



ANN CORY

MORTAL COMPASS

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There's always a choice...even if the options are deadly.

Rook Vasser hunts with the fate of his vampire clan riding on his shoulders. Without the clan's stolen moonstone, an all-out war and his leader's death are inevitable. Acting on a tip, he heads deep into the Blood Mountains, confident the stone is within his grasp. He doesn't expect to find it hanging around the neck of a beautiful mortal—or that it will be nearly impossible to get it away from her.

Ember Chalane came to the mountains to recharge her critically low healing powers. The lovely stone she finds lying in the grass is more than a shiny trinket. She discovers it restores and enhances her empathic ability, flooding her body with fresh life force she's unwilling to give up—not even to the dark, sexy vampire who wants it back.

Rook tries everything to get his hands on the stone, including seduction...only to learn that not only does it protect her from his bite, without it she becomes dangerously sick. With time running out, Rook faces the darkest of choices—save his falling clan, or save the woman for whom he's fallen.

Warning: This title contains some naughty bits! A bit of Alpha male attitude, a bit of explicit sex with a hot vampire, and a bit of a bite!

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Mortal Compass

Ann Cory

Dedication

For vampire fans everywhere

Chapter One

For days Rook Vasser watched his leader Faolan waste away to mere bones, his withered skin paler than its normal ashen shade. It pained him to see a man of great power reduced to a weakened state where those who'd once admired him now looked on in pity. The sudden change in loyalties disturbed him. They'd be nothing without Faolan. Hell, *he'd* be nothing, and that knowledge had helped temper his rage. Though it hadn't always been that way.

Many times he'd been lured into battle, wanting nothing more than to rip his rivals in two and adorn the forest floor with their carnage. But he'd resisted.

Under Faolan's rule, the Ravyn Myst clan remained peaceful—sworn against spilling blood unless provoked. Before, Rook had honored those vows. Recent events were about to change that.

There'd been talk by head members of the clans to merge into one unit with current leaders battling for top rank. And to complicate matters, the number of rogue vampires had tripled—rebellious independents hell-bent on breaking traditions, bleeding innocents dry and waging war among clans. They'd targeted the Ravyn Mysts at first word of the leader's poor health. Only one thing could create such a domino effect of chaos. The loss of the sacred moonstone. Not only was the stone tied to Faolan's well-being, but it was the key to balance among the vampires. The moonstone served another incentive. Hold *it* and they hold the power to unlock otherworld secrets.

Rook sensed the restlessness of his brothers, and while they questioned the path the Ravyn Mysts would take, he stayed busy formulating a plan. He'd be damned if he'd stand by and watch all that Faolan had built crumble into nothingness. His leader deserved to finish his reign and name a new leader when warranted.

He would see to it. He also needed to prepare for the worst.

The problem lay in tracking down the moonstone. He had an idea of its whereabouts. If correct, he'd find it within the Blood Mountains in the heart of the Amazon. But without proof he'd cause more harm than good. Time was precious.

He hoped to receive the confirmation he'd been waiting on tonight.

With swift strides, he moved through the manor toward the common room. Cadoc—one of the few he trusted—stepped into his view and nodded.

"I have news. I was just on my way to find you. How's Faolan?"

"Worse than yesterday," he said, unable to cloak the strain in his voice.

Cadoc bowed his head and sighed. "I'm sorry."

"You said you had news," Rook prompted, wanting to move away from the glum subject. "I take it you confronted our coven sister, Lucretia?"

"Yes." A wry smile followed. "Your instincts are dead on. It seems she didn't care for Faolan meddling in her personal affairs. She took the moonstone and handed it off to the only one she'd trust to destroy it."

Slade. Adrenaline rushed his veins. "Excellent. It gives me a starting point."

"The Blood Mountains?"

He checked that no one else had heard and nodded.

Cadoc frowned. "You know the rogues will have their spies out."

"I know."

"Do you want company? Someone to watch your back?"

Rook appreciated the gesture but knew Cadoc well enough. He couldn't afford distractions. "I need to do this on my own. If I fail, I want to know there's still someone here I can trust."

"You've never failed at anything." His friend's disappointment was apparent, but brief.

"Let's hope I don't start now." He winked and patted Cadoc's shoulder. "Keep an eye on the clan for me while I'm gone."

"Of course, and an eye on Faolan too," he added. "Safe journey."

"Always."

Satisfied with the news, Rook continued outside and stood at the cliff's edge. Turbulent waves crashed below, mimicking the rage that battered his gut. He meant to find and destroy the one who held the moonstone, and restore balance to the clan. Failure wasn't an option. At this point, neither was his promise to uphold peace. Blood would be shed.

"Forgive me, Faolan. I'm about to let you down."

A full moon illuminated the night. Its brilliance would light his way.

Rook glanced behind him at the only home he'd ever known, and then took to the sky.

He'd been tracking Slade's scent for miles when the sweet essence of mortal blood overpowered it. Long had been the years since he last stepped foot in the Blood Mountains. Deemed a neutral zone, it had once been a place of great battle. And the dumping grounds for human bodies bled dry.

The climate of the rainforest had done little to mask the scent over the decades. Rook hadn't expected it or he'd have nourished himself first. The scent dredged up memories he wished to forget. Strong will and determination had helped him overcome the uncontrollable cravings. He no longer required human blood.

Rook couldn't deny that for a brief moment he'd weakened. Fortunately, no human dared go near the mountains. If any did, they'd be going to their grave.

The sooner he picked up Slade's trail again, the better. The fate of Faolan and the Ravyn Mysts depended on it.

Ember Chalane removed her long-sleeve shirt and knotted it around her waist. Beads of sweat trickled down her chest, soaking the scalloped trim of her tank top. She'd never been to South America, or anywhere for that matter, and had decided to make it her first adventure. For months she'd prepared herself for the vacation of a lifetime—a quest for peace and to recharge her batteries, a time for personal reflection. Who wouldn't want to experience the beauty of the Amazon?

The excitement had vanished within ten minutes of traipsing through the rainforest. Her lungs were ready to explode from the humidity. Temperatures had reached scorching levels even with scattered clouds shielding her from direct sunlight. Already drained from years of working as a healer, she'd hoped to be rejuvenated, not more fatigued than before.

But the word quit didn't exist in her vocabulary. So, if that meant suffering mosquito bites, heatstroke, poisonous dart frogs and anything else nature wanted to throw her way, so be it.

She wondered if peace even existed.

Surrounded by noise, pollution and crowds of people with more issues than a newsstand, she didn't have a hope in finding solace in her own home. As an empath, she soaked in the environment around her like a sponge. Bombarded with negative energy, she spent a considerable amount of time sick. And while her gift of healing worked wonders on others, she lacked the ability to do the same for herself.

Ember adjusted her backpack and trudged on. Insects buzzed nearby and a bird chattered from a cluster of trees. The thick, muggy air intensified the pungent odor of vegetation. Not a pleasant smell by her standards. Though she hadn't expected the climate to be such a downer, the rainforest itself was a place of beauty with lush foliage and an enchanted ambiance.

She noticed a procession of mountains up ahead. Tall in stature, they helped her put things into perspective. The world was vast and she'd seen very little of it in her twenty-eight years. The fault lay with her alone. She'd put herself in a position where others counted on her. Not one to disappoint, she'd made sure to be accessible at all times. Until her body couldn't take anymore and had demanded escape. But had she waited too long? Being surrounded by miles of solitude made her aware of how much time she'd wasted.

Feeling her shoe had come loose, Ember bent down to tie the laces tighter and she came across an object half-hidden in the grass. She finished tying her shoe and picked up the large oval object, turning it over and around between her fingers, its texture flawless and smooth to the touch. Iridescent white with a pale blue shimmer, she recognized it as a moonstone—a stone of balance. It also helped safeguard travelers and drew lovers to one another. Balance was something she'd always sought, and being on her first

vacation the extra protection would be appreciated. As to the love part, she could dream. Ember had seen moonstones before, but this one's beauty was unmatched.

She rummaged inside her pack for a piece of wire. Careful to not make a scratch, she coiled the wire around the stone and affixed it to the silver chain she wore around her neck. The stone lay cool along the cleft of her breasts.

Excited by the rare find, she continued on. Blades of grass tickled her calves. Though the heat seemed to intensify, she noticed strength had returned to her legs, her gait quickened. She'd covered more ground in the past five minutes than when she'd first started out. To her surprise she wasn't winded, instead was able to take in full, deep breaths. Unexplainable energy surged through her with each step. What had changed?

The moonstone?

While she knew the stone helped bring balance, could it to such an extent?

I wonder?

Curious, Ember removed the necklace and set it on the grass. She walked away from it and closed her eyes, concentrating on even the slightest difference. Her energy depleted rapidly and her pulse slowed. She felt her lungs tighten and the strength in her legs diminish. If she weren't mistaken, she was weaker than when she'd found the moonstone. The dramatic change made her uneasy.

Wood snapped from behind her, startling her out of her thoughts. She went back for the chain and placed it back around her neck. As the moonstone restored her power, Ember searched out the source of the sound. She hoped there weren't any large animals following her, or worse—a viper ready to strike.

Behind a gathering of trees, lay a wolf on its side.

She approached with caution until she saw its leg caught in a trap. Dark streaks of crimson stood out from the snow-white fur. The animal raised its head and watched her with one green eye and one brown eye, almost human in its expression.

"You poor thing," she soothed and crouched down. "It's okay. I won't hurt you."

The wolf growled low from its belly, making her hesitate.

"Easy now." Ember spoke softly, trying to put the animal at ease. "Let me help you."

