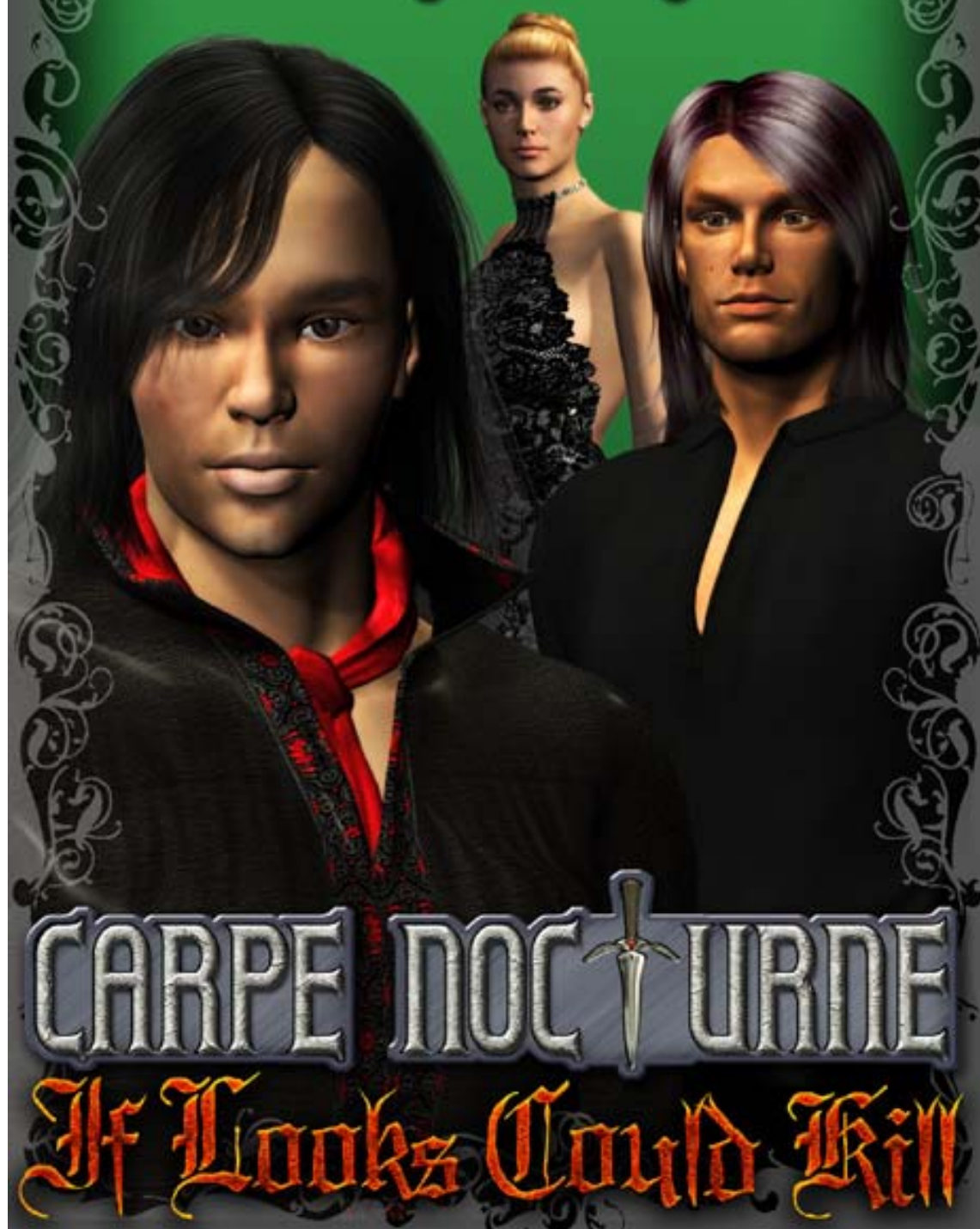


Changeling Press

Tawny Taylor



Carpe Nocturne 3: If Looks Could Kill

Tawny Taylor

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Carpe Nocturne 3: If Looks Could Kill

Tawny Taylor

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"

Nightclub owner -- and mate to two dominant, powerful vampires -- Sylvie Durand is kidnapped and learns her death is the key to a killer's bizarre and demented plan. Bound and imprisoned, she's forced to face her darkest fears, ghosts of a past she can no longer escape.

Time is quickly running out.

Sylvie will die if her vampire mates -- former enemies Miko Dvorak and Burke Langton -- can't put their past differences behind them and learn to trust each other. All three must not only conquer a madman who will stop at nothing to get what he wants, but also clear Burke's name, pay back debts owed to lifelong friends, and shatter the chains that have bound them to their private demons their entire lives.

If they fail, none of them will get the happily-ever-after they deserve... or the blood-bond they desire.

Chapter One

Sylvie Durand woke up as the meat in a hunky, alpha vampire sandwich. She was still tingly, giddy and weak from their earlier lovemaking. A happy little tremble shook her body at the memory. She'd had two men at once. Two! Who would've ever thought it? Certainly not her.

To think it had all started just a few nights ago, after a man was murdered in her bar, Carpe Nocturne. Immediately after discovering the poor guy in her office, his blood drained from his body, she'd learned vampires were real -- gasp!

The shocking discoveries didn't end there. Next, she'd discovered she was some kind of mate (an *Origo*) to a pair of vampires -- another gasp! Burke Langton was a vampire on the run from the law for a series of brutal murders he didn't commit. And Miko Dvorak was an officer with a super-secret vampire police force.

And finally, she'd fairly quickly discovered that her libido had a mind of its own whenever her hunky vampires entered the room. Her body insisted she complete this bizarre Binding ritual -- called the *Iugum* -- that involved making love to both her vampire Masters at the same time. Last night, she buckled to the agony, which had taken the form of this awful pounding, burning pain that felt like a full-body toothache.

At least for now, the pain had eased. Sweet relief.

She stared at her first Master's handsome face, committing his features to memory. Burke Langton had the most delightful mouth this side of paradise. And he looked adorable when he was sleeping, sweet and sexy. His eyelashes were uber-long, the shade of coal. His cheekbones and jaw line hewn in hard angles. His skin was the deep olive tone that perfectly set off the deep ebony of his wavy hair.

A work of art.

Miko Dvorak, her second Master, was sleeping behind her. As he changed positions, spooning tightly against her back, his dick prodded her bottom. She was tempted to arch her back and welcome him inside. The only things stopping her were the bazillion questions running through her head, now that her brain was finally working again, and the absolute lack of energy making her feel like she'd swallowed an entire bottle of sleeping pills. When she lifted her arm to brush away a strand of hair hanging over her face, it felt like her limbs were carved out of solid concrete. Too much work. She let her arm drop back to the bed. It felt like a dead fish.

"We're not finished with the *Iugum* yet," Burke said, his eyes still closed.

"We're not?" She wasn't sure how she felt about that little tidbit of information. A part of her was relieved. She was not only uncertain of what she thought about this binding stuff but also feeling like something her neighbor's cat had dragged in. Now she had to wonder if it was because of her half-*Iugum*-ed state.

"We had to wait to finish," Miko added. "You must make the decision with a clear head, not while in the midst of a Binding Fever."

Now, that was thought-provoking. She shifted positions, rolling onto her back to allow her to see both men. "Binding Fever? That's what they call that agony? I swear, I thought I was going to die."

Both men gave her a sympathetic nod, reminding her of twin bobble head dolls. Hunky, handsome bobble head dolls.

"So, uh, do I dare ask? What's left?" she said when they didn't elaborate.

"We both fed from you, which is why you feel so tired and weak." Miko took one of her hands in his and stroked the back with his thumb. His touch was like feathers. Soft and teasing. Tormenting. "Now you must feed from us."

"Feed?" She knew she was scowling but she couldn't help it. "As in drink your blood?"

"Yes."

She shivered, and not because she was cold. She didn't eat rare meat because the sight of those bloody juices gave her a serious case of the *squicks*. How would she

manage to consume blood? And not animal blood, but people blood? Vampire blood. Her throat constricted, her gag reflex threatening to kick in. "And if I don't?"

"You'll eventually grow stronger." Burke sat up and snapped his fingers. In the time it took to blink an eye, he was fully dressed in a pair of black pants and a snug black T-shirt that was this close to being obscene it fit so perfectly.

"But the Fever will return eventually as well." Miko mirrored Burke's actions. Although he ended up in a pair of blue jeans, his shirt was identical to Burke's. And it looked just as good too. "I'd be willing to bet the Fever will be worse, now that we've fed from you."

"I'm thinking the same thing," Burke said.

Okay, she was getting the picture. Granted, earlier she'd said such noble things about wanting to be with these men forever, being willing to make whatever sacrifice was necessary to become one with them. They'd been heartfelt. She did want to be with Burke and Miko. But blood? They'd never mentioned her having to drink blood. Ew! And ew!

All this talk about the Binding raised a few questions. What exactly would happen after she drank their blood? What did this Binding mean?

Gosh, would she become a vampire? Would she be forced to keep a liquid diet for all eternity? Ack! Would she turn to dust if she went out in the sun?

As much as she adored Burke and Miko, she wasn't sure she was ready for such a huge change. She was suddenly very thankful they'd waited to complete the final step until after she'd had some time to think.

Yes, for an onlooker, it might seem a little late to be asking these questions. If she'd seen this in a movie or read it in a book, she would've been skeptical. But the pain had been so overwhelming, she hadn't been able to think of anything but finding relief. At the point when it had been the worst, there was no saying what kind of awful things she might have done to receive even a temporary break from the agony. Thankfully, she hadn't been forced to test herself. But, she could see how someone evil might use the pain -- or more specifically the promise of a cure -- to his advantage.

Miko's suggestion that the so-called Fever would return certainly didn't sit well with her. "Couldn't we settle for tomato juice instead?" she offered. "Is there a less permanent arrangement we can make? I need some time yet to figure this stuff out."

Both men shook their heads, grave expressions on their faces.

She heaved an intentionally loud and long sigh. "It was worth a try. Hey, how about some clothes for me too?"

Burke snapped her a cozy velour outfit and T-shirt then sat beside her and took her hand in his. "This isn't an insignificant decision, and although it's being made under some pressure, you need to think it through thoroughly. There are both benefits and drawbacks to being a bound *Origo*."

"And they are? Give me the bad stuff first. I'm the kind of girl who likes to hear the bad news before the good."

"The most significant drawback is if something happens to any one of us, then it happens to all of us," Miko explained.

That statement confused her. "In what way? If you get a toothache, then I will too?"

"In a matter of speaking, yes," Miko said. "If you are hurt somehow, then we will also feel your pain. If you are killed, we will die with you."

A huge glaring light bulb flipped on in her head. "And if Burke is executed for murder then I'll die too?" A second light blinked on. "And so will you."

Miko's expression darkened even more. "Yes."

"So why aren't you telling me this is a bad idea?"

"Because I can't influence your decision. It's not right... and I want to complete the *Iugum*," Miko admitted in a softer voice. His eyes were full of confusion and turmoil and a deep line cut between his eyebrows. "God help me, I want it more than anything."

She wanted something really bad too -- to touch him. She also longed to tell him she wouldn't go through with the *Iugum*. To save his life. But she knew she lacked the strength to resist.

Already, the hunger or fever or whatever was returning. Her blood felt hot as it pumped through her body. Like boiling acid. And little razor sharp spikes of awareness shot up and down her spine.

Her Masters were touching her. They were close. They both smelled wonderful, and oh boy, how they looked!

A lump had gathered in her throat. She swallowed hard to force it down and blinked away the stinging in her eyes. "You want to complete the Binding? Even if it means you might die?"

"We are your Masters, and no matter what you decide, we will remain your Masters." Burke cupped her chin and gazed deeply into her eyes, like he was trying to delve into her very soul. She both welcomed the erotic, unsettling probing and bristled against it. Could he see her secrets? Her darkest fears? "Don't let the worry of losing us sway you. We're not going anywhere."

Had she said she was worried? Maybe she hadn't, but it was something to think about. The whole death issue, of course, took precedence over any other concerns -- sunlight and diet, saying goodbye forever to her adorable, scrumptious vampires. She broke eye contact with Burke to look at Miko. "Will you help him? Will you help us find the real killer? Or do you still believe Burke's the murderer?"

Miko's gaze shifted to Burke then darted back to her. "I've begun to re-evaluate the evidence and there is the possibility that Burke is innocent."

Sylvie didn't hesitate to show Miko how happy she was to hear that. She threw herself at him and flung her arms around his neck. Luckily for her, even though she'd taken him by surprise, he was quick to recover -- as it seemed most vampires were. He stood quickly, holding Sylvie so that her toes barely skimmed the floor. She showered his face with sweet kisses in between thank yous.

But within seconds, each kiss started getting longer. And each thank you got quieter until eventually, something inside her snapped. She fell into full-blown lust mode and could think of nothing but how to cram her tongue down his throat.

Who needed to talk right now?

Miko kissed her back for a few minutes and then seemed to find his head -- the big one on top of his body. He gently pried her off and gave her a bleary-eyed smile. "We need to decide what we're doing before it's too late." His face was a deep scarlet, the shade of one of her favorite dresses.

Burke chuckled and she was tempted to give him a little taste of the medicine she'd just dosed to Miko. As if he'd read her mind, he sobered and crossed his arms over his nummy chest. "Miko's right. As I understand it, it is our legal -- not to mention moral -- responsibility to make sure you comprehend all the possible consequences for your decision before you do anything."

"Is that the lawyer in you talking? Or the man?"

