



SAMHAIN

Kiss of TEMPTATION

Crista McHugh

She was sent to make him burn...

The Kavanaugh Foundation, Book 3

It takes a witch to outwit another witch, so when Daniela finds herself in the catacombs of Rome intent on retrieving the legendary Staff of Octavius, she's prepared to wield her innate fire magic to claim the staff and keep it—and its overwhelming power—from getting into the wrong hands.

All her Foundation training, however, never prepared her for Luc.

One breath of her scent is enough to reawaken a thirst Luc hasn't felt in six hundred years. It's enough to make him almost forget his vow to keep the staff out of the wrong hands—and to never give in to his bloodlust. The moment he touches Daniela, the last shreds of his humanity revive with a violent fury and drive him to claim her...blood, body and soul.

He's her enemy. He's arrogant and infuriatingly secretive. And his kiss makes her want things she shouldn't—like abandoning her mission to spend eternity in his arms. Crossing that line, though, could not only send them up in flames...it could condemn all mankind to hell on earth.

Warning: Contains a smolderingly hot (literally!) witch, a sexy, brooding vampire, wild sex you want to sink your teeth into, and a sensually charged romance that spans several lifetimes.

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Crista McHugh

Dedication

To Gwen, for being the super-fabulous crit partner on this story. And to my readers, who asked for more. Thank you!

Chapter One

Daniela fought back a squeal as a spider scurried away from the narrow beam of her flashlight. Snakes she could handle. Rats too. But creepy-crawlies always sent a shiver down her spine.

Once her heart slowed, she returned to the markings etched into the wall. Centuries of condensation had taken their toll, leaving behind a thick layer of slimy calcium deposits that coated the wall. She scraped some of it away and found the symbol of the eagle. Perfect! She was still on the right track.

The eagle's outstretched wing pointed to the tunnel on the far left, so she followed it, venturing deeper along the twisting paths that led her farther into the underground catacombs of Rome. The air grew heavier with magic the closer she got to her destination. Her breath hitched. Morwen had said the staff was well-hidden, but she hadn't mentioned anything about protective spells guarding it.

She gathered her power and sent out small tendrils of magic to search for the source. The other force retreated down a tunnel to her right, further adding to the unease that rolled in her stomach. It wasn't a spell—it was another witch or warlock. *Merda!* She clicked off her flashlight and hid in a crevice.

Several agonizing minutes passed while she listened for any voices or footsteps that would give her a clue about the other person's whereabouts, but none came. Part of her was tempted to return to the surface and come back tomorrow for the staff. But the urgent nature of her task strengthened her resolve and allowed her to step back into the corridor. Morwen said the vampires were searching for magical artifacts like the Staff of Octavius, and Daniela refused to let them find it.

The musty scent of the tunnels filled her nose as she continued farther into the catacombs with the aid of her flashlight. Her shoes left fresh footprints in the dust. These passages hadn't been disturbed in years. Each step took her farther away from the foreign magic, and the tension eased from her shoulders.

The tunnel came to an intersection. Hundreds of skulls formed the wall in front of her. Their eerie smiles seemed to mock her as she searched for the next eagle. Whoever had buried the staff wanted to make sure the markers were a pain in the ass to find.

Tendrils of magic grazed the back of her neck and she froze.

The other witch was sending out feelers for her.

Daniela whipped around, her magic poised at her fingertips to summon a fireball if needed.

Before the spell could fly, a man grabbed her and lifted her off her feet. His hand clamped over her mouth, muffling her scream. "Shh!"

The wild beat of her heart pounded in her ears, breaking her concentration. This strange man was hauling her off into a side crypt, and she couldn't even cast a simple spell to save herself. Her helplessness faded as anger replaced it. She may be in Rome's mass grave, but she refused to become a permanent fixture.

The man released her before she could summon the spell again. He pressed a finger to her lips and pointed to where she'd been standing, right before he doused her flashlight. Darkness descended on them.

She tried to wrench free of her captor, but he pressed her against the damp wall. The man was a rock-hard mass of muscle, even though he'd appeared lean when she'd glimpsed the outline of his body. The spicy scent of his cologne tickled her nose. He turned around and kept his back to her, allowing her only a glimpse of the flickering lights coming from a side tunnel when she peered over his shoulder.

Thank God I'm not alone down here with this lunatic. She opened her mouth to call for help, but when she heard the other party's conversation, her blood chilled.

"Shut up and find the next marker," a woman muttered. "I need to find the staff before Morwen's little brat does."

"What makes you think she's sent someone?" a male voice replied.

The flickering lights grew closer, outlining the silhouettes of three people. They paused in front of the wall of skulls.

"Colette, perhaps you should consider making this your new home," the other male joked. "The decor seems to fit your tastes."

A swing of Colette's arm sent him crashing into the skulls. The crunch of dry bone echoed through the tunnels, but the man picked himself up off the ground and laughed. "I must have hit close to home to get her that pissed off, eh, Phil?"

"Shut up, you imbecile," Colette growled.

A beam of light turned toward the crypt where Daniela hid behind her captor. He smashed her even closer to the wall until her nose pressed against the soft cotton of his shirt.

Her head spun, and she wasn't quite sure if it was due to his presence or the fact she'd been holding her breath since she realized who the woman was. Morwen had warned Daniela about the vampire witch, but she never expected to be less than twenty meters from her.

"I sensed another witch down here," Colette continued. The light flickered back to the intersection. "I've lost her trail, though."

"Maybe you're not as powerful as Marcellus thinks you are."

She raised her hand to strike him again when Phil aimed his flashlight to the ground. "Someone has been here." All three of them bent over the footprints in the dust marking the place where she'd stood before her captor whisked her off of her feet.

Daniela's throat tightened. *Please don't let them come this way. One vampire I can handle, but not three.* She looked up at her captor, wondering if he would set her free or turn her over to them. He didn't even flinch.

"The footprints end here," the first male vampire said.

"She must have sensed my presence and retreated. Find her." Colette pointed in the direction Daniela had originally come from, and the other two vampires bolted. She lingered behind, taunting in a singsong voice, "Come out, come out wherever you are, little witch. I'll find you eventually."

Her temper flared at Colette's insult. *Little witch? Doesn't she realize that I'm the third most powerful witch in the Foundation?*

Her captor reached behind and grabbed her wrist, the commanding grip dousing the inferno of magic inside her.

Several seconds passed before Colette followed the other two vampires. Several more elapsed before Daniela allowed her breathing to return to normal. Morwen was right about Colette wanting to find the Staff of Octavius, and God only knew what she'd do with it once she got it. She'd probably make opening up a portal to Hell seem like a party trick.

All the more reason to find it.

Her captor released her and took a step forward, allowing her the opportunity to squeeze past him. She'd just reached the skull wall when he caught her arm and started dragging her back to where they'd hidden.

"Let go of me."

"Silence!" He pulled her closer and whispered in her ear, "Do you want them to find you?"

"At least I know their motives."

Her knee smashed into his groin, but all she got from him was a short grunt. His viselike grip didn't waver. "I thought Morwen had better sense than to send someone else to find the staff."

She stopped struggling. "You know Morwen?"

"Yes," he replied, his face still concealed in the shadows. She knew nothing about her captor other than he seemed to be made of stone and had the slightest French accent.

Before he could elaborate, heavy footsteps pounded down the tunnel and light bounced off the slime-coated walls. "I heard something this way," Colette's voice echoed.

Her captor tightened his grip on her arm and carried her back into the darkness. This time, he didn't smash her against the wall to hide her. He raced through the pitch-black tunnels with a speed that made her heart want to jump into her throat, twisting and turning as if he had his course already mapped out and memorized. How did he know where to go? What was to stop them from crashing into a wall? Or worse, a pile of bones?

At least they were losing the bloodsucker.

His steps didn't falter as he ran past the heavy iron gate she'd opened earlier that evening using her magic, and carried her up the four flights of stairs to the Via Agrippa. The humid night air bathed her face, a stark contrast to the cool damp of the catacombs. She didn't have time to enjoy it. Her captor set her down and continued to drag her through the crowded street.

"Where are you taking me?" Would causing a scene with a spell be safer than going along with this stranger?

He stared straight ahead as he pushed deeper into the throngs of people that glutted the sidewalk. "Away from them."

"And why should I think you're better than them?"

That made him pause. He stopped and turned to face her.

Her gut wrenched. *Mio Dio*, a man shouldn't be that gorgeous. Ebony black hair framed a face with a strong jaw and a slightly crooked nose—his only flaw as far as she could tell. But his eyes took her breath away. They were such a deep blue, they almost matched his hair.

He looked her over from head to toe and sucked in a deep breath. His mouth fell open, and for a few heartbeats, they just stared at each other. Then his jaw tightened. "I'm the least of your worries."

As if on cue, a woman's scream pierced the night. Daniela spun around. The crowd parted like the wake of a speedboat, but it moved way too fast for normal humans. Her throat closed up. The vampires.

The stranger yanked her out of her daze and pushed her against the window of a crowded café. Gorgeous or not, she was getting tired of the Neanderthal treatment. She was about to give him a piece of her mind when his lips crushed against hers, cutting off her words and nearly making her swoon. At first she resisted, but he continued to kiss her, slowly wearing down her defenses. By the time his tongue brushed against the seam of her mouth, she eagerly opened it to him.

She couldn't remember the last time a man had kissed her this way. So strong. So domineering. So possessive it made her toes curl. A flush spread from her face all the way to the pit of her stomach, and her sex ached. Although she barely knew him, she already wanted to forgo this sexual foreplay and head straight to the bedroom. Her arms wrapped around his neck and she began kissing back with a ferocity that surprised her.

Perhaps it surprised him too. A muffled gasp worked its way out of his throat. He pressed his body against hers so that his erection rubbed against her mound. For a would-be rescuer, he acted like he wanted to screw her right here in the middle of the street. One hand grabbed her buttocks, lifting her so he could grind against her. The other worked its way between them and cupped one of her breasts.

Her head reeled with each delightful twist of his tongue, and she slipped further and further into her lust-filled trance. He could be working with the vampires for all she knew, but at this point, she almost didn't care.

She froze and opened her eyes. Her mission. She needed to find the Staff of Octavius before Colette, not waste time playing tonsil hockey with a stranger. And as much as she wanted to continue, her duty to the Foundation came first.

He must have sensed her unfortunate jolt of reality, because he ended the kiss by gently sucking on her bottom lip. "I think they're gone now."

She barely noticed the dazed people pulling themselves off the ground around them or blaring horns from blocks ahead. Her voice didn't want to work. "Gone?"

"*Oui.*" He placed a quick peck on the corner of her mouth. "They passed us and are probably several kilometers away by now."

The fog of lust evaporated, leaving her with a sharply cruel vision of the situation. He'd only kissed her to hide her from the vampires, and she'd humped him like some horny teenager. *Merda!* She hung her head, unable to meet his eyes, and tried to slither past before he caught on to her humiliation, but his arms formed a barrier on either side of her.

"We were lucky," he said.

"Were we?" Daniela snapped her head back up and pursed her lips. "Lucky in what way? That they didn't catch us? Or that you got to feel me up in the process?"

A hint of a smile played on his lips. "That we avoided a confrontation with them. The kiss was a delightful bonus."

The magic inside her welled up until the air crackled around them. Secrecy be damned! She was going to blow him halfway across Rome.

"*Hey, hai intenzione di scoparla?*" a male voice asked from nearby, and the people around them laughed.

Her anger turned from the stranger who'd boldly kissed her to the arrogant punk who'd asked if her rescuer-assailant was going to fuck her. She tensed her muscles, ready to unleash the spell poised on the tips of her fingers.

"Careful," the stranger whispered. "Blowing him up will only attract unwanted attention."

And his distraction didn't?

He turned to the teenager and replied, "Not tonight." Then his gaze slid back to her and his grin widened. "Unless you would like to continue this elsewhere."

"*Vaffanculo!*" She shoved him away and stomped off with her spine rigid and her shoulders squared. In the brief amount of time she'd known this asshole, he'd gone from a potential kidnapper to a possible lover to man whose balls she wanted to smash.

When he caught her hand again, he pressed a keychain into her palm. "Your room is being watched. Stay here tonight."

Icicles formed in her veins. "What do you mean my room is being watched?"

He chuckled softly. “Morwen needs to learn not to give her employees a company card.”

“But my things—”

“Already taken care of.”

“Why should I trust you?” Blood pounded in her veins as she waited for his answer. Her gut told her she could trust him, even though her mind remained cynical. And she wasn’t even going to start on how much her body craved a repeat performance.

He closed the space between them until their noses touched. She caught a faint whiff of mint as he replied low enough for only her to hear, “The staff is no longer here in Rome. I moved it.”

His confession shocked her. Perhaps it would’ve been easy for him to figure out what she was looking for, but for him to tell her he’d beaten her to it? It was almost unbelievable. “Where?”

“That’s for me to know.” He backed away. “Stay safe, little witch.”

He spun on his heel and disappeared into the crowd, leaving her hot, bothered and confused.

She studied the hard, oval-shaped plastic keychain he’d given her. *Pensione Preziosa*, Room 7. No address. No idea where in the city it was. Nothing.

I need a drink.

Daniela headed straight for the bar of the café. “*Due bicchierini di grappa, per favore.*”

As the first shot of the liquor burned down the back of her throat, she formed a game plan. First, she needed to call Morwen and update her on the status of the mission. Then, she needed to find this hotel and get her things.

But as she sipped the second glass of grappa, she wondered if the sexy stranger would be waiting for her when she arrived. As much as she wanted to blame her fevered skin on the alcohol, she knew it was the lingering aftereffects of his seductive kiss.

