a half away from the top of the mountain and . . .”

“Wait,” she interrupted, dashing to the mouth of the cave. “Rianna?” she shouted into the night, her hands cupped around her mouth to project her voice. “Rianna, where are you?”

Rhad’s hands settled on her shoulders. “Mischa, stop this! We don’t know where Rianna is yet and the last thing we want to do is alert another pack of vampires to our presence.”

She looked over her shoulder at the harsh planes of his face. “I didn’t think vampires traveled in packs.”

“There’s a lot of things you don’t know about us.” He turned once more to tuck his shirt into his jeans and for a moment, though a brief one, Mischa knew she’d seen genuine pain in his eyes.

How was that possible? Vampires did not have a conscience. Oh, she knew her grandfather had pierced his soul, making human blood abhorrent to him, but even the shaman’s magic could not have restored the man the vampire had consumed. She kept her eyes glued to his spine as he moved around the cave, suddenly, in no hurry to leave.

“Rhad, what’s happened?”

“Happened?” His voice sounded foreign, strained even.

“You’re acting differently towards me.”

He spun back around and stalked past her. This time, he didn’t reach for her before he exited the cave. “I am a vampire, Mischa, and you are a human. We should have not forgotten our differences.”

His words spiked her temper. “You’re saying you regret what happened between us?”

“Let’s just be grateful it didn’t go farther than it did.”

She jogged to catch up with him. “Grateful? You’re telling me you’re glad we didn’t have sex?” She smacked his shoulder to capture his full attention. “Pardon me for saying so, Rhad Valentine, but you’re full of shit.” Though his eyebrow lifted, he didn’t comment. She forged on. “You wanted me just as much as I wanted you and if I were to touch you right now, you wouldn’t push me away.” Deliberately, she moved closer, invading his space. “Would you?”

His eyes glittered in the darkness. “Mischa, don’t.”

She placed her hand on his chest. “Don’t what? Don’t touch you? Don’t make your body aware of my presence?” She glided her fingertips over his skin, tiptoeing them up to his neck. “I won’t deny how I feel simply because you choose to.”

He gripped her wrist. “If you’re interested in casual sex, you’ve found the wrong man.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Casual sex.” She twisted her arm free and dropped it down to the hard line of

his abdomen. “You might be surprised to know when my last relationship ended.”

“When?” The question came out on a guttural groan.

Her hip brushed his deliberately. She’d slipped into siren mode though she’d never taken on the role before. Something about Rhad extinguished her inhibitions and she found herself giving into the wanton cravings within her. “Eight years ago.”

Rhad’s head fell back the second her lips touched the sensitive area beneath his chin. “Mischa, we need to go. Your sister could . . .” he broke off abruptly.

The mention of her sibling splashed cold water on the fire and Mischa quickly stepped away from him. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

He touched her cheek gently. “Don’t blame yourself. It’s the night. The air can do this to you.”

She smiled slightly. “I’ll blame the night. That’s good.” At least he wasn’t speaking to her in short, clipped tones now. She covered his hand with hers. “I don’t sleep around, Rhad.”

He closed his eyes briefly. “I should have known. I’m sorry I said it.”

She shook her head. “You couldn’t have known.” The scent of his skin called to her and she forced herself to put some distance between them. She didn’t know why Rhad affected her the way he did. It didn’t make sense. She’d never abandoned her own common sense to throw herself in the arms of any man, least of all, a vampire.

Rhad extended his hand. “Come.”

She linked her fingers with his. “We’re close to her.”

He didn’t respond.

“You can’t feel her, but I can. We’re close.”

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. “Mischa, perhaps you should prepare yourself.”

She began walking. “Prepare myself for what?”

“Did it ever occur to you that there is a possibility that . . .” he hesitated then continued once more, “that something might have happened to your sister?”

Her fingers tightened around his. “Occurred to me? My God, Rhad, I think about it all the time. What if we’re too late? What if I should have come a day sooner?” She shook her head and her hair fell over her shoulders. “But I can’t allow myself to think about that. Riana is alive.” She breathed in slowly. “She has to be.”

Riana watched her sister clinging tightly to the vampire and under ordinary circumstances, she might have rebelled at her sister’s choice in men. But then, this hadn’t been Riana’s choice.

She floated up into the trees and followed the couple, drifting lower to pick up their conversation. She didn't want to eavesdrop as much as she wanted to hear Mischa's voice again.

"So what do you do during the day?" Mischa wanted to distract herself.

Rhad shot her a curious look. "I sleep."

"Oops. I meant what do you do when you're awake? Do you work?"

He laughed a little. "No, I don't work."

"Why is it that all vampires are rich?"

"I can't speak for all vampires, but my family was in the oil business. I inherited the money when my parents died."

"Was it difficult?"

"Was what difficult?"

Mischa released his hand to tuck both of hers into the pockets of her jeans. "Watching everyone you know die."

Rhad remained quiet for a long moment, so long that Mischa was convinced he wasn't going to respond. Then finally, when he broke the silence, she almost wished he hadn't.

"I didn't watch my family die." His voice cracked a little.

Her heart began a rapid beat. "What do you mean? You weren't there?"

"I could not be around my family or friends, the ones I had known before I was turned. The town knew what had happened to me. They were waiting for my return . . . to execute me."

She sucked in a sharp breath. "Had you killed someone?"

He stopped walking and turned to face her. "No. Not then and not now. I don't kill, Mischa, unless it's to protect someone I care about. Then, it would be a possibility."

She touched his jaw. "Or to protect yourself."

He didn't respond.

She prodded him. "You would defend yourself, wouldn't you?"

"Would you choose to live this existence?"

She looked down at the ground and considered his words. "What if you didn't have to live it alone?"

He grasped her chin and brought her head level once more. "What are you asking?"

"Wouldn't your life be better if you didn't have to live it alone?"

He dropped his hand. "I don't live in what if land, Mischa." He stared out into the distance. "We should pick up the pace. We haven't covered much ground."

Mischa recognized the cue. Rhad didn't want to continue the topic of conversation. Reluctantly, she allowed it to drop. She walked along in silence beside him for several minutes and then, on the breeze, she picked up a scent, familiar, personal. Knowledge slammed into her stomach. "Riana? Oh my God, I can smell her perfume!"

Riana hastily pulled herself higher, evaporating into the air. She'd made a mistake, gotten too close, but she wanted, no, needed to see her sister's face, to hear the melodic sounds of her voice. She thought when the Amazon had taken her life she would never see Mischa again, but she'd been granted a reprieve, if only for a few more days.