"The man. I've never dealt with an *Origo*, in my fake law practice or otherwise." He winked. "Frankly, I'd always assumed they were legend. Little did I know." He chuckled again and he and Miko exchanged knowing glances. "I'm relieved to see that Miko's looking into the case against me, but you should still remember that there's always the possibility that one of us could be harmed or killed. And since we'll be psychically bound for all time, we will always be vulnerable."

"So what's the good news? I've heard the bad. Or haven't I heard it all?"

"That's about it. I think." Burke looked to Miko for affirmation, which Miko delivered with a nod.

"I haven't read much about *Origos*," Miko said. "But I think that's it."

"Good news?" she prodded.

"The good news is you'll be immortal," Burke said with a smile. Dimples poked into his cheeks on either side of his mouth. Dimples! She was inspired to heave another sigh, this one of pure bliss.

Then she remembered what he'd said. Immortal? Like live forever? Did that mean she would be a vampire? Would have to become nocturnal and drink blood? What kind of job could she hold down if she had to work from sundown to sunrise? "How exactly does that immortal stuff work? Will I have to avoid sunlight, sleep during the day, and snack on vagabonds?"

Burke shook his head. "No. You won't turn into a vampire. You will remain human. Consume food. Drink whatever you like. But you will not age and you will not get sick."

Now that was good news indeed. Not age? She'd be perpetually thirty-something? She'd never go through menopause? Or get arthritis or osteoporosis? She'd never get thick like her grandmother? Or start growing hair in places she didn't want to think about?

Forever thirty. Hmmm... Yes, that was one heck of a benefit. The cons were pretty bad, but the pros sure did sound great.

"And my fountain of youth is within you two?" she asked, growing giddy. "I'll just need to do this once? Drink your blood?"

"Only once," Burke said.

"And only a small bit. A drop or two," Miko added.

Only a drop or two? That didn't sound so bad. That wasn't more than a lick. Not a gulp. She could handle that.

So, the decision was either face certain death as a human or unlikely death as an immortal? Not much to think about when it was put that way.

"So, do I need to sign some kind of disclaimer first?"

Both men gave her the kind of smile a guy might give his doctor upon hearing he won't have his testicles removed sans anesthetic.

"There is no paper to sign," Burke said, positioning himself directly in front of her. "At least none that I know of. Since I don't think either of us has witnessed the *Iugum*," he added, glancing Miko's way, "we'll have to wing it."

Miko nodded and stood beside Burke. "I don't think there's any official forms we must submit to the United Magical Nations."

"Okay." She eyed their necks. Really, did they expect her to literally bite them? It wasn't like her teeth were made for that... well, kinda. She'd consumed her share of meat in her day, but never raw. Her chompers were strong. She'd practiced good oral

hygiene all her life. “Uh, what’s next then?” Her stomach did this funny little squirmy, flip-floppy thing. Blood. Ick.

The two guys looked at each other then simultaneously said, “I’ll do it. Oh.”

Do what? she wondered.

Miko pointed. “The wrist, you think?”

“Yes, that makes the most sense,” Burke agreed. “I can bite yours and then my own.”

“No, no. I’ll bite yours and then my own.”

They were fighting over who gets to bite whom? Would she ever understand vampires?

“Here’s a thought. Why don’t you bite yourselves?”

They looked at her like she’d grown two heads.

Why was that such a bad suggestion? It wasn’t like they had a thing about biting themselves. They’d each offered to do as much a second earlier... granted, after biting the other guy.

Finally, Burke grumbled, “Fine,” and chomped on his wrist.

That was so not an appetizing sight. “Yikes! Could’ve given me some warning,” Sylvie murmured as she struggled not to gag. She made sure to keep her gaze focused on a much more pleasant sight -- the brown shag carpet -- while Miko took care of his arm. *Breathe in through the nose. Out. In. Out. How will I get through this?*

Within seconds, there were two wrists hovering under her nose, both with two tiny tooth pricks in them and a ribbon of blood running from the holes.

The blood was a deep crimson and she’d swear it looked thicker than normal, not that she’d spent hours and hours staring at blood. It kind of oozed from the wounds, sluggish like molasses dripping from an overturned spoon. Her stomach did another flip-flop, this time threatening to lurch up into her throat.

If only there were an easier way for a girl to gain eternal youth, like sell her soul to the devil.

She closed her eyes and tried to visualize something more appetizing, like a triple-fudge brownie sundae with all the fixings. Oh yes, much better. Saliva collected under her tongue.

Her eyes still closed, she reached out, caught one hand in her fingers and pulled until it was up by her mouth. Then, with her thoughts on all things chocolate and good, she pressed her lips to the skin and slipped her tongue between them.

The taste was salty like seawater and bitter like coffee left out overnight. She fought the urge to vomit, pressed her mouth firmly to the arm, and sucked. The salty, thick liquid seeped into her mouth slowly, like a milkshake sucked through a skinny straw. When there was enough to swallow, she contracted her throat to force it down.

Her eyes watered.

She released the hand she'd been holding and reached blindly for the other one. Once she had a hold of it, she repeated the same process, breathing in through her nose in slow, deep breaths to counteract her gag reflex. This was one girl who'd never win *Fear Factor*. Heck, she got nauseated from watching the show.

After forcing down the second swallow of vampire blood, she released the other hand and blinked open her eyes.

When was it going to happen, whatever it was?

Sylvie felt nothing. Or rather nothing extraordinary, that would suggest she was now eternally thirty-something. There was no gripping pain or lights or ringing in the ears. Neither was there a huge surge in energy or sudden super-duper strength. She wondered if they'd done something wrong.

She shrugged. "Well, that was sort of anti-climactic. I don't feel any different. Did we goof something up?"

"Well, hell," Burke murmured.

Miko shrugged. "I doubt it."

"How can we test it?" she asked. "Anyone have a friend who's sick? They can sneeze on me."

Both men shook their heads. Burke was looking like he was deep in thought. "I think I'll call Isabella. She'll know if we did something wrong."

He had his phone in his fist in a snap, but before he'd punched a single number, she had gently plucked it from his grasp and was setting it on the nearest horizontal surface she found.

She was in the mood to celebrate -- *Origo* style.

Chapter Two

Sylvie had just paid a visit to the fountain of youth. This was for real! She'd never have a saggy ass or boobs. No floppy arms. Or drooping chin.

And best of all -- no disease.

Burke was quick to catch on to her festive mood. He scooped her into his arms, spun her until she was dizzy and then carried her to the bed.

How she adored her vampires! She nuzzled his neck as he lowered her to the bed, inhaling his nummy bad boy vampire scent. He tugged her jacket's zipper down, pushed the garment's sides apart and tickled the inch of tummy exposed when the hem of her T-shirt inched north. A coat of goose bumps sprang out all over her upper body. Her nipples tightened to sensitive peaks, straining against the snug knit material of her shirt.

It did not surprise her to find Burke had failed to provide her with a bra when he'd snapped her into clothes. Not that she was complaining. Especially after he pinched her nipples through the thin cotton.

Sweet agony.

Smiling, she briefly wondered why Miko hadn't jumped into the action yet. But she quickly decided it wasn't worth worrying about. At the moment, nothing was worth worrying about.

It was time to just lie back and enjoy.

Burke slid his hands beneath her bottom, wedging his arms between the bed and her backside, and sliding them upward until he found the back of her knit pants. He tugged them down, over her buttocks, her legs, her feet. They went sailing across the room.

She giggled, realizing, of course, that as she'd expected she had no underwear on.

He grimaced. "What's so funny? You know what? You need to be spanked." As if to punish her, he sat on the bed, positioned her on her stomach, draped over his lap, and gave her fanny a light smack. The sound reached her ears a split second before the sting registered in her brain. She yelped, not so much because it hurt, but because it caught her by surprise. Then, because she liked it, she wagged her hips back and forth, an invitation for another.

He was quick to respond. The strike was as hard as the first one. But the next several became progressively softer until he was gently caressing her stinging flesh. His fingers slipped into the cleft between her buttocks, teasing her anus. Then, those naughty digits slid down lower, to tease her pussy and clit.

She wrapped her arms around his leg and gritted her teeth against a shudder. Burke knew exactly how to touch her, how hard to strike to produce just the right amount of pain to drive her crazy. And then how gently to touch her to drive her even more mad.

Warm wetness pulsed from her pussy to slick the insides of her thighs. She rocked her hips up and back, eager to rub away the wicked ache his tormenting was stirring between her legs. "Fuck me," she pleaded.

"Gladly." He eased her off his lap, undressed and then sat on the foot of the bed, coaxing her onto his lap. She knelt with her knees positioned on either side of his hips, her pussy hovering over his erect cock. He held it in his fist, pumping up and down until a pearl of precome collected on the tip.

Burke nibbled on the tickly spot just below her armpit, producing a quiver of pure, indulgent pleasure.

Miko came up behind her, pressing his stomach against her back, and sliding his arms around her sides until he had his hands closed over her breasts. She let her head fall back against his chest, closed her eyes, and surrendered to the powerful men stroking and kissing her to oblivion.

Life as an *Origo* was oh. So. Gooooooooood.

Burke held her hips, supporting her weight as she slowly impaled herself on his thick cock. A moan rushed up her throat. With his penis buried deep inside, she wrapped her arms around his neck and slowly circled her hips like a belly dancer, grinding her slick folds against his pelvis. His fingers dug into her soft flesh. He dropped his head forward and nipped her collarbone, murmuring sweet promises against her warming skin.

Now, this was the way to spend an eternity! She had to be the luckiest woman alive. Once, she'd figured she'd never find the right man for her. Now, she had not only one Mr. Right, but two. And they were both so very right.

While Burke lifted her hips, pulling her up until only the tip of his thick erection remained inside, Miko kissed a searing path down her spine. Fingertips teased her anus. Burke's hips rocked upward, once again thrusting his penis deep inside her. Over and over he drove into her, and over and over she murmured, "Ohmygod, ohmygod!" Miko kissed and tickled and teased. Pulses of heat rushed through her body. Pounding, urgent desire drove her to the brink of release.

And just as she was about to soar over the crest, Miko caught her hips between his hands, pulled her roughly off Burke's cock, positioned her so that she was bent over Burke's lap and entered her from behind.

Oh yes, this two-guy thing was for her.

She rocked back and forth, slamming into Miko's groin, the sexy slap of her ass striking him adding yet another sensation to the flurry already driving her to madness. Her deep breaths became little panting gulps. Her heart pounded against her breastbone, and the telltale flush of heat swirled in her stomach.

"Yessssss!" she screamed, giving herself over to an intense orgasm. But before the delightful pulses of bliss had eased, a loud bang sounded at the door. Miko jerked away, spun around and snapped his fingers, instantly dressing himself and her.

"What the hell?" Visibly confused, Burke jumped to his feet. He snapped his fingers mid-stride as he raced to the door, magically donning a pair of jeans and a shirt. "What's going on? Hang on!" Just as he was about to reach the door, it flung open.

"Shit!" Miko cursed, lunging in front of Sylvie, who suddenly realized she was standing dazed and motionless as a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming semi. He backstepped, taking her with him as a horde of men stormed into the room.

Although Miko's bulky bod blocked her view, the slamming and scuffling, shouting, crashing and thumping told her things were getting ugly fast. At the sound of Burke cussing, she tried to inch around Miko's right side to sneak a peek. Was he okay? What was going on?

Had Miko known what was about to happen? Had he intentionally stopped the Binding from working, so that they wouldn't die if Burke was killed?

Two men had Burke pinned to the floor, flat on his stomach. Because of the angle, she couldn't see his face, but what she could see sickened her. The two men were battering his head, shoulders and back with black metal rods.

He went completely still.

Was he dead? Oh God. Her insides went ice cold then blazing hot. Someone screamed, someone female.

Miko spun around and, sweeping her into an embrace, crushed her against him. It was then, as the shrieking grew muffled, that she realized it had been her. She clamped her eyes closed, wishing it was as easy to shut out the image of Burke lying still as death from her memory. She shuddered. Tears ran unchecked from her eyes, coursing down her cheeks and dripping from her chin.

"Excellent work, Miko," someone said.

Excellent work? She wanted to spit at whoever had said that. This wasn't good work. It was terrible. They'd just beaten an innocent man unconscious. A man she loved.

Unable to hold back the rage, flared hotter by the added hurt of knowing Miko had somehow contributed to what happened, she wrenched herself free from his

embrace. "Bastards!" Spinning, she kicked the man closest to her. Her foot made contact with his knee and there was a satisfying crunch, but she didn't bother looking to see what -- if any -- injury she might have caused. At the moment, her focus was on Burke.

The two creeps who had beaten him senseless were now hauling him to his feet, but his head hung limply. His body flopped as they dragged him toward the door.

"Burke! Ohmygod!" It was hard, but she fought her way between several men to get to him. She caught his hand in hers and squeezed. *Be alive. Just be alive.* "Burke?"

Nothing. His hand was cool and lifeless in hers. His head remained slumped forward.

The men holding him yanked, forcing his hand from hers. Desperate, she lunged forward, to grab any part of him she might reach. Arm. Hand. Leg. Whatever. But a split second before she touched him, someone caught her from behind, jerked her arms back.

"Miko?" she screamed. "Ouch!"

Whoever had her was holding her tightly, to the point of pain. Panicking, she twisted her upper body, trying to see who was holding her. Whoever it was, he now had both wrists held in one steely fist, had wrapped an arm around her waist, and was rushing her toward the exit.

She just knew she didn't want to go outside with whoever was manhandling her. Frantic, she dug her heels in and fought to free her hands. Didn't help. She jerked and kicked. Nothing. She screamed and fought.

Despite her thrashing, she was forced outside and into a black car with tinted windows. Finally, while fighting for her life -- kicking, punching, clawing -- she caught sight of the man who'd smuggled her outside. She didn't recognize him.