Its growl lessened and turned into a whimper.

She moved closer, satisfied it wouldn't attack.

With her hands on either side of the contraption, she struggled to pry it open.

Anger gripped her. What kind of idiot set out traps in a rainforest? With all the dense foliage around anyone could've stepped in it. Hell, she could've stepped in it herself.

Her arms shook as she pulled the sides apart, muscles taut and burning.

The iron jaw gave just enough for the wolf to pull its leg out.

She released her grip and sucked in her breath as the trap clanged shut. If she ever came across the bastard who'd put it there, she'd give him a piece of her mind.

Venting session over, she turned her attention back to the wolf—furiously licking its wound. Having never attempted to heal an animal before, she wondered if it was even possible. Driven by the need to take away its pain, she decided to try.

“You trusted me before. Maybe you’ll trust me again?”

She rubbed her palms together to charge her energy and then pressed her hands firmly against its injured leg. The wolf growled but didn’t make a move to bite.

“I won’t hurt you. I promise.”

Ember breathed deeply. Using her empathic abilities, she focused the pain out from the animal and in through her body. She felt it flow through her veins, her bloodstream, and into the very fiber of her being. From there she visualized unblocking the negativity, breaking it up into tiny pieces and shifting the vibrations around the wound. Ribbons of black and gray swirled before her eyes, twining together until knotted. Pain gripped her leg as if it were caught in the trap.

Distorted images flooded her mind of half-human, half-animal experiences—mere fragments.

She reached down deep inside and pushed the negative energy out, replacing it with positive energy. In her mind’s eye she watched the knot loosen and disappear altogether. Streams of golden light followed, tunneling through her body and into the animal, healing the final remnants of pain.

Content, she forced her hands away and folded them in her lap.

“There you are. All better.”

The wolf scurried to its feet, eyes intent on her. She remained still, not wanting to pose a threat. It snarled and circled several times before bolting off.

Ember released her held breath. Even with the intensity of the healing, her energy remained charged. The only explanation that made sense was the moonstone.

She took out a bottle of water from her pack and sipped it slowly. The cool liquid quenched her thirst and gave her an added boost.

Her stomach grumbled and she considered taking a break, maybe munch a power bar and write in her journal, keep notes of how the moonstone affected her.

She wandered into a small clearing, the towering mountains closer and more prominent than she remembered.

Ember froze. A sensation of being watched sent prickles along the back of her neck. She scanned the area but didn’t see anyone. Perhaps the wolf wanted to keep an eye on her.

Shrugging away the paranoia, she took off her backpack, pulled out a blanket and sat down. Her feet tingled and ached. Two weeks on the treadmill hadn’t been near enough preparation.

Legs stretched out, she leaned back on her elbows, listening to the subtle sounds of the rainforest. As she started to unwind the sensation of being watched returned full force. She peered ahead and noticed a man staring straight at her.

Ember groaned. There went any attempt at peace. She sat up and grabbed her power bar.

Is a little privacy too much to ask for?

She tore the wrapper off and took a bite. The mix of rich dark chocolate and gooey caramel helped quell her appetite, but did little to ease her frustration.

Half-concealed by an overgrown leafy bush the man stood statue still, eyes trained on her like a predator. She wondered what he was thinking and how he saw her. Maybe he thought her an alien? Most of the time she felt like one, sheltered in her little world of siphoning pain and taking care of everyone but herself. Only those who sought her for personal healing thought her normal. And they were the ones who made her sick. Vampires she called them. They drained the joy right out of her life, sucked her of health and energy.

Ember chuckled to herself. When had she become so bitter? The heat must be getting to her. Or the fact a half-naked man watched her.

She tried to pretend he wasn't there, but his steady gaze proved unnerving. Of course, there was nothing wrong with savoring him from afar. Her gaze favored the braided muscles of his shoulders and arms. He could probably lift her over his head one-handed.

The distance made it difficult to see his expression. She'd put it somewhere between a frown and deep in thought.

What does he want?

Did he plan to hurt her?

Frustrated, she called out, "Hello?"

When he didn't respond, she decided she'd had enough and stood up.

"Excuse me, sir?" she hollered. "Are you going to stand there all day and be rude, or what?"

He uncrossed his arms and stepped out from the bush. All six foot of him. Pulse elevated, she couldn't help but appreciate his muscle-bound form. A shirtless, tight-black-pants-wearing dream. As he approached she picked up dangerous vibrations. Her mind said run but her eyes begged to feast on his powerful physique. Though pale-skinned, it did nothing to diminish the hard lines of his body or the way his six-pack looked chiseled by hand.

Figures a man this deceptively handsome existed only in the Amazon.

He stopped just past her comfort zone. She'd have taken a step back if it weren't for the way she melted in his commanding presence. Sure his face was set in a scowl and his brows were two dark slants. But his deep-set eyes, velvety brown like wet sand, mesmerized her. He had a squared face with defined

cheekbones and a firm jaw. Her fingers longed to reach out and run through the long chocolate brown hair that draped his shoulders and chest.

When she'd sufficiently drunk him in and the dreamy haze faded, she realized his scowl had deepened. What she could have done to anger this man already, she had no idea. Eye-catching as he was, the silence grated on her nerves.

Then it occurred to her that he might be foreign.

Before she had a chance to ask, he spoke. "You have something of mine, mortal, and I demand you return it."

Caught off-guard by his harsh tone, she struggled to find words.

"I—I'm fairly certain I don't have anything of yours."

His gaze shifted from her eyes to her chest. "The necklace you wear. Is it yours?"

She brought her hand up to the moonstone and stroked it with her fingertips. "Yes."

"Liar."

The bold accusation drew a gasp from her. "Pardon?"

"I said you're a liar," he repeated. "Unless you can tell me the moonstone's true origin, I won't be lenient on you."

"You won't be lenient? I'm not following." What the hell did he mean?

"I won't take it easy on you just because you're a woman, mortal," he said gruffly.

Had she missed a sign posted somewhere? Warning—cold-blooded male up ahead. Liable to chew you up and spit you out.

"Hang on. If we could back up one second it might help me to understand," she proposed. "Is that possible?"

He shrugged.

"And real quick, my name's Ember. I'd prefer that than being called mortal."

"Fine," he thundered. "Ember, I'll give you one more chance to confess to stealing the moonstone."

While she liked the sound of her name from his lips, it was the "one more chance" part that concerned her. She swallowed down the lump of fear rising in her throat and tried to steady her voice.

"Honest. I didn't steal it."

His eyes darkened. "That lie will cost you."

Chapter Two

Rook cursed under his breath.

Stupid woman. Didn't she know better than to be this far out in the Amazon? No wonder he'd lost Slade's trail. Her strong scent permeated the air. Fresh and sweet. Enough to disorient him from his intended mission.

He hadn't traveled all this way to deal with the likes of a mortal. Let alone a woman who lied through her teeth. He'd expected to battle Slade for the stone and be on his way back home. He loathed distractions, yet one existed.

His gaze skimmed the snug fit of her top and the creamy white of her skin. Strands of long, inky black hair cascaded down her shoulders. He liked the way she looked. Not a thing like the females from his clan. They coated themselves in make-up and dressed to reveal. Overstated and far from his type. She had a nice figure and the shorts she wore showed off her shapely legs. It was a shame he'd have to kill her. The natural glow that surrounded her appealed to his senses. It had been ages since he'd seen a woman of such innocence and purity. She'd taste sweeter than wine.

"Look, I'm not trying to be difficult," she started in a shaky voice, "but you're accusing me of something I didn't do. Something I'd never do. I didn't steal the stone. I found it."

Rook eyed the moonstone. He needed to keep focus. She was a potent beauty, but she stood in the way of healing his leader and protecting his clan.

To stay motivated he pictured Faolan wasting away.

"You're a liar and a thief," he growled.

Her eyes narrowed. "Do you talk this way to everyone you meet? Or am I getting special treatment?"

"This is how I talk to my enemies," he corrected, with added emphasis. "I don't have time to go back and forth with you. Stop wasting time and hand over the moonstone."

Concern reflected from her ocean-green eyes framed with ebony lashes.

"And if I don't, you're going to hurt me?" she asked in a soft-spoken voice.

Worded that way, it made him pause.

"I'll do what I need to do," he stated. "The moonstone belongs to me."

She rested a hand on her hip. "Why do you need this particular stone? Can't you find another one?"

His muscles tensed. He'd never let an enemy live long enough to ask questions.

Rook gestured toward her with his chin. "The one you wear is sacred and belongs to my clan leader."

"Do you mean a moonstone in general is sacred, or this exact one?" she asked, her finger tapping the stone.

Impatience gnawed at him. "The exact one you wear. Hand it over willingly or I'll take it by force."

Fear sparked in her eyes. Maybe now she'd cooperate.

"I can't," she said flatly and wrapped her hand around the stone.

Beautiful didn't realize the trouble she stirred up.

"You females and your need for pretty trinkets," he muttered.

Her eyes widened. "It's not just a trinket to me. The stone has come to mean more."

Rook wanted to rip it from her neck and hated that he couldn't. Her peaceful demeanor kept him from lashing out. He hoped verbal warnings would scare her into doing the right thing.

"It's to your detriment that you anger me."

A smirk passed her heart-shaped lips. "If the stone is so sacred, then why would you leave it in the open for anyone to find?"

"I didn't leave it here."

"So it appeared all by itself?"

Exasperated, he clenched his fists. "It was stolen by a member of my clan. I've come to retrieve it."