"You took a chance down there," came a gravelly voice.

Riana turned slightly to see the gray-haired man approaching her. "I just had to see her."

He took hold of her hand. "You cannot get so close to her, Riana. Your presence will only create grief within her."

"Won't the knowledge of my death do the same?"

The man sighed. "Yes, it will, but that grief will pass in time and the memories she has of you will be restored. To see you like this, in your incorporeal body, would be more devastating to her than the news of your passing." He squeezed her fingers. "You have to trust me, my sweet. Your sister will be better for remembering you as you were."

Riana nodded head slowly though her eyes filled with tears. "I will miss her." She hiccupped. "You know, we didn't see each other that often, but I always knew she was there for me. I never, for one second, thought I'd be the one to go first." She slipped her hand free and sailed higher into the sky. "I need to be alone now."

The old man didn't follow her.

Rhad tried to ignore the hunger pangs clawing at his insides, but the urge to satiate his need intensified with each step he took across the rocky terrain. At just after midnight, it had been almost twelve hours since he'd tasted the blood of the wolf he'd cornered.

"Aren't you getting hungry?" Mischa asked as if reading his mind. *Perhaps she had.*

They'd grown closer over the last couple of days. Too, close maybe. Rhad needed to protect her, shelter her and the knowledge he carried within him consumed him. Guilt ate at him and he cursed the apparition that chose to force-feed him the information.

"Rhad?" Her soft voice drew his mind back to her question.

He touched her arm. "I will go soon."

“You should go now. I don’t want you passing out on me.”

His hand slid down to take hers. “What do you think of the night?”

Her fingers tightened around his. “I like the smells and the feel of the wind on my face even though it is frigidly cold. Why do you ask?”

Rhad stopped walking long enough to tuck a stray strand of her silky hair behind one of her shell-shaped ears. “Do you miss the sun yet?” He watched her eyes shift toward the moon before she focused her gaze on his face once more.

“What are you asking me, Rhad?”

He pulled away from her instantly. “Nothing. I was merely making conversation.”

“Go eat. I’ll wait right here for you.” She perched herself on a moss-covered boulder and crossed her legs at the ankles.

Rhad watched her for a moment longer before he slipped deeper into the darkness. He’d touched a nerve with the topic of conversation. And he knew why. Mischa did not intend to stay in Romania once she found her sister. Only, she was expecting Riana to be alive.

How would the knowledge of Riana’s death change the course of Mischa’s life? Would she decide to stay in Romania or would she return to the States and to her lonely life there? He could not go with her. The shaman had warned him he could not leave his country or his soul could rejuvenate. But could he allow Mischa to leave?

She’d touched him. No woman had ever done that before. He didn’t allow women to get close enough to spawn these types of feelings inside of him. They’d all marked him as a monster, a creature they should fear. They couldn’t have known of his inability to harm an innocent being.

His stomach rumbled again and he began his search for sustenance. Shifting into subtle mode, he prowled, dropping lower until he became level with the low-hanging branches of the bare bushes.

He heard a crunch, just a slight noise, really, but it could signify dinner. His fangs lengthened and just as his nose caught the scent, the scream bounced off the interior walls of the mountain.

Loud, horrified screams. Mischa’s screams.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mischa didn't know who held her, but the sweaty hand covering her mouth told her it was an unwashed male. Her stomach roiled and she increased her struggles.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," a gravelly voice sang in her ear. "Where's your vampire?"

Mischa stopped struggling instantly. Her captor didn't want her. The thought should have relaxed her a little. Instead, terror raced through her veins. Only two kinds of people went looking for vampires. Idiots and hunters. Or a combination of both. She tried to speak against his hand and when the man felt her lips move, he gave a grunt.

"You trying to say something to me, girlie?"

Just the tone of the man's voice reminded Mischa of sloppy men with stained tank tops and beer bellies. She shuddered. Her captor dropped his hand and she found her voice. "What do you think you're doing? Release me at once." She hoped she injected just the right amount of old-fashioned indignity into her voice.

He kept one meaty arm around her waist and Mischa saw a dark smattering of hair and a cheap watch encircling his wrist. "You want me to let you go, sweetie?" He chuckled in her ear. "Then tell me where your biter is and I'll be happy to throw you to the wolves. In case you haven't figured things out, I ain't after you."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm on my way to Draas to meet my father," she lied easily though she doubted the burly guy bought it. "And if you don't release me at once, my entire family will be looking for me in a matter of hours."

The arm cinched her even tighter. "And what makes you think you're going to last that long?"

Mischa couldn't have swallowed if she wanted to. "Did I mention I have four brothers? Extremely big men."

"For your information, Draas is a deserted village."

She squared her shoulders as haughtily as she could. "I'm aware of that. My father is an historian. I'm on my way to meet him."

"And he lets his daughter walk alone at night by herself? Don't you know that this part of Romania is thick with vampires?"

Mischa managed a laugh, which didn't come out as hysterical as she was feeling. "Only uneducated people believe in vampires."

"Oh really? Look at this!"

She found herself staring at a wooden stake honed to a sharp point. "Just because you've read a few

stories on the Internet and carved yourself a weapon doesn't mean you're going to find any vampires out here. I've been perfectly safe all by myself."

Her captor's breath hissed out near her ear and Mischa tried not to breathe in the foul odor. "So tell me who saved you from those five odd vampires the other night?"

Mischa's blood ran cold, but she kept up the pretense. "You really need to get a new hobby."

He caught hold of her hair and gave it a sharp tug. "What I'm going to get is the body of a vampire and," he licked her neck, "the body of his girlfriend if she doesn't shut up."

Mischa recoiled instantly. "Get away from me!"

"Why? Is a red-blooded American male not good enough for you? You need a vicious, blood-sucking creature that's been dead for over a century to light your fire?"

Twigs snapped and leaves crunched as booted feet smacked the ground less than a yard away from where Mischa stood in captivity. Her shoulders sank with relief when she caught sight of Rhad's face . . . his furious, cold face with those beautiful eyes narrowed to slits.

"Let go of her," Rhad said in a low, deadly tone of voice.

The arm around Mischa's waist shook, but her captor's response was full of bravado. "I'll make a deal with you. Your life for hers." He held up his stake. "I promise I'll make it quick."