"Why?" she whispered, breathless. "Where are you taking me?"

"Miko asked me to take you to his car so you wouldn't be hurt," the man responded calmly. "Sorry I had to be so rough, but you were fighting me, and I didn't want to take any chances you were going to get in the middle of something again. You got this close to having your skull crushed." He gave her a friendly, reassuring smile.

"Miko'll be out as soon as we wrap things up inside." At the sound of a voice on his radio, the man shut the car door, turned and ran back toward the building.

A split second later, another man approached the vehicle. This one she recognized immediately. It was the man from the bar, the one who'd been there with Miko. She wished she could remember his name but she was drawing a blank.

He pulled open the door and motioned for her to follow him. "Something's happened. I need to protect you." When she hesitated, he added, "It's okay. Everything's going to be okay." He leaned forward and unfastened her seatbelt. "It's just a temporary thing, until we can sort out the facts."

A sickly chill swept through her body, followed by a wave of nausea. She wrapped her arms around herself to hold back the shudders wracking her body. "What happened? Is Burke okay? And Miko?"

"They're both fine. But there's been another threat on your life and Miko felt it would be better to get you out of here immediately." He led her to another car, identical to the one she'd been sitting in, opened a rear door for her and shut her in before taking the driver's seat. "We have another safe house not far from here. I'm going to drop you off there, and he'll follow as soon as he can." He started the car, and pulled away from the apartment building.

"Okay." She had a niggling feeling this man hadn't told her the whole truth, but she wasn't exactly in the position to demand any more information. She'd have to wait for Miko.

He'd get a good grilling. The way she saw it, things were looking really bad. For all of them. But especially for Burke.

The niggling feeling morphed into a serious case of the jitters when she noticed there were no handles to open the back doors. Locked in. Like a criminal.

"How far away is the safe house?"

Bringing the car to a stop in a parking lot, next to a big white van, her unofficial chauffeur twisted, giving her an empty smile she assumed was meant to reassure her. "Everything's going to be okay. Trust me."

* * *

Miko sensed something wasn't right about sixty seconds too late to do anything about it. He'd been too distracted by the chaos to keep a close eye on Sylvie, but now that the proverbial dust had settled, he could think of nothing but finding where she'd gone.

If she was hurt, he'd never forgive himself.

It had only taken a little over a half hour for Miko to put a stop to the senseless beating his fellow officers had launched on his bound mate, secure Burke, and take him down to a waiting vehicle for transport back to Burke's homeland in eastern Europe.

Miko still hadn't pieced together all the facts in Burke's murder case. But it would have to wait until he made sure Sylvie was okay.

It was too soon to panic. He didn't see Hadrian at the moment. He guessed his brother had probably just escorted her outside where she'd be safe.

If only he'd been able to protect her from the trauma of watching Burke's capture. There'd been no other way. The decisions he'd had to face. Impossible choices between love and duty. Heartrending.

Miko rushed out of the building, his gaze sweeping the scene outside as he ran. There were several unmarked Excoluni vehicles scattered about in the parking lot. He headed for the closest one, inhabited, as it turned out, by an old friend of his brother's, Tom Cizak.

"Have you seen a woman? About this tall with long blond hair?" he asked the officer.

"Yeah. She was a little shaken. Hadrian put her in his car, I think." He motioned to the car parked closest to the street.

Thank the gods. She was safe. The burning in Miko's gut eased. The fact that he'd reacted so strongly to her disappearance bothered him more than a little. He'd had no reason to suspect something bad had happened to her. She'd been surrounded by Excoluni officers he trusted with his life, not to mention his brother. Yet he'd been damn close to panicking. Why?

As he approached the vehicle, the driver's side door swung open and Hadrian stepped out. Brows lowered and mouth twisted in confusion, Miko's brother slammed the door shut. "What's up?"

Miko motioned to the car. "I just wanted to make sure Sylvie's okay. She was pretty upset."

Hadrian's brows scrunched even lower. "She's not with me. Petrov told me you asked him to take her to your car."

Now, that confused him because he did not remember saying any such thing. "Really?" He glanced over his shoulder at his car.

"Yeah. I was about to take her with me, but decided, since I had to go back to the station to make preparations for the prisoner, I'd better find someone else to babysit her. I didn't think twice about letting her go with him. Dyre Petrov has been a friend to both of us for years..."

"Sure. Okay." Ignoring his brother's continued reassurances, he turned, waved a farewell and headed for his car. His heart thudded heavily in his chest, a reassurance that she was probably still alive. At least for now.

He was overreacting. Hell, maybe he had told Petrov to take her to his car. Things had been so crazy, he'd probably shouted at least a half dozen different commands without even thinking about them. In a crisis, he'd learned to operate on auto-pilot. To act and react without thinking too much.

Approaching his car, he glanced up, catching the vehicle transporting Burke turning out of the parking lot, headed for the closest underground Excoluni facility, about an hour's drive away. Time was running out for Burke -- and possibly for both Miko and Sylvie too. The jury was out yet on whether they'd succeeded in completing the *Iugum*. Because he hadn't felt the effects of Burke's beating, he suspected they hadn't. But since Burke had not been killed, he couldn't be absolutely certain. Injuries were temporary, only slowing a vampire down a little. Within minutes, broken bones, stab wounds and ruptured organs could be healed. Perhaps that was why Burke's bound mates had not felt any pain from his injuries?

He almost hoped they hadn't completed the *Iugum*.

If he failed to clear Burke's name in time, and if they'd succeeded in completing the Binding, they'd all die. The clock was ticking. At most, he figured they had another twenty-four hours.

First things first, however. He couldn't concentrate on investigating the string of murder cases Burke had been suspected of until he knew for a fact that Sylvie was safe. Now within feet of his car, he ducked down to peer in the window.

Empty.

His heart skipped several beats before launching in a wild gallop.

Maybe she was lying down?

He jerked open the door and searched the front seats then did the same with the back.

Empty.

His knees wobbly, he sat in the car and depressed the call button on his radio. The little voice in his head had warned him something wasn't right. That nagging voice was now screaming. He called Hadrian, and Hadrian assured him Sylvie had to be okay. There'd probably just been a misunderstanding.

He could hear the guilt in Hadrian's voice.

Knowing his brother, he was blaming himself.

He placed a call to Petrov, who said he had indeed walked Sylvie to the car, but had been called away immediately afterward. He had no idea where she might have gone.

Had she simply taken a walk? By herself? In the dark? When she was worried about Burke?

He couldn't see that being the case, but just to make sure, he drove around the parking lot then circled around the block. It was a residential area. No convenience stores for her to duck into. No grocery stores.

Did she have a friend in the area?

He tried to recall their conversation as he'd driven her to the safe house. No, he was pretty sure she'd never been to this part of town. But desperate, he looped around several more blocks. When that turned up nothing, he called Hadrian to see if he'd learned anything yet.

Nothing, but he promised to keep trying. Miko could tell his brother was nearly as worried as he was.

Growing more desperate by the moment, he called Szader, the officer who was driving Burke's car. He heard Burke speaking in the background as they talked but couldn't make out his words. Next, he heard a lot of commotion, shouts, tires screeching. The tooth-jarring sound of metal striking metal at high speed, and then Burke's voice on the radio, "Where are you?"

Oh, shit.

He was not going to communicate with a wanted felon on the radio. A felon who'd just done something to an Excoluni officer.

What the hell was Burke Langton thinking?

Chapter Three

What the hell had Miko been thinking? He'd let Sylvie out of his sight? Lost her!

Burke cursed under his breath for the desperate act he'd been forced to commit to get free -- he'd attacked an Excoluni officer. Shitpissfuck! Now he couldn't deny he was a felon.

But what choice had he been given? Sylvie was missing. He couldn't trust Miko like he thought. What if he'd been right all along in assuming the murderer had been after her? And what if the bastard had her right now?

If anything happened to her, he had no idea what he'd do.

He punched the vehicle's gas, speeding through a yellow traffic light. Most likely, Miko was still somewhere in the vicinity of the safe house, searching the streets for Sylvie. That's where he needed to head first.

He couldn't afford to keep this car for long, especially since he knew there was a GPS chip planted on the vehicle. At best, he figured he had an hour before someone with the Excoluni realized something was wrong. Sooner if the officer he'd bound and gagged somehow found a way to escape and phone in.

He glanced at the officer's radio, which he'd chosen to keep so he could monitor communication. It seemed, at the moment, no alarms had been sounded. Yet.

It took less than twenty minutes to return to the safe house -- luckily he hadn't been taken far before picking the handcuffs and *convincing* the Excoluni officer transporting him to pull over. The short drive, however, hadn't allowed him enough time to cool off. The minute he spotted Miko's car, slowly rolling down a residential street about a half mile from the safe house, a pulse of rage spiked in his gut.

He jerked the wheel, maneuvering the car into a tight one-eighty then pulled up behind Miko's vehicle. His mate's brake lights glowed red. Both vehicles' doors swung

open simultaneously, and both men exited, charging at each other like pissed off bulls. Miko's face was nearly the same shade as his previously illuminated brake lights. The heat burning Burke's neck, ears and cheeks suggested his were equally inflamed.

Miko shot Burke death-daggers from his eyes. Burke returned them. "What the fuck!" they shouted in unison.

Burke then launched into a tirade about Miko's lack of testicles, and Miko came back with a rant about Burke's lack of a brain. Insults were traded... then shoves... then punches. Before long, they were both breathless and sore, battered and bruised. But at least the heat of their rage had been cooled.

Catching his breath, Burke clenched and released his bloodied fists. His knuckles cracked and popped, the pain just intense enough to make him grit his teeth.

He knew they'd both expected it to come to this. They had never been on the same team, yet they'd pretty much chosen to ignore it -- up until this point. Couldn't anymore. Miko was the law. He lived the law. And he lived by the law.

Burke, on the other hand, had once had a great deal of respect for the law, but not any longer. His esteem had disappeared when the law -- and the organizations representing it -- had turned against him, despite his innocence. Justice was a myth. When it came to crime and punishment, finding the guilty party wasn't as important as playing to the demands of politicians in the UMN. The Excoluni was a puppet organization.

The sad truth was it didn't matter whether he was innocent or not. A judge had determined he was. Some bastard who had only one priority -- winning his next term on the bench -- had determined what facts would be presented in his case. A lowly citizen of the UMN, given no *real* legal representation, was powerless to change the fictitious reality that power-hungry piece of shit had created.

It was amazing the way the truth could be stretched and reshaped by the manipulation of facts.

"What did you do to Szader?" Miko snapped.

"No need to get all pissy. He's still alive. I just bought myself a little time."

"I should take you in. You know that, don't you?"

"If you do, then Sylvie's as good as dead."

"You don't know shit. Dead? What makes you think she's in danger? She could have gone to a friend's --"

"You don't believe that any more than I do," Burke interrupted. Dvorak didn't honestly believe that, did he? "Come on. Use your fucking head. She would've left a note, a phone message, something to let us know where she was."

They traded more hostile glares. Miko was the first to break eye contact. He combed his fingers through his hair and dropped his gaze to the ground. "Yeah."

"I say it's time you made a choice."

Miko lifted his eyes and slowly nodded. "It's been a long time coming."

"You can't straddle the fence. Either you're with us, or you're with them."

Miko leaned back, resting his backside against his car. He toed a stone, sending it skipping across a puddle before landing with a plunk in a deeper patch of water a few feet away from the car Burke had stolen from Szader. "My career's been everything to me. My purpose. My life."

"Yeah, well, I learned a career isn't the solid foundation I once thought it was. It can drop out from under you at any time, and then you fall. Hard."

Still staring down, Miko simply nodded.

Burke sensed Miko's struggle, read it in his mate's set shoulders, dark expression and distant eyes. "You never know if or when something might happen. Relationships, people, they can be just as shaky and unreliable, I suppose. But they sure make for a more pleasant, more meaningful base. We might have a lot of differences between us, and maybe we'll never fully settle them. But we share a very powerful and unique bond."

Miko finally met his gaze. "Our love for Sylvie."

"Yeah."

Silence.

Burke pressed Miko, knowing his decision could very well determine how this whole thing ended for all three of them. "What's it going to be, Miko? Your ego? Pride? A career that could let you down tomorrow? Or us?"

"I've wanted to be an Excoluni officer for as long as I can remember. My father. My brother..."

"For some reason, I don't think it's as important to you as you think."

After another brief silence, Miko admitted, "You don't know. I don't know. Maybe."

"We're not going to save Sylvie if we don't work together. Working together means you're going to have to betray your Excoluni pals, the guys you've trusted and respected since your first day. Can you do it?"

"What about you? You're going to have to trust me. Fully."

"Not liking it, but that's the way it is."

Miko nodded. "That goes for me too."

"Let's see what we can do when we're truly playing on the same team."

"I say we go back to the safe house and see if we can find any clues. She didn't just vanish. There's got to be something."

"Good idea." Burke motioned to Miko's vehicle. "You drive."

* * *

After enduring a nerve-wracking ride in the backseat of an unmarked cop car like some common criminal – an unpleasant if not downright terrifying experience -- Sylvie was hardly relieved when she caught sight of their final destination. The words ghetto, slumlord, and dilapidated sprang to mind immediately.

Granted, she supposed it would be a little farfetched to expect a public safety organization -- human or otherwise -- to set her up in a five-star hotel. But still. Sheesh. They could do better than this place. Was it even safe?

She followed him into the ramshackle building with the boarded up windows, peeling paint and rotted front porch. The hinges groaned loudly when he pushed open the front door, revealing an interior as neglected as the exterior. He slammed the door

closed behind them, eliciting a shudder, and motioned for her to continue straight ahead, through a living room inhabited by a single ratty couch which had clearly been abused by more than its share of transient cats.

