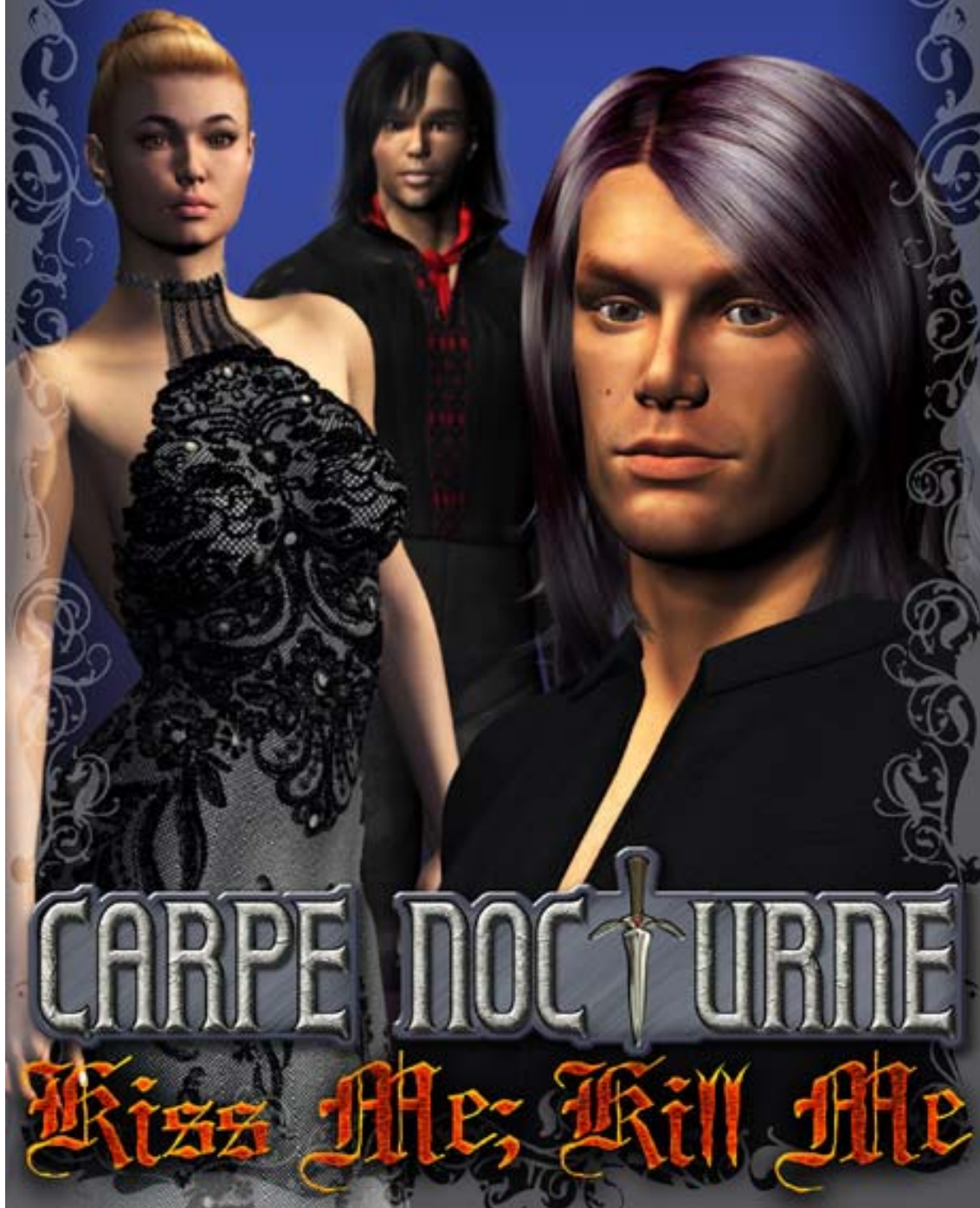


Changeling Press

Tawny Taylor



# **Carpe Nocturne 2: Kiss Me, Kill Me**

## **Tawny Taylor**

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## **Carpe Nocturne 2: Kiss Me, Kill Me**

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*One determined entrepreneur.*

*Two seductive vampires.*

*A brutal murderer...*

*... and a bar where every vampire knows your name.*

*Gives new meaning to the expression "Thrilling Nightlife."*

Sylvie Durand, nightclub owner, and mate to not one but two powerful vampires, finds her desire for Excoluni officer Miko Dvorak every bit as intense as it was for his quarry, suspected murderer Burke Langton. She can and will love both men. She can and will serve both men. This is her future.

But life is far from perfect. The killer is still on the loose, and Burke has yet to uncover his sinister plans or clear his name. Miko is a passionate, dominant and skilled lover, yet, without completing the Binding, there will be no end to Sylvie's agonizing pain. If only the killer was caught so their triad could be complete.

Miko is torn. His career has always been the center of his life. Should he be caught protecting Burke from the Excoluni, his career will be over. Sylvie's determined to convince him to take that risk, but it's the agony of the Binding that will drive both Miko and Burke to a desperate act.

## Chapter 1

He would have his answer. *Finally.*

The pain of living this way had become unbearable. He missed her so much. Needed her more than anything. The price he'd had to pay to find the answer was a dear one, but well worth it.

The document was fragile. Scrawled in a barely discernable variation of the Ancient Tongue on a piece of dried human skin. The skin had then been rolled onto a bone that once belonged to a powerful wizard. The magic, which protected the document, shimmered in the air as he slowly unrolled it. The faintest zapping sensation, like tiny pinpricks, traveled over his fingertips.

It was the most amazing thing. And what it would give him was the one piece of the puzzle he'd lacked, the answer to why his past attempts at raising his beloved had failed.

He would not fail again.

He read the document for the third time, double-checking to make sure he had all the necessary ingredients for the revealing spell.

Who'd known each spell in the *Book of the Shadows* had its own key? Lucky for him, a mage had owed him a fairly large favor, or he would never have known.

It paid to know people in high places.

He drew the circle on the floor with ash, set the candle in its center and lit it. Then he read the spell on the scroll aloud, poured the virgin's blood onto the ground. Setting the scroll down, he slowly tipped the burning candle, adding the molten wax to the puddle of blood.

Slowly at first, then quicker, the blood congealed. It turned into a thick black gelatin, forming words on the ground.

But the words were nonsense. Utterly meaningless, even in the Ancient Tongue.

Had he been taken for a fool? Furious, he thought about throwing the still burning candle into the mess, but ran to gather a pencil and paper first.

It never paid to act in haste.

He copied down the entire message then completed the final cleansing step to clear away the results of the spell.

He took a moment to read what he'd written on the paper. Was it some kind of code? A puzzle he had to solve?

He supposed it would be foolish for a mage to hand over a spell this powerful if there were no protective measures in place.

That had to be it. A code. A puzzle. He was excellent at both.

"It won't be long, my love," he said to his beloved, still lying in her resting place on the altar. "It won't be long at all. The next time I cast the spell, you will be mine for always."

\* \* \*

Burke Langton parked the car in the middle of a drugstore's parking lot. He turned to Sylvie Durand -- his *Origo*, his mate -- and was immediately rendered a near cripple by the pain of the *Iugum*, the Binding. It had increased a hundredfold since leaving the bar.

Fuck!

Of all the *Insurgis* who had to be Sylvie's other mate... of all the fucking *Insurgis*! Why did it have to be Miko Dvorak, brother and second in command to Hadrian Dvorak?

While he knew in the back of his mind there was the possibility the situation could work to his advantage, right now, while his blood was burning like acid and his body ached for what it could not have, he didn't care. All he cared about was completing the Binding. The pain would be gone. And if the legends were true, he'd not only find completion, but he'd also experience the one thing that was impossible for him now -- love.

The emptiness, the hollowness, he'd lived with all his life would be gone.

His suffering would not end until the Binding was complete. The ache would steadily increase until it either killed him or drove him mad. Would he catch the killer in time? Before he lost his grip on sanity? Before he lost his life and soul?

And what about Sylvie? He knew she was a resilient woman, with a strong will and spirit. But how much suffering could she endure? Would he be forced to take his own life just to free her from the torture?

She licked her lips as she looked at him, searching his face for the answers he'd been too unwilling to answer yet. His cock stiffened as his gaze fixed to her mouth. To feel those lips down there, gliding up and down his shaft. Her tongue swirling around the head.

He stifled a roar of frustration. He needed to get moving. Now. Get some money and find them a place to hide until their paperwork was done, allowing them to travel freely, register in a hotel, rent a car.

He needed to ease the burn a little. Fucking her would do that, lessen the pain. For both of them. But only temporarily. There was only one permanent cure. And it was impossible without Miko.

"Stay here and stay together," he said. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"What if you don't come back?" Isabella, his dearest friend, asked.

"I'll be back. Just stay out of sight. And don't go anywhere." He knew he'd regret it, but he leaned over and brushed his mouth over Sylvie's. It hardly qualified as a kiss, but the effect would have knocked him on his ass if he hadn't already been seated.

Dizzy and lightheaded, he fumbled with the door handle, pushed open the car door and after standing on legs that felt wobbly for the first time ever, he gently shut it to keep from making too much noise. It wasn't too late yet, not even eleven in the evening. But the suburban neighborhood was quiet. Dvorak had no doubt tracked down his address and was trolling the area, looking for him. He'd have to be careful.

He stuck to the darkest shadows as he walked to his building. Once again, he found himself thankful for the fact that his apartment complex didn't have street lights.

It made for plenty of shadows. The moon, mostly hidden behind an inky cloud, produced only the faintest bluish glow, barely enough light for even a creature of the night to see.

He made it to his building with no trouble. As he neared, he was relieved to see there was no sign of visitors. No cars. No lingering glitter of magic. No sounds. Moving slowly and carefully, not to make a sound, he rounded the side of the building. Still nothing.

Could he have been wrong about Dvorak? Had he failed to get a clear view of the license plate?

He could only be so lucky!

He slipped inside, and made his way up the stairs, his every sense alert to anything that was out of the ordinary. Nothing, except the pathetic whimper of a poodle.

Oh the gods, he'd forgotten about the dog.

He hated dogs, especially girly dogs like poodles. And this one had made it clear it didn't exactly have the greatest regard for him either. But dammit, he couldn't leave the thing there to starve. There were some things that even he knew were plain wrong.

He considered leaving her be until he was ready to leave but changed his mind. It seemed, from its reaction, that it was sensitive to the scent of the *Insurgi*, the Immortal. Therefore, if there were any Excoluni members nearby, the little thing might go yipping and nipping after them. At least that would get them out in the open and give him a fighting chance at getting out of the apartment with his money.

*Sounds like a plan.*

Walking soundlessly, each step taking far longer than he wished, he made it back to the bedroom, flattened himself against the wall and opened the door.

The poodle, yipping at an eardrum-shattering volume and pitch, went straight to the door.

At least it was trained well. And nothing had distracted the animal. It wasn't exactly a clear signal that the apartment was empty, but it eased his worries a bit.



Unable to let the poodle outside to conduct its business yet, he went back to his room to handle his.

Working quickly, he pulled the suitcase out from under his bed, went to the closet and removed the hidden panel. Didn't take more than a few minutes to gather the cash from its hiding place, pack it in the bag, gather a growling, snapping dog and head for the door. It took a whole lot longer to convince the fur ball to shut up and stop trying to take off his digits so that he felt safe enough to head outside.

He was smack dab in the middle of the building's front yard when the headlights hit him.

"I've got you!" Miko shouted. "Stop!"

Blinded by the glare, Burke ran as fast as he could, in the opposite direction of Isabella, Sylvie and the car. As he tripped and stumbled over lawn ornaments and low-lying shrubberies, he put up a silent prayer to the gods that the women hadn't been found.

The dog stiffened but showed the rare wisdom not to start yapping. At a full run, Burke headed around a corner at the end of the block and into the small patch of woods that cut the apartment complex into two. He stayed in the woods, dodging trees as he ran, until he had gone to the end. He stopped just before stepping out onto the paved street.

He saw no sign of a car coming. Heard nothing behind him. No snapping twigs or rustling leaves. Had Miko given up so easily? Although it would have been nice, Burke didn't believe that for a minute.

Being extra careful to stay in the shadows, he walked down the residential street, heading back toward the parking lot where he'd left the car. It was a long friggin' walk, especially while carrying a squirmy, dribbling poodle. The little beast was the most nervous animal he'd ever seen. Lost its bladder control at the slightest noise. Sure helped him, though. It was a particularly substantial leak that alerted him to the fact that there was a car coming up behind them with its headlights off.