Rhad came closer and the man behind Mischa tensed. "I don't make deals with my enemies."

"You know who I am then?"

"I know you are one of the ignorant, one who believes I have committed a deadly sin by choosing life over death."

Mischa felt the muscles in the man's body bunching and she knew he was preparing his strike. "Rhad, be careful," she whispered.

"So it's Rhad, is it?" Her captor sneered. "The vampire has a name."

She stomped his foot, though it had little effect. "Why are you here?"

The man snorted. "I thought that much was obvious or were you not here when we were just having that conversation, sweet thing? I'm here to kill your man, although, we don't really like to refer to these creatures as men."

"He's not a creature!" Mischa hotly defended. "You don't even know him and you would judge by the little information you have which has been passed down through the centuries. You live your life hunting others, seeking the thrill of taking another life."

"Shut up, lady," the man's voice sounded weary. He lifted his head to meet Rhad's unwavering gaze. "If she talks like this all the time, I don't know how you put up with her."

“Put up with me? I’ll have you to know . . .”

“Mischa.” Rhad silenced her with just the sound of her name.

She sensed his control of the situation, his overwhelming confidence and she held perfectly still, knowing that any minute, Rhad would free her.

Rhad took another step forward. “What’s your name?” he asked the hunter.

Mischa heard the man swallow hard. “Hamrick. That’s all you need to know, but by mid-morning, the whole world will know my name. The world’s first successful vampire hunter in almost two centuries.”

“Well, Hamrick” Rhad continued as though the man had never spoken, “I need you to release Mischa. She has done nothing to you. Your fight is not with her.”

Hamrick laughed nervously. “You can’t bend me to your will, vampire. I know all about your little mind tricks. I’ve protected myself.” He took several stumbling steps backwards, dragging Mischa with him. “And if you come any closer, I’m going to have to kill her.”

Mischa saw Rhad’s eyes glow red. “You will not harm her. You did not come to my country seeking your own death, but you will find exactly that if you hurt the woman in your arms.”

Hamrick’s back bounced off the trunk of a tree and he gave a squeak of dismay. Mischa sensed his courage had dissipated with Rhad’s appearance. Now face to face with a real vampire, the hunter had become the hunted.

“I’m warning you,” Hamrick said in a desperate voice. “I don’t want to have to hurt her, but,” the stake dropped from his hand and clattered against a root. Mischa felt his hand at the base of her spine, but before she could wonder what he was doing, the cold, lethal edge of a knife pressed against her throat. “I’m not playing games with you, vampire. Now back off!” he practically shouted the last instruction.

“Mischa,” Rhad called to her. “Do you trust me?”

She knew she had little choice, but regardless, she would trust him. She nodded her head slightly.

“He will not harm you,” Rhad promised.

“Okay,” her voice came out on a squeak.

Rhad growled low in his throat and leaped upwards, catching hold of a low-hanging branch of an oak tree. He spun overhead like a limber gymnast and shot through the air to land on an opposite tree branch a few feet above Hamrick’s head.

The hunter gave a shout and propelled Mischa forward, his rubbery legs stumbling and refusing to obey his commands. “Oh, God,” he muttered, his breaths coming in short bursts against Mischa’s ear.

“If you release me, I’ll make sure he doesn’t hurt you,” she told him in a confident whisper.

Hamrick stilled, his arm slipping around her waist. “Why would you do that?”

“Because I don’t want him to kill you. I just want you to go away.”

Before Hamrick could respond, whipping wings whirred through the air, startling both the hunter and Mischa. The owl came in low, talons extended as if preparing for a landing. Hamrick covered his eyes and fell to the ground.

Mischa felt arms around her waist again, but this time, they belonged to her savior. He lifted her out of the way before kneeling beside the hunter. Mischa heard the native words and rushed forward with a cry.

“Rhad, no!”

His hand halted in mid-air. “Mischa, stay back.”

“I won’t let you kill him.”

Hamrick prayed in between pleas for his life.

“He would have killed you,” Rhad spat the words.

She touched his shoulder. “No, he wouldn’t.”

He raised his eyes to see her face. “How can you be so sure of that?”

“Because you wouldn’t have let him.” Her fingers tightened over his leather jacket.

“If I let him live, he’ll only come back.”

“You can’t kill him. If you take his life, you become what he calls you . . . a monster. And that’s not what you are.” She pressed her palm to his cheek. “Please. Don’t.”

He turned his face away from her again and Mischa knew the need to avenge her capture was strong. Rhad was more than just a man. He was a powerful mixture of tortured life and unrelenting integrity. The nature of the beast insisted he kill the enemy, but somewhere, deep inside of him, lived the heart of the man he used to be. Mischa had to believe the vampire had not overtaken every part of Rhad Valentine.

Rhad got to his feet and Hamrick wept with relief. “Get up,” Rhad commanded in a voice which held no compassion. Mischa knew Hamrick’s pardon was not the vampire’s choice.

The hunter scrambled to his feet. He bent to retrieve the knife he’d dropped when the owl startled him, but Rhad placed his foot over the blade. Hamrick looked up. “It’s not mine.”

“Then you shouldn’t have brought it.” Rhad wouldn’t yield.

Hamrick straightened. “You’re right.” He scrubbed his hands down the front of his pants. “Look. This has been a big misunderstanding. I was just trying to prove something to the guys I hang out with. They’ve never believed me when I tell them that vampires exist. They always make fun of me and tell me I’ve never seen one.”

Rhad shifted his stance and leaned forward to capture the edge of Hamrick’s wool shirt. “You still haven’t.”

The hunter licked his lips. “But you are.”

“Not if you want to leave here alive.”

Hamrick’s eyes bugged. “Oh. Right. Yeah. You’re right. I haven’t seen one. Haven’t seen a damned thing. Been out here all night in the freezing cold and all I’ve caught is a cold. The guys will get a kick out of that.” He directed his attention toward Mischa. “I’m sorry about catching you like that. I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

“If you did, you wouldn’t be walking away,” Rhad told him in a no-nonsense tone of voice.

Hamrick began a backwards step toward the opposite end of the woods. “And on that note, I’ll just be heading back to my camp. Got a long journey back to the hotel.” Rhad’s attention stayed riveted on the departing man until the darkness swallowed him.

Mischa placed a hand at the small of his back. “Thank you.”

He tensed. “You should not have interfered.”

Her hand dropped. “I couldn’t let you kill someone.”