Another shiver zigzagged up her spine. This place gave her a serious case of the willies. Since her vampires had been able to give her last safe house a facelift with a simple snap of the fingers, why did this dump have to be so ugly? Weren't all vampire types magic? Maybe Mr. Big Shot hadn't had a chance to fix the place up yet?

"Uh," she hedged, eyeballing the dirty walls and filthy linoleum floor in the kitchen as they headed toward the back of the house. Surely she wasn't expected to consume any food stored or prepared in that filth. "This place could use a little TLC, doncha think?"

"Apologies." Her escort gave her a reassuring smile, which didn't exactly do its job. "This was the only remaining safe house we have in the area. You won't be here long."

"Glad to hear that." Her toe caught on a curled tile and she stumbled, catching herself on outstretched arms, hands flattened against a closed door. Upon contact, the latch released, the door swung open, and she tumbled into a bathroom so grimy, she gagged. Twisting, she jumped to her feet and lunged forward.

Her host had one hand on the door. Was he about to shut her inside? Why would he do that?

She shivered as she stomped down a narrow passageway. "Okay, not trying to be a whiner, but oh my God. I'm going to get the plague. You've got to do something about this place," she ranted as she shoved by him. "It's gotta be condemned. I'm wondering if it's even safe. Black mold's deadly, you know. You could at least give me some hand sanitizer. And where are we going?"

"The bedrooms are in better shape." He hurried past her, halting outside another door. He twisted the knob and pushed open the door, revealing a room the size of a closet.

“Better shape? Says who?” Her gaze hopped from the wall, painted the most obnoxious red color ever, to the twin-sized bed, lacking bedding of course, to the boarded up window. The carpet’s grungy nondescript color reminded her of boogers. It was all too gross for words.

Before she could voice her opinion about the state of the bedroom, Mr. Big Shot gave her a swift shove then slammed the door shut.

What the hell? Closed inside this dump? He had been trying to shut her in that nasty bathroom. Did he think she was going to run?

She clambered to her feet, knowing something was really, really wrong, and lunged for the door. Locked. Scared, confused and pissed, she pounded with her fists. “Hey! Open up!”

No answer.

Well fuck! She was getting really tired of being locked up. What did these vampires think? She was going to head out for a little stroll in the moonlight? And if they thought Burke was the killer, and Burke was now in their custody, why did they need to hide her away anyway?

What the hell was going on?

Miko was going to have some explaining to do. And that other guy, the one who’d locked her in this shithole -- he’d just better protect his dangly bits.

She was about to proclaim open season on his groin.

* * *

Burke was in hell. He’d long hated having dragged Isabella into this mess. She was now wanted for aiding and abetting a convicted felon.

She was a great friend, a dear woman who deserved so much better than what she’d received in the last several months.

And now he’d inadvertently hurt Sylvie too.

God help him, maybe the Binding had been completed, because the torture he suffered now... Agonizing. He’d never possessed a soul. He’d never been complete, fully human, in the most positive sense. Never experienced the kind of bone-deep

regret he felt right now. If he didn't know better, he'd swear he had a soul. And it had been put through a shredder.

Death would be welcome relief.

He loved Sylvie. Loved. A man without a soul. He'd always thought it was impossible.

"Since I was slightly indisposed, I couldn't exactly keep a close watch on Sylvie," Burke snapped as they pushed open the door to the apartment. His gaze swept around the room, now completely empty. The only sign of the earlier struggle was a single scuffmark on the scarred wooden floor.

"If it hadn't been for my intervention, they would've killed you. And then where would Sylvie be?" Miko stood in the hallway outside, down on one knee inspecting the stained carpet.

"We don't know that they'd have killed me. Yet. Do we?" Burke toed the floor, kicking up a cloud of dust. "Dammit, how will we find her? I was flat on the floor. I saw Szader and of course Hadrian. Who else?"

"There were several agents inside. But there could have been someone else outside, waiting."

Burke headed for the window, shoving aside the battered blinds to peer down to the parking lot below. "How would they know what was about to happen?"

"Overheard?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "One of the Excoluni?"

Miko gave his head a decisive shake. "Absolutely not. Impossible."

"Aren't you trained to consider every possibility? Even the impossible?" he challenged. The blinds slipped through his fingers and fell back into place with a metallic rattle. "Who was the last man to see her?"

"Petrov escorted her to my car."

"Then we will talk to him. There's nothing here." Burke pushed past a bewildered looking Miko and hurried down the stairs without a backward glance.

Who is the detective here?

* * *

Several hours later, Sylvie had not only developed a seriously full bladder, but also a really pissy attitude. Thus, when the door to her prison cell was finally opened, she had a tough time deciding which pressing issue she needed to deal with first -- the urgent need to pee or the equally pressing compulsion to make one asshole pay for his sins.

The need to pee won. But it was a temporary concession. She gave Mr. Big Shot Whatever-his-name (Was it Adrian? She couldn't remember, but she did recall meeting him at the club) the cold shoulder as she shoved past him. "That was just wrong."

"Your safety is our only concern."

"Heh, right. That's why you brought me to this deathtrap. There's more germs in this dump than a cesspool, the roof is about to fall in on us, and there are more holes in the floor than Swiss cheese. Puhleez." She found a larger bathroom at the end of the hall, and after giving him yet another scowl, closed herself in and took care of business.

There was, of course, no running water. Therefore, she could not flush. She could not wash. It left her feeling icky, itchy and dirty. And more annoyed.

The instant she opened the bathroom door, she launched into yet another rant. "This is unacceptable. What kind of second rate organization houses innocent victims in roach infested, filthy accommodations that aren't fit for vermin? Come on! Snap, for chrissakes. Do something about it." At his bewildered look, she illustrated with a literal finger snap. "You know? Snap?"

"Not sure what you mean by that."

"Uh... You can't snap?"

"Of course I can, but what's that got to do with the safe house?" He snapped his fingers, but absolutely nothing happened.

Interesting. So, the snap didn't work for all vampires? How about that? Then again, did she know for a fact that this guy was a vampire?

A flurry of questions followed. Why were Burke and Miko able to do magic and this guy couldn't? Did he know Burke and Miko possessed magical powers? What did it all mean?

"Sorry. I guess I thought you were magical. Silly me."

He eased her down the hall with a gentle press on her lower back. "Oh, I can. But it takes a little more than a gesture to invoke a spell." He directed her a little more forcefully toward the kitchen.

"I see," she said, intentionally dragging her feet. "Where are we headed? Do I need to be worried about anything? You know, while I was in the *prison cell*, I had some time to think. Why do I need to hide if you caught the killer?"

"Hmmm. It's a little complicated." He reached around her and opened a door, which she quickly realized led to the basement.

Oh. No way.

A coat of goose bumps popped up all over her back and this funny, tickly sensation pricked her spine, little creepy spider feet. "Why do I need to go down there?" She was getting a bad vibe about this.

As crazy as things had been when she'd been on the run with Burke and then hiding with Miko, she'd never once felt this squicked out. She'd never been afraid they were going to hurt her. Quite the opposite, she'd felt safe, protected.

She guessed this guy was a big shot in the vampire secret police, but he gave her a bad case of the willies. There was no way he was convincing her to go down into that basement. Something was wrong here. She didn't want to know what that something was.

Twisting, she planted an elbow in his gut then sprinted in the opposite direction. But before she'd gotten very far, something hard and heavy slammed into her from behind, flattening her to the floor.

"Dammit, I don't have time for this," her assailant whispered, his voice trembling. "I have some blood and an assortment of body parts to harvest."

A split second later, just as she was about to belt out a scream, everything went black.

Chapter Four

Miko knew he shouldn't be smiling, considering the situation, but he couldn't help himself. Burke really thought he was something. Yet, at the same time, his insides were being ripped apart. Sylvie was missing. He -- a man who hadn't questioned his ability to do his job in several centuries -- was suddenly wondering if his life was on the right track. He'd always dreamed of being an officer with the Excoluni. Further, once he had joined the force, he'd never questioned his ability to be a damn good officer, just as his father had been.

Until now.

Since the first night he'd met Sylvie, everything he'd believed about his life, himself, his priorities, had been in question. Was he a good officer? Did he want to be? What was important anymore?

He hated to think he'd spent his entire life to this point chasing rainbows.

On Burke's heels, he headed back to his car. But just before reaching the vehicle, he took a quick detour. He hadn't taken the time to inspect the ground where he'd been parked earlier, a mistake. He was getting sloppy.

With the wind having picked up, he expected anything that might have been left behind gone, swept away. But it was worth a look, anyway.

What he found was a large puddle about a foot away from where his car had been parked, and three sets of footprints. Three people had passed through the water, leaving a wet trail going to and from the vehicle.

One set of prints was noticeably smaller than the other two -- it had to belong to Sylvie. The others were both similar in size. The tracks were identical in pattern, suggesting both men wore the same size and type of shoe. He stooped down, to get a better look at the trail heading away from the car.

The footprints were dry, and the mud around the puddle showed few tracks. But what remained was enough. Hadrian had led Sylvie from his car. To... somewhere. Maybe another vehicle?

He'd lied.

Why?

"What do you have there?" Burke asked from behind him.

Miko pointed at the evidence. "My brother knows more than he's telling."

"What makes you say that?"

"He's always had troubles with his left leg. See the way the left footstep is scuffed? He sort of drags his foot as he walks. Has done that as long as I can remember."

"Well... damn." Burke scowled. "Why would he keep secrets from you?"

"Maybe he thinks I'm helping you? And since he thinks you're the killer..."

"Yeah. Maybe. Could he be using her as bait? To get to me," Burke offered.

"Why would he do that? She was missing before you escaped."

"True."

"I need to talk to him." Miko jumped to his feet and hurried back to his car, Burke mirroring his strides beside him.

"I'm sure you're right," Burke said as he slid into the passenger seat and pulled the door shut. "He's just trying to keep her safe."

"Yeah." Miko shoved the key into the ignition, started the car and threw it into gear. He couldn't get to Hadrian's fast enough. To his credit, Burke didn't complain when Miko sped through not one, not two, but three red lights. Nor did he comment on the hairpin turns he took at speeds that should have earned him a ticket for reckless driving.

The car's tires skidded on wet pavement as he hit the brakes in front of his brother's temporary home, a townhouse in a nondescript building. Before he left the car, he gave Burke a warning glance. "Wait here. Keep your eyes open."

"Sure."

Running, he approached the building. Hadrian's car wasn't in its marked slot in front of the townhouse's entry. Chances were he wasn't home. He knocked anyway but wasn't surprised to get no answer.

Now what? Did he want to risk taking Burke to the command center? It could be a trap. He did a one-eighty and sprinted back to the car.

Before Burke could ask the questions etched all over his face, Miko raised an index finger and went for his phone. He tried Hadrian first, and got his voicemail. Next he tried Petrov. Dyre hadn't heard from Hadrian in a while.

Although Miko didn't dare risk asking, he sensed Petrov had not heard about Burke's escape yet. Petrov did, however, say that he thought he'd spied Hadrian approaching Miko's car earlier. But he hadn't thought anything of it.

Something was really nagging at Miko about all this. Specifically, he was having a hard time understanding why his micromanaging, uber-efficient brother had pulled a Houdini so quickly after Burke's capture. Normally, he would be breathing down everyone's neck, demanding paperwork and preparing for their return trip home. What the hell was so important?

He hit the speed dial key for Hadrian's number. This time, when he got his voicemail, he left a message. "Hey, I have my reports. Where are you?" Then he punched in the command center's phone number. No answer. He shifted the vehicle into gear and drove to the command center -- housed in a warehouse located in the rear of an industrial complex -- explaining his worries to Burke as he drove. As a safety measure, he left Burke at a nearby motel before heading to the complex. A wise decision. Hadrian's car was parked in front of the building. Miko laid his hand on the hood as he walked by.

Hot. His brother hadn't been at the command center for long.

Preparing himself for whatever might happen, Miko pulled open the door.

His brother wasn't there. Cizak had driven his car back to the command center for him. That same man had some very shocking information to share with Miko about his brother.

Cizak had been secretly watching Hadrian for the past few weeks, and had developed his own theory about the string of murders they were investigating. Of course, at this point, he still had no proof to support his suspicions. Therefore, he hadn't been able to take any action against Hadrian. But he'd been watching, waiting for Hadrian to make a mistake. He explained he regretted not telling Miko what he suspected earlier, but he hadn't wanted to risk it, since he couldn't be sure he could trust Miko.

Could Cizak be right?

Struggling with disbelief, Miko dashed out to his car, leaving Cizak back at the command center, hoping he'd keep Hadrian distracted if he returned.

If what he'd heard was true, Sylvie was at another safe house, about fifteen miles away.

And Hadrian was the killer.

* * *

When Sylvie had been four or five -- she wasn't really sure how old she'd been at the time -- she'd faced a demon head-on. That monster hadn't been a literal being with claws and scales and teeth, but a figurative one.

Hopelessness. Despair. Desperation.

She'd never denied the fact that those awful years had shaped who she was and how she reacted to situations as an adult. Day after day, night after night, spent hungry, dirty and scared, begging for money from passersby under the protective cover of a freeway overpass had taken its toll.

As a child, she'd spent years constantly fearful of being scooped up by a social worker and taken from the only adult she trusted, the mother who she now knew had had no business becoming a mother. Years narrowly escaping the leering eyes and groping hands of men who'd offered her brief relief from hunger by doing the unthinkable.

Thanks to the pressure, she'd more or less skipped childhood, maturing to adulthood long before she'd reached puberty. As her mother's mental illness

progressed, Sylvie stepped into her place, becoming the parent. Her mother's mind slowly deteriorated until she was like a child, entirely dependent upon Sylvie for her every need.