Burke was able to duck behind a hedge and hide until Miko had driven by.

"Yeah, you spoke too soon, asshole," he murmured to the taillights of the car.

It was too dark to tell if there were any other people in the car with him, but Burke was guessing there weren't.

Twenty or so minutes later, he crept into the parking lot. He was hugely relieved to see the car was parked where he'd left it. And he guessed, by the subtle shift of shadows inside the vehicle, that Isabella and Sylvie were still waiting, probably getting anxious and impatient, not that he could blame them. By his estimate, it had been at least forty-five minutes since he'd left them.

It was a wonder they hadn't wandered off to go looking for him. He knew Isabella had probably been tempted.

One thing that bothered him as he approached the car was how careless they were being. Even though he couldn't see them per se, he could see their forms shifting. He'd told them to stay quiet and still, to avoid calling any undue attention to themselves. Looked like they were practically holding a party in there.

And then he realized what was going on. It was the legs and trunk of a non-female body emerging from the vehicle that shed some light on the situation. The car parked next to his, engine running, headlights off, gave him a fairly reliable clue whose legs and torso they were.

"Fuck!" he whispered, cutting a sharp right to hide behind a crop of trees in an empty lot. "Should've known you wouldn't quit so easy."

"Why would you think something as stupid as that?" Isabella said behind him.

He jerked. The dog tinkled -- again -- dousing the front of his clothes. It then decided to yap its fool head off at Isabella.

Burke dropped the suitcase and tried to muzzle its mouth with his hand, but it bit him. He swallowed an angry growl and was about to go for a second attempt when Sylvie jumped up from behind a shrub and snatched it out of his arms, whispering, "Shhhhhush, Lulu! Before you get us caught."

"You're... Who's in the car?" Confused and relieved, Burke turned back to the car to see if Miko had heard them.

Okay, the guy was standing next to the car, his gaze leveled right at them.

He'd say that was a yes.

"Fuck. Gotta run. Fast!" He pointed east. "That way!" Snatching up the suitcase, he bent down, hit Sylvie mid-stomach with his shoulder and scooped her off her feet. Still hugging her dog to her side, she dangled over his back as he ran, kicking her legs, insisting he put her down.

Not that he could take the time to explain it now, but there was no other way. Humans moved slow as snails compared to immortals. If he let her run, they stood absolutely no chance of escaping.

Ignoring Sylvie's continuing rant, and her dog's continued assault on his shoulder, he turned north, cutting through some lawns to go back toward the woods. That narrow patch of forest wound down several miles, to the county line. It was their only hope of staying out of sight.

They stopped running about three miles in. He set Sylvie down on her feet and prepared himself for the verbal assault he was sure to get. She gave him a pretty nasty glare but didn't say a word. She hugged her quivering animal to her chest and stumbled beside him as they walked. When she tripped over a tree root, he caught her hand to keep her from falling.

She answered his gesture with a faint smile. "Thank you. For getting Lulu."

"You're welcome."

Neither of them released the other's hand.

It seemed he'd been forgiven.

One disaster averted, several actually.

Now he just had to figure out where they'd go next. With no car, they could only go so far. And with daylight coming in the next few hours, they needed to find someplace safe to hide, or he'd be dust.

Literally.

## Chapter 2

Sylvie knew she was holding his hand. There wasn't a cell in her body that wasn't vibrating like a bee trapped in a glass jar. What was left of her gray matter was telling her she should cut ties now, while the cutting was good. Those two, Burke and Isabella, were in some serious trouble with a law enforcement organization she knew nothing about.

At this point she figured she could talk herself out of any legal trouble her affiliation with them might have brought on her, but if she stuck with them much longer... there was no telling what might be assumed.

*Oy, the tangled webs, blah, blah, blah.*

Ironically, her troubles had started because she'd tried to do something new and exciting to get Carpe Nocturne in the black.

That was another thing. She needed to get in touch with the police and find out when she could open Carpe Nocturne back up. Because she'd had to close early Friday, she'd now lost almost two days' revenues, and although Sundays weren't her biggest day of the week, money was money. Things were beyond desperate at this point.

But damn if she could get herself to let go of Burke's hand, let alone wish him luck and hightail it away from there. Whether it was the vampire-bonding thing or her Catholic upbringing, even the thought of leaving him made her feel guilty as hell. It was like she was abandoning him.

She was getting really tired now. Beyond tired. Her feet were killing her. Her legs were sore. Her back was achy. Her eyes felt like they'd been alternately rolled in crushed glass and petroleum jelly. She did a lot of blinking as she walked. And a lot of wondering.

Where the hell were they headed? They weren't far from Lisa's house.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"We need to find shelter before sunrise." Burke stopped walking when they reached the end of the woods. He looked right and left, down the street. She admired his profile. Until she'd met him, she'd never even held a conversation with a man who looked like that, let alone had sex with one.

How things had changed in the last twelve hours or so. In some ways for the better. In some ways for the worse.

"My friend doesn't live far from here," she suggested. "I'm sure she wouldn't mind some company. She works days, so it'll be quiet once she leaves. That is, if you don't have somewhere else in mind."

Burke smoothed a hand down her arm then nodded. "That sounds good. Real good."

"It's this way." She pointed to the north. "She's bound to be freaking out by now anyway, after what happened last night."

Burke continued to hold her hand as they started north, keeping to the shadows. Little buzzes and zaps of erotic awareness zinged up her arm and straight to her groin. Her cheeks heated.

"Is there any chance she might've gone back to your house after we left the bar last night?" Isabella asked, falling into step on her right side.

"Maybe. Why?"

"We'd better keep a lookout as we get closer," Isabella suggested. "Someone posted at your house might've followed her home, thinking she might lead them to you."

"Oh." Sylvie looked at Burke. "If that's the case, maybe we should go somewhere else."

He shook his head and gave her a reassuring smile. It wasn't the most gleeful expression she'd ever seen but it eased her worries a smidge. Also amplified the tingles and zaps. "It'll be okay. You can go in alone and then sneak us inside."

"You want me to sneak you in?"

Burke stopped walking and took her arms in his hands, giving them a firm squeeze before changing his touch to a slow, erotic caress. He looked into her eyes and she saw the heat of suppressed longing in his eyes. A spark of wanting flashed through her. Her mouth dried. "It'll be better for everyone, especially your friend, if she doesn't know we're there."

She nodded. "Okay." She didn't like the idea of lying to Lisa, but she could kind of see his point. Already there was a good chance she was neck-deep in trouble. Why drag her best friend into the quicksand with her?

It was choosing the lesser of two very nasty evils.

It took them about a half hour to walk to Lisa's house. Sylvie told Isabella and Burke she'd tell Lisa she was letting Lulu out and then sneak them in the back door. Despite the fact that she knew she'd see Burke in a little while, she had a really hard time leaving him. It felt like a part of her anatomy had been sliced from her body when she took a few steps away from him.

This Master-slash-mate stuff was hard on a girl.

Feeling both dull from exhaustion and sadness, and also jittery from fear, she walked up Lisa's front walk and knocked on the door.

It took a long time for Lisa to answer. She looked like death as she opened the door. Her short hair stuck out at odd angles and dark circles made her eyes look sunken in.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Lisa snapped, scowling.

"Long story. Can I come in?"

"Yeah, sure." Lisa stepped aside to let Sylvie in then slammed the door shut. "So, spill. What's going on? Something's going on. Something weird. Tell me now or I'm going to... to do something drastic." She scratched Lulu's head and cooed, "How's my girl? How's my girl?" as she took the shaking animal out of Sylvie's arms and inspected her. "My goodness! You're a wreck." She gave Sylvie another look. One of her trademark I'm-not-going-to-quit-hounding-you-until-you-spill-it looks. "What happened? First, you made me go to that yuppie bar last night. And then you were

fought over by not one but two absolutely gorgeous men. And then some chick who looked like Anna in *Van Helsing* stuck a knife to your throat and dragged you off.” Her voice rose with every word she spoke until she was shouting and practically shaking as bad as Lulu. “I’ve been worried to death!”

Sylvie had never seen Lisa so hysterical. Hysterical friends were absolutely no help. “Listen, I realize things are kind of crazy right now but I need you to keep it together. For both of us. Okay?” When Lisa responded with a nod, she asked, “Did you go to my house last night?”

“No. I was going to but then the police told me they’d handle it --”

“The police? You went to the police?”

“I talked to the undercover cops who were at the bar when you got kidnapped. That good looking one who’d bought --”

“Shit!” Sylvie shouted. The noise made Lulu twitch in Lisa’s arms. She peered out the front door’s peephole. So far there wasn’t a fleet of unmarked Ex-co-whatever police cars crowding the driveway, but she knew chances were good Miko would head to Lisa’s after losing them outside of Burke’s apartment complex. “Shit, shit, shit! Please tell me they didn’t take your address.”

“Um... Yeah. They did. Why? Don’t police officers usually take someone’s personal information when they report a kidnapping?”

“Gotta go. Will you do me a favor and keep an eye on Lulu for a few days?”

“Uh, sure, but --”

“And the bar. Will you call the detective on this card and ask him if it’s okay to open the bar?” She unzipped her purse, pulled the detective’s card from her wallet and handed it to her friend. “And whatever you do, don’t talk to those other policemen again. They’re not real police.”

Lisa glanced down at the card Sylvie had handed her. “But what about --”

“I’ll get in touch with you as soon as I can. Thanks.” She gave Lisa a quick hug and pulled open the door.

She stopped dead in her tracks. Miko was standing on the front porch.

Her libido went wild when their eyes met, sending frenetic bursts of heat through her bloodstream. She staggered backward and bumped into someone or something behind her. The air leaked from her lungs until they threatened to collapse.

"I'm glad to see you're okay," Miko said, stepping into the room and reaching for her.

Every minute part of her body -- especially the girly ones -- wanted him to touch her. Yet she threw her hands up, blocking him. "Don't." Her voice sounded a whole lot firmer than she'd expected it to. She glanced behind her to see who she'd backed into.

"I'm sorry," Lisa said, still holding Lulu. "I called before I let you in. I was scared. I thought I was doing the right thing --"

"Your friend was worried about you," Miko said.

Sylvie spun around and nodded, trying not to notice the spark in his eyes. The swell of his shoulders. The flat plane of his stomach. "I... uh, kind of got that."

"I was worried about you too," he said. "It nearly killed me to watch you get dragged away by that bastard, Langton." His words eased her nerves and weakened what little remained of her resolve to keep some distance between them. "If he'd hurt you... I would've killed him," he whispered.

Oh God, she was in the middle of a huge mess. A huge mess that involved two men she couldn't resist no matter how hard she tried. Her body, her mind, her will, none of them belonged to her anymore. She was being tugged this way and that. It was both frustrating and thrilling at the same time.

What to do? "He didn't hurt me. I swear." She looked into Miko's eyes, searching them for the answers she desperately needed. He was her second Master. What a shocker that had been when Burke had flipped his arm over to reveal the mark. Though she shouldn't have been so surprised, considering her reaction to him.

She instinctively knew she could trust him not to harm her, but how much could she trust him otherwise? Should she tell him the truth -- that Burke didn't kill those people? Would he believe her? Was he unable to harm Burke, since they were in some



weird, magical way bound to each other? Did Miko know about Burke? That he was the other Master? Should she tell him?

So may questions. It was all so confusing.

At least at this point one question had been answered. It seemed she wasn't being tied to Burke and Isabella by the authorities. If anything, it seemed they viewed her as a victim.

That part was good. Right?

Too bad all she could think about was dashing out there into the dark to help Burke and Isabella. Well, that or throw herself on Miko and beg him to haul her off to the nearest bedroom.

She should be relieved he didn't see her as a criminal. She should be staying with Lisa until the killer was found. She should be contacting the real police department and getting the clearance she needed to open Carpe Nocturne.

"I must protect you. He could come back."

If only he knew.

As if he'd read her mind, Miko snatched her wrist and gripped it so tightly her bones ground against each other.

She knew she should be angry, furious, absolutely livid at his barbaric treatment, but she wasn't. She was totally turned on. Her pussy was warming up in preparation for some fun. Her nipples were hardening into tight peaks. Desire was rolling through her body in relentless, swelling waves. Regardless, she tried putting on a good act. She gave him her best mean-eyed glare and twisted her wrist. "Let go of me."