He walked away from her, ice crunching beneath his boots. “There are things about my life you don’t understand, Mischa. Sometimes, it is better to accept the decisions I make even if you don’t agree with them.”

She sensed this was the part where he would start to beat his chest. She marched around to stand in front of him. “I’ve never been the follow along sort. You’re telling me you would have killed him.”

“He would have killed me had he gotten the chance.”

“That’s because he’s ignorant. You can’t hold that against him.”

Rhad’s eyes burned into hers but Mischa sensed his weakening. She pressed her hand against his chest, where his heart would beat if it were able. Rhad covered her hand with his.

Mischa dropped her gaze. “Did you eat?”

“No. I heard you scream.”

Warmth coated Mischa from the inside out. He’d come back to save her. She stood on tiptoe and brushed her lips against his. “Then go find some food, hunter. I’ll huddle inside the cave this time and keep quiet.” She held one finger against her lips and gave him a saucy wink before turning away from him.

“Mischa,” his voice reached to her out of the darkness.

She paused and preparing herself for a lecture, she squared her shoulders. “If this is the part where you tell me never to do that again and I could have gotten myself killed, spare me. The guy came out of nowhere and there wasn’t a lot I could do to prevent that. In fact, I . . .”

“Mischa.”

She heard the exasperation behind the word and she looked up. When had he walked closer to her? Goosebumps littered her arms. Those eyes, so beautiful and yet so distinctly male, bored into her face while

sensual lips curved upwards slightly. "I want you." He made the words a demand.

Mischa took a stumbling step backwards. "I thought you were hungry."

"I am."

"For food," she offered lamely.

"That, too."

"Then you should eat."

His nostrils flare. "I intend to."

Like a flash fire, her skin heated. She licked her lips with just the tip of her tongue. "Rhad, do you think this is wise? I mean, we're like night and day, pardon the pun. We don't have a lot in common. I mean, I drink coffee. You drink blood. I like to tan in the summertime and well, that's not really an option for you. I live in Boston in an apartment with thick rugs and classic paintings and you live here, in Romania, in an age-old castle surrounding by portraits of dead people. I really don't think . . ."

"Mischa," he interrupted in a deadly quiet voice.

She stopped abruptly. "Yes?"

"Do you want me?"

How could he ask that? Could he not hear every beat of her heart when he stood before he like this? She knew he waited for her reply. She drew in a deep breath and nodded.

He caught a fistful of her hair in a possessive grasp. "Then say it."

Mischa threw caution to the wind along with a healthy portion of her common sense. "I want you."

He danced her inside the mouth of the cave and backed her against a stone wall. "Do you want me?"

At her nod, he continued. "Here? Now?"

Her breath shuddered out of her lungs. "Yes."

Rhad's eyes smoked and he slipped one hand between her legs, cupping her, molding her. "Tonight is ours. We'll only think about the pleasures our bodies can give one another. I will make you mine and I will be yours." He bent his lips to her neck. "For all time."

Mischa's head lolled back and she moaned low in her throat. His words faded in the distance as his lips created havoc within her mind. She couldn't think as her brain jumbled with feelings and emotions. Pleasure. Passion. Perfection.

Rhad's hands began a slow, leisurely pace over her spine before sliding down to her bottom. He cupped her soft flesh, lifting her against his growing erection. Without words, he tipped her head back and lowered his lips to hers, drinking in softness of her lips, the heat of her mouth. "I love how you taste," he whispered before gliding his lips over her temples, her cheeks and back to her mouth.

Mischa's eyes closed. Her hands scrambled to get underneath the thickness of his shirt. She needed to touch him, to feel his hot flesh.

"Slow down," he instructed. He dragged her shirt over her head and tossed it aside. Though darkness bathed the inside of the cave, Mischa saw his eyes roam over her full breasts. He licked the top of one mound. "I've thought about touching you like this again. I've dreamed about it." He dropped a kiss to her bare shoulder.

Mischa tipped her head back and leaned back on her hands, giving him full access to her bare skin. She felt the catch on her bra give way and moved her arms long enough to slide the lacy material out of her way. "I dream about you ever since the first night we touched. I've remembered this, the feel of your hands moving across my body, holding me." She tugged his head back down to her face and fused her lips to his, taking the initiative. Her tongue plowed against his, tasting his welcome.

With short, furious movements, Rhad popped open her jeans and tugged them down her legs. His hands moved back up her thighs, skimming the lace of her panties before diving beneath the waistband to find her hot, moist center. She bucked beneath the intrusion of his fingers, opening herself to his quest and he groaned low in his throat, pressing tiny, heated kisses against her neck. Her body burning, need clawing its way up her spine, Mischa shoved against his shoulders, dislodging him, tearing the shirt from his body. Eager to feel his skin against hers, she unzipped his jeans and shoved them down his muscled thighs, brushing her knuckles over the thick bulge beneath his form-fitting briefs. Sliding down his body, she pressed kisses along the wall of his abdomen, that warm stretch of perfect skin, before traveling lower to touch the warm material stretched tightly over his erection. Her lips created damp patches and her teeth scraped him through the cotton. Then, with a sudden flick of her wrists, she freed him, rubbing her cheek alongside the hot length of him. She purred low in her throat and turned her head to taste him.

Rhad's breath hissed out of his lungs and he caught her beneath her arms and hauled her back up the length of his body. "Not this time, baby."

Mischa laughed and crawled up toward him. On her hands and knees, she didn't even feel the stone floor as she raised her head to see his face. "I guess you have something else in mind."

Up on his own knees, Rhad caught her hips and pulled her closer to his throbbing shaft. "I have a lot more in mind." Mischa's legs parted as they knelt face to face. He moved his hand over her dampness and her head fell to his shoulder.

"Look at me," he urged mere seconds before he thrust into her moist cleft. Mischa cried out, adjusting her hips to meet him. His fingers bit into her soft flesh as his body began to pump.

Mischa's hands fisted in his hair and she arched her spine, forcing him deeper into her body, pushing him to push her over the edge. She felt his hands moving around her hips, his fingers delving between her

legs to find her pulsing nub. She moaned low in her throat and gasped his name, pleading with him.

“That’s it, baby. You’re almost there,” Rhad crooned in a husky voice, his hips grinding against hers.

Mischa felt the first waves of her release crest and she lowered her hands to his hips. A low scream built in her throat. “Oh God, I’m... Oh, God...”