When she didn't comply he thought he'd explode. He'd have to find a way to get through to her. Very soon things were going to turn ugly, and she'd be at the center of it.

"Look," he reasoned. "You aren't safe here."

Her lips turned down. "I was fine until you showed up."

"I'm not the only one seeking the stone. Am I in any way being unclear?"

She jutted out her chin. "I refuse to be chased away by veiled threats."

Anger swirled in his gut. Veiled? She had no idea the severity of her situation. "Your stubbornness will get you killed."

"Killed?" Her lips twitched. "Why would someone kill me?"

"Few mortals would dare set foot among the Blood Mountains."

Confusion streaked her delicate features. "Where are the Blood Mountains?"

"It's the name given to this area and the mountains surrounding it."

The woman bent over her pack and pulled out a folded pamphlet. After turning it over and around she waved it in front of his face. "Not according to my map."

Rook snatched it and tore it in two. "There's good reason for that. It used to be dumping grounds for humans bled dry. Not exactly something to lure tourists with if you get what I mean." He could see she was visibly shaken. "Give me the moonstone and it will increase your chance for survival."

She chewed at her lower lip. "Who exactly is trying to kill me?"

"It's not who you should worry about. It's what," he said with a sly smile.

A shiver ran up her spine. “Okay. *What* is trying to kill me?”

“Vampires.”

Blood drained from her face. And here she’d left home to get away from vampires. Though she had a feeling he meant real ones. In which case his threats held more merit.

“Then I take it you’re a vampire?”

“I am,” he answered with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

Ember took a deep breath and forced herself to remain calm. She’d always believed vampires existed, though she never expected to come into contact with one. As a healer she’d seen many things through the eyes of others. Those visions taught her to be open-minded and non-judgmental. But her belief in vampires didn’t help to put her at ease. Instead, it frightened her more. A handsome stranger with an attitude she could handle. A vampire? Not so much. So far he hadn’t attacked her. She could run...and end up lost in the rainforest. Come nightfall that would pose a problem. Her options were limited. Maybe she could still find a way to get herself out of this mess?

“I must look real tasty to you right now.”

He folded his arms. “I’m able to control myself when I want to.”

“And do you want to?” Her pulse beat loudly in her ears while she awaited his answer.

“For the moment.”

Hindsight was twenty-twenty. If she could go back to when she’d first discovered the moonstone, knowing what she knew now, she’d have left it alone. Her current situation didn’t allow much in the way of alternatives. Give him the stone, or anger him to the point of no return. The choice should be simple, but it wasn’t.

How could she explain to him that she craved the energy force flowing through her since putting on the moonstone? Or that she couldn’t give it to him even if she wanted to because of her attachment to it. Either way she was screwed. How had a single stone become so damn important?

Ember knew one thing for certain. She didn’t dare let her guard down with this guy, this...vampire. Distracting him with questions seemed to work to her advantage.

“Since it appears you’re going to let me live a little longer, would it hurt to tell me your name?”

“It’s Rook.”

The name sounded strong to her. It suited him.

She decided to brave some more questions. “Can I ask the importance of the stone? Why would someone want to steal it?”

His lips pursed. “I’m not inclined to tell you.”

Did he think that would shut her up? “Why not?”

"You don't need to know," he replied with a nod as if that were the end of the discussion.

Ember had one more trick up her sleeve to get him to talk.

"That's too bad. If I knew the story behind it, I might be more inclined to let you have it back."

He narrowed his eyes. "Is that so?"

She nodded. "Mm hmm."

After a quiet moment, he stroked his chin and let out a heavy breath. "Fine, I'll tell you. The moonstone was a token of love from a witch to our clan leader, Faolan. It's to remember the beauty of their love, and his solemn promise to uphold peace. So long as Faolan protects the stone, balance remains. Without it his health will deteriorate and the balance among clans shifts. That is what we are faced with now."

She studied the well-defined lines of his body while processing his words.

"What happened to the witch?"

"Faolan couldn't break a curse in time to save her."

"Oh." She always hated unhappy endings. "If the people of your clan know what will happen without the moonstone, then why would one of them steal it?"

"A female from my clan was seeing an outsider. Faolan punished her and banned all contact with him. I believe she took the moonstone to punish him without realizing the impact it would have. She gave it to her lover, Slade, to bring here—to the Blood Mountains and destroy it." He paused and gave her a hard look. "What I don't understand is how you came to have it."

"I told you. I found it. I don't know this Slade person. There's only been you and a wolf to cross my path."

His eyes widened. "A wolf?"

"Yes. White as snow with one green eye and one brown one. I rescued it from a trap and healed it."

She wasn't sure if he heard with the way he looked about and sniffed the air.

"That would be Slade," he said dryly. "Did you see which direction he went?"

Ember glanced behind her. "I don't even know which direction *I* came from. I planned to go a little ways farther and set up camp. Come morning I'd head back using that map you tore in two. Anyhow, I thought you were looking for a man."

"He's a werewolf. You sure he didn't have the moonstone on him?"

"No, I found it before I saw the wolf." She frowned. A vampire and a werewolf in the same day? What were the odds?

"He must have dropped it and you got to it first. Count yourself lucky. He could have torn you to shreds."

Ember circled the toe of her shoe along the grass. "He seemed harmless to me."

"Looks can be deceiving."

He had that right. She glanced around. “Why was the stone brought here to be destroyed and not somewhere else?”

“It’s not a place vampires come to anymore. They’re urged to stay away.”

“Why?”

“The scent of mortal blood is thick here. Those who haven’t learned to control cravings might find it too much to handle. And a vampire’s presence here breaks the peace pact agreed to between clans. I figure one of the rogues overheard the stone would be brought here and knew one or more vampires would come look for it. They’d go back to the other clans with news that the peace pact had been broken and war would break out. For you to be here is dangerous.”

A chill went through her. “And of all of this because of a moonstone.”

“Yes. And once they catch wind of you, they’ll consider you a bonus.”

“Maybe they won’t hurt me,” she projected. “The wolf didn’t.”

He gave her a dark, warning look. “As I said, you got lucky. The rogues are ruthless.”

“In other words, I don’t stand a chance against them.”

“No mortal does.”

She had to think there was some sort of loophole. “But if I hold the moonstone, won’t I be safe?”

His jaw clenched. “It’s not a bargaining chip.”

“I know.”

The vampire leered. “Do you think you can put your hands on them and draw their evil out with your healing powers?”

“Don’t be rude,” she snapped. “You haven’t a clue what I can do.”

His gaze turned smug. “What the hell would possess you to heal a werewolf?”

“To me it was a regular wolf, and it was hurt. I don’t judge those I heal.”

“What do you care about the pain of others anyhow?”

Ember’s pulse quickened. She wasn’t used to defending her healing abilities.

“If I can ease their pain and bring them comfort then they can get on with their lives. Everyone deserves happiness.”

“What do you get back in return?”

She’d never had anyone ask her that question before. Hell, she’d never even asked herself that. After a pause the answer became clear.

“To remove someone’s pain gives me comfort.”

He shook his head. “Sounds like a waste of time to me.”

The guy was insufferable. What didn’t he understand? That just because he thrived on a daily regimen of anger everyone else should too? She felt her blood pressure rise.

“Without all the pain and suffering in life, people can take better care of themselves and their families,” she explained. “People who come to me aren’t able to manage their pain. They want to be rid of it. They aren’t looking to be driven by the pain. When you ignore your pain you become a coldhearted person.”

“Ah. Like myself,” he said and took a step toward her.

“Well, you *are* filled with a lot of rage.”

He reached forward and her muscles tensed. To her surprise he stroked her cheek.

“Not all pain is bad, beautiful. It can fuel one’s actions. It can motivate. It’s part of the experience of life.”

The sight of two black figures in the sky ruined the moment. She hated that her first instinct was to scream.

Rook drew her near and covered her mouth. “Rule number one around here, beautiful, is don’t make it so easy for them to find you.”

He removed his hand from her mouth but kept his arm around her.

The figures circled again and then disappeared into the clouds.

Her heart pounded. “What were those things?”

“Rogue spies. They’ll go back and report what they saw. I expect Curran and Silbas will want to make their appearance.”

“Who are they?”

“The leaders of the rogues. Ruthless vampires you don’t want to tangle with.”

In Rook’s embrace her fears of vampires and rogue spies dimmed. It was like he tripped a switch that made her sit up and take notice of how attracted she was to him. She couldn’t explain it, but for the moment she didn’t feel like analyzing it.

Ember let her head rest in the crook of his neck. Where the moonstone lay against her chest, it burned.

Chapter Three

Rook had a very real and complicated problem right now, and her name was Ember. On the one hand, he wanted his hands to explore every nook and cranny on her scintillating body. On the other hand, she was heading past her expiration date. She'd never make it out of the Amazon alive. She'd sealed her fate the moment she'd touched the moonstone. So far she hadn't budged. In a way he found her stubbornness sexy. But that notion stopped once he realized she'd be dead before nightfall.

He had to try a new tactic. While he could easily overtake her, there was something about her that kept him from lashing out. For all her hard headedness, she had a gentle demeanor, a trait that reminded him of Faolan. If she wasn't going to willfully give him the stone, he'd acquire it by other means. And take pleasure in doing so.

Rook took advantage of the situation and brought her in close. When she didn't scream or resist, he knew his plan would work.

He put his thumb beneath her chin and tilted her face upward. She locked her eyes on him. Eyes that reflected trust. It made what he had to do that much easier.

"You don't have to be afraid," he said in a hushed tone. "I'll protect you against the rogue vampires."