"You're in danger."

"No, I'm not. I'm perfectly safe here with my friend. And my dog."

As if on cue, Lulu let loose with a less-than-threatening snarl that sounded more like a burp.

He raised a single eyebrow at Lulu. One corner of his mouth curled up, pulling it into a lopsided smile that made her knees wobbly. "That... ball of fluff?"

"She's tougher than she looks."

He reached out with his free hand to pet the quivering animal, and Sylvie stiffened.

"Don't!" she said, recalling Lulu's reaction to Burke.

He didn't flinch. "Why not? She's such an adorable little thing." He patted the top of her head and, being the attention whore she was, Lulu wriggled in Lisa's arms in an attempt to get closer. "Not much of a guard dog, though."

"Tell me about it," Sylvie deadpanned. Evidently, Lulu didn't have it in for all vampires.

"Time to go." He gave the dog one last scratch behind the ears then turned to the door and pushed open the screen door. There was no doubt she was heading to parts unknown with her second Master.

Some parts of her put up a loud cheer of excitement.

But the small portion of her brain that was still functioning reminded her that posed a huge problem for Burke and Isabella.

"Wait! I... I need to let Lulu out first." Catching him off guard, or so she assumed, she easily wrenched her arm free and snatched Lulu from Lisa. She headed toward the French doors leading to the backyard with Lisa hot on her tail, rattling off a million reasons why she didn't need to worry about Lulu's more basic needs at the moment.

Turning, she gave Lisa a meaningful stare. "I insist. I'm already asking a lot from you."

Lisa might not have completely understood what she was trying to say, but she backed off. "Ooookay."

Sylvie stepped outside, set Lulu on the ground and searched the dark for Burke and Isabella. She heard nothing, and it was too dark to see. After turning to make sure Miko was still inside and out of earshot, she whispered, "I'll leave the door unlocked, but I'm not staying here. Miko is inside. He's insisting on taking me with him. If I try to leave, you'll have nowhere to go."

"Dammit." The male voice came from a nearby bush.

She stepped closer to the source of the voice. "There's nothing I can do. I have to think of your safety first. With me gone, he'll have no reason to come back here. You can hide in the basement. There are a couple of bedrooms down there. No windows. It'll be perfect." If she hadn't been so upset at the moment, torn between her new and unexplored feelings for Miko and her loyalty to Burke, the fact that she was whispering to an evergreen might have been funny.

"It's okay," Burke said, stepping out from behind the bush. He pulled her into an embrace that felt so warm and wonderful she never wanted to leave. She held him tightly, wishing she could literally crawl into his skin and fuse with him forever. He stroked his flattened hand down her hair. "It's okay. I know what you're feeling, what you're struggling with. It's the way it's supposed to be. It will get easier. When I'm gone."

"Gone?" She tipped her head to look at his face. When he didn't meet her gaze, her heart grew as heavy as a bus. It sank to her gut. "Gone!" He was going to leave? Forever? No. Not forever. "No, this is just goodbye for now. See you later."

"Go to your Master. You'll be safer with him." He gently pushed her away.

Tears burning her eyes, she backed from him, snatched up Lulu and went inside, making sure to leave the door unlocked.

What a strong and sweet man. He'd pushed her away for her own good, for her protection. She knew that. It didn't make her feel any better about leaving him, but it sure did make her respect for him swell to enormous proportions.

Her heart heavy, she turned to Lisa, handed her Lulu and went to Miko. "I'm ready now. Let's go."

Miko took her hand in his and led her outside to his waiting car.

\* \* \*

Battling the most unpleasant emotion he'd felt in a long time, Burke stood in the shadow of a tree and watched Sylvie leave with Miko. It wasn't jealousy. He was sure of it. He could feel nothing but joy for Sylvie. She'd found her second Master. That could mean completion, the Binding, if it weren't for the fact that he was a ranking

Excoluni officer. No, this pain was more a sense of loss and frustration. The Binding could not be completed until the true murderer had been found and his name was cleared.

He knew the agony would grow. He'd be compelled to go to her, to find her. It would be difficult to fight the compulsion. But he had to think of Sylvie first. Miko would protect her from the killer. He would provide for her.

"I can't believe you sent her away," Isabella said, stepping up beside him just as Sylvie's friend cut the lights in the living room and, with dog in tow, left the room. "I know that had to hurt."

"It's for the best."

"You're going to suffer."

"So be it. There wasn't another option." He reached for the door.

"How will you keep from going after her?"

"I don't know." He turned the handle, motioning for Isabella to follow him into the house. "Let's get inside before the sun rises or none of that'll matter."

## Chapter 3

Miko couldn't believe he'd found her, his *Origo* Sylvie. Safe. She was safe. Unfortunately, the fever her nearness spiked wouldn't allow him to relax, even though daybreak was mere minutes away.

He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep until he'd had his fill of her, regardless of how weary and tired he was.

He hadn't believed what he'd seen back at the bar. Until he'd felt the symbol rise on his inner arm, he'd always believed *Origos* were the stuff of legend. He'd never seen one. Never read of one. It was one of those things that had been passed from generation to generation by word of mouth. No one actually knew anymore if it was based on truth or fiction.

Except now he knew for certain.

He wondered how much his mate understood. He wondered if she'd found her other Master. If she had, her Master would follow her, search for her. If the legends were true, her Master would be powerless to stop himself.

He peered at her after parking the car in his garage. She was sitting silent, her hands clasped together in her lap, her expression glum.

She needed gentle reassurance. Patience and understanding. The fire burning through his veins would make it hard for him to be patient, but he would try his best.

He had been put through the most rigorous Excoluni training. It tried a man's self control and strength on every level. Yet, he suspected it would be nothing compared to the challenge of resisting the urge to take Sylvie before she was ready.

*A Master serves his submissive first. Her needs must come before his own. Always.*

Those words had meant a great deal to him. He remembered them whenever he took a new submissive to his dungeon. But now their meaning took on a new importance. They were more than polite reminders. They were the key to his sanity.

He shut off the car and gave her one last look. She was staring down at her hands. Still. She hadn't moved since they'd left her friend's house. "Are you sure you aren't hurt?"

"I'm fine. Just... very tired." She gave him an empty smile.

Guilt pricked him. He should wait, let her rest. Tomorrow night would be soon enough. "Remain here. I'll get the door for you."

She sat obediently and waited for him to walk around to the passenger side and open her door. And she politely thanked him when he offered her a hand as she exited the vehicle. He was overjoyed when she left her tiny hand in his as they walked into the house.

"This way. You may sleep in the guestroom tonight."

She gave him a slightly brighter smile. "Thanks."

It nearly killed him but he allowed himself the pleasure of only a small kiss on her forehead before leaving her. Even that brief contact of his mouth to her skin left his cock painfully erect and his balls heavy.

*The needs of a submissive must always come before the needs of her Master.*

"Goodnight, Miko," she said, meeting his gaze for the first time since they'd left the bar.

He mentally reached for her mind, to psychically send her soothing thoughts. What he found, however, as he gently prodded her mind had the opposite effect on him.

She had found her other Master.

He was Langton. The murderer.

"Rest," he heard himself murmur. "We will talk later."

\* \* \*

Sylvie woke up some untold hours later. She felt better, although she wasn't exactly in the mood to sing a cheery tune.

Miko, being the thoughtful guy he'd revealed himself to be last night, seemed to have anticipated her every need. Her room was warm, her bed comfy. And there was a tray sitting on the nightstand with a pot of piping hot coffee and a dish covered with a metal lid to keep the food warm. She salivated at the scent of bacon but made herself wait to eat until after she downed her first cup of coffee.

It was positively delicious, better than the stuff she paid a small fortune for occasionally at the local coffee shop. Sigh. And sigh.

She could get used to this treatment.

She wondered how Burke and Isabella were doing. Had they been able to sneak into Lisa's house? Were they safe?

The phone sitting on the nightstand on the other side of her bed jangled. She set her coffee cup down and scooted across the bed, tipping the receiver to peer at the caller ID.

Lisa.

She scooped up the receiver and answered, "Hello?"

"Hey. Just calling to make sure you're okay. We didn't get to talk much last night."

"I'm a little better. I think I slept a week. What time is it?" Sylvie asked, searching the room for a clock.

"It's almost five."

"Five? Holy crap. Five at night?" She emptied her coffee cup in a series of frantic gulps and refilled it. "Did you talk to the detective?"

"Yeah. He said you can open up tomorrow."

"Excellent. I can't afford to stay closed any longer than necessary. I'm in deep shit."

"I told you I'd help --"

"No," she interrupted before her friend offered yet again to bail her out of financial trouble. Living in poverty sucked. Using people you loved sucked even more. She had nightmares about her past, about being homeless and scared and cold. But she wouldn't stoop to taking money from her friends. No way. "I told you I won't take a loan I can't pay back."

Her friend's sigh sounded as tired as Sylvie felt. "Can you get to the bar tomorrow?"

"I don't see why not."

"Okay. Call me if you need me."

"Will do. Thanks."

"Gotta go. Bye."

Sylvie hung up the phone and devoured the absolutely delicious breakfast Miko had left for her. Cheese omelet, bacon, sausage, fruit salad. The man was a god, although the hearty eating was not going to do her figure any favors.

Stuffed to the point of shame, she took care of some personal issues in the attached bathroom then poked around the closet to see if he'd been so kind as to whip up a new wardrobe for her while she was sleeping.

Good-golly, he had.

*I'm in love.*

Yes, it was a little shallow falling in instant love with a man who had magically produced some food and clothing, especially after saying farewell -- temporarily or not -- to Burke last night. But she'd been stressed lately. She was due for some shallow indulgence.

Okay, maybe her justifications were a little lame.

Actually, she'd thought long and hard about this whole thing last night, or rather this morning. She'd laid in bed, her eyes closed, her thoughts her only company. And she'd worked through some things.

She missed Burke, no doubt about it. A part of her physically ached after leaving him last night. That pain hadn't eased even a tiny bit, and she figured it probably



wouldn't until they were together again. But pain in any form was an old friend to her in some ways. It never left her, not as long as she could remember. So, it was pathetic, but the pain of leaving Burke added a little to the already enormous burden she carted around every day. Like a dull throbbing headache. She just kind of got used to it and moved on. Always had to keep going. That was life.

Whether she was truly ready to accept it or not, Miko was a part of her life too. He might be a virtual stranger to her now, but deep down inside she knew he was destined to become an important part of her future, as big a part as Burke. Eventually they would all be together. It was just a matter of time.

She was ready. Ready to face Miko. To face the hunger that had been plain in his eyes last night. He'd been kind by denying himself last night, kind and patient. She knew he wouldn't be able to resist today.

She knew something else as well. She knew she'd want him as much as he'd want her. Regardless of any preconceived notions of what love and relationships she'd had for the first twenty-something years of her life, she'd accepted the fact that these men did something to her that no human ever would. And she decided to allow herself to embrace it. She wouldn't fight the overwhelming desire any longer.

They needed each other. All three of them. They would not be complete until their circle had been closed. There was no reason to be scared or guilty. Despite what she'd grown up believing, wanting, needing -- even loving -- two men was possible. She could do it. There was room in her heart for both Miko and Burke.

Perhaps she would love them differently. She didn't know yet. But she knew for a fact she would love them with everything she was.

She passed up the tailored blouses, slacks and skirts and went to the lingerie. A short black sheer nightgown caught her eye. It was uber-sexy in an understated, sophisticated way. As she expected, it fit her perfectly, covered everything it needed to while enhancing what it should. It was the outfit to greet her new Master in.

If she was going to spend the rest of her life as a submissive to two absolutely drool-worthy vampires, she was going to do it whole-heartedly. And with style.

Was there any other way? Really?

At the faint metallic sound of the doorknob rattling, she lowered herself to her knees, rested her hands on her thighs and waited. He was coming to her. She hoped he would be pleased.

Her heart racing, she kept her gaze lowered and watched a set of well-shod feet step inside and pause. Did all vampires have a thing for expensive shoes?

Silent, he pushed the door closed, walked to her and stopped.

She wasn't sure if he expected her to look up at him or not. She took a chance and glanced up.

He was looking down upon her intently. He nodded. "I see your other Master has taught you well."

"He hasn't had much of a chance, really. We were together for such a short time before we were separated."

"How long?"

"Less than two days."

"I will keep that in mind." He circled her and she felt her face flush with excitement and embarrassment. The sheer material didn't hide much, and she'd never felt particularly comfortable with her body.