Chapter Two

Luc hung back in the shadows and watched Daniela leave the café. The lights reflected off her caramel-colored hair, creating a golden halo from the long, tousled waves. But she wasn't an angel. More like a temptress based on the way she'd kissed him back. His cock twitched at the thought of it. She looked yummy enough to eat, and it took every ounce of willpower to keep from approaching her.

He'd followed the vampires back to her old hotel room before backtracking to find her. As if he'd have any trouble finding her. The one benefit of all the years he'd spent trapped in his own private hell was that he could pick up on subtle cues faster than Colette and her two goons. He'd recognized Daniela's magical signature from over a kilometer away.

But what shocked him was his physical response to her. The second he touched her, something lurched in his chest. Then her scent hit him and his mouth began watering. His fangs elongated. Her lips had been just an appetizer. Now he craved her blood. Thankfully, he'd managed to enthrall her before she realized what he was.

Mon Dieu, give me strength to avoid temptation.

He clutched the simple wooden cross around his neck and tried to remember the prayers from his youth. It had taken him centuries to accept that God could show grace on an abomination like him, and he didn't want to squander his redemption by sinking his teeth into the delicate curve of Daniela's neck.

She paused at the corner and studied the map on her phone. He laughed to himself. If the vampires didn't take advantage of her distraction, a pickpocket would. Perhaps he should tell Morwen to train her witches as well as her hunters how to be aware of their surroundings.

When he was still human, he would have said the Divine Hand of God interceded and led him to her. Now, he believed it was sheer luck. He'd heard rumors circulating in the vampire community that Marcellus was building an army to take down the Kavanaugh Foundation. The latest plot involved gathering magical artifacts to use against the Foundation's hunters and witches.

As soon as he'd heard the rumor, he'd raced down to Rome. Although he'd removed the Staff of Octavius from its hiding place in the catacombs decades ago, he'd wanted to see if anyone would dare go after it.

Daniela had entered the mass grave with a fearless determination that would have put Lara Croft to shame. She seemed to have an inner compass guiding her, leading her within minutes to the same markers that had taken him weeks to find. Perhaps her ease in spotting them had to do with her witch's blood. He

wondered what her reaction would have been if she'd come to the end of the trail and realized that someone else had beaten her to the staff.

She turned the corner and he followed. For a brief second, he questioned his actions. Why was he following her? He'd confirmed the rumor that both the vampires and Morwen were looking for the staff. He'd informed Morwen's witch that it wasn't there. He'd saved her life. All noble and rational behavior. But then he'd overstepped his bounds and kissed her.

He hadn't planned on it. At the time, he'd merely wanted to conceal her from the other vampires. The next thing he knew, his lips were on hers. He'd half-expected her to hit him with some sort of spell that would make him wish he had never been born. Instead, she'd kissed him back and awakened a desire that surpassed the purely physical and filled his mind with whispered thoughts he'd be better off not thinking.

Luc had learned to suppress the bloodlust centuries ago, refusing to feed on humans unless absolutely necessary. Thanks to modern blood banks, he no longer needed to hunt rats in the sewers or deer in the woods. He could have expired pints of O-negative delivered right to his door. With the exception of being confined to the non-daylight hours, he almost felt human again. But the second his lips touched hers, he discovered it was all a farce.

The jolt he'd experienced when he first touched her returned with a fury when he slipped his tongue into her luscious mouth. It was only after they parted that he realized it was his heart. It hadn't beat since the day Marcellus drained the life from his body, but somehow, Daniela had revived the long-silent organ like a defibrillator.

He placed his hand over his chest and felt nothing now. No thumps, no flutters. Just stillness and an ache that made him want to cry out in frustration. He could lie to himself and say he was following Daniela just to make sure she got to the new hotel safely, but the truth was he wanted to figure out what was so special about her. How could one woman affect him this way and make him want to abandon the moral code he'd clung to for centuries?

Maybe Morwen would have the answer.

Daniela glanced down at the GPS map on her cell phone and made a right. The Pensione Preziosa stood just ahead, tucked away on a quiet street a few blocks from St. Peter's. A shiver coursed down her spine. It seemed to be the perfect place for someone to lure her into so he could kill her. No one would see her. No one would hear her scream.

She retraced her steps back to the main road. Why should she trust this stranger? For all she knew, he was in league with Colette and wanted to capture her so she could be their midnight snack. She stopped when she remembered Morwen's advice from their conversation an hour ago. If he wanted to harm her, he would have done so already. More importantly, he knew where the Staff of Octavius was. In the current

war between the vampires and the Foundation, every weapon could turn the tide, and she didn't want to be the person who cost them the battle.

Her gut told her something was different about the stranger. He seemed too strong, too quick to be a mere mortal. But then, her gut often made her wary of strangers.

Daniela remembered the first time she'd met Morwen. The Head Witch set off every type of internal warning bell she had, but over the last eighteen years, the woman had grown to be Daniela's mentor and closest friend. Perhaps the same would hold true for the man whose kiss still made her sex ache just from the memory of it.

She stared at the keychain and traced the words engraved on the plastic. If he was waiting for her, would she throw him out or throw him into her bed? A brief fantasy of his lips trailing down her neck played out in her mind. Her nipples tightened as she imagined how his tongue would swirl around them. Perhaps he'd even catch the stiff peaks between his teeth and nibble on them until she cried out.

A whimper rose in the back of her throat. She needed to soothe the throbbing between her legs before she went insane.

Without a second thought, she rushed to the pensione, hoping she could find some relief once she got to her room. Too bad a locked door prevented her from getting what she wanted immediately. The key didn't work on the outside door, so she rang the bell and waited.

When she glanced behind her, something darted between the buildings and her breath caught. Could Colette or one of the other vampires have found her already? She peered into the shadows. The second the bloodsucker jumped from its hiding place, she needed to be ready to attack. Magic flowed through her veins, gathering in her hands and coiling around her fingertips like a snake poised to strike.

"Can I help you, *signorina*?"

A yelp broke free from her mouth and a spark erupted from her fingers as the magic discharged. Daniela hastily stamped out the tiny flame licking at the doormat and prayed the elderly woman standing in the doorway hadn't seen it. "I have a key to a room here."

The woman's eyes narrowed as she inspected the writing on the keychain Daniela dangled in front of her.

Oh shit, I'm in trouble now. I wonder if I can erase her memory before she calls the police and has me charged with arson.

Then the woman's face unexpectedly brightened. "Ah, you must be the young woman Padre Luc said was coming." She wrapped her arm around Daniela's shoulders and invited her into the *pensione* like a long-lost daughter. "You poor girl. The stories you must be able to tell after everything you've been through."

"Excuse me—*Padre* Luc?" Her stranger was a priest? What kind of classes were they teaching in the Vatican to turn him into that kind of kisser?

The woman laughed. “Forgive me, *signorina*. Even though he’s left the priesthood, I still think he’s a man of God, always rescuing you poor lost souls from the streets.”

Daniela stiffened. “I’m not a lost soul.”

“Of course, *signorina*. Whatever you say.” She led Daniela up a staircase and pointed down the hall. “He brought a bag full of clothes for you earlier this evening. You’ll find it in your room. I’m Sophia. Sleep well, and I’ll come fetch you for mass in the morning.”

Mass? Was this some sort of religious halfway house?

Sophia disappeared down the stairs, leaving Daniela alone. She gritted her teeth. Now more than ever, she wanted to grab her bag and disappear. Padre Luc could go rescue some other *lost soul*. She wasn’t going to fall for his little game of seduction, nor was she going to participate in whatever plan he had for her here.

Inside room number seven, her backpack sat unopened on the bed. At least the spell she’d cast to keep thieves out of her bag prevented him from rummaging through her stuff. When she grabbed it, a piece of paper floated to the floor. She picked it up and studied the elegant script.

You will not find what you seek in Rome. Stay here until tomorrow night. Then I will tell you more about the staff.

Luc.

Daniela sighed and sank onto the mattress. She wanted answers. She needed to find the Staff of Octavius. And the only person who knew where it was happened to be a defrocked priest who had a habit of rescuing girls off the street and made her want to fuck him senseless when he kissed her. All in all, a bad combination.

She glanced at the open door across the room. With a flick of her wrist, it slammed shut and locked. One night wouldn’t be too long to wait, but she’d take precautions. She closed her eyes and began casting a protective spell on the room that would guarantee no one could barge in on her unexpectedly, including the sexy priest that plagued her thoughts.

Luc waited until the light in room seven turned off before he approached the *pensione*. Unfortunately, the light downstairs remained on. Sophia was waiting up for him. Even though he was ten times her age, she still fussed over him like a mother and considered him a saint. Too bad she didn’t know his true nature.

The unlocked door swung open as he approached the stoop, and she stood there with her hand on her hip. “This one is different from the others.”

“Different?” he asked, feigning innocence as he slipped past her. “How so, Sophia?”

“Older, less frightened. More *worldly*.” She closed the door and winked at him. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you sent her here for a different reason. Why else would you give her your usual room?”

“Perhaps because she deserves the nicest room here.” He smiled and winked back. “Do you have another room for me?”

“Of course. You’ve been my favorite guest for years.” She gave him a key and caught his face between her hands. He ran his tongue over his fangs when he noticed the intensity of her perusal. Nope, they’d long since retreated back to their normal size. “There’s something different about you tonight, Padre Luc.”

He covered her hands with his own and gently pried them from his face. “Please, it’s just Luc. I don’t know how you weaseled out that secret from my past.”

“I don’t know why you left the priesthood. If you’d stayed in, I swear you’d be Pope in ten years.”

A bitter taste filled his mouth as he remembered the way Marcellus forced the blood into his mouth, changing him from a humble priest into a monster. “God had other plans for me.”

“One day, you’ll tell me what happened.” She patted him on the cheek and turned toward her room. “How long will the *signorina* be staying with us?”

“We’ll leave tomorrow night.”

“We?” A mischievous light danced in her eyes. “That’s the first time I’ve known you to take someone with you.”

“That’s because you were right, Sophia. This one’s different.”

Luc climbed the stairs like he had lead in his shoes. Perhaps he would be better off returning to Paris without Daniela. He’d hidden the staff over seventy years ago to keep people from using it to conquer the known world. The emperors of Rome had abused its power, just like the Egyptian pharaohs before them. The magic was both ancient and deadly.

Morwen knew that, which was why he questioned her intent to find it. On the one hand, he could understand her desire to keep Colette and Marcellus from using it. But what would she do with it once she had it? A witch of her power could cause cataclysmic damage if she wanted to.

He tried to erase those images from his mind and opened the door to the room Sophia had set up for him. Blackout drapes covered the windows, preventing the sun from turning him into a pile of ashes when it rose. His clothes hung in the small wardrobe, and she’d placed a sandwich for him on the bedside table.

His lips curled into a smile. Despite his protests that she didn’t need to feed him, some things never changed. He wrapped the sandwich in a piece of paper. He would find someone to enjoy it tomorrow.

The humid night air stirred the drapes, and he poked his head out the open window. A small balcony stood outside Daniela’s room, so close he could easily climb over to it and join her in her bed. He’d enjoyed the company of women over the years since he’d been changed, but none of them had aroused him

like she did. His pants grew tight while he remembered the way her body pressed against his earlier tonight. Yes, he wanted fuck her. He wanted to do more than that.

He shook his head to clear it. If he got that close to her again, he'd risk drinking from her. The craving clouded his mind. He felt like a drug addict looking to get his next fix. The problem was, once he got it, would he be able to stop? Better to avoid temptation in the first place, and that meant keeping her at a safe distance.

A soft moan came from her room and another thump rocked his chest. A second moan followed, this one at a slightly higher pitch than before. Sweat prickled along his hairline. Could one of the vampires have snuck in while he was chatting with Sophia downstairs?

Luc jumped the narrow distance to the balcony and landed with catlike silence. He lingered outside her door and listened. A whimper came from inside. When he peered in, he froze.

Even though the room was pitch dark, his heightened senses could easily make out her naked form on top of the bed. One hand cupped her breast while the other disappeared between her thighs. Her body writhed as another whimper rose from her throat.

I shouldn't be watching her touch herself like that.

But his eyes remained fixed on the sensual roll of her hips and the graceful arch of her neck as she brought herself closer to her climax. His cock strained against his trousers. He longed to be the one making her moan like that. The blissful pleasure they could enjoy together...

He squeezed his eyes shut. He had reassured himself she was safe. There was no reason for him to stay here and tempt fate.

"Mmm, Luc."

His eyes shot open when he heard Daniela say his name in that sexy, breathless voice. Did she know he was standing there?

She called out his name again, this time slightly louder. A bead of sweat dripped down the back of his neck. How much longer could he stand there and watch her when every inch of his body screamed for him to barge into her room and give her the release she so desperately seemed to crave, to give himself the release his aching cock demanded?

But his muscles refused to budge. He remained motionless, completely enraptured by the erotic scene playing out before him. Better to imagine the softness of her skin, the slick heat of her pussy, the taste of her kisses. His imagination had limits, but it prevented him from doing the unthinkable.

The tips of his fangs pierced his lip. He hadn't felt bloodlust this strong since he stood on the outskirts of a battlefield. Then, he could explain his feelings. The scent of blood hung so heavy in the air, no vampire would be immune to it. But she didn't even have a cut to entice him. No injuries. Just an overpowering urge to sip the sweet nectar flowing through her veins, pounding louder and louder with each beat of her heart until her body jerked to a standstill and collapsed in a shudder.