“It’s okay. Let it go. Let it go.” He gritted his teeth, the tension building in his muscles, sweat beading on his chest and stomach. Just as Mischa screamed his name, his own climax tore through him and he groaned as his seed spilled into her.

Mischa’s shaky knees forced her to collapse against the unyielding ground and she fell back, her arms splayed above her head. “That was . . .” she searched for the proper adjective that would give full justice to the monumental moment. “Perfect,” she finally managed.

Rhad laid down beside her and nuzzled her neck. “Perfect would have been on a bed with candles glowing and the whisper of wind in your hair.”

She slid her palm alongside his cheek and the rasp of his stubble tickled her skin. “No, I’m pretty sure this was perfect. The other stuff would have just been overkill.”

Laughter rumbled in Rhad’s chest and he pulled her close, pressing her head against her chest. “I’m glad you came to my house, Mischa Bonovich.”

She moved her lips over his damp flesh. “Me, too, but I still wish I could remember how I got there.”

He threaded his fingers through her hair and Mischa felt him bring the strands to his nose. She heard him draw in a deep breath and she pulled back slightly.

You might not want to do that,” she warned. “Shampoo hasn’t exactly been in abundant supply out here.”

He winked at her. “If you think that’s been the toughest part, wait until I break out the grappling hooks tomorrow night.”

She pushed herself up on her elbows and winced as a rock bit into her. She shifted her arm. “What are you talking about?”

“Grappling hooks? Well, those are hooks made out of . . .”

She smacked him in the center of his chest. “I know what they are. What do you mean when you break them out? What are you talking about?”

“How did you think we were going to get up the rest of the mountain?”

“We’ve walked so far.” Panic started to take root inside of her.

Rhad grinned at her and touched the tip of her nose with his index finger. “The trail will continue to narrow and then we’ll have to climb the rest of the way.”

Mischa shot to a sitting position. “That’s out of the question.”

“You don’t want to climb?”

“I don’t climb,” she emphasized each word with a poke to his chest.

He captured her finger. “May I ask why?”

“I don’t like heights.”

“We’ve been up pretty high for the past day or so.”

“I haven’t looked down,” she informed him in a haughty tone of voice. She didn’t look at him for fear she’d see a smirk on his face. She’d have to hit him then.

Rhad closed his eyes. “I see.”

“What exactly is it that you see, Mr. Valentine?”

Sexy green eyes popped open. “Oh, it’s Mr. Valentine, is it? In answer to your question, I see you’re scared.”

Mischa scrambled to her feet. “For your information, I’m not scared. I just don’t happen to like climbing.” She tried to make the excuse sound like a perfectly reasonable one, but her wobbling voice didn’t enhance her bravado. And it didn’t take her long to figure out the moment she stood up, Rhad lost all interest in the conversation. His eyes climbed from her toes to her breasts before zeroing in on her feminine center. She made a sound of disgust and turned away from him. “Will you stop looking at me like that?”

“How am I looking at you?”

“I’m not interested in playing word games with you.”

“It’s not a game, I play, Mischa.” Rhad climbed to his feet. Mischa heard him walk toward her as she stood at the mouth of the cave. His hands settled on her shoulders and he brought her back against him. She felt his erection heavy against her bottom. She resisted the urge to sigh with pleasure.

“I can’t climb, Rhad,” she heard herself say. Damn. Where had that come from? She hadn’t wanted to say that.

“I’ll teach you how.”

“You don’t have time for lessons. We’re running out of time.”

He turned her in his arms and for a moment, no matter how brief, Mischa swore she saw something in his eyes, something like guilt, maybe?

“Rhad, what is it?”

He kissed her forehead. “Nothing, my sweet. You should try to rest.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to pick up an innocent citizen for a late-night snack.” He tossed her a wink, snatched his clothes and sauntered out into the brisk night.

“Smart-ass,” Mischa grumbled, though she couldn’t resist a grin of her own.

Riana fell into step beside Rhad, her ethereal form floating a few inches from the ground. “*You haven’t told her,*” her voice held an accusation.”

Rhad gritted his teeth and quickened his pace. “I’ll tell her when the time is right.”

“*And if I say it’s right now?*”

He shot her a glance. “Are you psychic now, too?”

Rianna made a sniffing noise. “*Vampires can be so testy.*”

“Only when they’re being pestered by ghosts.”

She smiled and for a brief moment, Rhad saw Mischa. He swallowed hard and concentrated on the dark path ahead.

“*You worry about her,*” Riana stated the obvious.

“Someone has to.”

“*Mischa has always been the strong one in our family.*” The ghost heaved a sigh, which, in itself, amazed Rhad considering ghosts, like vampires, didn’t breathe. At least, they shouldn’t breath.

His breath fogged in the air and he cupped his hands around his mouth and blew into his palms. The heat warmed his fingers for the space of a second before the frigid chill set in again. “Sometimes, even the strongest person needs a soft place to fall.”

Rianna shimmied around to hover in the air directly in Rhad’s path. “*Will you take care of my sister, then?*”

“Didn’t we already have a conversation similar to this?”

Rianna sniffed the air. “*You’ve had sex with her.*”

Rhad stopped walking and glared up at the translucent form. “Okay. That’s it. I’ll put up with your ghostly company and listen to your self-recriminations, but what I won’t do, will never do, is discuss my sex life with you.”

Riana gave a throaty laugh and pursed her paper-thin lips. “*Do you love her?*”

He gave her a disgusted look and resumed walking. “I won’t discuss that, either.”

Rianna began to rise toward the trees. “*I must warn you.*” Rhad saw her eyes lift to the skies. “*There isn’t much time, so you must listen to me.*”

“You could have already said it in the time it took to issue that warning,” he pointed out with a grumble. He wished the apparition would just get to the point and then go on to the other side or whatever in the hell it was that dead people were supposed to do. It made him damned uncomfortable that Mischa’s sister

had chosen to confide in him.

“Are you listening to me?” A haughty note tinged the voice.

Rhad waved a hand in the air. “I’m all ears.”

“You will encounter more danger along the way, more than what you’ve dealt with so far.”

Now that got his attention. He crammed his hands into his pockets and rocked back on the heels of his boots. “What kind of danger?”

An owl hooted and a low rumble of thunder warned of impending rain. Otherwise, the air remained eerily silent. Rhad blinked once and realized Riana had disappeared.

He cursed loudly and began a swift jog back to the cave where he’d left Mischa. “The next time you want to warn me about something, Riana, how about giving me a little more heads-up?”