She pressed into him tightly. Through the fabric of her shirt, the hardened peaks of her nipples abraded his chest. He inhaled deeply. Her heady scent infused his senses. It was obvious she was aroused, and more than responsive to his touch. It would be easy to take her. Have his way and finish with a long, slow drink.

Beautiful had placed herself closer to danger than she realized.

He swept her hair from her shoulder and eyed the delicate slope of her neck, its alabaster hue. Perfect. Rook buried his face there and inhaled the fragrance of her skin. Her hair stroked his face like threads of silk. He could stay in this moment for an eternity.

His body craved the brutality of her pureness inside. She'd stirred an appetite he'd long since tamed, taunted him with her warm, mortal blood. One drop—that's all he wanted. Too much and he'd kill her for sure. One drop to savor on the tip of his tongue and ingrain in his memory forever. Just enough to suppress the desire she'd ignited inside him.

He pressed his lips against her ear. Felt her sink further into him. The heat from her body wrapped around him and triggered an erection.

Get a grip.

He couldn't afford to lose control. Rook reminded himself again that she was the enemy.

Quit stalling. Bite her. She means nothing.

Why did he hesitate? He opened his mouth and zeroed in on the sweet spot of her neck he knew would taste divine.

A sharp, blinding pain ripped through his body and he jerked back stunned.

Ember's eyes had been closed, her face soft with desire, but they flashed open. He watched her eyes search his for a reason why he reacted the way he did.

"What's the matter?"

He had no explanation, but he wanted to find one.

Rook shook his head and embraced her. Again, he tried to sink his fangs into her neck, only this time his lips met fire. Enraged, he pulled away.

He'd have to take the stone without biting her. Somehow the moonstone protected her from his bite. In a way it made sense. The witch likely safeguarded herself in case Faolan lost control when they were intimate. So why would Ember—a human—be affected the same way as a witch?

Unless she is a witch?

She stared at him with her luminous eyes. A pale blush streaked her face. "I don't understand. Is something wrong?"

"No," he grumbled and moved away from her.

Rook raked a hand through his hair. Everything was wrong. Slade was his intended victim. He hadn't counted on a woman of unsurpassed beauty to stand in his way. She held a powerful stone that she seemed hell-bent on keeping for herself. The same stone he needed, but seemed unable to get. And now he had to entertain the theory she had some witch blood in her with the way the stone protected her. He should never have let her live so long. He should never have let her feminine charms seduce him from his loyalties. There wasn't any excuse for why he hadn't killed her. At least none that sat well with him. The sooner he got the moonstone away from her, the sooner he'd be done with her.

Ember's body trembled. Dark and deadly had been close to kissing her. Twice. She'd felt his hot breath against her skin, full lips against her neck. Even the moonstone had reacted to his touch, nearly scorching her.

Both times he'd changed his mind—though probably for the best. She shouldn't want him anywhere near her.

But I do want him.

She watched him pace. Long strides that showed his muscle definition against the tight pants he wore. Instead of worrying over what he might do to her, she imagined his face buried between her thighs.

Ravishing her with the same kind of passion he put into being irate. The thought of his mouth anywhere on her body kept her in a permanent state of need. She had the soaked panties to prove it. Even the deep vibrations of his voice excited her.

That's it, she was going mad. Why would she want a man who meant to kill her? When the rogue spies had come and he'd embraced her, his touch had roused sensations she'd thought were permanently dormant.

She'd become a pro at distancing herself and shutting off all emotions. Both were necessary in her work as a healer to stay focused on the patient. But when Rook touched her, really touched her, she felt it deep down in her soul.

It was clear by his incessant rambling as he paced that he warred with himself over her, and she hoped it had everything to do with not wanting to cause her harm. She couldn't fault him for loyalty to his leader and clan. If she hadn't come to rely so much on the moonstone to keep her strong, she'd give it up. The stone made her believe there was more to her than being an empath. It's not like there was a voice that spoke to her or shared its secrets. The stone infused her thoughts and gave her clarity. At any cost, she needed to stand her ground, or she'd end up like Faolan.

Aware she should flee rather than dangle herself like a worm on a hook, she approached Rook. "Are you done brooding?"

The look he threw her packed a punch. She'd lose the attitude, pronto.

"Sorry," she said, and meant it.

Ember studied his face, now set in the same scowl she'd first been introduced to. Why was he always so full of angst? Mr. Mad at the World.

A balmy wind moved through the rainforest and rustled the vampire's hair, exposing an odd shaped mark on his neck.

"Is that a scar?"

He nodded.

"It looks like the number—"

"Seven," he finished. "Yes, I know."

The vein in his forehead throbbed. Clearly he didn't want to talk about it. She racked her brain to come up with another topic, but she kept coming right back to his scar.

Damn her curiosity. "Why a seven? Does it have to do with your clan?"

His expression hardened. "I was sold to a child trader when I was a boy. I was the seventh slave out of fifty that day. I guess they worried I'd forget my number so they branded me with a hot iron."

Ember winced and felt bad for bringing it up. No wonder the guy had issues. "That's terrible. You must have been terrified."

He shrugged. "I don't recall the pain anymore. I hardly remember anything about it."

She found that hard to believe. “It’s obvious the painful memory still exists inside you.”

Like a magnet, the scar drew her need to heal. She wanted to take away the hurt. Allow him the freedom to move on.

Hand raised, she reached forward.

Midway, he snatched her wrist like a snake. “Don’t.”

His eyes turned dark, piercing and almost hypnotic.

She refused to fear him. He could raise his voice, growl and send her a fierce look, but it still made her melt. His grip tightened. Was this his way of saying she’d gone too far?

Her mind shouted for him to let go of her, but her body wanted to be open, alive and at the mercy of his touch.

“I only wanted to help.”

The pressure of his grip lessened but still he held her.

He leaned in—a hairsbreadth away.

“Then let me taste you,” he whispered.

In response, she tilted her chin upward and welcomed the crush of his mouth.

If he were any other man, any other stranger, she’d have pushed him away by now. No, scratch that, she’d never have let a stranger get this close. Rook was different. She wanted his darkness. His lethal attraction.

The kiss deepened, turned primal. Became urgent. Ember parted her lips and felt his hot breath fill her. His taste was addictive. All dark, hot and spicy. Though her body was tight up against him, she couldn’t seem to get close enough. She wanted to tear her clothes off and beg him to fulfill any carnal desire he’d ever had.

His hand trailed along her back and rested at the base of her neck. He scraped his tongue against her teeth and claimed her mouth repeatedly.

Her pulse thundered. Being near him intensified her emotions for him.

Slowly, she felt his lips part from her, bringing her back down to earth. He’d left her nearly breathless, and longing for more.

As he pulled away a sly smile bowed his lips.

A warning bell went off in her head.

She followed her instincts and dipped her gaze to his hand.

In his hand he held the moonstone.

Ember choked back a sob.

“It’s nothing personal,” he said with slight sarcasm.

Bastard.

“No, I guess not.”

He'd used her to get the stone back. Well screw him. She wouldn't let him get to her.

"You mortals and your need for materialistic things."

His thoughtless words stung. "You don't know anything. Not about me."

"Maybe not," he retorted, "but it's best this way. I'm saving you from a painful death."

"My hero," she replied dryly.

"Don't worry. I'll make it quick. You'll hardly feel a thing."

The guy had a way of muddling her thoughts with or without words.

"You'll make what quick?" Silence followed, allowing her enough time to figure it out on her own. Here she thought he meant saving her from the vampires by taking the moonstone. But no. He'd save her in the end by killing her first. "You have what you came for. Can't you just leave me alone?"

"I'm concerned you know things from the stone. I have reason to believe you have witch blood in you."

Ember held her palms out. "No secrets have been revealed to me. I assure you. You said you'd protect me from the rogue vampires. But what I really need is protection from you."

His shoulders raised and lowered. "I'm doing you a favor. They'll track you. Right now you're a mortal compass leading them to your slaughter. At the same time your scent is ripe on the moonstone. Once I take this back to my clan, they'll want to hunt you as well. You're out of choices. Out of time."

Moments ago she'd almost convinced herself that she cared for him. Now she hated him. "Let them come. I'm not afraid."

He frowned. "You should be terrified."

"I'll take my chances," she said under her breath.

Rook rushed right up in her face. "Are you aware of what a mortal scent does to a vampire?"

She refused to look at him. "No."

"I'll tell you. It strips away all sense of control. It reduces us to mere shadows of ourselves. It triggers our sexual appetite and fills our heads with sensual thoughts. It awakens every sensation we've ever had and swirls around our guts until we find a way to squelch it. Mortals are dangerous. You are dangerous. We've worked too hard to get our cravings under control and I'm not going to allow you to live while your sweet scent brings disorder to my clan."

Ember caught most of what he said. His voice faded in and out while he spoke. She guessed it was the effects of the stone's absence from her body. Her legs had weakened. Exhaustion hit her in violent waves. She needed to get the moonstone back. If she planned to fight him off, she needed all her strength. This wasn't how she wanted to die. She'd pictured a peaceful death. With minimal pain and surrounded by honeysuckles.

She stared at Rook from beneath the veil of her lashes. Amazed he could be so savage and desirable at the same time. She wanted to loathe him for leading her on, but couldn't ignore the way his kiss had ignited

a fire in her belly. To think otherwise would make her a liar. If he could kiss her to get the moonstone, she could use the same strategy to get it back.

At this point she had nothing left to lose.

Ember took a deep breath in. "I guess there's no getting around the inevitable. I'm a danger to you and vampires everywhere. You do what you have to do."

"That's a girl. I knew you'd come around."