"The clothing suits you perfectly. You look lovely." His voice was rich and warm and comforting.

Some of her self-consciousness faded. The heat gathering in her belly didn't though. If anything, his sweet compliment cranked it up a notch or two. "Thank you." The sight of him in his black trousers and unbuttoned white shirt cranked it up another six or seven.

He was in some ways very different from Burke. But in other ways he was similar. He was every bit as handsome. Every bit as muscular. Every bit as sexy. How was it that she'd been chosen to be with two absolutely gorgeous men?

"Do you miss your Master?"

She hadn't expected that question. Not now. Not when they were about to... do whatever they were about to do. She tipped her head up again and looked him in the eye.

"I suspect I know your answer but I want to hear you say it," he said.

"Yes. I do miss him. Even though we were together for such a short time, there was something there. A connection. It was very strong -- *is* very strong."

He nodded. "It's something only an *Origo* and her Masters can know. How quickly and intensely the bonds form."

"Does it bother you? That I miss him?"

"No. It is as it should be. We are three parts of one. Burke, you and me." He took her hand in his and gently pulled, urging her to her feet. When she stood, he ran his fingertip along the lace trim at the nightgown's plunging neckline. "I feel the ache of his absence too. It's more compelling than I expected it to be. Complicates things a bit." He licked his lips.

How would he taste? Would the first kiss be as sweet as Burke's? Would he kiss her roughly, his tongue darting in and out of her mouth, his lips firm? Or would the kiss be soft and sensuous? Staring at his mouth, she murmured, "How?"

He pushed one narrow strap off her shoulder. Her breath caught in her throat as he lowered his head. "I want to feed from you. I need to feed from you. But I can't." He nipped her skin and she flinched at the sting. "I have to resist. I can have you in all ways but that. Without the Binding complete, I can't take even a taste of your essence. Yet that is the one thing I will be compelled to do. The hunger is the worst kind of agony." He nipped again, this time lower on her shoulder. "I am sworn to bring him to justice. If he is executed for murder, I will never be able to feed from you. And the hunger will only grow and grow." As if to illustrate or make his point, he dragged his tongue down the side of her neck. She was instantly coated in goose bumps.

She closed her eyes. This man had barely touched her. A couple of nips, a lick. Yet the moment was sooooo erotic. It was difficult to remain standing, to remain still.

Her arms hung at her sides, her hands balled into tight fists. Her knees felt a little loose and wobbly. These vampires sure did know how to tease a girl. She both appreciated that fact and hated it.

He raised his head and met her gaze. "You feel our hunger, don't you?"

She nodded. There was a burning in her gut. It wasn't so bad she couldn't stand it but it was there. She expected it was a hundred times worse for them.

He grasped her chin and stared into her eyes. She knew what would happen if she looked deep into the darkness. As expected, her pussy spasmed. Her nipples hardened. Her breathing grew shallow. Her blood sizzled in her veins.

She wanted him. She wanted him now. Her Master.

She whimpered. A gush of hot juices seeped from her pussy. "Miko."

"Come. I will take you to my dungeon." He brushed his mouth over hers, the brief contact making her lightheaded. More. She wanted a lot more. He was a cruel Master. A cruel Master in the most delicious way.

He took her hand in his and led her out of the room, down the stairs and into a well-furnished bondage dungeon. As expected, the room was dimly lit. The walls were painted a deep red. The furnishings were all constructed of darkly-stained wood, polished to a rich gloss. Table. Kneeler. Swing. Various other pieces she couldn't name. They were both beautiful and intimidating at the same time.

"Do you like to feel powerless, at your Master's mercy?" he asked, looking at her as if he knew the answer already.

"Yes, Master."

He nodded. "Undress."

"Yes, Master." Her hands trembling a little, she lifted the nightgown over her head and handed it to him. Then she stepped out of the matching panties.

Fire in his eyes, he led her to an apparatus that looked like an upright cross attached to the front end of a narrow bench. There were ropes secured to either side of the cross. "Sit." He pointed at the bench. She sat with her back to the cross. "Now lean back."

She did as he asked, sitting back until the upper part of her spine rested against the center post of the cross. He walked around the back, lowered the crossbar, lifted her arms and tied her hands up over her head. The position made her breasts stand out. She felt sexy and powerless.

"Look at my sweet little *Origo*." He gave her a wicked smile. "You're wet." He secured two more ropes to the crossbar then stepped to one side and lifted one of her legs.

"Yes, Master."

He tied her leg up and out, one rope just above her knee, another at her ankle. Then he did the same thing with her other leg.

She was as open and exposed as she could be. She was hot. Trembling. Anxious to see what he'd do next. Her nerves were all on edge. Her muscles tight. Waves of hot wanting coursing through her body.

"Would you like me to fuck you, my pet?" In a blink, his clothes vanished. Everything.

His body was glorious. Perfectly proportioned. Thickly muscled.

"Yes. Please, Master. Fuck me."

He moved to the end of the bench and straddled it. "I don't believe you're ready yet." Moistening two of his fingers with his mouth, he sat. The head of his cock was inches from her pussy. Inches. Yet he was clearly not going to fuck her. Not yet.

She wanted to plead. She moaned instead.

He ran his damp fingers over her vulva, spreading her juices and his saliva up over her clit. "I never take a woman before she's ready."

How much readier could a girl be?

Her face flamed when he thumbed her clit. Her eyelids felt like there were lead weights tied to them. She let them fall closed and let the sensations he was stirring in her carry her away to a dark, secret place. A place where she could let herself go and just feel, explore, be.

Sliding two fingers into her pussy while continuing to stroke her clit, he murmured, "Just before a woman comes, there's this scent she gives off. It's the most wonderful fragrance. It drives me crazy."

His intimate strokes were driving her crazy. The way his fingers curled slightly so that his knuckles rubbed that very special place inside her. The way his strokes to her clit sent rhythmic pulses of heat through her body. The way his words stirred her wanting to even greater heights. "Oh God," she said on a sigh.

If he kept this up, she'd come within moments and it would be over. She didn't want that. Not yet. Not really. She wanted it to last and last. Even though her body was careening toward a quick and powerful release.

"Stop. Please," she begged. She wouldn't come without him inside her.

"Yes," he said, plunging his fingers into her one last time. "You're ready now."

She felt his fingertips digging into her hips as he lifted them. The large head of his cock prodded at her opening. In one swift thrust, he buried his thick cock inside her hot pussy. She moaned her gratitude and wrapped her fingers around the ropes securing her wrists.

Tightening her inner muscles to increase both their pleasures, she rocked her hips to meet each of his thrusts. He drove into her slowly, deliberately. He nearly pulled completely out before driving deep inside again. It was the most delicious fuck. Beyond words or thoughts.

Releasing her hips, he teased one of her breasts with one hand and stroked her already burning clit with the other.

This was more than a fuck. It was a complete joining. A fusing of minds and bodies and souls. For a split second, as her body trembled at the brink of completion, she felt his presence within her. He was there. Filling her. Claiming her. Putting his mark on her soul.

She belonged to Miko and Burke.

Orgasm came in a flash. It quaked every muscle in her body. She heard herself cry out but didn't feel herself speak. She heard him too, as he joined her in ecstasy.

He drove into her hard, pounding in and out of her spasming pussy. She tossed her head from side to side and rode the waves of bliss, wishing they'd never end.

But eventually, the pulses slowed. The sensations faded. He pulled out, untied her and held her gently in his arms.

She smiled against his chest and kissed his slick, smooth skin.

The man was a virtual stranger and yet she felt so special and treasured and secure. She didn't know if she'd ever get used to the feelings the two men stirred.

"Come now. It's time for us to decide what we should do about Burke." He helped her to her feet.

## Chapter 4

"What do you mean?" She twisted her body at the waist to look back over her shoulder.

"I want to see that you're comfortable first. Then we'll talk." He motioned for her to keep walking, upstairs, down the hall, back to her bedroom. "As much as I delight in the sight of you like this, I want you to be wearing something warmer. It's chilly. I don't want you to catch cold." While she stood staring at his back, wondering at exactly how he'd become such a thoughtful man, he searched her closet for what he considered appropriate clothing. He emerged smiling, a pair of knit jogging pants, a tank top and a matching jacket in his fists. "These will do." He handed them to her then settled in the huge cushy chair in the room's corner. With a sweep of his hands, he was magically dressed, wearing a snug T-shirt and a pair of black pants. He rested his elbows on the chair's arms and steepled his fingers under his chin.

She was acutely aware of his gaze on her as she dressed, even though she sensed his mind was somewhere far away. Yes, they'd just had the most mind-blowing sex a few minutes ago, and she was ready to go another round.

These vampires were turning her into a sex fiend and she was oh so grateful.

Once she had located some fresh panties and a bra, she donned her clothes and accepted his invitation to join him in the chair. It was nice sitting on his lap, being held so protectively. His arms were strong and sure. His touch soft and firm at the same time. He pulled her against him, until her side pressed up against his scrumptious chest. Her head decided it needed a shoulder to rest on.

She let loose with a genuine sigh of contentment.



"I'm facing a difficult situation here. I have to choose. Between my career and my sanity." Miko's voice was thick and heavy. It rumbled through her body like a low voltage electric current.

She didn't want to seem flip, but she knew which choice she'd make. In a heartbeat. Then again, she'd never had her dream career, the one she'd always thought she would have when she grew up. What kind of choice would she make if she had?

She tipped her head to study Miko's profile. He had a strong forehead and chin. A long, narrow aristocratic nose and a perfect mouth. He was a delight to look at.

"I've wanted to be an officer of the Excolumi for as long as I can remember. My father retired from the force years ago but I remember being a kid, having a father I was so damn proud of. He was the best." He breathed in for the first time since she'd sat on his lap. His chest rose then fell when the air left his lungs in a huff. He shook his head. "I can kiss my career goodbye if I help Langton."

"But what if he didn't do it?" she whispered, sensing the frustration and turmoil Miko was struggling with.

His gaze met hers. It was probing. Intense. "You're saying he's innocent so I'll help him."

"No, I'm saying it because I believe it's the truth."

His eyebrows dropped to their lowest point. "You don't know the details of the case --"

"True, but you have to admit I share a very unique and personal bond with the man. I would know if he was the killer. I'm sure I would. He didn't kill those people. The man in my bar, in Carpe Nocturne. He didn't kill the others either. I believe what he said, that he was at the wrong place at the wrong time." When Miko didn't respond, she added, "He's trying to find the real killer so he can clear his name."

Miko shifted his gaze away from her again and nodded slowly. He pressed an index finger to his lower lip. "What has he found out?"

She couldn't help staring at his mouth as she answered, "Not much of anything that I'm aware of. The only connection he saw between the people was the setting -- the

bars. Outside of that, he couldn't find anything tying the victims together." She hesitated. Should she tell him more? Would it put Burke at risk? Or help Miko see Burke didn't know the victims? She had to take the chance. "That's why he'd been spending nights in bars. He was hoping to be at the right place at the right time."

Again, Miko's eyebrows dropped. His tongue slipped between his lips and left a dab of moisture on them before disappearing back inside his mouth again. He caught his lower lip with his teeth. "He hasn't told you everything. He hasn't told you that all the victims share a connection to him, a vague one, perhaps. But a connection."

Whatever she was about to say flew from her head like a caged bird let loose. No, Burke wouldn't have kept something that important from her. "Uh... what kind of connection?"

Miko gently lifted her off his lap and stood. He turned, gripped her shoulders in his fists and stared down into her eyes for what felt like an eternity. The silence was heavy. She dropped her gaze but he caught her chin in his hand and lifted it until she looked at his face again.

"I commend your loyalty. It's unfortunate that your Master has put you in this position. This isn't the way it should be." His eyes softened as they swept over her face.

Despite the fact that his warm expression was doing all kinds of pleasant things to her insides, she sharpened her gaze. "I believe Burke," she said crisply. "I believe in his innocence." She needed to convince Miko. She needed him on their team.

"The first victim was the nephew of a gentleman Langton was in negotiations with," he barked. When she stumbled backward out of reflex, he caught her wrists and held them until she steadied herself. In a lower voice he said, "I apologize." He shook his head. "Dammit, I want him to be innocent as much as you do. But it's hard to ignore the evidence."

"What evidence? So, the first victim was related to some guy Burke was doing business with? What does that prove?"

"The deal fell through and a few nights later, the man's nephew was found slaughtered. What would you think if you were investigating the case?"