CHAPTER FIVE

Rhad found Mischa sleeping, curled with her head on a boulder bigger than she was. Smiling, he knelt down next to her and brushed the hair away from her face. “Mischa.” He kissed her cheek and the scent of her skin ignited his senses. “Mischa, I need you to wake up.”

She cracked open one eye and sighed. Her warm breath bathed his face and he knew he could take her again right there. Her eyes still held the glow of their passionate encounter.

She pushed herself away from the rock and stretched. Rhad’s eyes dropped to the luxurious mounds of her breasts. He still recalled the taste.

“How much farther do we have to go now?”

Rhad stood and held out one hand. “Not much. Are you up to more walking?”

She lifted one eyebrow and gave him a saucy wink. “Why? What else did you have in mind?”

And just like that, he was hard. He gave a grunt and took a stumbling step backwards. Guilt washed over him like a tidal wave and he cursed the ghost’s secret. “We really should go.”

Mischa clamped her hands on her hips. The movement thrust her breasts out even more and Rhad stifled a groan. Good God, could he think of nothing now other than the heat of her sex holding him?

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on?” she demanded in a voice as rich as honey.

He closed his eyes and rubbed them vigorously. “Nothing’s wrong.”

“You’re regretting what happened between us.”

His head shot up. “No, I’m not. I’m . . .” he hesitated.

Mischa squared her shoulders and marched past him. “Fine. Keep your secrets. We have ground to cover.”

Rhad cursed to himself and gave himself a few seconds to regroup. He didn’t know what to say to her and . . .

“Rhad?” Mischa’s voice sounded strange, but at least she was still talking to him. He took that as a good sign.

“Yeah?”

“Could you come out here, please?” He didn’t miss the strain in her voice.

He jogged outside into the night and in the distance, just ahead of Mischa, he saw a silvery cloud floating toward them. He snatched Mischa’s arm and shoved her behind him. “Stay back.”

“And what exactly are you going to do to protect me from something you can’t physically hurt?” She whispered furiously in his ear.

Rhad hadn't thought of that one, but he'd always been quick on his feet, both mentally and physically.

"*Rhad*," came the now familiar voice.

"Riana?" Both Rhad and Mischa said the name at the same time, it was Mischa who pushed forward.

"Riana?" She called again.

The cloud dissipated, leaving Riana standing in its place. Mischa clapped her hand over her mouth.

Rhad's hands ached to close around the ghost's throat and he would, if she weren't already dead.

"Riana, for the love of God . . ."

Mischa spun around. "You know her? I thought you'd never met her."

He knew that no matter what he said, this wasn't going to turn out good. "It's a long story."

Mischa shook her head and fastened her eyes on her sister's floating body. "What does this mean?

What are you doing? Is this some kind of a joke?"

Riana shook her head slowly and advanced. "*It's no joke, Mischa. I tried to get your boyfriend to tell you sooner, but he chickened out.*"

Rhad took umbrage at the words, but he kept silent. He'd give the sisters time to talk, to make their own discoveries and finally, to say good-bye. Slowly, quietly, he receded into the background and out of earshot. Mischa would come to him when she was ready. She'd want answers from him. Maybe by then, he'd have them.

Mischa felt the blood drain from her face as the ghostly form of her sister hovered near her. Tears clogged her throat. "Riana, my God, what happened to you?" She extended her hand, but it passed through the translucency of Riana's face. Mischa recoiled and held her hand close to her chest.

Riana smiled sadly. "*I guess you could say that my smart mouth finally caught up with me.*" She gave a light laugh, but Mischa didn't join in. "*You always said it was only a matter of time before I met someone who wouldn't put up with my smart mouth.*" She grimaced. "*And as much as it pains me to admit it, you were right.*"

Mischa lowered her hand away from her chest. "You're really dead?"

Rianna nodded.

The tears leaked from Mischa's eyes. "This can't be happening." She shook her head wildly. "I was . . . we were coming to find you. Something brought me here. I was home in Boston and I kept hearing your voice. You were calling me here."

Riana floated in closer and Mischa felt a brush of cold air over her skin. "*I didn't call you, Mischa.*"

A sob scrambled out of her chest. "Then who?" Mischa lifted one hand to silence the reply. "Never mind. I can't do this." She took a backwards step. "I thought I was coming to save you, but now I find," she

waved a hand toward her sister's ethereal form. "This. I was too late."

"No," Riana protested. *"You weren't too late. I made wrong decisions, bad choices, and for that, I paid with my life. You could not have saved me."*

"You don't know that!" Mischa screamed. "You couldn't know that!" Hysteria overtaking her, she fell to her knees, covering her face with her hands. Grief compelled a torrent of weeping. She barely felt the hands on her shoulders, drawing her to her feet, lifting her into strong arms. She didn't raise her head even when Rhad carried her away, away from her sister's ghostly form, away from knowledge she didn't want.

Mischa woke to bright sunlight streaming in through the mouth of the cave. She knew Rhad slept beside her and she didn't attempt to waken him. Instead, she extricated herself from his arms and walked on shaky legs to the entrance.

She'd cried herself to sleep and now, in the bright light of morning, numbness coated her soul. Rianna had been her only family and now, she'd lost her. She'd failed her parents. She'd promised she'd take care of her. Biting her fist to keep from crying out loud, she stumbled into the clearing and leaned against the nearest tree.

"I've been waiting for you to wake up," came Riana's painfully familiar voice.

Mischa's breath came out in a shudder. "You shouldn't be here. You're dead."

Riana made a rude noise. *"It's not polite to remind me, Mischa, though, you always were the logical one."*

Mischa tipped her face to the sky but even the warmth of the sun couldn't restore the light which had dimmed within her. "I don't know what I'm going to do now."

"Don't give me that. You've always known what you wanted with your life, of course, that was before you met your dark and brooding vampire."

"He's not my vampire."

"Seems to me he was the one who came to your rescue last night and every night before that." Rianna lifted a transparent hand in the air. *"And was it my imagination or was that his chest you pillowed your head on last night."*

Mischa spun around to face her sister's ghost. "Rianna, will you listen to yourself? You're talking like it's really you standing here and it can't be. You shouldn't be here." She scrubbed her face with her hands. "Why are you here?"

"I asked for permission to say goodbye to you. I knew you'd come for me. You always come for me."

Mischa's chest burned. "I've always taken care of you. I don't know what I'm going to do without

you.”