The enthusiasm in his voice made her stomach clench.

"Yeah," she grumbled. "You called it."

He put his hands on her shoulders, and though she loathed him, he still made her body tingle.

"I never intended to bring you harm. You were thrust into something you never should've been involved in." For once he sounded genuine.

"Chalk it up to poor timing on my part." She moistened her lips. "There's one thing you could do to help ease the pain. If it's not too much trouble."

"What's that?"

"Kiss me. Call it a souvenir—something to take into the next life."

He paused, his eyes fixed on hers.

"You want me to kiss you?"

"Please?" She batted her lashes, hoping it would get him to cave.

Rook shrugged. "I suppose I could."

He leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. It was a soft kiss, but nice still the same.

Ember savored it and his taste. Wanting to lock it away in her memory forever. Regardless of what might happen, a part of her would love him. The moonstone had shown her what it could be like. But they were from two different worlds, and it was just plain impossible.

She brought her hand up to his face and cupped his cheek. Slowly, she smoothed her hand along his shoulder, down his impeccable muscles and paused at his forearm. She went to kiss him deep when he broke away abruptly.

His eyes blazed.

"I'll not be baited by a mortal."

She trembled. "I'm not baiting you."

"You tried to get close to me so you could snatch the moonstone."

He should know.

"Sound familiar?"

"Don't you value life?" he snarled.

Ember couldn't believe her ears. "You're asking me—a healer—if I value life?"

“I’m not talking about other people’s lives. I mean yours. You’re careless and that’s why you’re trouble.”

She’d always considered herself level-headed. Now she was careless. Much had changed in a day. He was right, though.

“I agree. I *should* value my life more. I came here to find myself.” She paused to take a breath. Even more energy had been sapped from her. “See, my life has been about what I can do for others. Help them heal so they can move on, all the while ignoring my own needs. I’ve never been selfish once in my whole life, and this one time I want to be, you ruin it.”

She had no idea where that had come from. Perhaps the threat of death had helped loosen her lips.

His expression softened. “I’m sorry. I thought you were trying to take back the stone. I overreacted. Much as I want to, I can’t kiss you again.”

“That’s a shame. I liked it.”

“I never said I didn’t. Regardless, it doesn’t change what I have to do.”

In that moment, she decided she couldn’t take hearing another threat from him. He’d won. He had the moonstone and though he’d never know it, he had her heart. She was done fighting. If she had a white flag, she’d wave it.

“You know what,” she started. “I surrender. Kill me. Get it over with. I’m tired. I feel older beyond my years. The thrill of life left me a long time ago.”

The trees in the distance swayed. Or was it her? Ember tried to take a step and felt her legs go out from under her.

Chapter Four

Rook caught her and carried her to the blanket.

He checked her pulse. It beat faint and slow. The pallor of her skin resembled Faolan's the last time he'd seen him.

"Ember?"

Confused by her unresponsiveness, he didn't know what to do. Maybe the heat had been too much? He didn't know why he cared. Now that she didn't have the moonstone he could bite her. Drain every last drop. And she wouldn't even know.

He leaned in and grazed a fang along her neck.

Enough.

Rook bolted up. He couldn't do it. His desire to kill her had waned.

He had the moonstone. He had what he'd come for.

He trailed his fingers along her cheek. He'd never felt skin so soft. She looked peaceful with her lips twitching and lashes stirring. He'd been unprepared to meet such a divine and complex creature. She'd succeeded in frustrating him and winning him over at the same time.

Here she was slipping away and now he figured out that he cared for her. What an idiot he was.

She stirred and he fell back on his ass. Heat fanned his face and shoulders as he stood and brushed himself off. Now was his chance to leave. Before she woke. He could get the moonstone back to Faolan, as he'd originally intended, and start on damage control within the clans. She didn't need him to bully her anymore.

Rook started to walk away, but each step got heavier. He made the mistake of looking back. She lay so still. This woman who healed others before herself. She deserved more. He wouldn't leave her. Not this way. Not to the rogue vampires, the elements or any other creature that might be lurking.

She was safe as long as he was with her.

He stood over her. Protecting her. Nothing would bring her harm.

To his relief, her eyes fluttered open.

Quickly, he crouched beside her.

"Are you okay?"

She attempted to sit up. When he went to help she pushed his arm away and lay back down.

"Why did you stay?" she snapped.

Torn, he could only shrug. "I don't know."

"Is this an ego thing where you want to be the one to finish me off?"

"No," he all but shouted. "It's nothing like that."

"Take the stone and go. I'll deal with whatever comes my way. I'm good as dead anyway."

Rook shuddered at the rawness of her words. "Don't say that." He felt her cheeks and forehead. There was no mistaking the discoloration of her skin. "You're feverish and much too pale. Something's wrong."

She diverted her gaze elsewhere. "It's not your concern. You have to kill me, remember?"

"Stop, okay? Just stop." He hated to hear his threats come from her mouth. "I happen to care about you. I sense you're holding something back and I can't figure out why. Earlier you were so vibrant and strong. There was this luminous glow about you."

"I'm sick." She sighed. "All the healing I've done has drained me."

"How?"

"By not taking care of myself."

He wanted to understand. "But how can you become sick by helping others?"

"I've been absorbing too much negativity and haven't released it properly. I'm drowning in other people's pain."

Rook noted the bitterness in her voice. "Can't you do something about it so you'll get better?"

She shrugged. "I don't think I care. You know, I didn't ask to have this gift."

"It makes you special."

"Not when it's expected and its all people want from you."

There was more to her being sick. He felt it in his gut. The more time he spent with her, the closer he got.

"You're not telling me everything. When I first approached you, your skin glowed. Your eyes sparkled."

"I know. I felt alive."

"The difference is significant. What changed?"

She glanced toward his hand.

Of course.

Why hadn't he figured it out earlier? "The moonstone empowers you. It's why you fought so hard to keep it." Guilt consumed him.

She nodded. "It gave me my strength back. The longer I'm without it, the faster my health deteriorates."

"The same as Faolan."

"Only he's a great leader. It's more important that he gets well. I'm insignificant."

How could someone who meant everything to him be insignificant?

“No, you’re not.”

She waved her hand at him. “Please go and take the stone back to Faolan. Let me die in peace.”

Rook didn’t realize it would come down to a choice between a vampire who had introduced him to a new life, and a mortal who would sacrifice her life for someone she didn’t know. It pained him to have to decide, but the answer was clear.

He took Ember’s hand and pressed the moonstone into her palm.

Ember’s eyes welled with tears at the gesture. “Why?”

“It’s what feels right. If Faolan were here, he’d do the same.”

He rested his palm against her cheek. The touch soothed her.

“So you’re not going to kill me?”

“I could never hurt you.” His gaze lowered to her body and then back up. “Even when I said the things I did, I knew I would never go through with it.”

The tenderness in his voice was new for her. She hoped to hear more of it.

“That’s a relief to hear.”

His knuckles brushed along her jawline. “I’m going to protect you, and I’ll see to it no one hunts you.”

Ember reached up and laced her hands behind his neck.

“I don’t mind being *your* prey right now.”

“It’s probably not a good idea. You’re just getting your energy back.”

Energy or not, her body begged for the feel of flesh on flesh.

“I feel stronger already.”

She pulled him onto her. His body fit perfectly against her.

Rook sighed. “We shouldn’t do this.”

“Yes, we should,” she countered and claimed his lips.

He kissed her back. Long, hard and deep. Heat curled around her, lighting every nerve ending on fire. Aware of his erection against the softness of her belly, Ember rocked her hips against him. She wanted every dark and dangerous inch of him inside her.

He kissed her deeply one more time, and then continued the sensual assault of his mouth down her body—dusting her chin, neck and collarbone. Briefly, he paused to untie the shirt from her waist and push her tank top up. Her abandoned lips tingled and felt bee-stung.

He cupped her breast and rolled his thumb along her nipple until it peaked. Ember noted the lust in his half-lidded eyes. It made her feel wanted and beautiful. He moved to the other breast and tugged her nipple gently with his teeth. She moaned against the pleasurable sensation.

In one languorous motion, he slid his body down and sprinkled a trail of kisses to her navel. He made quick work of unbuttoning her shorts, and wrestled them and her panties off.

Her body quivered at the closeness of his mouth to the apex of her thighs.

Head raised, he held her within his penetrating gaze. "Are you wet for me?"

Drenched was more like it. "Why don't you find out," she dared.

A wild gleam reflected from in his eyes and made her body rumble with awareness.

"I think I will."

He slid one finger into her silky heat, followed by his tongue. Heat spread fast throughout her body.

"Ah, so wet," he rasped.

She could only moan and spread her legs wider.

His moves were swift, but skilled, daring to venture inside places that had long since forgotten the touch of a man.

He continued his delicious torture by sliding another finger between her dewy folds. Opening her up. Readyng her for more. Ember sucked in her breath. Desire scorched her insides.

He slid a third finger inside and at the same time suckled her clit. His searing breath made her body writhe and tremble at his mercy.

"Yes," she whimpered.

The speed and intensity of his movements increased. Her toes curled as the sensations drove her wild. Close to orgasm, she fisted her fingers in his hair and rode his mouth.

"Yes, oh yes," she moaned and cried out as the climax let go.

Ember clawed through his hair and tried to bring him up closer to her.

"I need to feel you inside me," she moaned. "I can't wait any longer."

Rook removed his pants and hovered over her. She tried not to stare, but the size of him brought a sob from her lips.

He nudged her legs open, his eyes dark with passion. "I'll take it slow. I don't want to hurt you."