It took him a moment to realize she'd come, leaving him the only one unfulfilled. He took a step closer and was greeted by the sizzle of a magical ward. The impact tossed him all the way to the railing. He grabbed it to keep from falling to the street below and saw the tendrils of smoke rising from his hands.

"Who's there?" The lamp flickered on and Daniela sat up in bed. She clutched a sheet over her chest, concealing those deliciously full breasts from his view, but not hiding the wooden stake in her hand. "You should know better than to sneak up on me."

The lust that had held him prisoner ebbed as bitter laughter silently shook his body. Maybe she wasn't as helpless as he thought. She'd rigged her own vampire alarm, and unfortunately, he'd walked right into it.

"I haven't killed a bloodsucker lately," she called out while she wrapped the sheet around her body and stood. She held the stake with the ease of a seasoned hunter.

Luc's throat tightened. If he wanted to know more about what Morwen was planning on doing with the Staff of Octavius, he needed Daniela to trust him, and that meant she couldn't find out what he was. He slipped over the edge of the balcony without making a sound and was safely concealed in the shadows by the time she reached the doors.

Her eyes flashed in the light as she scanned the street. "I know you're still there."

A cold tingle raced up his arm and coiled around his chest, all bearing her magical signature. It made him feel like a fly caught in a spider's web. The more he tried to resist it, the more it seemed to suck his strength. He retreated farther down the street before she found him.

"You'd better hide soon. The sun is coming up." Daniela turned around and closed the balcony doors behind her.

After a few seconds, the last threads of her magic disappeared, leaving him completely drained. The sky began to lighten in the east. He had maybe four or five minutes before the first rays of the sun peeked over the horizon. Yet he crouched in a side alley, wondering what the hell had just happened. He'd just risked getting caught, getting killed, all because he couldn't keep his mind off this damn witch.

He ran his fingers through his hair and fished his key to the *pensione* from his pocket. Hopefully, Sophia hadn't touched the bottle of blood he'd hidden in her cellar. He'd need the whole thing to clear the fog from his head and strengthen his resistance if he wanted to work with Daniela.

Chapter Three

The sunset bathed the domed roof of St. Peter's in pure gold, but Daniela barely took in its beauty. She stared at her cell phone and contemplated throwing it into the street. Her conversation with Morwen had left her with more questions than answers. Morwen had remained tight-lipped about Luc and reminded her that the mission came first. The mission always came first, as far as the Foundation was concerned. All the Head Witch had told her was that she could trust Luc.

Trust was something to be earned, not given. And so far, Luc hadn't gained it.

She headed back to the *pensione*, wondering if the elusive ex-priest would come for her tonight. Should she tell him about the vampire that had tripped off her ward just before dawn? Her cheeks flamed at the memory. She was just coming down from her climax when she saw the spark. She wondered how long the vampire had been standing on her balcony and how much he or she had seen before hitting the ward.

It embarrassed her that she almost got caught masturbating, but what bothered her more was the fact that she couldn't unwind until she'd made herself come, all the while thinking of Luc. Men usually didn't have this effect on her. She'd appreciate them when they were near but forget about them once they were gone. And they always left, especially once they found out about her abilities. Not that she broadcasted them or anything. Just a few slips of a spell here and there, and BAM! Boyfriend running out the door so fast, he'd leave his treasured belongings behind.

Daniela sighed as she opened the door to the *pensione*. Maybe one day she'd meet a man who wouldn't mind being involved with a witch, like Darren from *Bewitched*.

She glanced down the hallway, hoping to question Sophia before Luc returned, but the owner was conspicuously absent.

When she reached the top of the stairs, Luc was leaning against the wall next to her door. "I thought I told you to stay here."

"What made you think I'd obey?" She brushed past him and every inch of her skin began to tingle. *Merda!* She shouldn't want him this much.

"I'd hoped you'd have enough sense not to become a target for the vampires again."

"It's still daylight," she replied, pointing to the fading light outside her window. "They'd fry if they came after me now. Besides, I have my own little vampire alarm installed."

He waited in the hallway. "Here, yes, but out there?"

"I appreciate your concern, but I can take care of myself." She showed him the stake she'd kept under her pillow to prove her point. Granted, she wasn't a trained hunter, but she'd killed a few vampires over the years. She wouldn't hesitate to do it again, if needed.

He crossed his arms and raised one brow. Damn, he looked too sexy for his own good when he did that. How many women in his parish had impure thoughts when they stared at him? Maybe that's why he'd left the priesthood. Maybe a woman tempted him enough to give up his vow of celibacy. If so, wonderful. It meant she could enjoy him without a guilty conscience.

Her panties grew damp as she thought about the body hidden under his modest clothes. She already knew from last night there wasn't an inch of fat on his lean frame. And from what she remembered of the erection that had pressed against her, he was very well-endowed.

"Grab your bag."

His order jerked her from her fantasies. "Excuse me?"

"I said, grab your bag. We need to leave."

"And where exactly are we going?"

He hovered inches from the doorframe. "Do you want to find the Staff of Octavius or not?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps you should follow me and stop asking so many questions." He turned on his heel and pounded down the stairs.

Luc paced the small entryway and watched the last rays of the sun fade into night. What kind of trouble was he getting into now? Last night, he'd almost made up his mind to leave her behind and keep the location of the staff a secret. Then he made the mistake of downing a whole bottle of human blood. Half-drunk from it, he changed his mind and asked Sophia to reserve a private berth for him and Daniela on the overnight train to Paris. They'd arrive after dawn, but he could easily stick to the shadows until they reached the Metro. Then he could decide where to go from there.

The last thing he expected was resistance from Daniela. He knew Morwen well enough to know that nothing would stop her from finding what she sought, and that carried over to her employees. If the Head Witch wanted something, Daniela would be forced to find it.

The sound of footsteps warned him of her approach, but his gut still clenched at the new wave of her scent. A human shouldn't smell that good to him, not after years of careful training to ignore the bloodlust. Yet, when he turned to his head to the side, the first thing he focused on was the faint pulsation in her neck. He clamped his lips together and hoped she wouldn't catch a glimpse of his growing canines.

"Fine. I'll play along with you for now, but you'd better be taking me to the staff."

The corners of his mouth twitched—a dangerous act considering his fangs were on high profile, but he couldn't help himself. She was trying to make it sound like she was compromising with him when in truth, he held all the cards. "Glad you decided to come along. Our train will be leaving within an hour."

"Train?"

Talking business seemed to help him control the bloodlust. By the time she stood in front of him, his fangs had retreated. "Do you have an objection to trains?"

She shook her head, making her golden brown hair dance in the light. "It seems to be a rather slow way to travel, though."

"True, but the vampires will be watching the airport for your departure. After all, how do you think they tracked you down in the catacombs?" He opened the door and stepped out into the street.

"How did you know they were after me?" She slung her backpack over her shoulder and followed him.

"One tends to overhear things in certain circles."

"You're annoyingly vague, Padre Luc."

He stiffened when she called him that. "It's just Luc."

"Sophia mentioned you were once a priest."

"Sophia talks too much." He forced himself to take slow, long strides down the street so he'd appear human, but Daniela still had to jog to keep up with him.

"And Morwen doesn't talk enough," she muttered under her breath. She waited a block before she said, "I don't completely trust you, Luc."

He almost breathed a sigh of relief. Her mistrust would keep a wide gulf between them and prevent him from getting close enough to her to act on his desires. If he didn't touch her, didn't kiss her, didn't inhale her intoxicating scent, he wouldn't give in to the darkness that threatened to consume him. "Wise girl."

They walked in silence to the Metro. Luc thought he had things under control until they were smashed together on the train. Her lips parted in surprise at their close contact, and he immediately remembered hearing her call his name last night. His cock twitched in response. His fingers ached to caress her breasts and tease her nipples. Her breathing quickened as if she was having similar thoughts, and her pupils dilated. Another thump lurched in his chest.

He closed his eyes and looked away before he lost control of himself again. Would every second around her be this agonizing?

He turned his attention to the flow of people coming and going from the car as they pulled into each station. Dozens of hearts pounded in his ears, but one rose above them all. Hers. It sounded so calm and steady, so oblivious to the monster that was standing next to her. Surely she would have guessed what he was by now. Or had his attempts to be as human as possible fooled even one of the Foundation's members?

He cast a sideways glance at her. She twirled a lock of hair around her finger and stared past him. He would have given anything to know what was going through her mind at this moment. Despite all his years of life, women still puzzled him, and this one confused him more than any other woman he'd ever met. Perhaps that's why he'd chosen to pursue this private hell—to solve the riddle of Daniela before he gave in to his madness.

When they reached the Stazione Termini, another scent made the hairs on his arms stand on end. Blood and death. The other vampires had to be nearby. He locked his fingers around her pack and guided her to a corner away from traffic, praying they hadn't been spotted yet.

As he lowered his head to whisper his instructions in her ear, an overprotective urge almost as powerful as his desire rocked his core. He needed to draw a steadying breath before he could speak. "If we get separated, you need to go to platform five, car seven, berth nine. Can you remember that?"

"Five, seven, nine," she repeated in a shaky voice. She licked her lips, and he fought back a groan. At this rate, he wouldn't be able to keep his hands—or his fangs—off her before they reached Paris. "Do you suspect trouble?"

"I'd say there are about half a dozen vampires crawling around here."

She placed one hand on her hip and cocked a brow. "And this is supposed to be safer than the airport?"

"Of course. There were over a dozen there." He tugged on her pack and pulled her after him. She was their prey. The sooner he concealed her on the train, the better. If they could escape Rome without Colette following them, it would be a miracle.

Miracles were rare these days.

The second they reached the main atrium, he spotted them. Or, to be more precise, they spotted Daniela. A knot lodged in his throat as two vampires began to converge on them at inhuman speeds. "Run," he managed to utter before shoving her toward the train.

"What the—" The words died in Daniela's mouth when she saw Luc ram into another man like a rugby player on meth. The man jumped to his feet with the ease of an acrobat and zeroed in on her. The strange glow in his eyes appeared all too familiar. Apparently, Luc was right about the vampires patrolling the train station.

"Didn't you hear me?" Luc shouted at her while he wrestled with another vampire. "Run."

She hesitated, wondering if she should risk using her magic in public to help Luc. After all, he was the one who knew where the staff was. She should be protecting him, not the other way around. But the second's hesitation gave her enemy the opportunity he needed.

The room spun in circles as he rammed into her and knocked the air from her lungs. He wrapped her hair around his hand and yanked. Pain flared along her scalp, bringing tears to her eyes. The scent of decaying meat rose from his hot breath. “Colette’s been looking for you.”

Fear combined with humiliation, and magic churned inside her like a tornado. “You’ll have to give her my regrets.”

She unleashed a spell at him. Flames licked at her field of vision, and a scream echoed off the walls of the terminal, stopping all the bystanders in their tracks. The vampire jumped off her and frantically tried to stamp out the mini-fires engulfing his clothing.

“Stop showing off.” Luc pulled her to her feet and dragged her behind him as he raced for platform five. “Our train is getting ready to pull out.”

Daniela now knew how a kite felt on a blustery day. No matter how fast she moved her feet, she couldn’t keep up with him. At one point, she swore both feet had come off the ground. The world blurred around her and her stomach heaved.

“Ready?”

It sounded more like a grunt than a question, and the next thing she knew, she was airborne. She landed inside the train and crashed into a pile of luggage like a bowling ball. The piercing beeps of an alarm sounded on either side of her. The doors started sliding shut. She jutted her hand out to try to catch them.

Luc dived for the doors and managed to slip in a split second before they sealed closed. When the train jerked forward, she released the breath she’d been holding. They made it.

“Are you hurt?” The concern on his face rattled her more than the mad dash through the train station.

“I’ll survive.” His frown deepened, so she waved him off. “It’s just a few bruises.”

That answer seemed to satisfy him. He stood and helped her to her feet. His eyes raked over every inch of her, and a flush spread from her cheeks to her pelvis. Damn, even disheveled, he looked irresistible. She reached up and brushed a lock of hair from his eyes.

He sucked in a deep breath and caught her hand as she pulled it back. The intensity of his stare spoke of one emotion—hunger. Her mouth began to water. He wanted her as much as she wanted him. Her heart skipped a few beats. He was dangerous, mysterious and frustrating, but she wanted to fuck him right there in the doorway of a train car. Thankfully, he looked like he’d be more than willing to accommodate her.

She leaned into him and waited with her lips millimeters from his. His heart beat so hard, she could feel it through his chest. His eyelids lowered and he closed the space between them. But unlike last time, this kiss was hesitant, light, fearful. He was holding back on her.

Daniela wrapped her arm around his neck and deepened the kiss. When his mouth parted, she slipped her tongue in to explore every corner of it. A moan rose from his throat and he released her hand as he surrendered to her and began kissing her in return. A bolt of electricity zapped through her body, stronger

than any magic she'd drawn upon. At the moment, she didn't care who or what Luc was. All she needed was to continue kissing him.

"Excuse me," a woman said as she shoved past them.

Luc broke away with his lips still parted. His chest rose and fell at the same frantic pace as hers. "Daniela, perhaps we should find our berth."

Yes, find our berth, get naked and finish this. She followed him down the narrow aisle. Her body both tingled and ached for him. She'd never been this excited about the prospect of sex. Maybe her inner bad girl felt a little thrill knowing he used to be a priest and she was slowly corrupting him.

By the time they reached the berth, she realized he'd already been corrupted. The ease with which he tossed her bag to the corner and simultaneously began unbuttoning her blouse while his lips sought hers spoke of years of practice. She followed suit, removing his shirt by the time he managed to bare her shoulders. They broke their kiss long enough to let the articles of clothing fall to the floor. The loss of contact gave her a split second to catch her breath. *Mio Dio*, she wanted him.