“And you assumed Burke did it? For what reason? Revenge?”

He crossed his thick arms over his broad chest. The position made him look big and strong and a little intimidating. Rigid and determined.

How would she ever change his mind?

“That deal would’ve made him billions of dollars. I’ve seen people kill for less.”

“I can’t believe Burke would kill out of revenge. Or for money. What about the other victims? How many have there been? The others can’t be close relatives of business associates too.”

“There have been four murders so far. The second one was also related to an individual Burke had had business dealings with, a cousin.”

Did Burke know this? Had he kept the facts from her? Shit. She was starting to feel like she was losing ground, not gaining it. She mentally scrambled for a foothold. “But didn’t Burke live in Europe somewhere? And weren’t the murders here in the United States?”

“They’ve all been here, in the Detroit area, yes. Then again, so was Burke. The coincidences are compelling.”

“And all of the victims were related to someone Burke has done business with? What about the third one?” she asked with a sinking feeling. She didn’t want to doubt Burke’s innocence, but the coincidences were stacking up. The mountain they created was a smidge condemning.

“Yes, all three were related to someone Burke has had difficulties doing business with. We’re still working on the connection with the fourth victim, but I’m sure we’ll find something.”

She nodded, appreciating why the Excoluni had narrowed their focus to only Burke. The victims hadn’t been chosen randomly. They were loosely linked to Burke through business associates, which meant the real killer had to know more than a little about his business activities. That had to narrow the field to a few people, in addition to Burke himself. “How many other people would know about Burke’s business dealings?”

"Not many. He keeps his personal and professional business to himself. I'm sure you've noticed that about him already. To my knowledge, he's never employed a large staff."

One person sprang to mind, a person who was close enough to know details about his activities. And one who had confessed to being blamed for the murders. It was hard picturing Isabella as the kind of individual who'd gouge out an innocent man's eyes, but she supposed it was possible. "What about his friend Isabella?"

"We've thought of her, but there's no obvious motive, and without some kind of evidence linking her to the crimes, we have no reason to suspect her. Unlike Langton, she wasn't in town at the time of the first murder. She has a solid alibi."

"Then she isn't wanted by the police?"

"Not for murder. Only for aiding and abetting."

Obviously, proving Burke's innocence wasn't going to be easy. "Did he have any enemies? People he owes money to? People who felt they'd been screwed in business? People who were jealous?" She had an equally hard time picturing Burke being anything but fair in business transactions, but she'd long ago accepted that people sometimes saw things in very twisted ways. Perhaps someone felt they'd been cheated and decided to seek revenge on Burke?

"He has no enemies, at least none that we've been able to identify."

She slumped into the chair, rested her elbows on her knees and dropped her chin onto her fists. "But doesn't it seem too obvious for an intelligent guy like Burke to risk killing relatives of his business associates? Wouldn't he know that sooner or later the connection would be discovered?"

"In a way, yes. Then again, the victims weren't sons or daughters. They were nephews and nieces. Cousins. More distantly related. We felt he chose those individuals for that reason, to put some distance between himself and the victims."

She looked Miko in the eyes. She wasn't going to change his mind. "You're convinced he's guilty."

He studied her for a moment. His gaze was warm and yet intense and assessing at the same time. "I have to accept the facts."

"Where does that leave us?"

He sighed. "At an impasse, I'm afraid."

"Then what's the point of this conversation?"

"I wanted the chance to explain why I have to find Burke... and why I have to turn him in."

\* \* \*

In all his many centuries of life, Miko had never been in a more frustrating position. Why did he, a sworn officer of the Excoluni, have to end up in a *Triumvirate* with Burke Langton, a convicted killer? If it hadn't been so physically painful, it would've been funny. He'd always been able to appreciate irony.

Not in this case.

The disappointment and frustration he'd seen in Sylvie's eyes only amplified his agony. Like his mate, he ached for their circle to be complete. They would never perform the Binding. They would never be whole.

Worse yet, the guilt of keeping one very significant piece of information from Sylvie was sitting heavy on his shoulders.

He had to tell his brother about Sylvie, and about her second Master. Because he was an officer first, he had to take himself off the case. He could not fulfill his obligations. And he would take Sylvie with him, back home. Putting as much physical distance between them and Langton was the only chance they had of easing the burn of their wanting.

He discussed his plans with the security guard he kept on staff before leaving to meet his brother. He gave the guard a thorough description of Langton, cautioning him that there was a good chance Langton might try to sneak onto the property to see Sylvie. Then, only minutes after nightfall, he drove off to meet his brother at a nearby professional park, where they'd set up a temporary headquarters in an empty warehouse.

Hadrian scooped up a stack of papers, stuffed them in a dusty old book and greeted him with a wave of a hand, motioning toward the chair on the other side of his rusted metal desk. As he dropped the book into a desk drawer, he held a phone cradled between his shoulder and head. Miko could hear the tone of the caller's voice as he sat, but couldn't make out exactly what the caller was saying. It was the Director of Excoluni Operations.

Clearly, he wasn't happy with their lack of progress in Langton's case.

"Yes, sir," Hadrian said at last, meeting Miko's gaze. "We have a solid lead on Langton and I'm hoping to have him in custody tonight." After listening to a few more minutes of barking, Hadrian replaced the phone in the cradle. His shoulders dropped several inches. "We have to nail him tonight. Vrabec is about ready to haul both our asses back home and demote us."

"I know how to get Langton, although I don't know where he is."

Hadrian's left eyebrow rose. "What do you have?" He leaned back in his rickety metal chair, a piece of garbage they'd picked up for a song from a thrift store nearby. It creaked as his weight shifted.

"I have his *Origo*."

Hadrian's right eyebrow joined his left at the top of his forehead. "Is that so? Who is she?"

"The bar owner from Carpe Nocturne. Remember the blonde?"

"The one who's your...? Wait a minute!" Hadrian shot forward. "You're the second Master in his *Triumvirate*? Langton's? That woman was his --"

"*Origo*. Yes."

"And yours?" he asked. His gaze dropped to the desk drawer for a split second before rising again.

Miko nodded. "Yes, she's my *Origo*. Which is why I'm here today. I am asking officially to be reassigned. I cannot in good conscience complete my assigned task in this case."

"Have you... completed the *lugum*?"

"No, of course not. That would require Langton to be with us. I haven't seen him. Sylvie was abandoned when I found her."

"I see. Then, no. I cannot grant your request. You heard Vrabec. There isn't time to get another officer here. You'll have to stay and finish the job."

Miko shook his head. "You're making a mistake by keeping me here. I can't say what'll happen if Langton and I end up in the same room together, especially if Sylvie's with us."

"Then you'll just have to make sure that doesn't happen. Where's the woman now?"

"At my house."

"Good. We'll use her as bait to get that snake Langton to crawl out from whatever hole he's hiding in."

"How? He knows I won't hurt her."

"He knows you're her second Master?"

"Yes."

"Then she'll need to be moved. So that he won't be able to count on your protection." He crossed his arms over his chest and tapped on his lower lip with an index finger. He'd always done that when he was thinking, even as a kid.

Miko knew the instant his brother had a plan in place.

Hadrian smiled. "I know exactly what we're going to do."

## Chapter 5

Sylvie hadn't gotten completely over her frustration with Miko by the next evening. He'd taken her to some empty apartment on the other side of town and left her there, with a single suitcase of clothes. He left her alone for a full twenty-four hours. With nothing but a few frozen Lean Cuisines in the freezer, a few bottles of her favorite cola, a half-gallon of Moose Tracks... and four blank white walls.

Twenty-four hours was a long time to stew and worry and think. To fume and rant about men and their controlling ways. To work herself up to a healthy rage about their inability to see what was most important in life.

Not to mention to try every window and door in the place to see if she could get out.

No such luck. He'd locked her up like an animal! Grrr!

Although she did have to admit after about twelve hours, she'd simmered down. The urge to pound some sense into the vampire had eased... somewhat. For one thing, it simply took too much out of her to remain pissed off that long. And second, she understood the position Miko was in. He had to do what he had to do and clearly his personal situations had to take a backseat to his professional obligations. While she didn't appreciate being locked up, he'd sort of explained the reason for it. She was in danger, and he didn't want her going to Carpe Nocturne. She guessed he was afraid of coming to check on her too often, in case the killer was following him.

Okay, so if they thought Burke was the killer, why, oh why did everyone think he was after her? Clearly they knew something she did not.

Knowing Miko couldn't come to her during the daylight hours, she'd forced herself to sleep then. When she awoke at dusk, she showered and put on fresh clothes. She nuked a frozen dinner and ate it. Wiped out the rest of the ice cream. Then, she



returned to her spot in the one and only piece of furniture in the place, an old recliner sitting next to the living room window, and sat. She stared out the window, watching the cars roll by, wishing someone would come to see her. About a half hour into her second staring-out-the-window session of the night, she perked up when she saw what looked like Miko's car drive by.

A few minutes later, the doorknob rattled and she heard the jingle of keys outside.

She stood up and faced the door, not sure if she should give Miko a friendly smile or a mean-eyed glower. As the door swung open, she went for a calm and sedate semi-smile.

He nudged the door open with a knee and picked up the grocery bags he'd evidently set on the floor in order to free his hands to unlock the door. "Sylvie, I'm very sorry it's taking so long." He kicked the door shut behind him and carried the bags to the kitchen. "I brought a peace offering. You don't deserve to be locked up like this," he added as he started unloading the groceries from the bags. More frozen dinners. Some fruit. Some snacks.

She snatched up a bag of corn chips and ripped it open, popping a cheese flavored chip into her mouth. "If that's the way you feel, then why can't you let me go?" she asked as she chewed. "I'm not a two year old. I can take care of myself."

"You don't know who you're dealing with." He shook his head then turned to put a fresh half gallon of ice cream in the freezer.

She had to smile at his back for having thought to bring more of her favorite dessert, even if it wasn't going to do her thighs any good. She stuffed her hand back into the chip bag and pulled out another chip.

"It shouldn't be much longer," he added as he shut the freezer door. "I'm hoping we'll catch Langton tonight."

"But what makes you think he can hurt me? Frankly, I don't believe it's possible. If he's the killer, I don't think I'm the next victim."

"I can't talk about this. I've told you everything I can right now."

She crossed her arms over her chest. Ooh, this was making her mad. She had a nightclub to run! She had bills to pay! And she was sick and tired of being a pawn in someone else's game. "Which is nothing," she spat. "I'm weary of this. I need to open my club, before I lose it to the bank."

Miko set the packages of food he was holding on the counter and reached for her. She lunged backward, scrambling to get away before he caught her. The vampire vibe would render her brainless within a second if he touched her. As it was, with him standing so close, it was getting harder and harder to keep her wits about her.

It was so not fair that those two vampires gave off some energy or hormone or whatever that made her dumb and horny in no time flat. Even as she was trying get away from him, she was thinking about how she'd get him out of his clothes.

She was a slave to her hormones.

She had a new appreciation of what male humans dealt with, especially teenage males. She'd heard more than one man say he thought about sex constantly when he was a teenager. Now she was in the same boat, particularly when she was in the same room with Miko or Burke. The minute they were near, her mind dropped from important stuff and settled into the Lust Zone.

Was there a cure?

Miko's lowered eyebrows and thinned mouth said everything his words didn't. "Sylvie. Come here."

She knew she was acting like a crazy woman, staggering away from Miko the way she was. But she needed space. The urges inside her were becoming overwhelming already. Whether it was the firm tone of his voice, or the way his eyes twinkled when he looked at her, or the fact that she'd been away from him for over twenty-four hours, she couldn't say. All she knew was she wanted him. In a bad way. Her anger at him for locking her up like a naughty kid was all but forgotten.

It shouldn't be that easy! She'd wanted him to suffer for it.

She met his gaze and her will crumbled like warm feta cheese. "Yes, Master."

He ran his hands down her arms then held her hands in his. His thumbs tickled the backs of her hands. His gaze caught hers and held it captive. "Not that I feel I should explain this to you, but I want you to know I'm acting in your best interest. I will not allow you to walk into a dangerous situation blindly. I can't take that kind of risk. It is true, as your Master, Langton would not harm you. However, I still have reason to believe you could be in danger."

She heard the conviction in his voice, saw the concern in his eyes, and had to accept he was genuinely worried. It had been a long, long time since anyone had cared so much about what happened to her.

Why did the movies portray vampires as terrible beings with no hearts, no souls? Clearly both men had hearts if they were that caring. She'd seen human males show less concern for their wives and girlfriends, now that she thought about it.