Riana sailed toward the opening to the cave. *“Seems to me you’ll have your hands full with your new boyfriend.”*

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

Riana grinned over her shoulder. *“No? Too bad. I’m thinking that one could give you a run for your money or,”* the grin turned slightly evil, *“the ride of your life.”*

“This is absolutely surreal.”

“Got news for you, Sis, so is sleeping with a vampire.”

Mischa sucked in a sharp breath. “How did you know about that?”

“I didn’t till just now. You always were gullible.” Riana’s face became somber. *“I have to go now.”*

Panic set in. “What? No. Wait. We haven’t had enough time. Are you coming back? Where are you going?”

Riana began to float backwards. *“Mischa, I’ll always be with you, you know that, but it’s time. I only asked for time to say goodbye.”*

“Why didn’t you come to me sooner? We could have had more time.” Mischa heard the accusation in her own voice.

Riana shook her head. *“My time started the moment I talked to you. Why do you think I told your boyfriend first? I wanted time to watch you, see the two of you together and know you weren’t going to be alone. Believe it or not, it helps.”*

“You don’t know I won’t be alone.”

“No, I don’t, but he does. I love you, Mischa. Thank you for being my big sister.” She blew a kiss into the wind and Mischa felt it as if Rianna had actually kissed her cheek.

With tears streaking down her face, Mischa watched until Rianna faded into thin air and long after the silver mist had disappeared, she clung to the tree holding her aloft.

She had never felt so alone.

Rhad came awake at dusk and found Mischa sitting just outside the cave, her knees close to her chest, her arms curled around them. Her tousled hair hung down her back and from the way she sat, he knew she’d spent the better half of the evening crying. He couldn’t explain why he felt her pain inside his chest, but then, he couldn’t explain anything about the past four days beginning with Mischa’s appearance on his front door step.

He climbed to his feet and brushed the dust off the back of his jeans, but before he could walk out of the cave, Mischa rose and turned to face him. He didn’t take his eyes off of her as she walked toward him.

He didn't know what to say to her. He certainly wouldn't ask if she was okay. The look on her face gave him his answer. He simply held out his arms and she walked into his embrace, burying her face against his neck.

He held her tightly against his chest, hoping she could miraculously absorb some of his strength. He whispered against her hair in the language of their country, offering reassurance and hope.

"My sister is dead," she whispered as if he didn't already know.

"I'm sorry, Mischa," he responded.

"She died too soon. I didn't even get to tell her about our . . ." Mischa broke off, her head popping up so suddenly, she almost bumped it on Rhad's chin. "Our grandfather!" She struggled to free herself from his arms. "Rhad, I didn't tell her about our grandfather!" She bounced back toward the position she'd just vacated. "We have to go." When Rhad didn't move, she shot him an irritated look. "What are you standing there for? We have to go!"

"Where exactly is it that we are going?"

"To find my grandfather. I thought Riana was my only family and that I was going to be alone in this world, but now I know I have a grandfather."

Rhad walked toward her slowly so as not to startle her. "And who is your grandfather?" His internal sensors went on high alert at the animated look on Mischa's face. Was she entering a denial stage?

Mischa's face cleared. "Oh. Right. I didn't tell you. My grandfather is the shaman."

"The shaman?"

Her irritation returned. "The shaman, who helped you, saved you from a life of drinking human blood. The one and the same." She tilted her chin proudly. "My grandfather is the shaman. And now that you've been filled in, we need to find him. So get whatever it is you need for us to climb that mountain and we can go." She started walking, but Rhad didn't follow.

Inside, he cursed the Fates for the cruel twist Mischa had coming. He hadn't told her when the shaman had helped him. "Mischa," he called after her in a solemn tone of voice. He wondered if the news he had for her would cripple her.

She froze, shaking her head in robotic fashion. "Don't."

He approached her, his boots crunching over the frozen forest floor. "I have to."

She held up one hand. "Rhad, I don't know if I can take any more devastation."

His hands gripped her shoulders and he turned her around slowly. "You already know, don't you?"

Her face crumpled. "How long?"

"Five years now."

Mischa remained silent for a long, ponderous moment and then, Rhad watched as her face became stoic. She stepped away from him and began walking in the opposite direction, back toward the path, which led toward his castle.

“Where are you going?” he called after her.

“I have no reason to stay in Romania. I’m going home.”

Rhad fell into step beside her. “Do you really believe you have no reason to stay here?”

“My family is gone.”

“I’ll be your family,” he shot back.

She stopped walking again. “We barely know each other.”

He gave a short laugh. “I daresay we know more about each other than most married couples.”

“Because we had sex?”

“Do you really think it’s important to know what my favorite color is or what I like to eat for breakfast in the morning?” He traced her lips with his index finger. “I know what you are like in here,” he tapped the wall of her chest, which her heart beat behind. “You’re the first person I’ve told about the shaman and what happened to me. You experienced the pain anew with me and though you knew I was a vampire, you didn’t run away from me.” He gripped her upper arms. “Why do you think you came to Romania?”

“I thought Riana called me here.”

“And now that you know she didn’t, who did?”

She tried to shake off his hands, but he held fast. “Does it matter?”

“Mischa, I found your unconscious body on my steps. You were half-naked and frozen and you don’t remember a thing about it. What’s more, someone or something knocked on my front door to call attention to your arrival. Who do you think wanted us to meet?” He saw the confusion cloud her eyes and he pushed his point. “Do you really think you were brought all this way simply to discover the news about your sister’s death?”

“I found out about my grandfather as well.”

“True, but how does that benefit you?”

“Who said it has to benefit me? Maybe it’s all some kind of cosmic joke.”

“You don’t believe that. That’s not who you are.”

“How do you know that? And furthermore, how can you look at life and not think it’s all some cruel joke with a master dealer cheating at the cards he’s dealing? Another creature transformed you into a vampire, Rhad, a hunted creature with a price on your head. Doesn’t that test the limits of your optimism?”

His temper began a slow boil. “You’re very good with that sharp tongue of yours, but even sarcasm isn’t going to get you out of this dose of hard, cold reality. This isn’t about what I am. It’s about you and

what your next step is going to be? Do you really want to go home to an empty apartment or do you want to stay here and live with the hunted?"

Mischa walked away from him. "I can't think about this right now. I need," a sob caught in her throat. "I didn't even ask Riana where she was buried." The words came out as a half-plea.