He stared at her, his eyes focusing on her breasts. When they snapped up to her face, a flicker of doubt clouded his expression. "Perhaps we should take things slowly."

Daniela took a step back. "Why? Scared?"

When he didn't answer, she shrugged her shirt back on and began buttoning it. If he wasn't going to put out, then the peep show ended here. She shoved past him and reached for the door.

Luc grabbed her before she could open it and pressed her back against his chest. His breath bathed her ear in lust-driven steam. "Are you mocking me?"

"Well, if the shoe fits..." She licked her lips and wiggled her ass against the increasing bulge in his pants. How much longer could the material restrain it?

"I don't think you can handle me." He leaned closer and pressed his lips against her neck. His hands reached under her blouse and cupped her breasts.

The sheer lace of her bra only added to the exquisite roughness of his fingers as they played with her taut nipples. She bit back a moan and dug her nails into his thighs. *Just keep him aroused*, her body urged. *He'll cave and you'll both find the satisfaction you seek.* "Wanna bet?"

The clang of the plastic buttons hitting the walls of the berth gave her his answer. Her blouse fell to the floor in a puddle, followed by her pants. Then he whirled her around and assaulted her mouth with his. Yet despite his rough handling, he was still showing restraint in the careful nibbling of her lips, the gentle kneading of flesh, the grinding of his pelvis against hers. If he wanted to hurt her, he could, but the fact he didn't intensified the warm ache deep in the pit of her stomach. She eased into his embrace, feeding off his aggression the way a fire fed off fresh kindling.

She gasped for air like a swimmer before diving into the depths of his kiss again. The spicy scent of his skin aroused almost as much as the taste of fine wine that lingered on his tongue. What had he been

drinking before he met her? The combination of earth and jammy fruits accented by a hint of pepper that flavored the recess of his mouth nearly made her drunk, but she still craved more.

She wrapped one of her legs around his, letting his hands support her ass and pull her as close as they could get with their clothes still on. If he didn't get naked soon, she'd have to cast a spell to incinerate his clothes. The few burns would be worth it if she could just get him inside her.

"Daniela, are you certain?"

The raw edge in his voice nearly made her cry out in frustration. He wanted her as much as she wanted him, and he was trying to talk her out of it? "No, I'm just dry humping you for shits and giggles. Now get your pants off and stop teasing me."

Both of his inky brows rose in surprise before his mouth curled into a grin. "Fine. There will be no teasing, no foreplay. Just me inside you."

"Yes, Luc, that's what I want. You inside me, making me come."

He opened the bed and laid her on it. Only a thin rim of blue remained in his eyes. What was visible glowed with a lust that sent a shiver down her spine. He wasn't joking about the lack of foreplay, but it didn't matter. She was so wet, she didn't need anything else to warm her up. She just needed release.

Luc hooked his finger under her bra and tore it from her chest as if it were made of tissue paper. Her panties quickly followed in the same fashion.

She bolted up from the bed. "Hey, those were designer underwear."

"Perhaps you should have kept that in mind when you challenged me." He unbuttoned his pants and kicked them to the corner.

Daniela froze as she admired him in all his naked glory. Michelangelo couldn't have sculpted a finer specimen of man. Thank God Luc left the priesthood. Talk about hiding a light under a bushel. It would be a sin to keep a cock like that locked away behind a vow of celibacy.

But as he crawled onto the bed, her appreciation quickly changed into fear. It had been so long since she'd had sex, she didn't think she could accommodate a normal man, much less someone as well-endowed as Luc.

His knees parted her legs and his fingers traced the opening of her damp sex. "Eager?"

A shudder ripped through her when he grazed her clit. Eager didn't begin to describe what she was feeling.

"Do you like that?" He continued to stroke the sensitive nub, applying more and more pressure until she almost snapped from the tension building inside her.

She bit her bottom lip and nodded. In a few more strokes, she'd probably be bucking like an unbroken horse while she came.

Luc pulled his hand back and shifted his weight until the head of his cock teased the opening of her cunt. "Too bad you didn't want foreplay."

The words hadn't died on his lips before he entered her. Daniela drew a breath in through clenched teeth as he eased into her inch by agonizing inch. A satisfying burn filled her sex from the stretching of the walls. *Mio Dio*, he was huge, but she welcomed the sensation of him filling her. The pain would pass in seconds. The satisfaction would remain.

He paused and winced. "You feel so wonderfully tight."

A shaky laugh broke free from her throat. "Then why do you look like you're in pain?"

"Because I'm trying so hard not to come right now." He opened his eyes and watched her. "Are you ready for more?"

"Holding out on me?"

He thrust the rest of his length into her with a grunt. The breath left her lungs and she dug her fingers into his shoulders. The heat of sex spread through her body like a wildfire. He gave new meaning to the word "fulfillment". Her inner walls were already clenching around him, urging him to start moving and take her closer to the edge.

And yet he remained still inside her, peppering her mouth with kisses instead of making the bed rock.

The frustration became unbearable within a few seconds. She started thrashing her hips underneath him, trying to angle her pelvis so his head rubbed against the one spot that would give her the release she sought. Why was he holding back on her?

Luc stilled her by pressing his full weight on top of her. "Patience, Daniela. I don't want to—" His words ended in a hiss as she squeezed his cock with her inner muscles. His features twisted into a scowl. "Fine. You want it rough?" He withdrew a few inches and rammed into her again.

The friction caused her to gasp. She raised her legs and hooked them around his waist, wanting to accept as much of him as she could. Despite his threat, there was nothing rough in his actions. Each powerful stroke sent ripples of pleasure straight to her womb. His hungry kisses made her crave more of him. The frenzied tempo of their lovemaking matched the wild beating of her heart.

For a few minutes, the only sounds in the berth were the slapping of skin and her moans. As wonderful as it felt to have him inside her, slowly building her up to her climax, there was something strangely familiar about all this. The smell of his desire, the taste of his skin, the intensity of his gaze as he watched her reactions. *This is ridiculous. I just met him yesterday.* But her body seemed to know him better than her mind, angling her hips to allow him deeper penetration and matching the rhythm of his thrusts. It was as if they were designed to bring each other pleasure.

The tension from deep in her gut began to build like the first rumblings of an awakening volcano. A grin appeared on Luc's face as if he knew he'd taken her to the brink, and he increased his pace. Every thrust intensified the internal tremors until they exploded on the surface with violent shudders. Rivers of bliss flowed from her sex to every inch of body. Her breath caught and she clung to him to keep from getting swept away by the intensity of her orgasm.

“Ah, Daniela, you’re more beautiful than the angels when you come.” A few thrusts later, all the restraint melted from his face as he reached his own climax. His arm buckled under him and the weight of his body soothed the lingering spasms of her orgasm.

Both of them struggled for air while their hearts pounded in sync, separated only by the flesh and bone of their chests. She curled his hair around her fingers and held him close until he grew still in her arms. Luc began leaving a trail of nibbles up the side of her neck, continuing to tease her and make her crave the taste of his mouth on hers again. Instead, she settled for the saltiness that hung on her lips after she kissed the beads of sweat away from his forehead.

“Don’t,” he grunted. He closed his eyes and turned his head to the side.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t be so gentle with me. I don’t deserve your affection.” He began to pull away, but she tightened her legs around his waist and kept him in her arms.

She lifted his chin and searched his face. What had happened in his past that made him say that? Her gaze traveled down to the simple wooden cross that dangled from his neck. She brushed her fingers against it, making it sway above her breasts. “Someday you’ll have to tell me your story, Padre Luc.”

The anger swirling inside the dark pupils when he opened his eyes made her regret calling him by that name. He pried her legs open and rolled off the narrow bed. Every movement was forced and purposeful, as if he was on the verge of striking her and trying to direct his rage into something else. “I told you not to call me that.”

“I’m sorry, Luc.”

He opened his mouth to say something else, but a brisk knock interrupted him. “*Biglietti*,” a man said from the other side.

The only perceptible movements were the flare of his nostrils and the ripple of a muscle along his jaw. Daniela knew that look. It was the, “we’re not finished with this conversation”, look, and a little trickle of fear ran down her spine. Whatever tongue-lashing he had in store for her, she hoped it would simmer down before he unleashed it.

Luc flung the remnants of her shirt at her before pulling his pants on. She covered her nakedness while he exchanged a few words with the conductor and presented their tickets. Shame burned her cheeks. What had been a mind-blowing orgasm followed by a few moments of tenderness now made her feel cheap and unwanted. That should teach her to let lust get the better of her. Maybe she’d misjudged him.

When he closed the door, his features had softened. “Get dressed and meet me in the dining car. You need something to eat.” He tugged his shirt over his head and left her alone and more confused than ever.

And I thought only women suffered from PMS.

Chapter Four

Luc pressed his forehead against the cool pane of the window just outside the berth, hoping to ease the ache of his head. Daniela was becoming far more complicated than he could have possibly imagined. The steady thump in his chest testified to that. What the hell was going on?

I should not have given in to temptation.

But instead of being repentant, he still craved her. His lips had sat poised on her neck, his fangs ready to pierce the succulent vein that throbbed under his tongue. Thank God he'd caught himself in time. A monster like him didn't deserve her tenderness. He deserved her hatred, and based on the look of shock on her face when he left the berth, he was well on his way to earning it.

But one question still plagued his mind. Why was his heart beating? Was it a warning of some sort? Or something far more ominous?

As he made his way to the dining car, he dug out a crumpled business card from the back of his wallet. *The Kavanaugh Foundation for the Arts*. He snorted. Who did Morwen think she was fooling with this false front to her organization of vampire hunters and witches? He flipped it over and studied the faded numbers on the back. He'd received it decades ago. Was the number still active?

He slowly dialed it, wondering if he was asking for more trouble with each button he pressed. Three rings later, her musical voice answered. "Hello, Luc. I wondered when I'd hear from you."

He jerked to a stop in the middle of the corridor. "How did you know it was me?"

"Besides the fact that very few people have this number and even fewer would call from a French city code?"

A chuckle eased some of the tension from his muscles, and he sank into a chair at an empty table. "Caller ID takes away some of the surprise, I guess."

"Partly, but there's also the fact that I spent the greater part of an hour last night convincing Daniela she could trust you without revealing what you are."

"You can't reveal my secrets without revealing your own."

Her voice lost some of its Welsh charm and turned cold and businesslike. "I suppose you've called to tell me where you hid the Staff of Octavius."

"Wrong." He shifted in his seat and glanced around the mostly empty car. He would've preferred having this conversation in private, but hopefully no one would overhear him and think he was a raving

lunatic. “I want to discuss something of a more personal nature, and I was hoping you might be able to help me.”

“Are you going to tell me where the staff is?”

“Always looking out for what you want, huh, Morwen?”

“Perhaps you don’t understand what’s at risk, Luc.” Even from the other side of the world, her anger seemed to sizzle through the phone, but he doubted her magic could reach him from that distance.

“On the contrary, I understand all too well what’s at risk. That’s why I took the trouble to find it and hide it from the likes of Hitler and Mussolini. I’m the only one who knows its location, and I can’t use it, unlike a couple of witches I know. It’s safe.”

“It would be safer in my possession.”

“I’m not so certain about that.” He flagged down a waiter and ordered two glasses of wine. “But back to my concerns. You’re the only person I know of who can answer my question. Can someone like me have a beating heart?”

Silence filled the airwaves for nearly half a minute, followed by a string of words in a language spoken centuries before he was born. “You’re not mocking me, are you?”

He placed his hand on his chest and still felt the dull thump on the left side, although now it seemed slower and less powerful than it had when he’d left Daniela. “I swear upon the cross that it’s true.”

More words in ancient Gaelic, some of which had to be curse words based on the tone. “Who caused it?”

“So I have to blame a person for my newest malady?”

Another pause. “Shit! It’s Daniela, isn’t it?”

“Is this due to some spell she might have cast on me?”

“No, no, no.” A heavy sigh came from the other end of the phone. “Part of me wants to tell you to stay the hell away from her, but you’re right. Only I can understand what you’re going through.”

“Please tell me it will go away as soon as she leaves.”

“Maybe, but you’ll always crave her. And if you taste her blood—”

“That won’t even be an issue. I’m above such things. I’ve trained myself not to give in to that temptation.”

“Are you certain you’ll be able to resist her?”

Luc rubbed his forehead. How close did he get less than an hour ago when his fangs dented the skin over her jugular? “I have resisted her so far.”

“You think you’re unbreakable?” More laughter. “I remember when I used to feel that way. Then I met Jack.”

“And you went on living without him. This is nothing for me to worry about, then?”

“On the contrary, it is something to worry about. She’s the reincarnation of your soul mate.”

He snorted. “I don’t believe in any of that nonsense. Besides, I’ve never loved any woman, not in all my 647 years.”

“Maybe not in this life, but in the one prior—”

“I’m not even going to indulge this ridiculous conversation further.” He straightened up in his chair. His pulse pounded in his forehead, heating his skin and causing sweat to bead up around his hairline. “I’m still undecided on whether or not I’ll take Daniela to where the staff is hidden. Until then, my dear Morwen, *au revoir*.”

He clicked the phone closed just before the waiter placed the glass of wine in front of him. Soul mate? What nonsense! It was all drivel that gypsies tried to fool idiots into believing. He was a man of God. When people died, their souls went to their final judgment. They weren’t reborn again into new bodies.

Another lurch in his chest reminded him that perhaps everything he’d been taught by the Church could be wrong. After all, he was technically dead, yet his soul remained trapped in an ageless body, eternally damned on this earth. He rubbed his chest, hoping it would ease the ache building inside. This state of undeath was never mentioned in the Bible.