With his hand around his cock, he eased inside her inch by inch, allowing for her to accommodate his size. Her entire being quivered at the way he stretched her. Through half-glazed eyes, she watched him thrust inside her deeply, deeper than she'd ever been taken before.

When he started to thrust faster, she swore she saw stars. The sweet friction set her entire body on fire.

"You feel so good," he groaned in pleasure. "Tight and wet."

Ember moved her hips beneath him, matching his swift tempo. The brink was within her grasp. She ground her body against his, opening her thighs wide to allow him deep passage inside.

With a hand on either side of her, he lowered his mouth and laved her nipples, making them moist and taut. Desperate for relief from the delicious ache his strokes brought her, she slammed her hips up into him.

She could tell by his grunts he was close to the sweet freedom, the same as her.

Legs tight around his waist, she held onto him for dear life until the tightness in her belly started to let go.

“I’m almost there,” she moaned.

“Come for me, love,” he urged in a strained voice.

It took only a few more of his deep thrusts and waves of bliss swept through her. She cried out and felt him join her.

Chapter Five

Rook helped her dress and then pulled his pants on. He stretched out beside her and swept damp, stray hairs from her face. The woman looked radiant and healthy again. Relief filled him.

“Your glow is back,” he said.

A smile lit up her eyes. “The glow is because of you.”

“You’re just saying that.” He drew her in closer.

“No, I’m not.”

They lay in silence for several moments while scattered thoughts crossed his mind. He never expected to care about anyone the way he cared about Ember. He wondered if she had doubts.

“You’re too quiet,” he said. “What are you thinking about?”

“I was thinking about the scar on your neck, and how frightened you must have been.”

The memory remained strong with him. Not a day went by that he didn’t think about it. Many times he’d convinced himself that he’d forgotten, only to feel the burn of the scar all over again.

“I was afraid until Faolan rescued me and gave me a new life. He has been a father figure to me, and I’m grateful to all he’s done.”

“Do you regret him turning you into a vampire?”

“No. At least I haven’t up until now.”

It didn’t take a genius to know it couldn’t work between a mortal and a vampire. Not without putting her in harm’s way all the time.

“I’m not sure how we could be together,” she said. “Unless...”

Rook didn’t even want her to finish with that train of thought.

“I’d never ask you to make such a sacrifice.”

“You wouldn’t turn me, even if I asked you to?”

It wasn’t that he wanted to deny her. He didn’t think he could stop himself from drinking too much of her essence. Around her he was in very real danger of losing control. But he didn’t want her to know. He didn’t want her to fear him. “I don’t wish this life on anyone.”

“But, I thought—”

A noise distracted him in the distance. “Shh.” Rook covered her mouth in case she screamed. He heard another sound, this time close by.

He turned to Ember. “Stay here.”

Rook hurried to his feet in time to see Slade in his wolf form enter the clearing with Silbas and Curran—the leaders of the rogue vampires.

Fists clenched, he approached all three, though he'd deal with Slade afterward. Even after Ember had healed him, the wolf had led them to her. He couldn't wait to split the wolf in two with his bare hands.

Silbas flashed a devious grin. "I see you're getting friendly with the prey. Isn't there a rule about playing with your food?"

The comment only served to fuel him.

"She's no concern of yours."

"Her scent is strong," Curran growled. "Smelled her some fifty miles away."

"You're not to touch her," he thundered.

Silbas folded his arms. "I see the mortal has the moonstone."

"She's holding it for me," Rook lied, not wanting them to involve her. "If you allow me to return it to Faolan, I'll tell him you aided in finding it. He might be lenient on you."

"We're not here for negotiations," snapped Silbas. "We want Faolan dead. We want you dead. And we want to feast on that mortal woman's blood."

Adrenaline surged through Rook's veins. "None of those things will happen."

Curran stepped forward. "We're all aware of your fighting abilities, but you're no match for all three of us."

He narrowed his eyes at the wolf. "I'm not fighting Slade. Just you two."

"Well, aren't we lucky," retorted Silbas with a deep chuckle.

Rook refused to waste more time exchanging verbal threats with the rogues.

He lunged for Curran and knocked him off his feet. The rogue vampire jumped up only to be knocked down a second time as Rook came at him full force.

"There won't be a third time," the vampire growled and went to get up.

Rook charged for him, and was met instead by a solid wall of muscle—Silbas.

He turned in time to see Curran make his way toward Ember. She stood and started to back away. Terror replaced the smile she'd been wearing moments before in his arms.

"Don't you fucking touch her," he shouted, spit flying from his mouth.

Before he could take a step to help her, Silbas blocked his way.

Rook charged forward, but Silbas proved a more worthy challenger by sending him reeling several feet. He got up and shook off the fierce blow.

Silbas came at him again, this time ramming into him like a bull and pinning him to the ground.

They struggled and fought. Rook kept trying to catch glimpses at Ember. When he saw her on the ground, his mind whirled. The last he saw was a flash of white fur taking off into the woods.

“Why don’t you give up?” Silbas rumbled. “I’m going to kill you and then have my way with the mortal. I’ll bet more than her blood smells sweet.”

Rook reached for the rogue’s jaw and gave it a good yank. That would shut him up. Stunned, Silbas paused and then fell back to the ground. Rook hovered over him and pitched his hand forward, ripping the vampire’s throat out. It wasn’t enough. He bit Silbas and drank quickly, ignoring the vile taste of rogue blood.

When he finished, Rook looked for Slade and Curran. Where the hell had they gone? Unable to find them, he hurried to check on Ember. When he neared, he saw the amount of blood that spilled from her neck, and noticed the moonstone was gone.

Rook feared the worst.

Ember drifted in and out of consciousness. With each drop of blood, she felt her strength leave. She wanted to call out to Rook, but knew he fought for her.

Her eyelids grew heavy. Vision blurred.

The next time she opened her eyes Rook knelt over her. His handsome face circled for several seconds until her vision cleared.

“Are you still with me?” He asked with worry apparent in his voice.

She nodded, sorry she’d never get the chance to kiss him again.

“He took the moonstone,” she whispered. “The vampire took it.”

“I’ll get it back.” His dejected tone did little to convince her.

“It’s long gone by now,” she reasoned.

Her gaze shifted down and she saw streaks of blood on his chest. “You’re hurt.”

“My wounds will heal. It’s you I’m concerned about.”

“Nonsense.” Ember pushed his hair from his face to reveal the scar. “Not all wounds can heal.”

She brushed her fingertips along the scar and then pressed her palm against it.

White light flashed before her. Strong vibrations entered her body and shot through her like an electric shock. Her senses peaked. She’d never experienced another person to this magnitude. Images of Rook being beaten, whipped, degraded as a little boy filtered through her. So much black, more than any one person or creature should ever know.

Too weak to expel them she held onto them, and forced all the golden light and positive energy into him that she had left. More ribbons of light filtered in. Violet and pink. She saw images of their kiss. Of their bodies intertwined. She experienced his heat and tasted the dark spice from his lips. Now it would live on in her memory. It would help to bring her peace in death.

Ember didn't want to let go of the cherished moment, but her strength ran out. Her arm fell limply at her side.

She looked up and met Rook's horrified gaze.

His body shook. "Why the hell did you do that?"

"You've held onto that pain for too long. It was time to let it go."

"You spent the last of your energy."

Ember smiled weakly. "Small sacrifice for the one I love. You saved me. In my own way I saved you."

Chapter Six

Rook was ready to lose it. He wanted to rip the trees from their roots and tear each limb into shreds. It pained him to see the woman he loved suffer. She had a beautiful soul and deserved a life of light and love. If Silbas hadn't been in the way he could've gotten to her in time. He'd meant to protect her but kept thrusting her into danger.

Determined to save her, he knew he had to search out Slade and Curran.

He took her hand and circled his thumb along her knuckles. "I need you to stay strong and hang on for me. If I can pick up Slade's scent, I can track him."

"He helped me," she said in a hushed voice.

"Who did? Slade?"

She nodded. "He stopped the rogue from taking more blood."

If that were the case, he'd been wrong about Slade's character. "I didn't know. Still, if I can find him, maybe I can find Curran."

"Don't go," she pled. "Please stay with me."

Carefully, he released her hand. "I'll be swift. I promise. You won't even know I'm gone."

Rook heard her faintly call his name but he had to find Slade. The wolf was his last chance.

He walked a short ways, not wanting to travel too far, and sniffed the air. Hard as he tried to pick up a scent, Ember's essence was infused in him. Her sweet aroma hung on every particle in the air like perfume.

He paced. Worried more rogue vampires would come.

From the corner of his eye he saw a flash of movement. A dark figure headed in the direction of where Ember lay. Panic rushed his veins.

Rook swooped in front of the figure, and then recognized Slade. Out of his wolf form, the man stood naked.

Slade put his hand out. "Wait. I'm not going to hurt her."

"I know. She told me you helped her."

He held out the moonstone. "Here, it belongs with you."

Rook took the stone and cradled it in his hands. "How did you get it back?"

"Let's just say that Curran's been dealt with and leave it at that."

"Silbas too. I have to know, why are you helping me?"

"I'm not," Slade muttered. "I'm helping the mortal. She took away my pain, along with my will to harm her. I'm in her debt."

"Then why were you with the vampires?"

"I tried to head them off but they caught wind of her scent. I planned to return the moonstone to Faolan myself, in case something happened to you." He gave a quick shrug. "It's your choice to believe me or not."

Rook sensed his sincerity. "No, I believe you. I'm in your debt. Curran could have killed her."