"I want you to understand how grave this situation is," he said, still holding her hands. "You may not even be safe here, which is why we have several undercover officers watching the apartment around the clock. I will not let anything happen to you. But you should still do your part. You must stay alert. And stay away from the window. I don't want anyone to see you." He released her hands. His shoulder brushed hers as he walked past her toward the window. He pulled the shades closed then turned to face her again. "I promise this will all be over soon and you'll be free to go wherever you wish."

She stared into his eyes for a while then dropped her gaze to her hands, which were clasped together in front of her. There were so many questions buzzing around in her head, like a swarm of houseflies. But one question stuck out from the others. It demanded an answer. "I need to know... exactly what happens to us if Burke is executed? Because of this strange bond, I'm afraid..." She let the rest of her words trail off. How to put into words the terror she felt at even the thought of losing Burke forever? Her eyes started burning and she blinked to ease the sting.

Miko sighed, took two long strides to reach her then pulled her into a tight embrace. One of his arms circled her back while his other hand stroked her hair. She

wrapped her arms around his waist and practically melted into him. He smelled so good, like fresh spring air. He was warm and strong, his voice soothing. The total effect was heating her insides to a pleasant simmer.

She tipped her head up to look at his face. He was gazing down at her. His mouth pulled into a gentle smile when their eyes met. Her breath caught in her throat.

"I'm not sure what to expect. I hope we won't have to find out firsthand."

Her mood launched into the stratosphere. "Does that mean you're going to help Burke?"

"Not exactly."

That brought her spirits back to earth in a hurry. She was nearly motion sick from how fast they fell. "Oh." She let her forehead rest against his chest.

"I must do my job to the best of my ability. New information I've discovered has raised doubts about whether Langton is the murderer, which is why I haven't stopped searching for the truth, whatever it might be." He gently lifted her chin until she was looking him in the eye again. "I've never sent an innocent man to the executioner, no matter what kind of pressure I felt from my superiors."

"You're being pressured?"

"It's part of the job."

"In other words, if Burke is innocent, you'll find the real killer, but if he's guilty you won't stand in the way. He'll pay for his crimes."

Miko nodded. "No matter what the consequences to us. The law must come first."

That was all the reassurance she could ask for. Miko would find the real killer. It would be only a matter of time before they were all three together. Complete. And the aching would ease.

She decided to show her gratitude to her Master in the way she knew best. She spread her fingers wide, tangling them in his hair and pulled on the back of his head until his mouth met hers. The kiss was consuming and passionate. Her tongue parried with his in a fierce battle as their bodies melded together.

One instant, she was clothed and the next completely nude. The material of his shirt rasped against her nipples and they hardened into tight peaks.

Now on fire with raw, urgent lust, she moaned into their joined mouths and swayed backward. Still, he didn't let up. While his tongue and lips did magical things to her mouth, his hands explored her body. Her neck, her breasts, her stomach.

Breaking the kiss, he scooped her into his arms and turned. In a snap, the empty room was filled with bondage furniture. He carried her to a kneeler and set her down. "I will not see you again until we have caught the killer."

While positioning herself on the kneeler so she was facing Miko, she swallowed a plea that he reconsider that unwise and extremely selfish move and nodded. "I understand."

Had he no idea how much she hated being separated from him?

He smiled at her. "You please me. In so many ways. It makes me want to please you in return." While she watched in awe, he pulled his shirt over his head. He'd obviously done that for her benefit, knowing how much she enjoyed watching him move. His arms, shoulders, chest. Otherwise he would've snapped his fingers like he had the last time.

The skin of his upper body was deeply tanned and smooth, with a narrow line of hair running from his bellybutton down to the waistband of his pants, where it disappeared underneath. She knew where that sexy line led and was salivating at the thought that she'd soon be feeling his cock gliding in and out of her.

"Would you like to suck my cock?" he asked as he unzipped his pants and slowly pushed them down over his hips. His thighs were thick and muscular, also tanned and smooth-skinned like a body builder's. His body was like a work of art.

She nodded. She wasn't the most skilled at giving head, but she knew sucking him would drive him crazy. Considering he was having that effect on her, just by looking at her like he might jump on her and tear her up in the next instant, she felt compelled to give a little in return. She could be submissive and still take some initiative in the bedroom... or the dungeon for that matter.

Her pussy tingled as she watched him remove the final barrier between her eyes and his cock, a pair of snug black briefs. He kicked them off and stepped closer to her. His cock stood straight out, its ruddy tip mere inches from her mouth. But before she took him inside, she tipped her head and gave her Master a flirtatious smile.

His eyes widened to the size of silver dollars. And then, as she gripped his erection in her fist and swirled her tongue around the head, they narrowed to slits.

Oh yes, it was fun to be naughty.

He dug his blunt-nailed fingertips into her shoulders when she opened her mouth wide and took him in as deep as her overactive gag reflex would allow. She used her hand and mouth in unison, moving forward and back in a slow but steady pace. If his sighs and groans were any indication, he was fully appreciating every lick and suck.

Meanwhile, her body was heating up like a blast furnace. Her heart was pounding so hard she could feel it knocking at her ribcage. Air rushed in and out of her lungs in short, staccato gasps and her muscles were starting to tremble. Heat had pooled deep inside, where it churned and simmered and boiled. Her pussy was empty. She wanted him inside her so much it hurt.

She couldn't say who was in worse shape -- Miko or her -- when he jerked back, pulling his cock from her mouth.

He looked at her with fierce eyes then motioned behind her. "Do you like to be spanked, kitten?"

Truth be told, she had no idea whether she liked being spanked. At the moment, it sounded damn good. She responded with a, "Yes, Master," then turned around and leaned her upper body over the support. Kneeling with her ass in the air, she felt alive and completely at her Master's mercy. It was sexy beyond words.

He stroked her ass first with firm hands. His fingertips slipped between her ass cheeks and teased her anus before gliding up higher to tickle the small of her back. "You are so obedient and trusting. I hadn't expected that from you, honestly. I thought you'd be more resistant."

"Me too," she managed to mutter. The things that man's hands could do to her!

"Spread your knees apart." He used his foot to push at her inner thigh. She shifted positions slightly, spreading her legs as far as she could. "Oh yes." His voice was closer now, maybe six inches from her right shoulder. Little tingles and tickles danced up her spine. "I can smell how much you want me," he whispered. "That is the most delicious scent in the world." He audibly inhaled. "I can't get enough."

She shuddered. Her pussy clenched tightly around burning emptiness.

He pulled her ass cheeks apart. "I want you more than anything."

*Take me.*

"I want to fuck you until you lack the strength to remain kneeling, until every muscle in your body is quivering and your brain has shut down and your insides are all twisted and looped around themselves. And then I want to fuck you again. This hunger. It won't go away. It's getting stronger and stronger. I don't know how much longer I can deny myself."

"Don't."

"You don't understand. If I lose complete control, I'll bite you. I can't do that. Not yet."

She twisted her upper body to look at him. He was holding a whip in his fist. The long leather straps cascaded down over his forearm. Her gaze locked on that whip for a few stuttering heartbeats before climbing north, to his face.

"Does this scare you?" he asked, lifting the whip.

She watched him comb his long, tapered fingers through the leather straps. "A little."

"Usually the anticipation of the pain is worse than the reality of it. I'm not just talking about in a dungeon, either."

"Yes."

"It's normal to be anxious. That's what gets the blood pumping, the endorphins rushing. That can be good or bad. In this case, it's very good. I want to build expectation." He pulled his fingers through the straps again. Then he gave his wrist a

quick flick, sending them flying toward her fanny, they struck with a quick and light snap. The pain followed, a dozen little stings.

She gasped and tensed the muscles of her back.

“Oh yes, very nice. Look how you’ve raised your ass. You want another? Perhaps a little harder this time?”

The pain from the first strike was already fading. She nodded and stared at his hand, waiting for that quick motion again.

One side of his mouth lifted into a crooked smile. He shook his head. “No, this time I don’t want you to watch. Turn around.” He motioned with an index finger. “It’ll be even more of a surprise if you can’t see.”

What a delightfully naughty game he played! Trembling now from head to toe, she turned and leaned over the kneeler’s center support. She felt every tiny gust of air, heard every breath she took in. Her mouth still tasted of his kiss.

A whoosh of air hit her backside and she flinched, expecting to feel the bite of the whip but it didn’t come. Her heart was pounding out a wild conga beat now, and she was tempted to turn around but before she could, the whip struck her ass. She jerked and yelped when the pain shot up her spine. She was shaking now, shaking and on fire and ready to collapse. Every nerve in her body was lit up. She felt like she was about to jump out of her skin.

A third strike landed on her other buttock, sending yet another spike of pain blazing up to her brain. This time she cried out, “Ow!” She was lost to the world, to everything but what was happening inside her.

She felt him kissing her burning flesh, stroking her sopping pussy. His hair tickled her skin, giving her a healthy dose of goose bumps. She shivered, even though she was so hot she was sweating.

“Enough.” He walked around the kneeler and stopped directly in front of her. “I know you hunger for more pain but you’re not ready. Not yet.” He helped her stand up and wobble to a sex swing. She leaned back and waited as he strapped her into it, tied her knees out to the sides and wrists up over her head. The skin of her ass still stung but



the burn only added to the already overwhelming mix of sensations charging through her system.

“Have you ever fucked in a swing before?”

“No, Master.”

His smile promised her the kinds of delights she’d only dreamed about until recently, and she briefly reflected on how much things had changed over the past several nights. It was so cliché, but she knew her life would never be the same again. Burke and Miko had set her life on an entirely new and thrilling course.

Still smiling, Miko gripped the straps rising from either side of her hips and pulled the swing toward him until the head of his erect cock was prodding her pussy.

Just a little more. A few inches and he’d be buried deep inside.

He gave the straps a swift yank and they were joined completely. His cock slid deep inside. Simultaneously, she moaned and he groaned. Then he set about driving her absolutely insane by alternatively pushing her away and pulling her closer.

Tied as she was, she could do nothing but drop her head back and enjoy the ride. And oh what a ride it was! She was weightless, completely under Miko’s expert control and out of her mind with lust. With each rock back and forth, she was brought closer and closer to climax. Tension wound through her body, pulling muscles into tight knots. Heat spiraled out from her center, spreading up over her stomach and chest. Down to her toes.

And then he stopped, pulled out and dropped to his knees.

She knew what he was about to do, but it didn’t stop her from giving a whimper of pleasure when he parted her labia and flicked his tongue over her clit.

The bliss was beyond words. He pushed two fingers into her pussy while continuing to stimulate her clit with his magical tongue. Climax came swiftly. It was like a warm wave as it rushed over her body, carrying away all the tension his sweet tormenting had sparked. The spasms hadn’t yet eased when he stood up and resumed fucking her. The added sensation of his intimate strokes in and out made her climax last for what felt like an eternity. She blinked open her eyes mere moments before he

reached climax. And then, as she watched, the beautiful man making love to her changed into a hideous beast. No sooner did she gasp in surprise than he was back to Miko, the handsome man. He staggered as he pulled out of her and gave her a sated smile.

Had she just imagined that change?

He must've realized something was wrong because his expression sobered. He tipped his head and gave her a questioning look. "Is something wrong, kitten?"

She was still tingling all over and warm from Miko's thorough lovemaking, but the horror of what she'd seen was sending chills down her spine. "I... I think I saw something."

He nodded and silently freed her from her bindings. After helping her to her feet and magically producing a robe, which she promptly put on, he motioned for her to have a seat on a bench. "You know we are a magical people by now."

"Yes."

"What you see, in that brief moment as I reach climax is what we call our *Verus Corpus*, True Body. Our magic is strong enough to maintain the form you see for all time, with the exception of a brief instant before we climax and at the time of our death. It is only then that you will see me as I truly am, as a monster to your eyes."

It was hard to wrap her mind around the fact that, in truth, she was making love to monsters. Great, tall beings with long, gangly limbs, skeletal bodies and gray-hued skin. Miko's face had changed too. It had reminded her of that hideous deep-sea fish. The one with the blunt-nosed face and mouth full of long, needle-like teeth.

The image was stuck there, in her head. It was frightening and repulsive and even knowing she didn't have to see it again, if she simply kept her eyes closed during that brief instant when the shroud fell away, she wasn't sure if she could get past it.

Monsters. Burke and Miko were truly monsters.