He exchanged his phone for a small tin in his pocket and added a few pinches of the dark, rust-colored powder to his wine. Another trick he’d learned from Morwen. Adding dried blood made any human food seem palatable. It helped him pass for one of them.

“I see you already ordered for me.” Daniela lowered herself into the chair across the table. Her tousled hair and flushed skin reminded him of their recent interlude.

He could still smell the scent of her arousal, and his cock hardened. *Mon Dieu*, he shouldn’t still want her. “You took your time getting dressed.”

“I had to retrieve some new underwear from my bag. Seems someone ripped my last pair in his impatience.” Despite her accusing tone, she winked at him. “Have you had a chance to look at the menu?”

“I’m not hungry for dinner.” He wanted to smack himself as soon as he said that. He hungered for the unthinkable, but she took his comment as mere flirtation.

Her grin broadened. “I’ll eat quickly then.”

Luc gritted his teeth. She seemed all too eager to meet her death. He waited silently while she ordered, focusing on the rhythm of his breathing and the continual beat that reverberated from his chest through his body. *I will not give in to temptation*, he repeated over and over in his mind. Slowly, he gained control of his bloodlust.

“Thank you for ordering the wine.” She took a sip and he mirrored her actions. So far, she showed no indication she knew what he was. Their behavior reminded him of all the young couples he saw sitting at the café tables that lined the Champs-Élysées. “Do you mind if I ask where we’re going?”

“To my house in Paris.”

“And is that where the staff is?”

“No.” He took his time with his next sip of wine and watched her temper rise. Satisfied he’d washed away all her impure thoughts for the time being, he continued, “My notes are there. If I find you trustworthy, perhaps I’ll give you a copy of them so you can figure out where I hid the pieces.”

“The pieces?” Her mouth hung open. “How did you manage to break it?”

He rubbed his arms, remembering the electric shock that ran through him when he separated the headpiece from the rest of the staff. Such a jolt would have killed a normal mortal. It took him nearly a month to heal from the burns it left behind. “It wasn’t easy.”

She cocked her head to the side. “I’m still in awe that you lived to tell about it. The Staff of Octavius is rumored to be indestructible.”

“But there’s the loophole. I didn’t destroy it. I just rendered it useless. You need both parts in order to use it.”

“Why did you feel the need to do such a thing?”

“This isn’t a child’s toy we’re talking about.” He clasped his hands together and leaned forward on the table. “When Octavius conquered Egypt, he stole the staff from Cleopatra’s treasury. Before him, it belonged to Alexander the Great, and Ramses II before him. Notice a trend here?”

The corner of her mouth rose in a wry smile. “You don’t have to repeat the staff’s history to me. I’m more curious about your part in the story. You found it and wouldn’t use it?”

“I could ask you the same thing. Unlike me, you are capable of unlocking its power.”

“So you’re not a warlock, then.” The waiter placed her plate in front of her and she dug into the pasta instead of continuing the conversation.

Luc welcomed the silence. If she continued her line of questioning, she would probably discover what he was. He weighed the pros and cons of telling her the truth. Would she run for her stake, despite his protestations that he wasn’t a bloodthirsty killer? His gaze fell on the thin aqua veins that laced her hands and his mouth grew dry. Who was he kidding? If he saw a fleck of her blood, he’d probably surrender to his bloodlust. What would happen then? Would he be tempted to turn her?

Daniela sopped up the last traces of sauce with a piece of bread. “So what are you? A vampire hunter?”

A river of ice coursed through his veins. “Why does it matter?”

“I’d like to know what resources I have at my disposal. You obviously know Morwen, and yet you claim you can’t use magic.”

“So you automatically assume I’m a hunter. Can’t I just be a man who knows a bit more than the average human?”

“There’s nothing average about you, Luc.” She stared at him over the rim of her wineglass while she drained the contents. “How did you spot the vampires so quickly at the train station?”

What would be a believable lie? Although he hadn't seen his reflection in over 600 years, he could still feel the two tiny mounds of scar tissue on his neck. He rubbed them with his finger.

She gasped. "You were bitten?" He nodded, and pity darkened her green eyes. "No wonder you hate them. How did you survive?"

He almost growled *I didn't*, but something held him back. Had his centuries of restraint altered him enough to make him appear almost human to one of the Foundation's members? Was this how Morwen fooled them all? "Can we change the subject? I don't want anyone to overhear this conversation and think you're insane."

"Of course." She cleared her throat. "Sophia mentioned you're in the habit of rescuing lost souls."

He chuckled. "Jealous already?"

"More like curious." Daniela tucked her hair behind her ear and jutted her bottom lip out into a pout. "Is this how you rescue all of them?"

He laughed harder now. The little coquette was trying to lay a claim on him. If she was smart, she'd stay far away. "These lost souls she mentioned are people I happen to find wandering the streets after being a vampire's snack."

"They don't kill them?"

"Not all of them kill. Some are quite content to use them for a quick meal. Others are interrupted in the middle of their feed. And some of the victims are so deeply enthralled, they willingly offer themselves. I'm surprised you don't know this."

Her eyes widened. "But that's not what's taught in the Academy. All vampires are bloodthirsty fiends and their bites are excruciatingly painful."

More like having hundreds of nails hammered into your body while your soul is forcibly ripped from it. At least, that was his experience, but he wasn't going to share that tidbit. "Most are that way, and they leave a trail of bodies behind that quickly catch the attention of the Foundation's hunters. But the ones that can master the technique of entralling their victims and controlling their thirst tend to live the longest among mortals without being detected."

"How do you know so much about this? Were you enthralled by a pretty little vamp into becoming her snack?"

"No."

Daniela jumped in her seat at the tone of his voice. He crossed his arms and held her gaze, unwilling to apologize for snapping at her. She had pushed too far, and he needed to let her know before she delved into the dark recesses of his past.

"How do you know these things if you aren't a member of the Foundation?"

"Years of experience. Most of the victims I find are young girls. All they can remember is having a drink with a stranger and waking up disoriented in the middle of the street with two fresh puncture marks

on their necks. They carry no painful memories of the incident. Instead, they believe they were drugged or drank too much.”

“All of them?”

He took a deep breath. “No. Only the lucky ones.”

“Is that why you return to Rome, even though you live in Paris?”

“Partially.” How could he explain the constant pull Rome had on him? The dreams that haunted his subconscious? The eerie feeling of déjà vu when he explored the ancient heart of the city? To admit that might give evidence to Morwen’s crazy belief in reincarnation. Instead, he chose to attribute it to the memories of his maker that had slammed into his mind when he was turned. “I know I have a purpose there.”

She nodded. “It is good of you to take them to a place where they can recover.”

“Don’t try to make me into a saint, Daniela.”

“I already know you’re not.” She bit her lip and ran her hand up his thigh under the table. “You can be quite wicked when you want.”

He stopped her before she reached the aching ridge of his erection. “Hasn’t anyone ever warned you not to play with fire?”

“Lucky for me, it’s my strongest element.” She slipped her hand free and stood next to him. “Perhaps you’d like to play with me,” she whispered in his ear.

The warmth of her skin called to him like a siren’s song. He needed to resist it or he’d drown in a sea of blood. Why was God testing him like this? Even after he’d accepted his damnation, he’d still tried to remain good. He’d never taken a human life, never forced himself on an unwilling victim. But from the moment he saw Daniela, his thoughts raced down a sinful path of lust and gluttony he needed to resist.

“I’ll be waiting for you.”

Luc forced himself not to watch her as she left the dining car, but in his mind, he still saw the sway of her hips, still remembered her tight wetness as he plunged into her. His hands shook as he finished the last of his wine. Common sense told him he should remain in the dining car all night instead of returning to the berth, but he also knew he needed to watch over her and protect her from any vampire that might have snuck on board. If any of them hurt her...

He bolted up from his chair and ran down the corridor. She’d been so focused on seducing him, another vampire could easily surprise her. When he got there, he’d give her a stern lecture about being hypervigilant so that the incident at the train station wouldn’t be repeated. He’d force those impure thoughts from her mind, from his mind, and replace them with fear. He’d remind her of her mission.

He flung the door open and Daniela yelped. His mouth went dry as soon as he saw her. For the first time, he soaked in the luscious curves of her naked body, from the heavy globes of her breasts to the narrow cinch of her waist to the vee between her thighs.

“Are you going to let everyone have a peek?”

His chest tightened, intensifying the hammering of his heart. What kind of magic was this? A blessing? A curse? His eyes never left her as he closed the door behind him.

“Stop trying to talk yourself out of it, Luc.” She pressed her body against his. “We’re both adults. There’s no reason why we can’t enjoy our time together and satisfy our desires.”

He reached up to cup her breasts. Would he ever be satisfied? Even if he made love to her all night, he’d still crave her blood.

She pulled his shirt off. The touch of her flesh almost sizzled against his skin. His breath hitched when her lips brushed against his. “Do I have to undress you?”

His muscles locked. *I must not lose control.*

She continued to trace his mouth with featherlight kisses and flicks of her tongue, while her hands unbuttoned his pants and pushed them to his ankles. Part of him breathed a sigh of relief at the release of the erection straining against the fabric, but a groan choked his throat when her fingers grazed the sensitive place on the head of his cock. “Please don’t fight me, Luc, not when we both so obviously want each other.”

“I’m not denying that I want you. I want you in ways you can’t imagine.”

“Show me.” She punctuated her challenge by kissing him again, deeper this time, her tongue prying into his mouth and swirling around his.

Her aggression surprised him. He was used to being the hunter, the dominant one, the person in control. But from the moment he’d entered the berth, his role had changed. He was the seduced, the pursued. *The victim*, his mind whispered. He broke away from her. “What kind of magic is this, Daniela?”

A wrinkle formed between her brows. “I haven’t cast any spell on you, Luc. Why are you fighting something that is human nature?”

“Because it’s our self-control that separates us from the beasts, from the monsters that lurk in the darkness.” *From the monster that lives inside me.*

Her face fell and she took a step away from him. “You must think I’m some sort of whore, throwing myself at you this way.” Then her mouth tightened into a thin line. “But you’re wrong. I don’t hide behind this moral façade you conveniently throw up whenever you want to think you’re better than me.” She whirled around and reached for her clothes.

He grabbed her hips and pulled her back to him. His cock pressed against the softness of her ass, so close to the slick folds he so desperately wanted around it. The pulse in her neck quickened, calling to him like an oasis in the middle of a desert. He gently kissed it, and his fangs elongated. How would her blood taste? “Are you calling me a hypocrite?”

A shudder rippled through her body, and he smelled fear mixed with desire. “Perhaps.”

“You shouldn’t tempt me.” He pinched her nipples and nibbled at the junction of her neck and shoulder, taking care not to sink his fangs into her. “You have no idea what I’m capable of doing.”

“I can handle you.” Despite her brave words, her voice trembled.

I should show her what I am, a dark voice whispered in his mind. I should end my misery and drink her dry. The stupid witch won’t even stop me. She’s too caught up in her own lust to recognize the evil behind her.

She shifted in front of him, standing on her toes so his cock nudged the opening of her cunt. Her whimper rivaled the sweetest music he’d ever heard. “Please, Luc. I need you inside me.”

His teeth grazed her neck, poised to pierce the thin skin over her vein. Would just a few drops of her blood quench this desire, or would her flesh be enough to satisfy his hunger for now? He closed his eyes and let the war between his thirst and the last shreds of his humanity play out inside him.

“Luc.”

He snapped his eyes open and saw his reflection staring back at him in the window. *This can’t be possible. Monsters like me don’t have reflections.*

Daniela wiggled her ass, teasing him and coating his cockhead in her cream. The sound of her hoarse panting heightened his arousal. “Damn it, Luc!”

Her cry of frustration snapped him out of his daze. He pushed her head down, bending her at the waist and placing her sweet blood as far away as possible while he guided his cock into her from behind. They both sighed simultaneously. The sound brought a smile to his lips, but she cut his joy short when she changed the angle of her hips and rocked forward on her toes. He smacked her ass and she froze. “Naughty girl.”

She moaned and melted against him, taking him even deeper than before.

He massaged the hand-sized mark on her cheek before spanking her again. Her walls clenched around him and her eyes sparkled in pleasure as he watched her reaction in the window. *So, she liked that?* Another smack, and she arched her back and clamped down so tightly around him, he could have sworn he’d made her come right then and there.

“More, Luc.”

What kind of woman was she? He began to thrust inside her, controlling the movements of her hips and spanking her when she tried to dictate their rhythm. Each time he did, her smile widened and his balls tightened. If he continued like this, he’d come too quickly. He dug his fingers into her hips and rammed even harder into her, determined to maximize the friction of every stroke.

She braced herself against the window and rocked with him. “Mmm, you know exactly how to please me.”

A grin touched his lips. “Always a pleasure.”

And he meant that. Every second inside her was pure bliss. The way his head rubbed against the tight walls of her sex. The curve of her ass in front of him and the sight of his cock entering the slick pink folds beneath it. The soft floral scent of her perfume that rose from her sweat-damp skin. All of it was perfection. Making love to her seemed to be ordained from above. His heart grew lighter with every stroke, completely free of the guilt that had weighed upon him in the past.

“I’m close, Luc, so close.”

So was he. The orgasm welled inside him, threatening to tear down his restraint. But he wanted to make sure she found release first. He let go of one of her hips and sought out her clit. As soon as he touched it, she gasped. He caught it between his fingers and rubbed, slowly increasing the pressure until her body went rigid and her breath came out in harsh pants.