"I did what was necessary. You can't keep the mortal here," warned Slade. "More of the rogues will be here soon. Word of what happened to Silbas and Curran will have reached them by now."

He nodded. "I know."

"Then you know what you must do to ensure her safety."

"Yes." First he had to talk himself into it.

"I'll leave you to it." Slade started to walk away.

"Wait." Rook hoped Slade wouldn't take what he was about to say the wrong way. "I think it best you stay away from Lucretia. At least until Faolan recovers and I can speak with him. I want to tell him personally how you helped us. And remind him that loving another species isn't all bad."

Slade nodded. "It's appreciated. I'll bide my time until you say otherwise."

He watched Slade change back into a wolf and head off into the night.

Rook returned to Ember and lowered to his knees.

He took her hand and closed her fingers around the moonstone.

"Here. You're going to be okay."

"It's too late," she rasped.

"No. It will buy us some time."

A crease formed along her forehead.

"Faolan lost the woman he loved because he didn't act fast enough. If he'd bitten her, they'd still be together," he reasoned. "I know he regrets not turning her. I don't want to make that same mistake."

"What are you saying?"

"That I love you," he said, and felt an incredible warmth move through him just from saying the words. "You've opened my eyes to an emotion I thought I was incapable of feeling. I've held onto every ounce of rage until you came along. Your caring and nurturing ways impacted me. I want to save you, though it means becoming something you may not want."

"But you said you wouldn't turn me..."

If he knew of any other way, he wouldn't. "It's what needs to be done or I'll lose you forever. I just hope you won't regret immortality."

A tear slid down her cheek. He brushed it away, surprised by the lack of warmth from her skin.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I want to love you forever.”

Rook removed the moonstone from her hand and put it in his pocket. He bent over her and rested his teeth against her neck. Eyes closed, he bit down and pierced her skin. The rush of liquid warmed his insides like fine brandy.

It had been ages since he last fed from a human, but even then it had never satisfied him. Ember’s blood affected him differently. Its sweet, rich taste awakened his taste buds and stirred a bevy of emotions deep inside. The more he drank, the more he craved.

Careful to not get caught up in her decadence, he withdrew his fangs and licked up the remaining droplets of blood from around her neck.

Ember woke with a start surrounded by sheer drapes bathed in red. Beneath her were sheets that caressed her nakedness. Colors appeared more vivid. Her body—charged. New blood pumped through her veins. Gone was the mind fog she’d been under. As if awakened from some deep slumber that she couldn’t shake before.

She sat up and looked around the lavish room. It was a far cry from the Amazon rainforest, though she’d always remember her time there.

A moment later, Rook entered wearing a robe and a sexy smile.

“My love, you’re awake.” He set a goblet down on the nightstand and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Yes, though I thought I was dreaming. I take it this is home?”

“Just wait until you see the rest of the manor. When you feel up to it, you’re welcome to roam to your heart’s content.”

She almost feared to ask but had to know. “How’s Faolan?”

“Like you, he’s on the mend. He’s preparing to meet with other clan leaders. For now, war has been avoided. But much needs to be done to put things right again. We need to seek those who left their clans to join the rogues. They’ll need to be kept track of. Some of the rogue spies will be punished.”

“Sounds like overall good news.”

“Things could definitely have been worse. How about you? You look radiant. How do you feel?”

That was a little harder to pinpoint. “Better. Different. Restless. Truth be told, I feel like too much woman in too small a skin.”

He rested his hand on hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. “To be expected. You’ve been through many changes. It will take some time before your body fully adjusts.”

Ember hoped it would be sooner rather than later. A craving of extreme measures screamed from inside her. She didn't know for what, but it was ravenous. Like a starved animal inside her was trying to claw its way out.

"I need—something," she hissed. "I don't know what but my insides are burning."

She gripped Rook's wrist and pulled it toward her lips.

"Easy, love," he soothed.

Ember wanted to taste him. Drink from him. Savor his essence.

He reached for the goblet with his other hand and offered it to her. "Drink this. It will help quell your appetite. I promise."

She clasped her shaky hands around the base of the goblet and looked into the deep red liquid.

Her stomach knotted. "What is it?"

"Drink first, and then I'll tell you."

She did as he suggested. At first the thick liquid made her gag. Her second try went down better. It tasted metallic and turned sweet. When she finished the final drop the craving ceased. A sense of normalcy returned. She met Rook's gaze. "Was that blood?"

He took the goblet from her and set it back on the nightstand. "Yes, but it's not from a human, and is packed with nutrients."

"Can't say I ever expected to drink blood before, human or otherwise." She'd have to find a way to get over that. "For a moment there I was worried I'd bite you."

He gestured to the goblet. "That's why I came prepared. You'll learn how to control the cravings over time. I'll look after you."

She wasn't used to hearing those words from anyone. "I'm used to taking care of everyone else."

"I'm the lucky one who gets to take care of you for a lifetime."

Ember took his hand in hers. "Thank you."

His brows arched. "For what?"

"You gave me a second chance at life. And you helped me to find myself."

"You mean the moonstone helped you."

She shook her head. "It's more than that. By the time I arrived in the Amazon, I'd already turned my back on my gift, and on life. I didn't know who I was, and didn't care. The moonstone recognized my witch blood, but I didn't believe it. The more I resisted, the stronger it made me. I know who I am now."

Rook unrobed and crawled beneath the covers beside her. "Who would that be?"

"I'm me. With a little bit of witch, empath, healer and vampire thrown in."

"Don't forget coy and combative," he teased. "Oh, and stubborn."

"You're walking a thin line," she cautioned playfully.

Propped on his side, he leaned in and kissed her breast. “You’re also the woman I fell in love with. That will never change.”

Ember wrapped her hand around his cock and stroked him to a fierce erection. “I sense another craving coming on.”

His hand moved to the juncture between her thighs and dipped a finger into her wetness.

“So soon?” he asked and sealed his mouth around her nipple.

“Yes.” She sighed in pleasure at his expert touch. “A craving for you.”

About the Author

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Uncovering Egypt

Desire hot enough to reach through the ages and melt the sands of time.

Uncovering Egypt

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Jasmine Devi is eager to start digging up artifacts on a field expedition to Giza. But finding a hidden chamber and an ancient bracelet could change this Egyptologist's life forever.

King Okpara is called through time to stop what he believes is someone stealing his former queen's sacred jewel. When he finds the bracelet firmly attached to the wrist of a woman of impeccable beauty, his plans change. Believing Jasmine is destined to be his new queen, Okpara needs to use all of his skill to convince her to step back in time with him.

In the face of Okpara's campaign to gain her trust and cater to her innermost desires, how can Jasmine refuse?

Warning: Explicit sex, hot Egyptian men and a unique body chamber.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Uncovering Egypt:

All her years of study hadn't prepared her for how remarkable it felt to be standing in an actual piece of the past. For sanity's sake, she pinched herself again and delighted in the brief jolt of pain. With or without a hunky pharaoh, she planned to enjoy her time in Egypt. So long as Mason left her alone, she thought it a real possibility.

As she went to set the lantern down, a crack on the far wall caught her attention. She squinted and took a tentative step forward.

With the pads of her fingertips she traced the faint spider-like lines, admiring the texture, when a piece of stone fell away exposing a small hole. She raised the lantern and a hue of dazzling bright green caught her eye. A soothing calm warmed her from the inside. Curious, she went to reach for the object when a noise caught her attention from behind. She gasped and turned.

Mason stood like a giant in the shadow of the lantern light, his hands planted firmly on his hips.

She put a hand to her mouth. "Oh my gosh, you scared me."

"What are you doing all the way over here," he scolded in a rough-edged voice.

"I could ask the same thing," she retorted. Thanks to him, her heart nearly beat right out of her chest.

His eyes widened. "I came looking for you. Hell, you had me worried sick. I wish you wouldn't take off into all these hideaways, especially ones off the grid. It's unsafe."

Jasmine fumed silently. She didn't feel the need to explain herself to the likes of him. Who did he think he was? "First off, I don't need your permission, and second, I'm a big enough girl that I can handle myself."

He rubbed at the back of his neck. "Maybe so, but what if something happened to you? Who would know? Why didn't you just say you were going to look around?"

Her blood boiled. Why couldn't he find some other woman to chase? If only he'd get the hint. "I don't have to tell you where I'm going. We aren't joined at the hip."

When he didn't say anything back she figured his feelings had been hurt and he was expecting some sort of an apology. Even if she did apologize she wouldn't mean it. But she didn't want him all upset either or he'd make the whole trip a hellish experience.

She offered a half-smile and lightened her tone. "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you. Must be jet lag. Gotta love time zones. If you'd give me a little time to myself in here, I'll meet back up with you. I promise to not be too long." Jasmine desperately wished he'd leave her alone so she could get back to inspecting the green object. Right now, she didn't want to share her discovery with anyone, especially him. He'd ruin it for her.

His dark brows furrowed like thick caterpillars. "So, you're saying that you don't want my company?"

Jasmine clenched her jaw. Leave it to him to take it personally. "We've been over this before. You know I prefer to work alone."

He sighed so loudly it reverberated all around her. "So stubborn."

She jutted out her chin. "No, I'm independent."

"It would be more fun if we worked together. We'd get more done."

She couldn't stand it. The man was driving her insane. Being nice didn't seem to cut it. Without a care of hurting his feelings, she let it out. "You're starting to piss me off. I know it's difficult for you to grasp in that thick head of yours, but this isn't about *you*. It's about *me*. When I work, I like to think that nothing else exists. I like to picture in my mind how the people dressed and how they spoke. What I don't like is being distracted."