Rhad caught up with her and wrapped his arm around her waist. "I'll find out."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would you want to help me when you know I'm going to leave soon?"

He kissed the top of her head. "I want to help you because you need to know where your sister is buried and you're not leaving anytime soon."

"What makes you so sure of that?"

Rhad's eyes searched her face and easily identified the fear. "I'm not leaving you, Mischa."

"You don't know me," she said almost desperately.

He captured her hand and held it over his chest. "I know I love you."

Her eyes lifted and met his. "How? You can't love me. It's impossible." She tried to tug her hand free, but Rhad held on fast.

"We're connected, Mischa. You can't deny it."

"I can deny everything. This is not happening. My sister is dead. The grandfather I never met is dead and I'm supposed to believe my soul is connected to a vampire?" Shaking her head desperately, she managed to free herself. "I just want to . . ."

"What? What do you just want to do? Go back to Boston where nothing awaits you?" He sifted her hair through his fingers. "You have nothing to go home to, my love. Here you have everything." He pulled her closer. "I'll give you the world."

"*Will she be happy, Grandfather?*" Riana asked in a heartsick tone of voice.

The white-haired man moved to stand beside her. He wrapped one arm around her waist. "*If she follows her heart, my sweet. I can only lead her to her heart's desire. I cannot guarantee her happiness.*"

"*Mischa never has been one to follow her heart.*"

The Shaman chuckled. "*You might be surprised.*"

"You know, he really is smug sometimes," Mischa commented as she placed the hand-picked flowers on Riana's grave. She patted the stems into place and sat down on the fresh cut grass next to the marble

tombstone. “Someone takes very good care of you.” From behind her, she sensed Rhad’s presence but he stood back, allowing her the time she needed to talk with her sister for the final time. “He wants me to stay with him, Riana.” She rested her hands back behind her and looked up at the sky. “I’d convinced myself that Boston is where I belong, but now, being here with him, I just don’t know.” She wiped the tears from her eyes. “He makes me feel . . . alive again. Could I really have fallen in love with a vampire? You always said I was the level-headed one. This certainly doesn’t sound very level-headed does it?” She laughed a little in spite of the pain in her heart.

She heard her name and she looked down at the valley where the bright green grass and blue flowers waved in the wind. She saw Rhad climbing the hill towards her. “That’s my cue, Riana.” She touched the tombstone. “He said we wouldn’t have long. A storm is coming in, or so he says. Personally, I don’t see it, but I’m not about to test his knowledge.” She stood and brushed off the seat of her pants. “I will miss you, Riana, but I do have to thank you. If you hadn’t come to Romania, I could have missed this.” She shot a look over her shoulder just as Rhad reached the knoll behind her. “As much uncertainty as I have about my life, one thing I am sure of. He wants me to stay with him. He loves me. Well, I guess that makes two things.” She pressed a kiss to her fingertips and touched the cool marble again. “Do you think you’ll ever come back to see me again?”

Rhad joined her on the top of the hill. “We need to go, but now that you know where she is, you can come back any time.”

“If I stay,” Mischa whispered.

He hooked an arm around her waist. “That’s a decision you’ll have to make.”

“This is all impossible,” she repeated her earlier words.

He turned her in his arms. “Do you want to believe it’s possible?”

She rested her forehead against his chest. “I do.”

“There’s nothing stopping you.”

“Do you really love me?”

Rhad laughed gently and drew her closer. “Allow me to show you.”

“What are you doing?” The words came out on a squeak.

“I’m going to bite you now.” He nuzzled her neck and Mischa gave an almost hysterical laugh until his teeth gently scraped her flesh. Then she melted. Dear God, how could anything so abnormal feel so erotic?

“Let’s go home,” Rhad made the suggestion a demand.

Mischa found herself aloft in his arms. “Is this the part where you turn into a bat?”

The winds shifted and thunder rumbled in the distance and suddenly, she saw the castle over the

horizon. She didn't even ask how he'd produced the stone structure. She only knew she was home.

Five years later.

Mischa rolled over in the bed and nipped Rhad lightly on the neck. "How does that feel?"

His hand slipped to cup her bottom. "Like I need to feel it again to be sure."

She curled her leg over his and pressed her sex against his thigh. "You know, I've been thinking."

He raised his head off the pillow and Mischa saw his eyes sliding over her face, hungry and relentless even now. "Should I be worried?"

She nudged him lightly with her elbow. "You know, I've been here five years now and I'm five years older."

Rhad remained silent though his hand tightened on hers.

"But you're not."

He touched his forehead to hers. "I know where you're going with this, but don't."

"We have to discuss it, Rhad. Eventually, I'm going to grow old and die, but you won't. You will never die."

He tipped her face up and kissed her, a brief, hard press of his lips to hers. "That's not true, Mischa."

"Okay, well, you'll die if someone stabs you."

He pressed his palms to her face. "Listen to me. I will not live without you."

She shifted on the bed and stared at him. "What are you saying?"

"When you die, so shall I."

"But how? You can't . . ." she broke off, her mouth dropping open. "Rhad, no. Promise me you won't take your own life." She sat up. "There's another way. You could make me like you."

Rhad pushed her back down against the mattress. "The Shaman is dead. If I were to make you like me, you would require the blood of humans to survive."

Mischa wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, I don't think I'd like that. There has to be another way. I certainly don't want to be responsible for your shortening your life."

Rhad began to laugh. "Mischa, I've lived hundreds of years now. My life span has been anything but short."

She hated when he was right. "Okay, fine, but you have to admit . . ."

He rolled and covered her body with his. "Let us discuss this another time. For now, I want to make love to my wife."

Mischa wanted to protest but the warmth of his palm cupping her breast quickly changed her mind. They had years to discuss the future. For now, they would just live. And love.

“Grandfather, isn’t there anything we can do? They’re so happy together and . . .”

“Everything comes to an end, my child.”

Riana clutched his arms. *“But there is something, isn’t there? You can do something, can’t you? Please. Do it for me. No, no. Do it for her.”*

The shaman sighed. *“Your sister has many years ahead of her, Riana. You do not need to worry.”*

“How many years?”

The shaman began to fade.

“Grandfather, answer me. How many years? You know, it really irritates me when you do this. The least you could do is answer my question. I don’t think that’s too much to ask . . .”

And the moon glittered brightly in the black sky, casting a brilliant glow over the two lovers reaching the pinnacle of their desire.