When she cried out in pleasure, her cunt seized around his cock, and he couldn’t hold back any longer. He exploded into her. The waves of his orgasm matched the spasms rocking her body, and for a second, he didn’t know where he ended and she began. He held her close, not wanting anything to interrupt their shared ecstasy, until the last drop of come had been milked from him.

He leaned forward and pressed his lips between her shoulder blades. “Satisfied?”

She made a purr of contentment. “For now.”

“You’re going to be my undoing, Daniela.” He pulled her into the bed with him and curled his body around hers. His heart pounded even louder than before, almost blocking out the sound of her breathing. He remained awake long into the night, his mind running over the events of the last twenty-four hours.

Would she be his undoing? Or his salvation?

Chapter Five

The train jerked to a stop so suddenly, Daniela would have fallen out of the narrow bed if a strong arm hadn't tightened around her waist and held her close. A warm ridge of flesh stiffened against her thigh and a deep voice groaned behind her, "Are we coming into Paris already?"

She smiled and settled deeper into Luc's embrace. The soreness between her legs gave testimony to the forcefulness of his lovemaking, but so did the pleasant memories of coming over and over again with him inside her. And still, she wanted more. "I would guess so, based on how the train is crawling."

"Too bad." He pressed his lips against her shoulder. "I would prefer to stay just like this."

"Me too." She wanted to add that it was the best night's sleep she'd ever had, but that would be a half-truth. Luc haunted her dreams. Or at least, someone who looked like him dressed in a toga. Instead of being freaked out by these visions, they strangely comforted her.

I must have drunk too much last night, she thought as she sat up and rubbed her eyes. Either that or I inhaled some kind of hallucinogen while in the catacombs. Why else would I dream about Luc in ancient Rome?

"You might want to close the curtains before you give anyone along the tracks a view of your lovely breasts."

Heat rose to her cheeks when she remembered how he'd taken her from behind last night. The sensation of his thick cock stroking her sex. The wicked gleam in his eyes as he spanked her when she tested him. Her pleasure at watching their reflections in the window while the Italian countryside blurred by under the moonlight.

She grew wet just thinking about how naughty it all seemed now. Perhaps she'd been too good with her other lovers, too eager to please them. Luc brought out a new side to her, one that promised more pleasure than she'd ever experienced. And better yet, he was still in her bed when she woke. Could this be the beginnings of a relationship?

Luc grabbed the edge of the fabric curtains and yanked them shut, shaking his hand after he released them. A hiss escaped his lips.

"What's wrong?"

A look of panic crossed his face a second before he smoothed the wrinkles. "I wrenched my wrist a little."

"Let me see."

“No!” He jerked his hand back when she reached for it, hiding it behind his uninjured hand. “We should get dressed before the conductor catches us naked again.” He gave her a playful smack on her bottom and her sex clenched. His grin widened. “The sooner we get back to my house, the sooner we can continue this little game.”

Merda, he wanted her as much as she wanted him. Was it insane to think of nothing but fucking him over and over again? She studied his lean frame as he searched for his clothes. He was thin, but the sculpted lines of his muscles spoke of his underlying strength. The only criticism she could come up with was that he appeared too pale, like he’d spent too many days locked away from the sun. Perhaps they should remedy that with a nice vacation to the Greek Islands.

“Get dressed,” he reminded her again and pulled her out of the bed. He gently kissed her fingers. “When we reach my house, I’ll give you my map to part of the staff and you can thank me properly for helping you find it.”

A chill rippled over her skin, puckering her flesh. Was that his interpretation of last night? That she was using sex as payment for his help? She snatched her clothes from him and dressed quickly, refusing to look at him for fear he’d see the shame on her face. “I am not a whore,” she whispered to herself.

“I never said you were.”

She froze. How had he overheard her? Her cheeks burned and her stomach churned. “I—”

“I know you didn’t mean for me to hear that, but I did.” He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Forgive me, Daniela. I’m in a position I’ve never been in before with a woman.”

“What is that? Never had a woman seduce you to get something from you before?” Her words sounded shrill and bitter to her ears. His face darkened and she regretted ever saying them, even in sarcasm.

“Is that what this is to you?”

The low, even tone in his voice scared her more than any shouting would have. Her mouth went dry. “No.”

“Then why did you say that?”

“Because that’s obviously what you’re thinking.”

His fingers curled around her arms and he stared at her in silence for almost a minute. “You have no idea what I’m thinking, *streghetta*.”

The use of that one derogatory word hurt more than a slap in the face. Flashbacks of the taunts she endured as a child flooded her mind, of how everyone in her village avoided her because she was a witch. Images of the angry villagers calling her *streghetta* and dousing her with holy water flitted through her mind. Her parents were only too happy to hand her over to the red-haired woman who’d mysteriously appeared one day and offered to take Daniela away to a special school in America.

His grip loosened and his lips fell open. “I said something that hurt you.”

She wrestled free of him. He was no different than the others. No, he was worse. He actually made her believe he could accept her for what she was, only to throw it back at her. “As soon as I find the Staff of Octavius, I’m returning home to New York.”

He looked away, and she almost thought she saw a hint of sadness in the way his brow wrinkled. “That’s probably for the best.”

She didn’t ask for him to elaborate, although the question nagged at her worse than an itchy spot she couldn’t scratch. Delving into his thoughts would probably only cause her more pain. She didn’t want to know why he was rejecting her. The point was already clear. He didn’t want her at the end of this, and she needed to stop deluding herself into thinking there was something more to it than just great sex. Mind-blowing, hot, intense orgasm-producing sex, but sex nonetheless. It was just physical. No need to involve her heart.

By the time the train pulled into Gare de Lyon, she’d steeled herself against any romantic notions when it came to Luc. This was purely business, nothing more. He had something she wanted, and she needed to play nice until she got it. Once she did, she could deliver it to Morwen and take a much-deserved vacation from the Foundation.

Hundreds of people crowded the station at this early morning hour, many commuting into the city and rushing to get to their jobs. Luc kept a firm grip on her pack as he guided her through the masses on the platform and into the main part of the station. As intent as he was on getting her out, as soon as she saw a sign for the toilets, her body reminded her of its own needs.

“Can I please use the ladies’ room?”

“What?” He halted so quickly, several people rammed into them. His brows drew together. “Can’t this wait?”

The aching in her bladder screamed that it couldn’t, and she shook her head. “I’ll only be a couple of minutes.”

He rolled his eyes and sighed but swept his arm in the direction of the ladies’ room. “Two minutes.”

“Give me a break—I’ve been holding it in since before dinner.” Who did he think he was, ordering her around and making a big deal about allowing her to take care of her most basic of human needs? Even after she relieved herself, she lingered in the bathroom, staring at her reflection in the mirror. Her lips looked swollen and redder than usual. But then, she’d been kissed more in the last couple of days than she had in the last year.

She fluffed her hair, taking her time to show Luc he wasn’t the boss of her.

“Enjoying yourself, little witch?” a woman’s voice said behind her.

Merda! Colette had used her lack of a reflection to sneak up on her. She took a calming breath, hoping the vampire couldn’t hear the pounding of her heart. “I’d be better if you were dead.”

“Wrong answer.”

A hand fisted itself in Daniela's hair and rammed her head into the mirror. Glass shattered around her, and a warm liquid trickled down her cheek. She blocked out the throbbing pain in her temple and focused on gathering her magic. A flash of red erupted from her fingertips and Colette yelped, releasing Daniela in the process. A second spell sent the vampire flying into an empty stall.

Daniela pressed her hand to her head to staunch the bleeding. "This morning is already off to a splendid start."

"Your loyalty to Morwen is almost heartbreaking to watch." She staggered to her feet and wiped the blood from her nose. "She'll betray you in the end, just like she did me. Once she has what she wants, she'll leave you to die."

Could Colette be telling the truth? Ice threaded her veins and threatened to freeze the air in her lungs. She felt like she was standing in an industrial freezer rather than a bathroom. At first, Daniela blamed her fear. Then she spotted the faint silver light pulsating from her adversary's hands. Another spell.

She called on fire, her strongest element, and two flames appeared in her palms. "I'm growing tired of your lies."

Colette laughed. "I speak the truth. Ask Morwen. Ask her how she abandoned me to the Nazis so she could save her own skin. And once you learn the truth about her, you'll see that everything she stands for is just a sham."

Her breath hitched. What if she was telling the truth? Something about Morwen never sat well with her, even though she considered her a close friend. The Head Witch kept more secrets than she could possibly imagine, but was treachery one of them?

Colette took a step toward her, undaunted by the dancing flames. "Tell me where the Staff of Octavius is and I'll let you live, which is more than Morwen or Père Luc can promise you."

At the mention of Luc, her heart wrenched. Was he part of Morwen's plan?

Something slammed into the other side of the ladies' room door and she snapped her head in that direction. Colette saw her distraction and lunged at Daniela, her eyes glowing bright with the feeding frenzy and her fangs bared.

Instinct took over, and Daniela launched the two balls of fire at the vampire. A high-pitched scream echoed off the porcelain surfaces of the sinks and toilets. She barely had time to gather another spell before Colette doused the flames and attacked again. This time, she managed to hurl her enemy at the radiator. A hiss of smoke exploded from the resulting broken pipe, and the smell of gas filled the room.

"Daniela," Luc's voice called from the other side of the door, followed by the sound of another thump.

An evil grin curled Colette's lips. "I brought reinforcements, little witch, especially after your bodyguard's demonstration at Termini. Tell me what I want to know or you'll both die."

The air wavered as gas filled the room, and she backed away toward the door, reaching for her rucksack without taking her eyes off of her opponent. She could end this—end all of this—now. Without Colette, Marcellus wouldn't be able to use the Staff of Octavius. Only a true witch could wield its powers. But if she cast a fire spell, what were her chances of survival?

"I see the fear churning in your eyes. What are you planning?" Colette lowered into a crouch, ready to spring for the next attack. "Tell me where it is and we'll leave you and your bodyguard alone."

"Or I end this now." Flames sparked from Daniela's fingers and grew into balls of fire.

Colette's eyes widened. "You're mad!" she gasped when the flame raced toward the gas leak behind her. The vampire's mouth hanging open in shock was the last thing Daniela saw before the explosion hurled her through the door.

One vampire, Luc could handle. Two took a bit of strategy, but he had years of experience over the vampires standing in front of him. Unfortunately, there were more than just two.

All four vampires pounced on him seconds after Daniela disappeared into the ladies' room. While he fought them off, Colette strolled past them as if nothing was amiss. Fear for Daniela's safety tore his concentration from the fight and earned him a bloody lip.

One of them slammed his back against the door and peered at Luc's face. "Well, well, mates, lookie what we have here. A traitor to his own kind."

"I never wanted to be one of you," Luc growled right before he punched the Cockney vampire in the face. One of them caught their friend while the other two attacked. Luc fought to stay in control, but he could feel the bruises erupting on his face.

The sound of something crashing into metal came from inside the ladies' room, and he shook off his attacker. He had to get her out of there before Colette drained her dry. An ache sharper than any dagger wound formed where his long-dead heart now beat. "Daniela," he called.

No answer came, and the ache intensified.

An arm clamped around his throat, pulling him away from her. His muscles strained against his captor. Something boiled deep inside him that he hadn't felt in centuries—pure rage. He let the beast inside him seize control, determined to tear his enemies to shreds, all in the hope he could rescue the seductive witch who made him more alive than he had been in centuries.

Luc dug his fingers into his attacker's arm and yanked. The sound of bones and sinew ripping rose over the pounding of his heart. Foul-smelling blood squirted into his eyes. He hurled the severed arm at the other three vampires and braced for the next attack.

None of them moved. Their mouths hung open in shocked silence while their friend bled out onto the station floor. The crowd that gathered around the fight started to scream and disperse in panic.

After he realized the other vampires wouldn't challenge him, he spun on his heel. He needed to rescue Daniela.

The door flung open, followed by Daniela and a ball of fire. He caught her and curled his body around her, trying to shield her from the explosion.

Screams filled the train station, followed by cries of "bomb!" He gathered her into his arms and ran toward the Metro, ignoring the shocked expressions of the humans surrounding him.

"Luc," Daniela moaned and wriggled against him.

Relief flooded his veins, cooling the rage that had burned inside him moments before. She was still alive. "Don't move unless you want me to drop you."

"You're running so fast, I'm going to be sick."

If he wasn't racing to reach the Number 12 Metro train, he would have laughed. When they got someplace safe, he'd convince her it was all a dream, or perhaps blame it on a bump on her head. Anything but the truth. Now more than ever, he needed to make sure she didn't associate him with Colette and her henchmen. He wasn't a monster, no matter what had just happened.

They slid into the train as the warning bells sounded. He found an empty seat and sank into it, holding her close. Her fingers fisted into his shirt. Her warm breath tickled the side of his neck. Once again, they'd managed to escape, and he resolved to take better care of her in the future. She wouldn't leave his sight.

When the train jerked into motion, he drew in a deep breath. That's when the smell hit him. Sweet and rich and oh-so tempting. Her blood. His fangs elongated and his cock stiffened. He wanted her—all of her—and the feeling intensified with every beat of his heart. He had to get away from her before he...

The image of her pale face frozen in death flashed in front of his eyes. Luc tossed her out of his arms and retreated to the other side of the car. He needed as much distance between them as he could manage without jumping through the window onto the tracks below.

The second's worth of shock in her expression faded into concern. "What's wrong, Luc?"

The skin on his face felt too tight, like it belonged to a much smaller man and had been overstretched to fit his skull. Blood trickled down her face onto her clothes, pulling at him stronger than anything he'd ever known. His mouth grew dry, and he knew the only thing that could quench his thirst was flowing right in front of him. He pressed himself into the corner. "Blood," he rasped.