But it all changed one chilly, rainy night in the spring. Sylvie woke up to the sound of screeching tires. A dull thud followed. Then silence.

It didn't take long for Sylvie to realize what had happened. Her mother had wandered into the street and had been hit by a passing car. There were no police cars, no ambulances. Only whispers, rain and darkness, terrible emptiness.

That emptiness had become a part of her over the years. It was always there. A cold spot inside. She'd tried filling the void with food, work, alcohol, studying, friendship, sex, exercise. Sometimes the cure-of-the-week would give her some temporary relief, but over time, the empty feeling would return and she'd be on the hunt for the next treatment.

Carpe Nocturne was her most recent temporary fix. Or at least she'd thought it was, until she'd met her vampires.

Whether it was the magic or something much deeper, they did something for her that nothing and no one had done before. Yes, the pain of the Binding had been agonizing. But now that it had eased, and she'd had time to just lie there in the dark and think, she realized that she felt complete, whole, for the first time ever.

Ironic, since she was pretty sure she was about to die.

She was spread-eagle on a chilly concrete floor, wrists and ankles in shackles. Heavy chains locked to the cuffs held her arms and legs in position, despite her struggles. There was no way she could escape. Not a chance.

To think her life was about to end like this.

She was alternately petrified and in complete denial. This wasn't really happening, right? It was some kind of hallucination. Or a dream. Nightmare. She'd simply overdosed on junk food and fallen asleep with the television on.

If only.

Although she'd completely lost track of time, she sensed the end was near. The bastard who'd kidnapped her had brought her down here unconscious, chained her to the floor. And just as she'd regained consciousness, explained exactly what he intended to do. In horrifying detail.

She wasn't heartless. Hell, in a way she could appreciate the reason why he was going to such extremes. The woman he loved had been taken from him, cruelly, unjustly. And he simply couldn't live without her. It was a tragic story, the kind she'd read many times in her favorite romance novels.

Unfortunately, it seemed that she, being an *Origo*, was the cure to his heartbreak. Her blood would revive his dead lover.

Why couldn't she just donate a pint? It was so unfair.

From her spot on the floor, she could see the corpse, positioned like Sleeping Beauty on a flat stone pedestal that in a bizarre way reminded her of a church altar. A band of strange engraved symbols circled the upper edge of the platform. Part temple, part storage room, the basement in which they both lay was very dark, with walls painted a deep burgundy. Floor-to-ceiling wooden shelves lined one wall. There were also some kind of symbols painted on the floor. It was all so... gothic. Creepy yet fascinating at the same time.

Up above, she heard a thump. Instantly, her heart rate launched into high speed, sending hot blood pounding through her body. She twisted, cocking her head to the side so she could see the stairs.

Was this it? Had her time run out?

Oh, God!

A coat of sweat slicked her skin. She pulled on her restraints, even though she knew it was useless trying to break free. This whole time she'd held some hope she'd somehow escape. But, as the door at the top of the stairs swung open with a spine tingling *creeeek*, the last remains of her hope were wafting away.

A rush of chills swept through her body. Her stinging eyes filled with tears, and pleas for mercy rushed to her mouth. To hell with pride, with romance, and tragedy.

She was going to plead, beg, cajole, whatever it took. As long as she had breath, she'd talk. Her words were all she had anymore.

She didn't wait for him to descend the stairs. Eyelids pressed tightly together to stem the flow of tears, she pleaded, "Please, I realize you love her, but you can't do this. It's wrong to take someone else's life. You know it --"

"Sylvie! Thank God we found you."

The rest of her unspoken plea jammed in the back of her mouth. Emotion rushed up her throat and out in an incoherent cry. Miko? He'd found her?

He dashed down the stairs, ran across the room and dropped to his knees. His dark gaze swept up and down her chained body before settling on one of her bound wrists. "What is this?" He curled his fingers around the cuff circling her right arm and pulled. His scowl deepened. He snapped his fingers. Nothing happened. He cursed, "Bastard!"

"He's going to kill me. To bring that corpse back to life. It's some kind of spell or magic," she blurted. Her gaze hopped between Miko's red, stress-filled face and the door at the top of the basement stairs. "Is he up there?"

"No. I don't know where he is." Miko jumped to his feet and started searching the room. "Did you see where he put the key?"

"Key?"

"To the bindings."

"No. I was unconscious."

"Dammit." He charged from one wooden shelf to another, knocking dusty boxes full of who-knew-what to the floor. Muttering curses, he dug through rattling contents until he'd run out of boxes and shelves to search.

Then, he turned his attention to the dead body. "What the hell are you doing, Hadrian? My God! Is that your girlfriend? She's been dead..." He approached the stone altar slowly, hands fisted at his sides, rage pulling the muscles of his shoulders and arms into tight, trembling ropes. "What the fuck?"

Sylvie's breath caught in her throat. She'd never seen a man more angry, confused, conflicted. He sniffled, swiped at the tears running from his eyes, and ran his hand along the upper edge of the pedestal, fingering the engraving. "I didn't want to believe it."

"What time is it?" She hated interrupting him, but even more than before, she sensed time was running out.

Miko checked his watch. "Almost four in the morning."

She'd been lying there for hours upon hours. "Oh God! We need to get out of here."

Catching the panic in her voice, he started searching the altar for the keys. An excited yelp and raised fist indicated he'd found them.

He dashed back to her, dropped to his knees at her feet and fumbled with the locked cuffs, releasing her left then right ankle. She worked the blood back in her limbs by shuffling her legs while he freed her wrists. Her head swam as he hooked his elbows under her armpits and lifted her to her feet.

"What about Burke?" she asked as she shuffled up the stairs behind him.

"He's safe." Miko knocked the door open, then turned and caught one of her hands in his. "We'll all be together soon."

"Thank God." Relieved, she ran through the dilapidated house with Miko, her sight focused on the door, freedom, safety, finally the happiness she'd waited a lifetime to find. "How'd you find this place?"

"I had some help." He opened the front door, and together, hand in hand, they ran across the weedy front lawn to his car, parked on the street. He helped her into her seat and slammed the door.

But then, as she sat frozen in horror, she watched her kidnapper sneak up behind an unsuspecting Miko. She hit the window with her fists, desperate to warn him. She screamed. Pointed. Gestured. But he didn't react quickly enough. One second he was standing there, staring at her through the car's side window, the next he was gone. The

kidnapper was in his place, his face a deep scarlet, his eyes narrowed to slits as he glowered at her.

Horried, she scrambled with wildly trembling hands for the car's power lock button, but in her panic unlocked the doors instead. When her door flew open, she shrieked and threw her body backward, slamming the back of her head against the steering wheel. Dazed, she started kicking, aiming for any part of her would-be killer she could strike. He grappled for her feet, cussing when he lost hold of them.

Sure that this was her last chance at escape -- at survival -- she caught the steering wheel in her hands and held on for life. He'd caught her legs again, had her by the ankles and was yanking hard, trying to drag her out of the vehicle. She screamed as loud as she could, hoping by some miracle someone might hear her and come to her rescue.

The sweat coating her palms was making her grip on the steering wheel loosen. She gritted her teeth and tightened her hold. But even as she did, she knew it was only a matter of time -- a very short time, at that -- before his strength won over her desperate determination.

The short time ended up being even briefer than she'd hoped.

It took one hard jerk, and he pulled her halfway out of the car. She screamed again and stretched, rolling onto her side to try to catch a hold of the steering wheel again. But it was too late. Before her fingers had closed around it, she was sliding out of the car and landing flat on her back on the ground.

Instinct took over. She thrashed wildly, arms, legs, body. She twisted and rolled, punched and kicked. But for all her effort, she received little in the way of reward. The killer had her pinned to the ground within moments, his butt parked smack dab on her stomach. Under his weight, she struggled to catch her breath. Tears blurred her vision. She lacked the lung power to shout. Her strength was slipping from her.

It was over. She'd lost.

But just as she'd all but given up, Miko knocked the killer off her, sending him rolling to one side. While the two men battled, throwing punches hard enough to knock

out a world class champion boxer, she scrambled to her feet and scampered back to the car, crawling across the passenger seat to wiggle herself behind the steering wheel. The keys were dangling from the ignition. She started the vehicle, hesitating, one hand hovering over the gear shift, her foot resting on the brake.

What to do? Drive away, leaving Miko to fend for himself? Or wait?

As if he sensed her struggle, Miko turned to give her a shooing gesture. "Go!" he shouted. "Now!"

She depressed the brake and shifted into drive. Yet, she couldn't make herself drive away. At the moment, he wasn't winning the fistfight. In fact, he was darn close to losing it. And while she could admit he was taking a beating to keep the kidnapper distracted long enough to allow her to escape, she simply could not abandon him like a chicken.

If only Burke were there to help!

Another slug to the face sent Miko staggering backward. He stumbled and fell to the ground. The kidnapper didn't let up. He kicked Miko, beat his head, shoulders, chest.

Crying, Sylvie jerked the steering wheel and gunned the gas, steering the car straight at the bastard. He was too close to Miko for her to run him down, but she was hoping she might be able to slam him with the car door. Or at least distract him long enough to let Miko escape.

Anything was better than sitting there like some stupid, helpless sissy. She stopped the car mere inches from the kidnapper and kicked the door open with all her might, catching him with it in the hip. The force knocked him aside but didn't hit him hard enough to give her the time she needed to get to Miko.

Miko was struggling to sit up, but the blows to his head had taken their toll. He moved sluggishly, clumsily, like he'd downed an entire bottle of tequila.

Meanwhile, she slammed the door closed and locked it to keep the kidnapper from getting his grimy paws on her again.

Visibly furious, he spun around, dragged Miko to his feet, and jerked him back against him. More monster than man, the kidnapper glared at her. "I'll kill him."

"If you do, then you'll kill your lover," she screamed through the window. "We're bound. If he dies then I die. You need me alive. That's what you said."

Hatred flared in the man's dark eyes. At that moment, she had to question whether he just might kill Miko, regardless of the consequences.

How did a man who lived to uphold the law, justice, all that was good, go so bad?

"You bastard, Hadrian," Miko shouted, struggling to break free from his captor. "He won't kill me. I'm his brother. Don't believe a word he says."

"Wouldn't I?" Hadrian produced a knife from somewhere and pressed it against Miko's throat. Miko's eyes revealed the depth of his shock.

That... that awful person was not just Miko's superior, but his brother? The one he'd talked about, bragged about? Compared himself to?

She could only imagine how painful it must have been for Miko to have someone he loved and admired so much do what he had. At that moment, her gaze tangling with Miko's, her doubt about Hadrian's intention completely evaporated. Poof. Gone. Whether it was insanity from extreme grief, or rage, or mental illness, Hadrian was not firing on all cylinders anymore. Brother or not, he would kill Miko.

And, if the Binding had been completed, she'd die too. Sure, there was a possibility it hadn't been. But did she want to take that chance?

The answer was no.

"Get out of the car," Hadrian demanded.

She flipped the lock and pulled on the latch, but before she had the door open enough to get out, Miko kicked it shut. "The Binding's not complete," he blurted.

Something flashed in Hadrian's eyes. For the briefest of seconds, the hand holding the knife dropped. Miko took full advantage of the opportunity. Within a blink, he was free from Hadrian's grasp and was lunging for the car.

Seeing where this was going, Sylvie stomped on the brake and shifted the vehicle into gear. But as Miko dove into the back seat, Hadrian lifted the knife and plunged it into Miko's back.

Sylvie felt the scream tear from her throat.

Chapter Five

His brother. Miko could hardly recognize the man he'd known his entire life. It was as if something -- a demon? -- had taken over his body. Gone was the boy who'd teased him relentlessly as a child. Fraternal twins raised in Eastern Europe by loving, indulgent parents. The so-called older brother -- Miko's senior by mere minutes -- Hadrian had pushed him, encouraged him, challenged him as they'd attended a small college in France.

Hadrian had been accepted into the Excoluni several years before Miko, and had quickly progressed up the ranks. But once Miko had been accepted, working under his brother's command, he'd demanded Miko perform his very best every day. Two brothers determined to do their father proud.

Hadrian. His mentor. His hero.

Miko wondered, was there any hope of rescuing the brother he loved? Or was he gone forever?

Then again, Miko wondered as he took in his current situation -- injured, bound tightly, gagged, gloves preventing him from performing magic -- would he even live to make that attempt?

He'd told Burke to give him one hour. If he didn't return to their designated meeting point, he was to prepare for the worst. Ironically, if Burke followed that timeline, they'd probably all be dead.

For the first time since they'd started working together, he hoped Burke would defy his direct order.

* * *

Three, two, one. Time's up!

Burke didn't give a damn what Miko had said. He'd waited longer than he'd intended in this dump. It was time to find out exactly what was going on.

Miko had been very tightlipped about what he'd learned over the course of the last several hours, but Burke had sensed something was very wrong. Miko had simply given Burke a gun with vampire-killing bullets, a cell phone, a piece of paper bearing an address, and a set of car keys. Before he walked out of the motel room he'd rented under an assumed name, he told him if he didn't return by five a.m., he should go to the address prepared for the worst.

Of course, Burke had no intention of waiting that long.

A knock sounded at the door.

Isabella.

He checked the peephole before opening the door. "Glad you could make it."

"Wouldn't miss this for the world." As usual, she was dressed in black, her hair pulled into a tight ponytail. There was only one change in her appearance -- the former red hue of her hair had been replaced by a deep mahogany.

She adjusted the black bag hanging from her shoulder, pushing the strap higher. "You look like hell."

"Yeah, well." Burke heaved a weary sigh. "At least I think it's almost over."

Scowling, Isabella reached a flattened palm to his cheek. "You... love them, don't you?"