Since she'd first met Burke, she'd barely recognized the fact that they weren't human. She was slowly accepting the fact that when either of them was around, her brain didn't function. There was some kind of invisible erotic bond between them and

no matter what was going on, in the world, in her head, wherever, if one of them touched her, she was ready to go at it like rabbits.

And she'd become even more accepting of the perks of being with a man who could drum up a five-course meal or designer wardrobe at the snap of his fingers.

But this... this wasn't fun. It wasn't even mildly annoying. It was spooky.

She supposed she should've expected some kind of negative to the whole dating-a-vampire thing. Something that went beyond the difficulties of Burke having been wrongfully accused of committing a crime. Everyone who walked the earth had a good and a not-so-good side. Why should vampires be any exception?

She supposed it would take some time to accept what she'd seen today. She could tell by the kind warmth she saw in Miko's eyes that he was going to be his understanding self and give her some space.

The man was really a sweetheart. Sexy and commanding in the bedroom yet sincere and kind outside. Perhaps it wouldn't take as long as she thought to get over that scare.

He snapped his fingers and the furniture changed into cozy, upholstered pieces. "I'm sorry I didn't do this earlier. I hadn't had the time to prepare the apartment for you, hadn't expected to have you stay this long." He swept his arm in a wide arc, motioning to the furniture in the room like a model in a game show. "How's this? Better?"

"How about some books? If I'm going to be stuck here all by my lonesome for God knows how long, I sure would like something to make the time go by. Oh, and a nice, cushy bed to sleep in too."

He snapped his fingers again, and one wall of the living room was covered with bookcases. "How's that?"

"Better. But can you tell me why can't you stay here with me? Why do you have to stay away?"

He glanced toward the window and pursed his lips. "Because if I stay, we'll never catch the killer." He looked reluctant as he stepped closer and took her hands in

his. And she admitted, she felt a little uncomfortable, having not gotten over the shock of discovering her hunky vamp turned into a hideous monster when they fucked. But she stayed put and gazed into his eyes as he kissed each of her fingertips. "Patience, kitten. When this is all over, we'll be together."

"What about my bills? My club?"

"They are all being taken care of."

"I don't accept charity."

"It's not charity. Consider it a loan if you like. I know how much your business means to you and I wouldn't want it to suffer. By staying here, you're helping me catch the killer. I think that entitles you to something. Wouldn't you say?" he asked, giving her a teasing, sparkly-eyed look.

"I suppose so," she said, not exactly sold on his reasoning, but figuring she'd go with the flow. Sooner or later, if things didn't change, she'd lose her patience. For now, she was willing to wait. "Hurry. Please."

"I will." After giving the back of her hand one lingering kiss, he bent, looking all noble and dashing, like a prince, and carried himself with long, purposeful strides to the door. "We will see each other very soon."

"I hope so," she whispered as she watched him leave.

## Chapter 6

It wouldn't be long now. He'd finally solved the puzzle, found the missing piece, discovered why his prior attempts to raise his beloved had failed. It had taken him a while.

He now knew what blood he needed, or more specifically whose. A bound *Origo*. That complicated matters a bit, since there was only one *Origo* he personally knew. And she hadn't yet been bound to her Masters. Plus, there was the minor complication regarding what her death would do to her Masters. But he couldn't think of that now. Not with the hunger inside him burning so agonizingly. He needed his beloved. He'd lived without her for too long. The end would have to justify the means.

Unfortunately, he was going to have to do something to help move things along for the *Origo* and her Masters. It wouldn't be easy, considering everything, but he needed them to complete the *Iugum*. And he needed them to complete the *Iugum* before sunrise.

He'd suffered long enough.

\* \* \*

"Sylvie's in danger." Burke dropped the newspaper on the floor and charged for the door, knocking Isabella's hand away when she reached for him.

"Wait!" she shouted to his back. "How do you know this isn't a trap?"

He stopped, turned and nodded. "I don't know that. It could be a trap. But the bottom line is she's not with Dvorak anymore, and if she's not with him then she's vulnerable."

"You're overreacting. Think about it. There's been nothing for nights. No murders. And you never did have any proof that she was the murderer's next victim. Maybe he's left town to track down the next victim? Maybe he's dead. Who knows?"

"Yeah, you could be right. But I can't stand the thought of Sylvie not being with one of us. Do you know what her death would mean to us? What the hell is Dvorak thinking by leaving her alone like that?"

"Exactly!" Isabella said, lifting a hand. "What is he thinking? And why is this in the newspaper? It rings of a setup. They're trying to trap you, use Sylvie to coax you out of hiding. It's all too convenient."

"Fine. So that just means I'll have to be ready for them." He scooped up the paper. "I need to find that ass, Dvorak, and find out where they have her."

"You're being stupid."

"No, I'm doing what needs to be done to protect my *Origo*. If something happens to her..."

"Hey, Dvorak isn't going to want anything to happen to her either. Bound or not, there's a connection between the three of you already. It's just not quite as deep yet. He'll still suffer if she's harmed."

"Unless he can't help it. Unless he can't protect her." He pointed at the article. "Do I need to read this to you again? According to this article, Dvorak's been taken off the case. I need to get to him before he's reassigned and find out what's happened."

Isabella frowned and shook her head. She grumbled something under her breath as she walked past him to the door of their temporary sanctuary, an abandoned store in a strip mall, and headed outside. "I know I'm going to regret this. Let's go," she said on a sigh.

Burke followed her to the rusted pile of bolts they'd bought off of a punk for a couple hundred dollars and they headed to Dvorak's place first. He'd spent the past few nights going back and forth between local nightclubs and Dvorak's house, unable to resist the temptation to try to get a peek at Sylvie. It had been several nights now since he'd seen her. He'd thought the pain of being separated from her would've eased with the passage of time, but it hadn't. It had grown steadily worse. It was now a fierce, excruciating agony, a cramping in his gut and heaviness in his chest that was making it hard for him to think, to function.

Isabella was probably right. This was a trap. But he was in such misery now, he didn't give a damn. If he could just see her. Touch her.

"What're you going to do?" Isabella asked once he'd cut the car's engine.

"I'm going to knock on the door and ask him where she is and what the hell he thinks he's doing leaving her unprotected. That's what I'm going to do. And if he's lucky, I won't kick his ass before I leave."

"This isn't going to be pretty." Isabella followed him up the front walk.

"Yeah, but at least he's been pulled off the case. I doubt Hadrian expected me to come knocking on his brother's door, so there won't be a trap set here. They're probably waiting wherever they've hidden Sylvie. Dammit, I wish they'd catch the bastard who's really committing the murders."

"You and me both."

He rang the bell. Within seconds, he saw a shadow pass across the window. He readied himself for a battle and, senses alert, took a step back from the door. "Watch my back," he whispered.

"Got it covered," Isabella answered.

Miko looked like he'd seen Dracula himself when he opened the front door. "What the hell are you doing on my porch?"

Burke didn't give him time to react. He charged at him like a pissed off rhino, shoving him back until they were both in his living room. Burke held Miko pinned against the wall. Their noses were nearly touching.

He could smell Sylvie on his skin. In agony, he dragged in several deep breaths. "Where is she? And what the hell do you think you're doing abandoning her with no protection?" he demanded on a growl. He had to give Dvorak credit. For a guy pinned against a wall by a vampire who could rip him like tissue paper, he was calm, icy cool.

Miko lifted his chin and glared. "What the fuck are you talking about? She's safe."

"If she's not with you and she's not with me, she's not safe."

One side of Miko's mouth curled into a cocky smile. Damn, he wanted to smack that fucking grin off Dvorak's face. "You've lost it, friend," Miko said.

"No, but I will lose it if you don't tell me where she is. Right now." He punctuated the last two words with a hard shake of the bastard's shoulders. "There's a fucking killer out there."

"Yeah. Why don't you tell me about him? Huh?"

"No, why don't you take a ride with us? Since you don't seem to be in a hurry to get rid of me. Is Hadrian on his way in with a fucking army?"

Miko shrugged. "No."

"Yeah. And I'm the Pope. Let's go." He took Miko by the shirt and shoved him toward the door.

"Where are we going?" Miko asked as he strolled through the doorway.

"How about we do a double date?"

"Okay. This'll be the last date you'll be on for a long, long time, once my brother gets his hands on you."

"We'll see about that."

\* \* \*

Someone was at the front door. Sylvie knew that someone was not just any someone either. This someone was special. This someone was making her hot and they hadn't even opened the door yet.

Curious. Very, very curious, indeed.

Neither Burke nor Miko had stirred this kind of reaction in her, at least not without touching her. Was something going on that she didn't understand? Had the bond between Miko and her somehow strengthened after their last lovemaking?

Expecting to find Miko on the other side of the door, she hurried to it, but it swung open before she reached the middle of the living room.

She halted mid-step and nearly fell over.

Burke and Miko. Together. No wonder she was on fire!



She did something she hadn't done in many years -- she squealed like a little girl who'd just been told she could shop till she dropped at Toys-R-Us. Then she hurled herself at the guys, determined to show them both exactly how thrilled she was to see them.

Miko slammed the door at the precise instant Sylvie landed in Burke's arms.

She cupped Burke's gorgeous face in her hands. "Are you okay? Is everything all right? I'm so glad to see you." She didn't wait for him to respond before peering at Miko. "You came here together?"

"He sort of kidnapped me," Miko admitted, sounding sheepish. His face was the shade of a ripe tomato.

She adored that face.

Compelled to soothe Miko's bruised ego, she took one of his hands in hers and squeezed it. She met his gaze. He didn't just look embarrassed. He also looked troubled. Deep furrows cut across his forehead. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing."

She tipped her head back to look at Burke's face. Unlike Miko, Burke was smiling.

"I think he's just sore because I'm not in handcuffs yet," Burke said. "He expected Hadrian and the gang to be here."

"Operative word -- yet," Miko murmured.

"Come on, boys. I might've been dreaming, but I was hoping we could all make nice." She gave Burke another squeeze around the waist then released him and turned to Miko. "I know what you're worried about, but I promise, Burke's innocent."

Miko crossed two thick arms over his chest. The black shirt he was wearing now stretched taut over his muscles. Yummy! Her body decided it was party time, despite the serious subject matter of their discussion. "Doesn't matter. He's a convicted felon --"

"The so-called trial was a sham!" Burke barked back. "My court-appointed lawyer didn't know what the hell he was doing. Did he even graduate from law school, I wonder? Or did he buy a degree from [www.degreesforsale.com](http://www.degreesforsale.com)?"

Miko shrugged. "I don't hire them."

Sylvie, who was so ready to jump both their bones, heaved the sigh of a woman who'd had enough testosterone. There was only one thing on her mind at the moment, and it had nothing to do with playing referee to bickering boys. The need to have them both naked and on top of her was almost beyond bearable.

Didn't they feel the same thing? That same desperate urge?

She glanced into Burke's eyes. Oh yes, he was feeling it. The holdout was Miko, no doubt because of his guilt.

A sassy thought whipped through her mind and she instantly reacted to it. This might be her only chance to have both Masters in the same room, especially if Miko continued to refuse to help Burke.

The agony of being apart from them would be eased, if only temporarily, if she could distract them from their differences for a little while. She was quite certain there was one way to would accomplish that. The average red-blooded American male forgot most everything when he was toe-to-toe with a naked woman. Why wouldn't two red-blooded vampires?

It was worth a try.

While Miko continued grumbling and Burke lobbed smart comebacks, she stripped nude. As she slowly peeled away one piece of clothing after another, the fire in their voices faded and the flames in their eyes flared.

Oh yes, it was working!

Both vampires were standing wide-eyed and gape-mouthed by the time she'd shed the last piece of clothing. Neither of them seemed to possess the mental capacity required to string together a sentence at the moment.

It was all good.

The two men looked at each other, seeming to be doing that male sizing-the-other-guy-up thing. The tension in the room was thick as liquid concrete. Sylvie stood her ground and waited.

"If we complete the *Iugum*, we're all fucked if you're executed," Miko said, as he pulled off his shirt.

"I know." Burke followed suit, kicking off his shoes and shucking his pullover. "This is why you have to help me. I'm innocent."

Miko was standing there, looking perplexed, his hands at the front snap of his pants.

Sylvie couldn't help noticing they weren't using magic to undress. Why?

Burke mirrored Miko's pose. "You and I both know there's no way we're going to leave here without completing the *Iugum*. Look at her! Just look!" Burke motioned toward Sylvie, whose face heated at the wild expression on his face.