Her eyes widened and sweat beaded along his forehead. *Mon Dieu*, had he just revealed what he was to her?

"Does the sight of it make you ill?" she asked, her voice sounding so innocent, so unaware of his struggle not to sink his fangs into her and draw out every precious drop.

He nodded. Yes, it made him ill. It turned him into the monster he feared becoming.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a knitted cap. As she gathered her hair and tucked it into the cap, the evidence of her injury became less obvious. Then she turned her jacket inside out so the only blood he saw was what coated the side of her face. "Is that better?"

He leaned over and buried his face between his knees. He may not see it anymore, but he could still smell it. Maple sugar and vanilla, with a hint of bourbon. So sweet, he could almost taste it. His stomach rolled.

"Don't worry, Luc. When we get to your house, I'll clean up."

He didn't even look up. Instead, he focused on the cracks in the laminate floor. A pair of blood-splattered shoes moved into his line of sight and a cool hand caressed the back of his neck.

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?"

No, I'm trying not to rip your throat out in front of everyone on this train. But he couldn't even bring himself to look into her eyes for fear she'd witness the bloodlust glowing inside him. He nodded and shrugged her off.

"Fine, I'll leave you alone. Just let me know where we need to get off."

"Madeleine."

The rocking of the train lulled him into a half-slumber, and by the time they reached Madeleine, he felt like he'd been drugged. At least that was an improvement over the fierce thirst that had consumed him earlier. She rose when he did and followed him onto the platform, concern wrinkling her brow. *I don't deserve her pity*, he thought as he turned away from her. *I deserve to burn for all my sinful thoughts.*

And yet, he only regretted his thoughts of drinking from her. What had happened last night would go down as some of his favorite memories. The passion in her eyes, the flush of her skin, the way her sex tightened around him when she came. Nothing could compare to that.

His heart gave another lurch, reminding him of the strange changes she'd caused in him. Maybe he should listen to Morwen's nonsense, if only to get a few more answers about his farcical return to humanity.

The sugary scent of Daniela's blood assaulted him, reminding him once again that he would never be fully human. He clamped his teeth together. The sooner she got cleaned up, the easier it would be for him to be around her.

He wove his way through the people milling around, not bothering to check if she followed. He knew she did. He could smell her. The crowds thinned as he ventured into a little-used area of the station and fished for his keys.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see." He stopped in front of a metal door and unlocked it. A dark tunnel waited for them on the other side. "Come along."

Daniela wrapped her hand around his, and he flinched. It would be so easy to lure her into the tunnel and drain her dry. No one would see them. No one would ever find her body. It would be the perfect murder. But the hammering of his heart prevented him from harming her. He didn't know why their paths had crossed or what purpose she would serve in his life, but he knew he needed to be patient to find out.

"There aren't any spiders in here, are there?"

Laughter welled up, easing the tension inside him as it broke free. "Most likely, but I'll protect you from them."

He locked the door behind them, plunging them into complete darkness. She moved closer to him, her grip on his hand tightening, but he didn't share her fear. To a creature like him, the darkness was an old friend. His thirst retreated. He could do this. He could overcome his baser instincts and retain some of his humanity. He might even be able to enjoy her company a bit longer before he'd inevitably have to reveal himself to her. Was it too much to hope that she'd accept him?

You're being a fool. All she wants is the Staff of Octavius. Once she finds it, she'll be gone. As soon as he admitted that to himself, the emptiness returned with such a vengeance, his chest burned as if someone had thrust a stake into his heart.

Daniela would be the death of him.

He navigated the tunnel with ease, stopping in front of another locked metal door. He slid the key into it. The locks groaned in protest as they turned, but he was home. He flipped on the lights and ushered her into the basement before closing the door and locking it. "Welcome to my *maison*."

Daniela surveyed the dusty basement and rubbed her arms. "You have a secret entrance to your house?"

He nodded. "It was built during the First World War and was later employed by the Resistance during the Second World War. I like using it from time to time, when I want to go about unnoticed." *Or when I want to avoid sunlight.*

"Good idea. Even though it's the day, I have a feeling we could be followed. That is, if Colette survived the explosion." A smile lightened her face. "We may not have to worry about her anymore."

"Maybe, but she wasn't alone. Remember that." He pointed to the door above. "Help yourself to anything you want in the house. I'll call for a doctor to see to your injuries."

"Thanks, Luc. I really mean that."

When her footsteps disappeared upstairs, he leaned his head against the wall and heaved a sigh of relief. He'd done it. He'd resisted the ultimate temptation. He was rubbing his face when something sweet crossed his lips. His tongue flicked across his fingers, lapping up the sweet nectar that clung to them.

Her blood.

His pulse raced. His breath quickened. Sweat ran down his neck, soaking his shirt. A tidal wave of emotions slammed into him—fear, longing, desire—all threatening to rip him apart. He knew there was no

turning back now. He'd tasted her blood, and his thirst overwhelmed his willpower. He would drink from her before the day was done. He would make her his.

Chapter Six

“Just one more staple and we’ll be done.”

Daniela winced when she heard the click of the stapler, even though she didn’t feel any pain. The doctor had taken care to numb her up well before inspecting the wound for any shards of glass and closing it. “Do you know Luc?”

“Yes, he’s been my neighbor for almost ten years now. You’re the first person I’ve ever seen him with.”

She chewed her bottom lip. So far, all she managed to learn about her lover/bodyguard was that he was a former priest and kept to himself. Oh, and he tended to prefer antique furniture from three centuries ago. None of it made much sense when viewed together. “So he’s never had a wife or a girlfriend?”

“Not that I’ve noticed. Again, I see very little of him. But he’s quiet, and he keeps his home neat. I couldn’t ask for a better neighbor.” He took a step back. “I think you’ll live. No need for a bulky bandage.”

She sat up and smiled. Dried blood caked her curls and cracked on her skin. She couldn’t wait to get in the shower and clean up. “*Grazie.*”

“*Prego,*” he replied with an amused grin. “If you have any concerns, don’t hesitate to give me a call.”

Her phone rang as the doctor left the room. When she saw the number, she cringed. Morwen. Her voice shook when she answered. “Hello?”

“What the hell do you and Luc think you’re doing? Do you have any idea of the damage you caused? Do you know how many witches I’ll have to deploy to wipe those people’s memories clean?”

Her heart rose into her throat. She’d never heard the Head Witch this angry before. “Um, no.”

“Your little escapade made the international news. The only good thing about it is that the media is blaming some terrorist group. But blowing up the ladies’ room in one of the largest train stations in Paris? What were you thinking?”

Annoyance crept up Daniela’s spine, locking each vertebra into place. “You have no idea what we were up against, Morwen, so shut the fuck up. Colette had me cornered, and it was the only thing I could think of at the time.”

Morwen muttered a few words Daniela didn’t understand, but she caught the gist of them. “Do I need to remind you of the need for secrecy?”

Colette’s words echoed in her mind. “Of course, Morwen. Nothing is more important than the mission. Not even my own life.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Why don’t you tell me about your relationship with Colette? She mentioned you were all too comfortable abandoning her when it came to saving yourself.”

Morwen stammered for words on the other end, and a pride surged through Daniela. She’d finally stood up to the Head Witch and rendered her speechless. As far as she knew, no one had ever dared do such a thing.

“Listen, Morwen. You gave me a job to do, and I’ll do it. But when I get back to New York, I may need to reconsider my future with the Foundation.” There. She’d said it. No more being bullied. She ended the conversation by turning her phone off, tossing it on the bed and heading into the shower. Hopefully, by the time she got out, Luc would remember where he’d hidden the staff.

Luc stared at the faded scrawl in front of him, easily deciphering the encrypted message he’d written over sixty years ago. The headpiece was in Copenhagen. He knew that. Why did he drag Daniela here when he could’ve taken her directly to it? Why was he making every excuse to string her along and tempt fate?

Because you don’t want to let her go, his mind answered. From the moment he first tasted her lips, she had revived more than just his heart. She’d revived his soul and reminded him of what it felt to truly desire something.

His mind filed through over six centuries of memories, but nothing rivaled the intense storm brewing inside him now. The lust, the hunger, the possessive pull he felt whenever he held her in his arms. Not even a cold shower calmed him. The lurch in his chest cruelly reminded him of how she’d taunted him with regaining his humanity. He would have been more than ready to give her the location and leave her, but once he’d tasted her blood, he realized he never wanted to be without her.

His mouth watered. *No, I can’t give in to this. I won’t. I refuse to become that kind of sinner.* But the sugary sweetness that hung on the tip of his tongue overpowered his mind. His vision turned red. He’d end this torment now.

He rose from his chair, his fangs piercing his bottom lip. The bitterness of his own blood did little to quench his thirst. She was the lamb meant to be sacrificed, and after he drained her dry, he’d answer for his sins.

A stab of repulsion rocked him, and he gripped the edge of his desk to steady himself. *Mon Dieu, what have I become?* He now understood how the image of Bathsheba bathing lured King David onto the path of sin. From the moment he saw Daniela, she’d tempted more than Satan himself could.

Maybe that’s why they burned witches in the past. Just by their very nature, they led men along the devil’s highway.

The image of her burning flesh awakened a new sensation in him, making his nostrils sting from the scent of sulfur and charred meat. In his mind, he saw a gray cloud of ash descend around him. Daniela's sobs echoed in his ears. He held her close, wanting to shield her from the destruction around them, wishing he could silence her screams.

As quickly as the image hit him, it vanished. He shook his head a few times, trying to erase the sensations from his memory. What the hell was that?

"Luc." Daniela's voice jerked him back to the present, and he rubbed the vision from his eyes before she appeared in the doorway of his study. A worried frown marred the fullness of her lips. "Are you still ill? Maybe I should call your neighbor back to come take a look at you."

"No!" He didn't mean to shout the word, but it stopped her dead in her tracks. "I'll be fine. I just need..." He ran his hand over his face. What did he need? A few minutes ago, he was ready to drain every drop of her essence. Now his soul shuddered from an image he couldn't explain.

She picked up the journal and flipped through the yellowed pages. "This looks ancient."

He snatched it from her and tucked it into his pocket. "It's none of your business. All you need to know is that the next stop is Copenhagen."

"And that's where the staff is?"

When he drew in a breath to calm his temper, the sweet scent of her blood teased his nose. He took a step toward her, fighting to stay in control when every fiber of his being was telling him to give in to temptation. Only his mind rebelled.

Her breath quickened. Even from a few feet away, he knew the pace of the pulsations in her neck that perfectly matched the beats of her heart. The beats that mimicked the low thumps in his own chest. What was she doing to him?

"When do we leave?" She licked her lips and he bit back a groan, wishing he could be the one licking them, gently biting them to draw out the nectar that flowed through her veins.

He had to tear his gaze away from her before he gave in to the monster rising up within him. His voice cracked when he replied, "Tonight."

"Are you certain you're not ill, Luc?" She brushed the hair away from his face and trailed her fingers along his cheek. "You've been acting strange since the train station. I'm worried about you."

The last four words hit him like a punch in the gut, shocking him from his self-absorbed world of misery. Ever since he'd been changed, only one person who knew what he was had ever shown concern for him. Morwen. The mournful note in Daniela's voice was different from her boss's, though. It sounded like it came straight from her heart.

Despair shot up from his gut and filled his limbs with lead. He couldn't destroy her. "I just need some time alone."

She backed away, her face falling. "Of course. I should have expected that."

Luc didn't pick up on the pain in her words until she was halfway up the stairs. He rushed out of the library. "What do you mean by that?"

She paused on the staircase. "Nothing. I mean, most men react this way when they witness my powers. I'm used to that by now."

"Daniela, it's not that."

"You don't have to make excuses, Luc," she said, followed by a fake laugh. "I mean, I am a witch. Most people are bothered by that."

"I'm not."

"Then why are you pushing me away?" Her fingers curled around the banister and turned white.

With her eyes flashing in anger and her cheeks blooming with color, she was more tempting than he could've imagined. He needed to have her—all of her—before he ripped the banister out of the wall. He was gambling out of pure desperation, but part of him wondered if he could enjoy her without crossing the line, without tasting her blood again.

Luc rushed up the stairs after her, never breaking his stride as he tossed her over his shoulder and carried her into his bed. Even with the blackout curtains drawn to shield him from the sunlight, he could see her lush lips parted in surprise, the rise and fall of her chest as she tried to catch her breath.

"Luc, what are you—"

He silenced her with a kiss. His desperation ebbed as she yielded to him, opening her mouth to let him indulge in the berry-sweet recesses.

She tugged at his clothes, and he broke the kiss long enough to pull his sweater over his head and allow her to do the same. The movement of her hair fanned the scent of her blood his way. Even under the floral mask of her shampoo, he could still detect it. Warm, spicy vanilla. His fangs elongated and he forced himself to draw in a steadying breath before he pierced the delicate skin of her neck.

Her fingers wrestled with the button of his trousers. "Please don't kiss me like that and then stop."

But he needed to stop. He needed to regain control of himself before he drained her dry. He stared down at her, the desire written on her face as clearly as the letters in a book. What had he done to deserve such surrender from her? He was a monster, an abomination, a creature that could snap her in half while he slurped up the crimson nectar that filled her veins.

She grew still under him and caught his cheeks between her hands. "What is it?"

"I don't want to hurt you, Daniela, but I'm so worried I will. You have no idea how much I hunger for you."