He nodded. "I had no idea it would be like this. My insides feel like they've been shredded, incinerated, and then stuffed back inside."

"Miko and Sylvie will be okay." She adjusted the strap of her bag on her shoulder for a second time. "This stupid thing is heavy. I brought everything you asked me to."

"Let's go."

Despite Isabella's insistence they take her car, Burke went with the car Miko had supplied him. After making a stop at a nearby gas station for a map, they drove the short distance to the address on the paper. When he slowed the car in front of the

building, Burke was instantly overcome with bone-deep, nauseating dread. What kind of place was this? Why would anyone bring Sylvie here? What kind of hell was he about to walk into?

He gave Isabella a warning glance as he drove around the block then past the building a second time. He wasn't sure he wanted to take his friend into that shithole, placing her in even more danger than he already had over the past few months.

It could be a trap. Maybe Miko's Excoluni pals had convinced Miko that he should be captured?

Deep inside, he doubted Miko would, after all this time, betray him. But he couldn't deny it was possible.

Car parked a safe distance away, Burke loaded the gun but left the safety on. His heart thumped against his breast bone as he exited the car, weapon in his fist. Sweat beaded on his forehead, his temple. Dragging one slick palm down his leg, he motioned to Isabella to arm herself, and tipped his head toward the house. "Tell me I'm not going to regret getting you into this."

"You're not going to regret getting me into this," Isabella parroted. A glance caught her giving him a toothy grin. "I'm here for you. Always have been."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it. But remember our agreement. When your name's clear, I'm heading home and you're selling me the house."

He smiled at their inside joke. As long as they'd known each other, Isabella had wanted to own his house in Valtrusy, a quaint town in the Czech Republic. Of course, thanks to the criminal case, which stripped him of everything he owned, he didn't legally own the property anymore. The UMN didn't recognize geographical boundaries. It didn't matter where on earth a crime was committed. By law any member found guilty of murder lost every material possession he had. But he'd promised that if he were ever able to clear his name, and regained ownership of his property, he'd sell it to her. For a fair price, to be negotiated at a later date. If he had it his way, that fair price would be exactly one dollar. "You got it."

Smiling, she handed him an elastic band for his hair. He accepted it, setting the gun on the car's trunk to gather his hair into a low ponytail. His hands trembled as he struggled to perform a task that had always been second nature.

Then, the gun back in his hand again, his dearest friend at his side, he moved toward the ramshackle house with caution. Every nerve in his body prickled. The hairs on his nape stood on end. He could hear the blood pounding through his head. The sound echoed in his ears.

His conscience screamed dire condemnations in his head. Miko might have walked into this place of his own free will, but Isabella? Sylvie? He wouldn't be able to live another day if something happened to either of them.

When he reached the house, ducking behind a scraggly pile of twigs that might have once been a beautiful rose bush, he turned to Isabella and shook his head. "I can't let you go in there. I don't know what we're walking into."

"Fuck you," she snapped. "I'm not sitting out here filing my nails while you're in there fighting God knows what."

"But --"

She silenced him with a lifted hand. "Nuh uh."

He knew there was no way she'd listen to reason. "Stay behind me, at least."

She gave him an eye roll. "Whatever you say, boss." Then she winked. "I'd rather look at your ass anyway. Have I ever told you that you have a great butt?"

"No." Brows furrowed, he twisted at the waist to get a look at his rear end. Then he met her gaze. "Are you flirting with me?"

"Hell no! But I can appreciate a nice body when I see one. I've never kept my appreciation of your finer assets to myself."

So, why couldn't he recall a single time when she'd commented on his butt -- or any other part of his person -- before? Granted, there'd been that time of the "experiment," when they'd toyed with the idea of becoming more than friends. But as quickly as that notion had risen, it was cast aside. They were definitely not compatible. There'd been no funny business since then, not a look, word, twinkle. "Ooookay."

"I'm just in a weird mood, I guess."

"Yeah. Weird." He turned around, focusing his attention on the window. There was a split in the plywood covering it. He peered through the crack. The glass behind was cloudy and smudged with filth, and a torn curtain limited his vision, but he could see inside. The window, positioned on the side of the house, faced the neighboring multi-family structure to the west. It provided a fairly good view of several rooms inside -- kitchen, living room, dining room. Because the exterior was cloaked in heavy shadows, the dim lighting inside was adequate enough to illuminate a single shadowy figure moving in one of the rooms. If he had to guess, Burke would say the person was male.

Miko? Who was inside? And if that was Miko, where was Sylvie?

The person headed toward the back of the kitchen, disappearing through a narrow doorway. The door closed behind him.

Figuring it was now or never, he motioned to Isabella then sprinted around to the front door. He tried it. Locked. Knowing Isabella would get the door open in half the time it would take him, he waved to her. She shuffled past him, lock pick at the ready. Within seconds, the door inched open. Burke stood back, peering around the door as it slowly swung in. Isabella stood against the front of the house, about five feet from him. Their gazes met for an instant. He lifted the gun, switched off the safety and tiptoed into the house.

Silence. Empty. Filthy. Carefully, slowly, he moved deeper into the house, heading toward the rear where he'd seen the mystery person moving around. He heard muffled voices. Below them?

Basement.

A tingle pricked his spine and a fresh coat of sweat slicked his face and palms.

A board creaked under his weight when he stepped toward the basement door. He froze in place, his breath wedged in his throat.

The voices below were silenced.

Burke lifted his foot slowly and placed it a few inches to the right, this time testing the board before settling his weight on it. He did the same with his other foot, impatient with his painstakingly slow progress, but worried he'd alerted the killer. Without the element of surprise, he had few advantages over the bad guy.

He reached the door without a killer filling him with silver bullets. Relief. He gave himself a few seconds to gather his frayed nerves before taking hold of the doorknob. He twisted the circa 1950's cut crystal handle a fraction of a degree at a time until the latch clicked.

He swapped a worried look with Isabella before pushing the door open. It struck something hard. An instant later, a man blasted through the door, slamming into Burke and knocking him to the ground before he'd had time to react.

Everything blurred. Someone's fists slammed into his face. The back of his head struck something hard. He tried to turn his head to the side and block the blows, but he couldn't move his arms. Sounds of scuffling and skin striking skin, the crunch of shattering bone, filled his ears. A grunt blasted from his chest. Cool darkness seeped into his pores, gathering like a toxic cloud in his head. He struggled to fight it, but the cold intensified, nearly overwhelming him. He focused on Isabella's distant voice, a whisper in the night. Followed it, out of the shadow, the frigid emptiness.

"Burke! I need your help. Hey, let me out of here, you fucking bastard!"

"Isabella?" He heard himself speak. That was his voice, wasn't it?

Light pierced the black world that had closed in around him. Painful, agonizing, blinding light. A searing ache blasted through his body in wild, relentless waves.

In the darkness was respite. Soothing cold. Peace. He wanted to surrender to it, but Isabella's screams kept pulling him toward the light.

He wasn't very happy with her at the moment, especially when another crush of white-hot, throbbing pain pounded through his body.

He blinked open his eyes. He was on the kitchen floor. Alone.

A muffled shriek.

He slowly turned his head toward the sound but saw no one. Muddy-headed, he moved his hands, legs. So far, so good. He rolled onto his side and levered his upper body off the floor. The pounding in his head intensified. He sandwiched it between his flattened hands, squinted, and slowly stood up.

The world tipped and whirled as he moved, but he continued, driven by worry for Isabella, Sylvie and Miko. He licked his parched lips, tasting blood. Was it his own?

His gun. Where'd his gun go?

The room spinning around him like he was on a runaway carnival ride, he turned a complete three-sixty, searching the floor for his lost weapon. Nothing.

Why did that not surprise him?

He searched for an alternate weapon, something hard he could use to beat some Hadrian ass. He'd recognized the Excoluni officer sometime after the bastard had pounded his nose flat.

Of course, the fact that he'd been attacked by Hadrian Dvorak led him to a devastating conclusion -- Miko could be a part of this. His own mate might have intentionally led him into a trap.

No. He didn't want to believe it. Not after what had happened earlier. They were on the same team now.

What if Miko hadn't known what he was facing when he arrived? What a shock it must've been -- discovering his own brother was somehow tied to the murders. Was in some way responsible for his *Origo's* kidnapping.

He had to find Miko. He had to find them all.

He swept up a broken broom handle tucked between the refrigerator and the wall and headed back toward the basement stairs. Whatever was going on, it was happening down there.

He had no idea what kind of hell he was about to walk into, but he was ready to give the devil a little taste of his own medicine.

* * *

The stench of those candles, it was enough to make Sylvie's eyes water. What the hell were they made out of?

Come to think of it, she didn't want to know.

Her belly was twisted into a tight knot, the awful smell only making the nausea that much worse. The chill of the floor cooled her back, sending shivers up and down her spine, while her heart sent scalding blood pounding through her body.

He had a strange looking knife in his hand. It reminded her of that scene in *Braveheart*, the awful one at the end. She was about to feel the same thing -- the agony of having her insides cut out.

Terror ripped through her body. She dragged in desperate breaths between muffled sobs. As she had a hundred times before, she started yanking on the chains holding her arms and legs, gritting her teeth at the pain. The skin around the bindings had no doubt been rubbed raw. Sharp, piercing sensations razored up her arms and legs every time she moved them.

Still, gaze focused on the man holding the knife overhead murmuring words in a foreign tongue she didn't understand, she made promises to every deity known to mankind that she'd live a better life, contribute to every church raffle in her neighborhood, and pay a weekly visit to every church, temple and mosque she could locate. If only she might be spared.

She'd long ago accepted death as inevitable. Everyone died -- everyone, that was, but vampires. And their *Origos*. Only she would discover immortality was truly possible and then find herself slaughtered brutally, the lamb whose blood was shed to redeem a dead person.

It was almost too bizarre to believe.

The man turned to her. Her eyes filled with tears. She tried to be strong, but terror completely obliterated every bit of pride and courage she had clung to.

He was coming closer.

His face was a blank canvas, completely devoid of emotion. His dark eyes glittered, the light of a nearby candle reflecting on the surface. Inside, the depths were like the furthest regions of outer space. Empty. Cold. Nothingness.

He lowered the crescent-shaped blade and hooked it in her shirt. The metal was cool against her skin. Her stomach muscles tightened. She jerked when he gave the blade a swift yank, cutting through her top. The material fell to the sides, leaving only her bra between his evil, empty eyes and her skin.

Trembling, air sawing in and out of her lungs as if she was sprinting up a mountain slope, she tipped her head to look at Miko. He sat in a chair, his arms tied behind him, his ankles strapped to the chair legs with duct tape. More tape covered his mouth, yet he still managed to shout, to rock the chair. Unlike the man standing over her, preparing to remove her insides like some demented surgeon, his eyes were filled with emotion.

Their gazes met as the blade pierced her skin. Instinctively, she flinched. Her eyelids shut out the agonizing sight of Miko struggling to escape to save her. "It's not going to work. We didn't complete the Binding," she said for the bazillionth time. "If you kill me now, you kill your chance of bringing her back."

A puff of air struck her skin and she flinched. There was a thump, then a clatter. Lots of scuffling. Some angry shouts.

She opened her eyes. "Burke," she whispered, turning to watch him fight the killer. The rage she saw in his face shocked her.

Within minutes Burke had the killer flat on his back, the wrist of the hand holding the knife pinned to the floor. "What the hell, Hadrian?"

"You wouldn't understand. You've never loved a woman."

"Yes, I have. I do." Burke lifted Hadrian's wrist then smashed it down. The knife was knocked from his grip, slid across the concrete, stopping next to a pillar candle burning on the floor. "And you're about to kill her."

Burke loved her? He loved her! Tears of joy burned in her eyes, along with the lingering tears of terror that hadn't yet dried.

"Then you know what I'm feeling. The desperation. I can't live without her. I had to do... this. There was no other way. You understand?"

"No. I don't want to understand. I don't want to hear anything. I just want you to pay the way I have. You did this to me. Took everything. You bastard." He closed his hand around Hadrian's throat. His knuckles turned white as his grip tightened. Hadrian's face turned a deep cranberry, yet he didn't move, didn't struggle.

Burke released Hadrian's throat and knocked him out cold with a single punch to the face. He flipped the would-be murderer over onto his stomach and hogtied him before coming to check Sylvie's cut.

Expression dark with barely repressed rage, he ran his fingertip down the wound, a gentle, soothing touch. "I can't believe he almost succeeded." He kissed away the tears streaming from her eyes, and the pain on her stomach, wrists, ankles. "Where's the key?" He glanced at Miko, who was shaking his shoulders and head. "I need to go find Isabella." He stood, found the knife then rushed to Miko and pulled the tape from his mouth.

"If you get the gloves and give me that knife, I'll free myself and Sylvie. You can go look for Isabella."

Burke hesitated for only a blink before doing exactly as Miko suggested. He pulled the gloves off, and handed him the knife, allowing Miko to cut himself from his bindings. Then, after giving Sylvie another gentle kiss, he promised he'd return in a minute, as soon as he found Isabella. He ran upstairs.

The instant Miko located the key and freed her from her restraints, Sylvie climbed to her shaky legs and staggered toward the stairs. There was plenty of time for hugs and comfort and marveling about his miraculous healing later. Right now, she just had to get out of that hellish place. She wouldn't breathe easy until they were far away from there. As she passed Hadrian, he lifted his head, startling her. She hopped to one side, kicking over one of the smelly candles sitting on the floor. A few scraps of paper ignited.

"Shit!" Miko looked at her and then at Hadrian, helpless as he was.

She had her own ideas about what that monster deserved, but Miko had the morality of a police officer. She supposed he wouldn't be able to leave him down there to burn to death.