Oh, who cared why? She dropped to her knees and lowered her head. "My Masters." She almost giggled when one of them growled.

"You did this on purpose."

It sure sounded like Miko's anger was losing steam.

"No... okay, maybe. But who could blame me? I couldn't fucking stand it anymore. I'd been away from her for too long. I was going nuts. Literally. But I'm innocent. I swear it. We'll complete the *Iugum* and then we'll find the real killer. You and me. Together. And you'll be a hero when it's all over, for finding the real killer and taking him down."

She trembled as she waited, her gaze on the floor. Her entire body was shaking with the anticipation of what was to come. She didn't know exactly what to expect. It wasn't every day that a girl did the *We-gum* or whatever it was called with two absolutely scrumptious, handsome, thoughtful, strong and sexy vampires. Considering everything, she figured it was bound to be mind-blowing.

There was a long, drawn out moment of silence and she guessed Burke and Miko were giving each other another stare. She lifted her eyes to check.

Burke turned a second later and still half-dressed strode toward her. He stopped directly in front of her, effectively blocking her view of Miko. "You haven't had her and then lost her like I have. You don't know what it's like." He palmed her cheek and

snapped his fingers. Once again, the room's furnishings changed. The bookshelves and comfy couches were gone and in their place were the assorted wooden bondage structures. "You are my life," he said, reaching down and palming her cheek. He took one of her hands in his and pulled her to her feet while tracing her lips with his thumb. "I had no idea how hard it would be to stay away. How excruciating. I need you, Sylvie. I must have you."

She smiled and nodded, grateful for his gentle touch and the warmth she found in his eyes. "I want to be with you and Miko. Together. For always. It's been so difficult."

He pulled her into a tight embrace. One of his hands rested on her head while the other pressed on her lower back. She smiled, inhaling the scent she'd missed so much over the past few nights -- of Burke, of man and passion and crisp night air -- and wrapped her arms around his waist. Even with her eyes closed, she sensed Miko approaching. He was behind her now. Her spine tightened as little pleasant tingles raced up and down.

Miko kissed a path down the center of her back then gripped her buttocks in his hands. While she shuddered against Burke, at Miko's touch, she tipped her head up to beg for a kiss. Burke obliged without her having to ask. He slanted his mouth over hers and gave her a slow, sensual kiss that left her breathless and dizzy and aching for more.

Miko's touch became more bold. His fingers slid between her buttocks and teased her anus, her pussy. Slick juices pulsed from her vagina, coating the insides of her thighs. Her knees turned to molten marshmallow. She started sinking, relying entirely on Miko and Burke to keep her from landing on the floor like a dropped sack of flour.

Burke swept her into his arms and carried her to a wooden table. He lowered her to the flat top, polished to a gloss. A set of four cuffs hung from long chains suspended from the ceiling.

With their help, she settled on her back. Burke kissed the breath right out of her then lifted her arms and secured them up high, over her head. As he stood beside her,

Miko eased her knees apart. She could see the hunger on his face, in his eyes, as he looked down at her.

She was quite certain her heart was going to explode. Or plain stop working. One or the other.

Her head was spinning but she didn't want to close her eyes. Watching Miko and Burke move, their muscles ripple and bulge as they lifted their arms. It was mesmerizing.

Huge, happy sigh.

Miko lifted her ankles and pushed her feet back, forcing her to bend her knees. Now her pussy was open and fully exposed to him, and she couldn't be happier. Being the gentleman he was, Burke decided this was a good time to produce a vibrator and use it to tease her nipples. Little zaps shot through her body. Heat gathered between her legs. Tension coiled in her belly. She quivered and moaned.

"You don't know what you're asking us to do," Miko said, teasing her slit with a fingertip.

It wasn't easy, but she responded. "Yes. I do."

Miko took his hand away and she whimpered. "No, you really don't understand. To complete the *Iugum* would mean to bind us together. You will live as long as we do, but should any of us be killed -- executed -- the others will die too."

Despite the fog of desire clouding her judgment, she recognized how serious this Binding stuff was. She knew she had no business making a decision this weighty while tied up and on the verge of ecstasy, but the illogical part of her -- which happened to possess firm control of her at the moment -- demanded she complete the Binding as soon as possible.

A few years ago, she'd had meningitis. The pain in her head had been so horrific she'd begged the doctors to make the pain go away. Every second of pounding pain was like a lifetime of agony.

This was no different. With two of them there, together, the misery was amplified. The blood in her veins felt like acid. Her skin felt like it was on fire. She

needed them to make it go away. She wanted to feel normal again. She wanted to be happy. She wanted to be happy with Miko and Burke. And she wanted to make them happy.

"I can't stand this anymore. Make it stop," she begged. She lifted her head and looked at Miko. "Please." When his gaze moved to the left, she turned her head to Burke. "I know I don't fully comprehend what this means, but I know I need to finish it. I need to be with you and Miko."

Burke nodded and stroked her cheek. Then he unfastened her wrists and together they walked to a low, narrow bench. He pushed her onto her knees and while she knelt before them, the two vampires undressed completely.

They were both gloriously built, their bodies like fine marble statues sculpted by the greatest master of all time. She was in awe of the fact that they would be hers, and only hers, forever. And she would be theirs.

What had she done to deserve such a wonderful gift?

Miko sat on the bench. His cock was erect, thick and long and hard. Her pussy throbbed at the thought that it would soon be buried deep inside her.

Burke, who stood beside her, handed her a tube of lubricating jelly and pointed at Miko.

She knew what he expected her to do. Still on her knees, she scooted closer. Then, with Burke behind her whispering sweet words of encouragement in her ear, she flipped the top off the lube, squeezed some of the cool jelly into her hand and closed her fingers around Miko's cock.

Miko audibly inhaled when she slid her hand down to the base and back up again, and Burke murmured, "That's it, baby. Oh yes."

Miko's face was flushing a deep crimson and his stomach muscles were tight, forming defined planes, cut horizontally by two lines and vertically straight down the middle. She'd always had an appreciation for the sight of a well-defined stomach. Miko's was as near to perfect as they came. Burke's was nearly as scrumptious.

Just because she had to, she stood up and traced the line of hair running from his bellybutton down to his cock. That was one of the sexiest parts of a man, that and his upper back. She had to swallow several times, the drool was coming fast and furious.

As she bent over, Burke caught her hips in his hands and started kissing her bottom. That inspired her to stay put right where she was and perhaps have some more fun with Miko's to-die-for bod. She continued pumping her hand up and down his cock while kissing and nibbling her way around the territory surrounding his genitals, upper legs, stomach. His skin was slightly salty but it smelled sweet. The combination of taste and scent, along with the tickly kisses Burke was planting all over her ass and lower back were enough to make her shiver with delight.

"In order to complete the *lugum*, you must take us both at the same time," Burke murmured.

Two men at the same time? Was that even possible? She shuddered. Did that mean one of them would have to fuck her in the ass?

"We must both be inside you when we bite." Miko's eyelids lifted. His eyes shone with a strange golden glow, like a cat's that had been struck with a flashlight beam. "We are nearly ready for you now." He reached out and grabbed her shoulders.

Burke pushed her from behind, forcing her to turn to the side. "The lube."

She handed the tube of jelly to him and watched, mesmerized, as Burke dispensed some into her other hand. He pressed his palm against the back of her hand and he didn't remove it when she replaced her one hand with the other. His fingers twined between hers as she glided it up and down to spread the lube.

Miko visibly quivered. He dropped his head back, letting it rest against the wall behind him.

"Yes, love. That's it." Burke released her hand and guided her to turn to face him. His gaze locked with hers, he nodded. "Take him in your ass. All the way in."

The breath she'd been about to inhale lodged itself in her throat. She was really going to do this? Take two men at once?

Ohmygod!

She looked over her shoulder and reached behind her to hold Miko's cock. Then she shuffled backward, her legs wide, straddling Miko's legs and the bench, and positioned herself over his cock. It pressed at her perineum, and the skin burned fiercely, but she found comfort and encouragement in Burke's eyes. He held her at the waist and helped hold her weight as she slowly, painstakingly lowered herself a fraction of an inch at a time.

Miko's cock filled her ass and then some. A flash of liquid heat coursed through her body when she'd taken him in entirely, and she cried out. She needed Burke's cock.

Miko wrapped his arms around her and pulled until her back was resting against his chest. While she lay there, waiting and in sweet agony, he slowly rocked his hips. His cock moved inside her and she nearly came. The promise of ecstasy lingered just out of her reach.

"This is it, love. You'll have what you've ached for all this time. Your suffering will be over." Burke lifted her knees and positioned his cock at her vagina.

Miko pinched and pulled at her nipples, sending torrents of pleasure pain pulsing through her body.

"Please," she begged, her body about to go up in flames. "Now, Burke. Now!"

He smiled and slowly pushed his cock inside her.

"Oooohhhh!"

The sensations were beyond words. The fullness in her ass and pussy, the crazy currents of energy charging through her system like bolts of electricity. The way everything seemed so much more intense -- touches were almost painful, sounds nearly loud enough to bust her eardrums, her vision crystal clear, despite the dim lighting.

Burke withdrew his penis and then thrust deep inside again, and Miko growled beneath her, his voice seeming to express what she felt. Her eyelids were too heavy to hold up and her eyes were blurry with tears. She closed them and let her head fall back onto Miko's shoulder. All she wanted to do was feel, to let the incredible sensations they were stirring in her body carry her far away.



They were both moving inside her now, and oh the joy! Burke stroked her clit, round and round, drawing slow circles over her sensitive flesh. Miko pinched and tugged at her nipples. Their cocks worked in unison, driving slowly in and out of her body until she was on the verge of climax.

She cried out. The sound was nearly deafening. The soles of her feet cramped as she climaxed. Her pussy and ass contracted around Miko and Burke's cocks in a swift rhythmic spasm.

Then she felt it, the sharp pain of their bites. But instead of stealing her pleasure, it increased it. She reached out blindly, grabbed Burke and dug her nails into his skin. Wave upon wave of wild erotic heat charged through her body like blasts from a blow torch. Still spasming from her climax, she trembled and clung to Burke, wishing the sensations would never ease, yet knowing she'd die if they didn't.

This was beyond anything she'd ever imagined. It was beyond comprehension. Beyond words. Beyond thought. It was both beautiful and horrifying at the same time. Erotic and terrifying.

When they stopped sucking, it all stopped. The pulsing heat. The spasms of her climax. She felt exhausted and shaky and muddle-headed. It took Herculean effort, but she managed to drag her eyelids up so she could look at Burke.

He was still inside her, but he'd stopped moving. He was gazing down at her with the sweetest, most peaceful expression.

She felt very much the same -- content. At last. Sated. At peace. Yes, she'd done the right thing.

He slowly withdrew from her before helping her off of Miko.

She was barely able to stand. Her knees were softer than ice cream left outside on a July afternoon. She stumbled, catching herself before she fell.

Miko cradled her to him, and with Burke beside her, he walked back to the bedroom and laid her down on the bed. And then, as she lay on her back, her body relaxing and her mind still, the two men settled on either side of her.

She was complete at last. Complete and content.

She hoped this feeling would last forever.

\* \* \*

It was nearly finished. There was one more step to the *Iugum* and then Sylvie would be a fully bound *Origo*.

He would have to be patient a little longer. It was getting more and more difficult to wait, but some things couldn't be rushed. Soon he would have his love. Soon.

Making sure to remain in the shadows, he watched and waited.

## Tawny Taylor

Nothing exciting happens in Tawny Taylor's life, unless you count giving the cat a flea dip--a cat can make some fascinating sounds when immersed chin-deep in insecticide--or chasing after a houseful of upchucking kids during flu season. She doesn't travel the world or employ a staff of personal servants. She's not even built like a runway model. She's just your run-of-the-mill, pleasantly plump Detroit suburban mom and wife.

That's why she writes, for the sheer joy of it. She doesn't need to escape, mind you. Despite being run-of-the-mill, her life is wonderful. She just likes to add some...zip.

Her heroines might resemble herself, or her next door neighbor (sorry Sue), but they are sure to be memorable (she hopes!). And her heroes--inspired by movie stars, her favorite television actors or her husband--are fully capable of delivering one hot happily-ever-after after another. Combined, the characters and plots she weaves bring countless hours of enjoyment to Tawny...and she hopes to readers too!

In the end, that's all that matters to Tawny, bringing a little bit of zip to someone else's life.

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