An unflattering smirk crossed his lips. The kind of smirk she wanted to slap right off and stomp flat. "Ah, so you admit I'm a distraction? I could take that as a compliment."

She frowned and tried to ignore the taste of the airline peanuts making a second trip. He was clueless. What she wouldn't give to find a way to make him leave her alone. "Please don't. It wasn't meant as one."

His smirk faded and he straightened, sweeping a stray hair from his eye. "No need to be rude. I just want to protect you. Nothing more. Women—"

Jasmine put her hand up to keep him from further making an ass of himself. "Well, it feels more like smothering and it puts me in a foul mood. Besides, I don't need protection."

"Yes you do," he countered. "It's dangerous. Remember the time when you set off that booby trap in Mexico? Had I not been there, you could've been hurt. And who knows to what extent."

She couldn't believe he gave himself credit for that one. Because of him, she'd suffered a fractured wrist when his big, boulder-like body fell on her. "Correction, *I* didn't set off the trap, that idiot Raymond, who later admitted to being drunk on the job, did. *I* know how to look for booby traps, and I know what I'm doing."

He shrugged. "I can't fault you on your love for this job. I admire it, but I worry it has become a dangerous attraction for you."

Jasmine bit her tongue to keep from laughing. "I don't fear danger. I welcome it. Now please, I beg you, let me work in peace."

Mason gave her a look of utter rejection and then jutted out his chin. "Fine, have it your way. I'll be by later to check on you, though. Like it or not."

She sighed. "I won't like it, but whatever floats your boat."

"If you need me, just holler."

Jasmine waved her hand at him. "Yep, got it. Bye."

He gave her a lingering look before turning and sprinting up the steps. She waited for a few moments to make certain she wouldn't be interrupted, and then turned her attention back to the brilliant green object. Her palms were sweaty and her fingers shook. The thought of holding something so intricate and valuable was almost too much for her to take.

From her pocket, she took out a small pen flashlight and shone it inside the open space. The object sparkled like a beautiful jewel. Unable to control herself, she reached inside and felt around until she grasped it. Fist tight, she made sure the object didn't get scratched as she pulled it out. Breath held, she uncurled her fingers. In her hands lay a beautiful bracelet made entirely of peridots. She'd read about the precious gemstones in Egyptian art books. They were also called chrysolites, and were considered the gems of the sun. Legend claimed they held the ability to clean and heal the heart.

Jasmine turned the bracelet with a delicate hand, in awe of its divine beauty. Against the paleness of her skin, she could fully appreciate its velvety appearance. It looked like something fit for a princess, or maybe even a queen. On her menial paychecks, she'd never be able to afford anything as extravagant.

With an envious sigh, she shone the flashlight back inside the wall for a final check, when the bracelet slid from her fingers and wrapped around her wrist.

What the? She blinked and brought her wrist up to her face. How in the hell did it fasten by itself? This wouldn't look good at all if she couldn't remove it. She didn't even know how it affixed itself on her in the first place, but who would believe that as an excuse? Sweat beaded on her brow and upper lip. In the soft light of the lantern, she tried to locate a catch of some sort.

Unable to find one, Jasmine gave the bracelet a cautious tug. Any harder and she risked damaging it. A whimper escaped her lips. Gods, she was in big trouble.

Footsteps shuffled behind her and she groaned inward, knowing it was Mason at the ready with one of his “I told you so” speeches. Yeah, he’d really get a kick out of this.

She turned with her wrist concealed behind her back, when all the breath left her lungs.

In a battle of wills, only one can be on top. Right?

Playing with Matches

© 2007 *Mardi Ballou*

A Fangly My Dear book.

After an investigation goes horribly wrong, former journalist and brand-new vampire Gabe Morrow, wants to get a life. A social life, that is.

Fresh from the vampire halfway house, he's ecstatic—and a little wary—when Fangly, My Dear fixes him up with San Francisco cop Tanith Kalinski. Although his last investigation had him tracking corrupt cops, one night with this detective blows him away.

Vampires have always both repelled and fascinated Tanith. She figures one date—one long, passionate night of hot sex—will finally get the creatures out of her system. Then she meets Gabe. Their instantaneous attraction is so intense that instead of curing her of her obsession, their one night together makes it stronger than ever.

What's worse, Gabe wants more than she's willing to offer. With his murderer still on the loose, keeping Gabe at arm's length risks more than her heart—it could mean her life.

Warning: This title contains plenty of hot vampire loving.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Playing with Matches:

The moment Gabe saw Tanith walk into the club, lightning struck. He had no doubt the fox who'd just come in and was snagging all the masculine attention was his date. Blonde. Big green eyes, big breasts, long legs. A walk that highlighted all her womanly assets. His dick sprang out of hibernation and reminded Gabe how much was at stake. He winced at the image of a stake and pushed it away. Thank you, universe—and Fangly, My Dear.

The club was dark and crowded. The musicians kept up a stream of mellow jazz, nothing too challenging or lively. Conversations buzzed in counterpoint to the music, and the smell of booze nearly saturated the stale air. Gabe watched Tanith confer with the host. He crossed the room and held out his hand to her. "You must be Tanith."

Her eyes widened with a momentary flash of surprise before she composed her face to neutral. Like everything else about her, that coolness turned him on. "Gabe?"

He nodded. She took his hand with a stronger grip than he expected. "How did you know it was me?" Her voice aroused him as much as her looks.

"A beautiful face that matches your beautiful voice on the phone."

She rolled her eyes. "You actually get anywhere with lines like that?"

“It’s the first time I’ve tried it.” He steered her to his booth and they both sat. “You’re saying it’s not effective?”

Her laugh resonated through his body.

“So what are you drinking?” His fangs throbbed for the only drink he wanted.

“White wine.”

He signaled a server and placed the order.

“Can I refresh that for you?” The server pointed at Gabe’s untouched, flat and insipid-looking beer.

“Sure.”

Gabe hadn’t yet decided how much to tell her about his own background. He figured he’d wait to make that decision until he knew her better. After the server left, he asked Tanith first-date questions. “So, what’s a nice girl like you doing in a joint like this?”

She chuckled. “I’m asking myself that same question. You come here often?”

So she was going to match him cliché for cliché. “My first time. But if I’d known great ladies like you hang out here, I’d have come years before.”

The server’s arrival saved them from exchanging astrological signs. They toasted each other. Though, since his transformation, beer tasted like used dishwater, he sipped some to be companionable.

“The folks at Fangly, My Dear said you’re a cop here in San Francisco,” he started.

Looking him straight in the eye, Tanith proudly announced, “Been on the force for eight years and just made detective.”

A detective. Please, let her not be one of the corrupt ones he and Tom had been investigating. “Uh, you know I’m a vampire, right?”

Her gorgeous mouth twisted into a scowl. “Yes. I requested a date with a vampire.” She took a long sip of her wine.

“You did? I guess that surprises me. I know some police officers don’t look kindly on our mixing with humans.” *Duh, smooth move.*

“That’s an individual choice, not part of our credo. For my private life, I make my own choices.”

“I see.” He loved the way her eyes flashed when she put him in his place. How would those eyes look when they made love? His dick practically sat up and begged. He crossed his legs.

“Did you choose to date a human?” Her voice held a challenging note.

He shrugged, nonchalantly, he hoped. “Not specifically. I’m pretty open.”

“Have you dated many vampires?” She finished her wine and he signaled the server to bring more.

“None.”

One beautifully arched brow rose. “How come?”

“I haven’t been a vampire all that long.”

“Oh? Tell me about what you did before and what happened to you to...to make you a vampire.”

Shit. Some day he'd learn to think before he spoke. "I'd prefer for tonight to be all about you." From her smile, he figured he'd just bought some time.

"Most guys only want to talk about themselves."

"I'm not most guys. I want to hear about you."

She motioned dismissively. "Not a whole lot to tell. As I said, I'm a cop. Native San Franciscan. Family's gone. No time for hobbies. I relax by going to the gym or curling up with a good book."

"Really? I'd think a job like yours would be so physical, you wouldn't need a gym."

"You'd think that, but you'd be wrong. Any exercise I get on the job is strictly unplanned. And I need regular workouts to keep me happy."

"Not to mention in incredible shape." When he looked deep in her eyes and did the vampire hypnotic thing Antoine Thierry claimed was foolproof, he could feel her warming to him. He took her hand in his and dropped a kiss on her long fingers. At the mere contact, his whole body shifted into an urgent plea for release.

Talk about being a sucker—funny word to pop into her mind with Gabe Morrow seated across from her. With his pitch-black hair worn on the longish side, chocolate brown eyes and even features, he reminded her of a cross between Johnny Depp and Orlando Bloom. As if his looks weren't enough, she melted into a puddle of feminine desire at the brush of his lips on her hand.

Heck, she'd always loved seeing men kiss women's hands. The men from Poland, her family's ancestral homeland, traditionally used this form of greeting. Experiencing it from a guy like Gabe Morrow, who could have been a movie star Dracula of the modern, hot kind—definitely not the Nosferatu kind—had her panties moist and her clit throbbing. He smiled, and her defenses crumbled. On the heat meter, he'd hit a perfect ten. She was so turned on she didn't know if she'd be able to stand up and walk.

He opened his mouth and she caught a sexy glimpse of fang. Did this mean she turned him on? So much to learn about the amazing creature staring at her from across a very small table. Was his penis hard too? Did the fangs and cock work together in real life the way they did in the novels she devoured? She was trying to shake free of the images these words conjured when he said, "How about we go somewhere more private?"



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