"Get outside," Miko shouted, as he stomped on the spreading flames.

"Come with me," she pleaded from the foot of the stairs.

"I'll be out in a minute. I just can't... he's my brother."

No, he wasn't going to risk his own life for that bastard!

Her heart rushed up her throat. She nodded and tripped her way up the stairs, using the loose wooden railing as support. Because she'd inhaled so much smoke, her lungs were burning, her eyes were tearing and her legs weren't one hundred percent steady.

She screamed "Fire!" as she wobbled and swayed through the house. A cloud of smoke was rolling up the stairs and gathering along the kitchen ceiling. Legs getting stronger, adrenaline doing its job, she ran through the dining room. "Burke?" She turned a corner and dashed across the living room.

The smoke was getting thicker by the second. She reached the front door but hesitated. Run outside to safety or help Burke and Miko? She threw open the door and filled her lungs with fresh air. "Burke! Fire! Miko!"

No one answered.

Clutching the shredded pieces of her shirt to her breasts, she scampered outside, jumped off the porch and ran around the outside of the house. At the very rear, she found the kitchen window. The board covering the window was partially pulled down. She frantically clawed at it, tearing a piece away. She now had a limited view of the scene inside. Miko had his tied brother in his arms and was staggering across the kitchen, toward the side door. Burke had Isabella with him and was running in the opposite direction, toward the front hall. But just as he was about to head out of the room, there was a loud crack, splitting wood. Miko dropped out of sight.

Had he fallen down, or literally crashed through the floor?

God, would this hell ever end? Sylvie screamed and ran around to the side door leading into the house. The knob was blistering hot. She covered it with a scrap of her mangled shirt and twisted, kicking it in.

Burke was long gone. There was an enormous hole in the floor. Red and gold flames danced around the opening. She kept close to the wall and inched back toward the stairs. But before she reached them, Miko staggered through the basement door, collapsing at her feet.

She grabbed his hands and dragged him toward safety outside. Only a few feet. She could do it. Her muscles screamed in protest but she pushed aside the pain. Safety was so close.

The moment she had Miko outside, she joined him on the cool grass. Flat on her back, gasping, her lungs burning, her eyes tearing so badly her vision was blurred, the cut in her stomach throbbing. Her skin felt dry and hot, like she'd fallen asleep in the sun.

But he was safe. She was safe. And the bad guy, Hadrian, she could only guess what had happened to him.

"Sylvie?" Burke called from around the side of the burning building.

"I'm here," she returned weakly.

"Oh, thank God." Burke dropped to his knees and pulled her into a tight embrace. And finally, she felt safe enough to just sit there and enjoy it.

The danger was over. And hopefully, with Miko's help, Burke would get back everything that had been taken from him.

Chapter Six

It took at least forty-eight hours for Sylvie to finally accept that she didn't have to hide from a killer anymore. But even two months later, she still hadn't worked through the lingering effects of the trauma she'd endured. She suppressed the worst of her emotions for as long as she could, burying herself in the business of getting *Carpe Nocturne* back on its feet.

She didn't want to accept the fact that the terror she'd endured in that basement had changed her, perhaps for the rest of her life.

Life had to go on. Right? People who'd endured more pain than she had -- attempted murder, spousal abuse, child neglect -- they pushed on. They grew up, graduated high school, got married, had families. Why was she having such a hard time?

Sleeping was particularly difficult. Nightmares woke her night after night. Burke and Miko stayed with her in her home, putting every obligation off to be with her. Work. Reclaiming the life they deserved to have again. Everything.

They held her as she cried out in the night, murmuring soothing words as she trembled in bed. Nothing was said about their Binding, whether it was complete or incomplete, or about the desire simmering below the surface of her vampires' concern-filled eyes.

They simply waited. Patiently. Supporting her. Encouraging her. Even helping her at *Carpe Nocturne*. Burke rarely let her out of his sight. He shadowed her everywhere she went, and she was grateful. This was ironic, since she'd always been the kind of woman who bristled at a man's overprotective attention. No longer.

She couldn't step foot into her office without reliving that first night. She could practically see the dead man hanging in her office, could smell the pungent stench of

death. Cold, dark places struck cold terror in her. She could see what was happening to her, like she was standing outside of herself, watching. She was letting those bizarre events shape her.

How could she stop that from happening?

Late one night, after closing Carpe Nocturne, she sat in the center of her bed and cried. The bad guy was dead -- the fire had destroyed the house and everything in it. But she was still in so many ways chained to that floor, a victim who couldn't move on. She was tired of being scared. Pissed off at her inability to put it behind her. But she just couldn't. Carpe Nocturne was doing well. The weekly costume parties had taken the failing bar and turned it around. But she couldn't handle working the theme nights. The creepy vampire outfits were just too much for her, despite the fact that she knew Burke and Miko were vampires. That night, she'd been unable to find someone to work the shift.

Burke and Miko traded concerned glances as they positioned themselves on either side of her. Burke rested a single hand on her knee; Miko placed a hand on her shoulder. They watched her cry, determination and anger and a plethora of other emotions playing over their faces. She knew they wanted to ease her pain but felt powerless to give her more than temporary relief.

Finally, as her sobs wore down, Burke spoke, "I think it's time we leave."

What? He was going to leave her? How could he even think of doing that? "No. Please." Panic set her heart racing. The organ thumped against her breastbone. She clenched her trembling hands in her lap, struggling to hide the effect his words were having on her.

"It's for the best." Miko took hold of her chin and coaxed her to look at him. "We talked about it and we both agree. You need to give yourself some time to heal."

"But without you? What will I do? I need you."

"Not without us. We want you to come with us."

Relief took the form of a warm, pleasant sensation that spread across her chest and down her torso. "Where?"

"Back to one of my estates in Europe," Burke said. He inched closer, sandwiched her hands between his. "You can have a new life, a new beginning. Not that I expect all this to go away yet -- the fear and trauma. But I want to give you the choice. I will stay with you no matter what. Don't think for a minute I'm going to walk away from you. I love you." He blinked several times and she realized, from the shimmer in his eyes and the slight tremble in his lips, that he was on the verge of crying too. "Do you want to stay here, continue to build Carpe Nocturne? Or would you rather come away and begin a new life far away from the memories?"

Her heart felt like it had swelled to at least twice its normal size. Contentment. Joy.

There could be no doubt. Burke was telling the truth. He loved her. More than any person ever had, with the exception of Miko. Their love had been like a cloak she wore whenever she left the house. It kept her warm, eased her fears, gave her strength. She wanted to give them the same kind of joy, to get beyond her own neediness and reach out to them.

If they wanted to fly across the world, to Timbuktu or wherever, did she belong anywhere but with them? Did she want to continue like this? Losing herself in ugly memories?

They wanted what was best for her. "Okay," she agreed.

Her vampires sandwiched her between them in a long, warm, soothing hug.

Yes, she was looking forward to starting her life over. The ghosts haunting her wouldn't follow half way around the world. At least she hoped not.

Above and beyond getting past the trauma of her kidnapping, she simply wanted to enjoy life and enjoy the two men who'd become such a huge part of it.

Over the next several weeks, a lot of things happened. She sold Carpe Nocturne to her friend Lisa, packed up the few personal possessions that mattered to her, took a final trip to the charred remains of the house she'd been held captive in, and then boarded a private jet with her vampires. She spent the bulk of the overnight flight in the

plane's comfy bed. For the first time in months, she didn't wake up sweating and shaking from night terrors.

Yes, this had been the right decision.

While the private plane should have clued her in to how rich Burke was, it wasn't until they'd landed and driven to his so-called estate that the reality sank in. Burke wasn't just a little bit rich. He was very rich. Like own-a-small-country rich. Because they had to travel at night, she wasn't able to get a good feel for the scope of Burke's real estate holdings, until she stepped foot in his house -- correction, castle. And this was supposedly his country cottage. Oh. My. God!

Clearly, the Langton family had deep roots in the Czech Republic. Burke gave her a brief history lesson about his family as he led her on a tour of the house. It was fascinating, learning how the former socialist government had taken possession of the property for a time and then returned it later. But what intrigued her the most about the house and its beautiful furnishings was the sense of history, of former lives and loves, she felt as she passed through the rooms.

Perhaps that was what she'd long ached for? Having been a child with no roots, no family that she knew of after her mother died, she lacked ties to the past.

She knew she'd heal in this place. Even though it was huge and so gorgeous it looked more like a museum than a home, there was something here that fed her soul.

"Are you tired?" Burke motioned toward the sweeping staircase that arched elegantly around in a wide "c" to the second floor above. His index finger traced the beautiful swirls carved into the wooden railing.

Mmmmm. A little ripple of warmth shimmied through her body. She'd had plenty of sleep on the plane. She wasn't tired. If he did decide to take her upstairs for a tour of the bedrooms, she could think of a few things she'd rather do than sleep. She glanced over her shoulder, wondering where Miko had gone.

Burke answered her unspoken question. "I believe he's upstairs, taking a shower."

Miko in the shower? Now, that called to mind some intriguing images.

Come to think of it, she was feeling a little grungy herself. A shower would be a good thing, especially if she were lucky enough to have some company.

She raised an eyebrow at Burke and he burst into a guffaw that tickled her insides like a flock of butterflies had been released in her tummy. A few parts of her anatomy launched into party mode when one side of Burke's mouth lifted into that wicked grin she so adored.

He scooped her up into his arms, flung her over his shoulder like a caveman hauling off a prize kill, and ran up the stairs. Thanks to her bouncing against his shoulder, her giggles rushed up her throat in broken bursts. Burke dashed through a bedroom she was sure she'd seen in an interior design magazine and threw open the door to an attached bathroom that would make the average girl weep. A sunken jet tub, long stretch of stone counter with framed mirrors hanging above it. Gorgeous tile floor and walls. But best of all, an enormous glass enclosed shower that could hold a half dozen people comfortably, with at least as many spouts spraying water at the one scrumptious body standing inside. Burke didn't bother to snap the clothes off either one of them before throwing open the glass door and carting her into the stall. The water temperature was perfect. It struck her from all directions, soaking her clothes within seconds. But she couldn't care less about a few soggy garments.

She was going to do the wild thing in the shower! Happy squeal!

She closed her eyes and focused on the erotic sensations pummeling her system. The water, caressing her skin as it ran down her torso in warm rivulets. The naughty thrill she received as her vampires ripped her soaked clothes from her body. The sound of rending fabric and murmured promises of wicked fun by the two most amazing men this side of heaven. She cleared her head, mentally shoving aside a few lingering questions she ached to have answered, and instead focused on the moment. How often did a woman find herself in the shower with two gorgeous men who were determined to drive her absolutely insane with pleasure?

Ohhhh! Could this moment last forever?

At one end of the shower was a wooden bench, jutting from the tile wall. Miko coaxed her backward and down, until she was sitting, her legs spread wide. He bent, muscles bunching as he moved, to kiss her shoulder. Burke, still dressed, the knit shirt clinging to his skin and emphasizing his bulk, knelt before her, his eyes taking a tour of her wet, trembling body. He rested a hand on each of her knees, pushing them further apart, and licked his lips. "Damn it, what you do to me. I want to take my time..." He skimmed one flattened palm up over her thigh before stopping at her hip. She quivered at his heated expression, and feeling naughty and brave, reached down to finger her labia.

Both her vampires visibly swallowed as they watched her. She knew how much power she held over them right then. She'd literally forced them to their knees. But at the same time, she ached to surrender to the latent power she witnessed in their bodies. They both had the kind of bodies that inspired wet dreams. She'd gladly swap shower nookie vampire dreams for the night terrors that had been interrupting her sleep for the last few months.

The water made Miko's hair hang in heavy waves around his face. Droplets clung to his eyelashes, nose, lips. He ran his tongue along her collarbone, and she gladly tipped her head to the side to give him greater access to her neck.

Would they bite her again? She wanted them to for some reason. As much as she wanted them to fuck her like they had before, both at the same time. While she'd been struggling the past few months, the guys had refused to make love to her. Burke had said they didn't want to make things more difficult for her.

Obviously, they weren't worried about that anymore, and she was oh, so happy.

While Miko worked his way lower, to her left breast, Burke pushed aside her hand and replaced it with his mouth. "Ohhhhh!" she moaned, letting her head fall back to rest against the wall a few inches behind her. Her vampires had performed magic plenty, with the snap of their fingers, but now, they were performing magic on her body. With their mouths.

She wrapped her fingers around the edge of the seat and inched her bottom forward, offering Burke easier access to her pussy.

"That's it, yes. Open for us. Take what is yours." Burke simultaneously pumped two fingers in and out of her clenching pussy and teased her clit with the world's most agile tongue. It danced, flicked, swirled. His fingers thrust in and out, somehow stroking that special place inside that sent quakes of pleasure through her body.

Miko's tongue was dancing over her nipple. He pulled it into his mouth, suckling. She arched her back, thrusting her breast forward, and sighed. The agony! The profound pleasure. It was all so overwhelming.

The water, scents of soap and man and sex, the sounds of mouths working over wet skin, all blended inside her body, whirling around and around like a ball of fire in her gut. Miko pushed roughly at her shoulders, forcing her to lean back until her shoulder blades ground into the tile wall. That little act of domination made her insides go all hot and molten. She groaned, blinking into the water spray. A part of her wanted the moment to last forever, another wanted to soar over the pinnacle. Release was just out of her reach, even with two men both pleasuring her. Something was missing.

Burke lifted his head and narrowed his gaze. "I know what you need."

She was quite certain, from the fire she saw in his eyes, that statement was true. He stood, pulled Miko away from her and turned off the water. Then he motioned with a tip of his head. "I think she's ready."

Miko's smile took her breath away. A blend of unspoken promise and raw desire, the expression made her squirm. He pulled her up and maneuvered her between his yummy body and Burke's.

She had to wonder if Burke's castle had a dungeon. The kind he'd magically created in the safe house. The answer, she quickly learned, was yes. Every bit as erotically dark and dangerous as its owner.

She let her Masters lead her inside. "Can I ask a question? Why couldn't Hadrian snap like you?"

"The dark magic." While Burke shed his sopping clothes, Miko lay on his back on a narrow, hip-high wooden table. His expression was wicked, the muscles of his toned stomach and lean, smooth-skinned thighs taut. A bead of precome glistened on the tip of his thick, rigid cock. "Suck me." It was a command, and a plea. Sylvie heard both in his voice.

She bent over him and swirled her tongue around the tip, enjoying the salty flavor of his skin. He smelled so good, masculine and clean. And he tasted even better. His moans of pleasure guided her as she experimented with tongue, teeth and hands. She took him deeper into her mouth, using her hands to pump his shaft.

Burke stroked her fanny, slow caresses that spiked the simmer in her blood to boiling. Heat pulsed down her legs and up over her chest. She groaned around a mouthful of Miko and sped up her motions. This is what she'd always wanted -- to be possessed by two powerful, dominating men. Maybe she hadn't been ready to admit it before she'd met them, but she had stared at her share of group porn pictures.

Two men. One girl. So hot.

Ha, she hadn't known how hot the reality of it was! It was like a nuclear blast. Kaboom!

Burke pulled her cheeks apart and teased her anus and pussy with his fingers. He bent over her back to kiss her shoulders and nape, while stimulating her clit with magical fingers. Miko grasped her hair and pulled, forcing her up and down, fucking her mouth.

She wasn't going to last long. She wanted release. Now. She couldn't plead, not with Miko's thick cock plunging in and out. Feeling powerless and wonderfully submissive, she whimpered and surrendered, letting her vampires dictate her motions.

Miko stopped her with a tug on her hair and forced her upright with a push to her chest. From behind, Burke guided her into position, her legs straddling the bench, her pussy hovering over Miko's hips. He pressed between her shoulder blades, bending her forward at the hips, gripped her waist and eased her down until Miko's cock was buried deep inside.

The air left her lungs in a slow sigh. Up, down, he supported her with his hands as she rode Miko, yet her thighs began to burn from her position. The pain wasn't enough to distract her from the pleasure her two vampires were giving her, though. Miko pulled and pinched her uber-sensitive nipples. Burke produced some lube from somewhere, spread it over her anus and slowly inched inside.

Oh, glory!

"Open, baby. Take me in."

Her perineum burned as he breached her hole, but the pain was oh, so good. She groaned, tossed her head back and relaxed, taking him deep. Miko's thrusts slowed, falling into the same pace as Burke's. The combined movements of both cocks, gliding in and out, coupled with the guys' softly uttered words of encouragement, and the tormenting touches of two sets of hands, sent her over the edge. A powerful orgasm blasted through her body just as her vampires found their own releases. Their cum filled her pulsing pussy and anus, lubricating her. They quickened their pace, taking her harder, faster. A second orgasm coursed through her body. Her pussy and ass milked their cocks until every drop had been expelled and she lacked the strength to stand.

Burke lifted her off Miko and took her hand, kissing each fingertip.

"Now, my love, it's time for you to make your final decision," Burke said, as he led her to the center of the room. "I wish we had more time. But we don't."

Her gaze focused on the floor. Four chains were connected to steel rings affixed to the floor, just like the ones she'd been tied in when Hadrian had tried to kill her. The lingering heat simmering in her blood chilled. Ice shards pricked her insides. The resemblance was too creepy. Why was he doing this now? Exposing her to something that would scare her, instead of turn her on? They'd just shared the most amazing experience, and she was still tingling all over. Now she was ready to run screaming for the nearest exit.

Did these two have the world's worst sense of timing or what?

"I learned there's a reason why our Binding didn't take effect," Burke said while easing her onto the floor. "Something was missing."

"Then it really hadn't taken? The Binding?"

Miko circled her before stooping down to pick up one of the leather cuffs attached to a chain. "Only partially. Just enough to ease the pain."

"Partially? How does one become partially bound? Isn't that kind of like being partially pregnant?" she snapped, resisting Burke's effort to force her to the floor. "What are you doing? Are you crazy?"

Burke muscled her onto her butt. "Not unless you want to equate loving you with insanity."

"I don't know. That's a close one," Miko quipped.

"Gotta agree with you," Burke said.

"This is no laughing matter," she shouted, struggling to break free from Burke's tightening grip. Her mounting panic took the form of an invisible belt of ice. It wrapped around her chest like a constrictor and squeezed the air from her lungs. "Stop."

Miko gave Burke a warning glance then settled on one knee beside her. "If you don't want to complete the final step of the *Iugum*, we can stop. Nothing has to happen if you don't want it to. But I think it's only going to help you to do this -- to face up to your fear."

"That's the final step? I have to conquer a fear?"

Miko took her hand in his and gently stroked the back. The innocent touch, a small show of concern and support, eased her panic somewhat. "No, it's more like pass a test of love."

"A test? I'm not fond of tests. Maybe we don't need to complete the *Iugum*? We're not hurting anymore. Right?"

"That's an option."

"What'll happen if we don't?" Her vampires swapped who's-going-to-break-the-news-to-her looks. She did not like the vibe she was getting. "It's that bad?"

"I guess it depends on how you want to look at it," Burke answered.

"Okay, Mr. Vague, what's that mean? Am I going to die?" She decided Miko might be more forthcoming, and turned a questioning glance his way.

Miko shook his head. "It's unlikely."

That sounded like good news. So what was the big deal? What weren't they telling her? "Is that awful pain going to come back? So far, it hasn't. Thank God. That has to mean something right?"

Miko released her hand, which almost made her whimper. It had been such a sweet gesture. "Sure. It means something."

"Then what?" she prodded. "I need to know. What are you holding back?"

"I contacted someone local here, to find out exactly how the *Iugum* works, and why our Binding didn't fully take." Burke settled next to her on the floor. He stretched his long legs out in front of him. "I also asked what the consequences would be if we went no further."

"Yeah, yeah, I kind of got that. So, what's the deal? You're killing me here."

"I'm trying to break it to you easy."

"Forget that."

"Okay." He sent Miko yet another one of those looks. "We didn't want to pressure you. We wanted to let you take the time you needed. But we didn't know... Neither of us have ever met an *Origo*. We didn't know there were certain rules..."

"What kind of rules?"

"There's no way we could have known before we left the United States," Burke added. "The elder I consulted is very ancient and does not use modern technologies..."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

Miko sighed. "Because we brought you here, to our homeland, if we don't take the final step by sunrise, you'll become a vampire."

"Oh."

Both her vampires stared at her like they expected her to freak out. She briefly considered doing just that. But instead, she bit her tongue and tried to sort out the facts.

She was a semi-bound *Origo*. She'd gone as far as she had for several reasons. First, to escape that awful, gnawing pain. Second, because she really liked the idea of

being forever young. Immortal. She'd never get sick. Never age. But mostly, she wanted to be with her vampires, Burke and Miko. She loved them.

There'd been a time -- not so long ago -- when she'd accepted the fact that her past had made it pretty much impossible for her to love another person. Human or otherwise. Her mother's death, the life-or-death existence on the streets she'd endured for years, and the many years spent later being shuffled from one foster home to another had taken their toll. Her heart had been hardened. Her ability to trust severely impaired.

She'd even kept friends at a safe distance, including Lisa. To let anyone get really close, to mean something, was to risk losing them. She could not survive another loss like that, even if she had immortal blood coursing through her veins.

But then Burke and Miko had come. Yes, initially her attraction to them had been all physical. They were both beautiful men. What red-blooded woman wouldn't find them attractive?

Next, she experienced a sense of needing them. For protection. Despite all the crazy things going on around her, they made her feel somewhat safe. That was one emotion that was completely foreign to her. She liked it. A lot. Soon, she started missing them when they were gone. This wasn't a little twinge of missing but a gut-deep, painful kind.

Finally, somehow she found herself loving them. She sold her bar. She walked away from the life she'd known. And she hadn't done those things just to escape the pain of her past, but because she couldn't imagine living a day without her vampires.

Maybe she could live with becoming a vampire. It would take some getting used to. But why would she go that route?

She loved Burke and Miko.

Now, she had to prove it. To Burke and Miko. To herself.

Chapter Seven

Sylvie took several deep breaths to slow her out-of-control heart rate. Adrenaline had her feeling dizzy, jittery, out of breath. Her senses were over-reactive, sounds, smells, touches so intense they were almost painful. She nodded to Burke and Miko, swallowed a huge lump in her throat and let them ease her onto her back on the floor.

"Trusting is one of the most essential aspects of love," Miko said while fastening one leather binding around her wrist. "Do you agree?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Can you trust us?" Burke moved to her ankle, lifting it to slip a leather cuff around it.

"I want to."

"That's not the answer we need," Miko said, reaching for her other arm.

Tears burned beneath her closed eyelids. "It's not easy for me to trust."

"Why? Can you tell us?" Burke pleaded, before securing her second ankle. "What happened to you, Sylvie?"

"Life happened. It taught me that trusting other people was stupid. Because people die. Move away. Decide they don't want you around. Whatever."

"We aren't going to die," Miko said.

"Or move away."

"And we definitely want you around for a long time."

Despite the fact that she was once again tied down spread-eagled like she had been in that awful place Hadrian had taken her, she had to give her vampires a teary-eyed smile.

Burke stroked her cheek, his love for her shining in his eyes. "The chains aren't really what are holding you down. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah."

Miko's eyes shone with love too, as he also smiled down at her. "Are you ready to say the words that will finally break the chains?"

She was surprised by how easily they came. "I trust you. I love you. I want to be with you forever."

Burke and Miko bit their wrists and each let a single droplet of blood fall, striking the center of her forehead.

The bindings fell from her ankles and wrists and magically dissolved into a swirling mist. The white cloud whirled around her. The circling wind started slowly but gained speed until it was howling like a tornado. Within seconds, the center of the cyclone was directly over her forehead, the narrowest part hovering less than an inch from her. She wanted to flinch, to move away, but Burke and Miko told her to remain still in calm, soothing voices. There was nothing to fear. The wind was magic. It wouldn't hurt her.

It touched her, a soft caress like a summer breeze. She closed her eyes, letting the wonderful sensation relax her. Behind her closed eyelids, images flashed through her mind. Memories of Burke and Miko in strange historical costumes, doing things like riding horses across green fields, sailing wooden ships. A barrage of emotions swept through her -- sorrow, joy, confusion, loneliness, despair.

And then there was only peace. Quiet contentment.

She sat up and sank into Burke and Miko's embrace, thankful for what she'd learned, and for the gift they'd given her -- freedom from the chains tying her to the pain of her past.

"Now, are you ready to finish what we started earlier?" Burke clapped his hands, rubbing them together eagerly, sexual promise glittering in his eyes.

A whole other kind of sensation pulsed through her -- a simmering sensual heat. A very wonderful erotic warmth, coupled with pure joy that made her feel so light she could literally take flight like the birds.

* * *

Miko had never known such profound joy existed. Having lived for centuries without a soul, he'd learned to accept the way he was. He'd also learned to hide from the emptiness, distracting himself with work. He still loved his job with the Excoluni, and in fact was looking forward to the challenges of his new position -- the one formerly held by his brother, Hadrian. But he now could put his job in its proper perspective. No longer would he live to work. There were two other reasons to wake up in the morning -- Burke and Sylvie. They were much more important.

Someday, however, he hoped to find out what had changed his brother. He could appreciate Hadrian's grieving for the loss of his girlfriend, now that he had experienced love firsthand. Yet it wasn't exactly the same. Hadrian and his girlfriend hadn't been bound mates. Hadrian couldn't love her. At least not in the purest sense. Perhaps he'd loved her as a soulless man could? And just maybe that imperfect love had destroyed his brother?

Answers. He would get them. But he would not let his quest for them rule his life. The man Miko had respected was gone. Nothing would bring him back.

* * *

Burke signed the final document and slid the stack of papers across the table's glossy surface.

The agent from the title company checked the signatures, nodded and set a signed check before him. "Very well. Best of luck to you both." He stood, shook hands with Burke then turned to do the same with Isabella, after handing a set of keys to her.

As soon as he left the room, Isabella beamed at Burke, keys in hand. "I wanted to pay more, you know."

"You paid enough." The full price she'd paid hung between them, unspoken words. She'd sacrificed her job, home, friends. She could have lost more. Thankfully, she hadn't.

She raised the key ring. "You can still change your mind."

"No, never."

"You're too damn stubborn for your own good."

"Nah. Just too damn stubborn for your good."

She gave him a watery smile. "Come visit me?"

"Soon."

"I'm going to redecorate. The estate's so... medieval. It's needed a facelift for centuries."

He knew damn well she had no intention of changing a thing. She was, after all, a medieval woman at heart. "It's yours now. If you want to put in shag carpet and mirrored disco balls, that's your choice."

She lifted a single delicately groomed eyebrow. "Hmmm. That is a thought." Leaning forward, she pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Thank you. For everything."

"No, thank you. For being my friend when I needed one most." He watched her leave the office, knowing she would finally have the life she deserved. No more struggling. He plucked up the check, reading the figure printed on it. One dollar and no cents.

He had paid his debt.

And he had received the most wonderful gift of all, even more precious than the money, houses, freedom he'd fought for.

He had finally experienced love.

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.

You can email Tawny at tawnytaylor@sbcglobal.net or visit her website at www.tawnytaylor.com