She pressed her fingers into the knotted muscles of his shoulders, massaging the tension away as they crawled down his back. "You don't have to adhere to your vows of celibacy anymore. For the moment, I'm yours. Yours completely," she whispered before pressing her lips to his.

The tenderness of her kiss set his mind reeling. Could she feel something more for him than pure lust?

“Do I need to be on top?” The corner of her mouth rose into a half grin.

“No.” His voice sounded raw and hoarse, like he’d gone days without water. He wanted her for more than just this moment. He envisioned an eternity with her. But could he force that on her?

“Then make love to me once more before we have to leave.”

Her plea was so timid, so genuine, as if she knew this was the last time they would lie in each other’s arms. By tomorrow, she’d have the headpiece for the Staff of Octavius. That should be enough to appease Morwen, and Daniela would return to the Kavanaugh Foundation. *And it is probably for the best*, he admitted with bitterness poisoning his thoughts.

He brushed his lips over the hollow of her throat. Her pulse quickened and she arched her head back.

I need to stop before I go too far. But the curving lines of her body awakened a new hunger inside him, one that made him forget about the taste of her blood. His mouth traveled lower to the soft globes of her breasts. In a matter of seconds, he unfastened her bra and pulled one of the taut, exposed nipples between his lips.

“Luc,” she moaned, threading her fingers through his hair.

The sound of her voice so heavy with desire spurred him on. His cock strained against his zipper, throbbing in time with the circling motion of his tongue. The harder he sucked on her breasts, the louder her moans grew. He caught one of her nipples between his teeth.

And then the unthinkable happened. His fangs, not yet retracted from before, grazed her skin, producing a shallow red line of blood. His tongue tingled as he lapped it up, savoring the precious drop and reviving the primal hunger he’d been battling for so long.

He pierced the skin at the top of her breast, and she jerked still under him. She tightened her grip on his hair and drew in a shaky breath.

Luc froze, all the pleasure draining from him in that tense second. Then she released him in a shudder that shook his very soul. What would she do to him now that he’d bitten her? He had crossed the line and he deserved her wrath.

But instead of unleashing her anger upon him, she said, “Please, Luc, don’t stop. More.”

Her hips rose and fell like the ocean waves in a storm, leaving him torn between wanting to soothe the ache in his cock and continue to taste her blood. His tongue circled her areola to remove any remaining blood from her skin, and her frenzy abated. A whimper rose from her throat. He chuckled. “Don’t pout yet, *ma bella strega*. I’m just getting started.”

The soft, spicy scent of her desire grew stronger as he travelled lower along her body. By the time he’d yanked her pants off, it nearly overwhelmed him. He needed to sample it, to compare it to the sweetness of her blood and the saltiness of her skin. His tongue delved into her sex, licking away the cream that already flowed down her thighs.

Her breath caught and released in a series of jagged exhalations. “Yes, that.”

The thumping in his chest quickened, and for the first time in centuries, he felt truly alive. What kind of spell had she cast to make him forget all the rules he'd so carefully encased himself in?

But when he lifted his gaze, she seemed to be the one under a spell. Her eyelids hung half-closed, and she was chanting his name in an ancient incantation while he teased the tiny nub inside her sex, pushing her ever closer to the brink of ecstasy. She was completely under his control now. He could drain her dry in a matter of seconds and she would welcome her death with open arms.

And despite his initial recoil, he continued to enthrall her, to watch her body undulate in pleasure and know he was the cause of it. He had discovered another taste of sweetness that had nothing to do with her blood, and he intended to relish it.

His heart beat so hard, he feared he would burst free from his chest by the time she climaxed. Her thick cream coated his tongue, but he licked and nibbled her sensitive areas until her body went limp under him.

"Ti amo, ti amo," she whispered over and over again as she combed her fingers through his hair.

Luc froze. She loved him? Surely, this was still part of the enthrallment, a hallucination caused by his power over her. How could anyone love him?

He pulled away, ignoring the deepening ache in his cock until she returned from her trancelike state. Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled at him. "I hope you aren't finished."

"No, I'm not." Her words called to him like a siren's song. He feared it would end in his destruction, but it would be worth it for the few precious moments of paradise in her arms. He almost ripped off his trousers in his eagerness to get inside her. His cock plunged into the slick, tight walls of her sex in one swift stroke.

A sigh broke free from her lips, and she wrapped her legs around his waist to hold him inside her. "Yes, this is what I needed. You and me, joined like this. It's heavenly."

Yes, joined together, moving as one. Luc couldn't think of a better description of Heaven. He had no idea where he ended and she began. Every thrust sent shivers through his body. The tip of his cock practically burned from the exquisite friction, but he couldn't find his release. He now needed something else. Something he dare not take.

"Daniela, *ma chérie*, I want—I need—" He couldn't say the words. The fear of revealing what he was and losing her tightened around his throat. His fangs grew longer. The pounding of his pulse in his temples threatened to make his head explode. But he refused to drink from her.

"Please, Luc, take me." She arched her head back, her eyes closed, and pulled his lips to her neck. "I'm yours."

The last of his restraint crumbled and he tapped into a river of pure ambrosia.

He had always heard that a witch's blood was more potent, more powerful than a mere human's, but he'd never believed it until now. From the first gulp, his soul seemed to spiral forward into an unconscious

realm he'd never visited before. Streams of light, like the headlights of cars racing down the Autobahn on a rainy night, sped past his vision. Daniela twitched under him, the walls of her sex clamping tightly around his cock and milking the come that flowed forth with each wave of the orgasm rocking his body, but he barely paid attention to it. His consciousness turned and focused on the disjointed memories flashing through his mind.

A small girl with curly brown hair. The cruel taunts of the other children. The decaying church up the street that promised sanctuary. The bruising sting of a rock colliding with her head. The heat of rage that flowed through her body. The explosion of flames from her fingers and the looks of horror on her assailants' faces.

The fire faded and another image replaced it. The little girl sat huddled in a cage, tears streaming from her dark green eyes. The smell of the charred church filled the air. A chorus of angry voices rumbled around her. *Witch. Child of Satan. Demon-possessed.* The cold splash of holy water from a black-clad priest made her cry out, further inciting the crowd around her.

The number thinned as night fell, and a lone figure approached her. A woman whose red hair shone in the moonlight like a crown of glittering rubies. Morwen. She smiled at the girl and held out her hand.

Luc pulled away in horror. He had intruded upon Daniela's memories while feeding on her, invading the secrets of her past and resurrecting things she probably wanted to forget.

She trembled under him, her eyes clamped so tightly that tears glistened in the corners. Her nails dug into his shoulders and she refused to release him when he moved.

He glanced down at the two tiny wounds on the side of her neck and disgust consumed his heart. He had given in to temptation. "I'm so sorry, Daniela," he murmured and wrapped his arms around her. "I never meant to hurt you."

Her eyes opened and her lips parted. "Hurt me?"

"Yes, you're in pain. I can see it."

She laughed and pulled him back to her. Her lips covered his, coaxing him deeper into her kiss. The tension dissolved from his muscles, making them smooth and pliant under her fingers. When she ended the kiss, she looked up at him with a smile. "There was no pain, Luc. Only pleasure. Such intense pleasure. It was like..." She hesitated and gave him a sheepish grin as if her thoughts suddenly embarrassed her.

He glanced down at her neck again, relieved to see the blood had already dried. Did she realize what he'd done? "Pleasure?"

Daniela rolled him off of her and cuddled next to him. "Yes, pleasure," she purred. She tilted her face up to him. "Didn't you enjoy it?"

The steady hum of delight that vibrated through his body with each beat of his heart testified to how much he enjoyed making love to her. But something had changed from the moment her blood filled his mouth. Morwen had warned him not to taste it. Now he knew why. He'd formed an unbreakable bond with

her, one that had him considering the unthinkable. He didn't even want to let death part them. He wanted an eternity with her and nothing less.

“Yes, *ma chérie*, I enjoyed you more than you can possibly imagine.” He tightened his arms around her, determined never to let her go.

Chapter Seven

Daniela walked into a frescoed room and halted. Luc knelt in the middle of the room, held still by two men while a third one leveled a sword on his neck. “What’s going on here?”

“Nothing for you to worry about, daughter,” a man in a red toga replied. “Leave before you have to witness how we deal with traitors.”

“Traitors?” She ran toward Luc, draping her arm over the back of his neck and blocking the blade. She tilted his chin up so he met her gaze. “What have you done?”

He hung his head to the side and looked away. Pain stretched his features, distorting them from the carefree lines of the man she knew. The man she’d fallen in love with. How could he be a traitor?

The man who called her daughter wrestled her away. “He is a slave who posed as his master to gain access to you. I have already sent word to the Emperor about Petrus’s deception. His slave is mine to deal with, and according to the law, he will be executed.”

Tears choked her throat. This couldn’t be happening. She’d given herself to this man completely—body, mind and heart. She’d spent nights of passion in his arms. And he was nothing more than a mere slave?

“Please forgive me,” Luc said, still focused on the ground. “I took one look at you and I forgot myself. I...” His voice cracked and he stopped straining against his captors. “Death would be kinder than having to spend a lifetime knowing you belonged to someone else.”

A storm of emotions raged inside her. He’d lied to her, deceived her, and yet her heart still ached for him. She turned to the man in the red toga. “Please, let him go, Father. I’m sure he was just following his master’s orders.”

“No. I will have justice, if only to save your honor.”

Everything seemed to move in slow motion. The man she called Father nodded and the executioner raised his sword. Luc cast a mournful glance at her. His lips moved silently. *I love you.*

Something welled up deep inside her, racing from her gut into her fingertips. He didn’t deserve to die, not like this. Nor did she want him to die. He had become a part of her, filling the emptiness that had plagued her soul for as long as she could remember. And she had the power to stop this.

Sunlight flashed on the polished metal as it sliced through the air. Then everything dissolved into flames.

Daniela jerked awake, her heart pounding from her nightmare. She sat up and ran her hands over her bare skin, trying to drive the chill away. What was the meaning of that dream?

She looked at Luc, who continued to sleep peacefully with a hint of a smile lingering on his lips. For the first since she'd met him, the tension had vanished from his face. He actually seemed happy for once.

She ran her finger along the wooden cross that rested in the center of his chest. He was still a mystery to her, but one she was determined to figure out. Perhaps once she completed her mission for the Foundation, she'd return to him and explore a future she'd never thought possible. Could she have found the one person she could spend a lifetime with?

Her cheeks grew warm as she remembered crying out that she loved him in the heat of the moment. It was ridiculous to think she could fall in love so quickly. Yet even in the end when she felt stripped naked and exposed for him to see, he still clung to her and called her *ma chérie*. My dear.

The warmth in her cheeks spread, settling in her chest instead of between her legs. She brushed a strand of dark hair back from his face. Yes, she could easily fall in love with this man.

She stumbled to the bathroom to wash her face. Her hair was probably a tangled mess by now too. All things that needed to be tended to before they left for the airport. She silently prayed she wouldn't have to cause another explosion in a public toilet again so they could make their escape.

The cold water chased away any lingering sleepiness, and she checked her appearance in the mirror as she patted her face dry. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, and she looked pale and drawn. She frowned. Not the look of someone who'd been brought to orgasm multiple times in the last few days. Perhaps the last few nights were catching up with her.

Then she focused on a new blemish—two small red dots on the right side of her neck. She angled her head to allow more light on them and peered closer at her reflection. Her breath froze when she realized what they were. Bite marks.

Her legs wobbled and she grabbed the sink to keep from falling. She didn't remember it happening during her battle with Colette, and they weren't there when she got out of the shower earlier today.

A knot formed in her stomach as the ugly truth hit her. *No. It isn't possible. Not him.* But the facts kept ambushing her. His nocturnal habits. His inhuman strength and speed. His avoidance of her on the Metro this morning when she was covered in blood.

She crept back into the bedroom, praying he wouldn't awaken, and dug the stake out of her rucksack. The words of her teachers at the Kavanaugh Academy echoed in her mind with each step.

Vampires are evil.

They are an abomination that needs to be wiped off the face of the earth.

Kill them before they kill you.

The splatter of crimson across her pillow confirmed her suspicions, and she almost doubled over. He was one of them. He had lied to her, betrayed her, fed off of her. She raised the stake over his heart. Her eyes stung. How could he deceive her? How could he have made her fall in love with him?

Then the memory of them making love on the train flashed across her mind. She remembered his smile of satisfaction as he thrust into her from behind over and over, driving her wild with his intensity, and her hand shook.

Santa Maria, Luc had a reflection.

Her arm fell to the side. Things weren't so black and white now. If he was a vampire, why had she seen his face reflected in the window? How could she fall asleep listening to the steady beat of his heart? Vampires didn't have a pulse.

She backed away from the bed, her thoughts warring with the storm of emotions swirling inside her. There was no doubt in her mind he'd bitten her and drank her blood. The stab of that betrayal burned deep in her chest. And yet she'd lost count of all the times he'd come to her rescue and saved her life.

And what about the pleasure she'd experience in his arms? Was that all a ruse?

She placed the stake on her pillow and pulled her clothes on as quickly as possible. She needed to leave while the sun still hung in the sky. She didn't need him anymore. The headpiece was in Copenhagen, and with any luck, she could decipher the clues in his notebook, find it and be on a plane to New York before dawn.

She fished the notebook from the pocket of his discarded trousers and cast one final glance at Luc from the doorway. He never stirred. *No doubt drunk from glutting himself on my blood.*

Anger sustained her long enough to carry her downstairs and catch a taxi to the airport. But when her phone rang, her strength faltered. A sob welled up in her throat as she reached for it, hoping it wouldn't be him.

Morwen's name flashed on the screen, and a new surge of rage boiled inside her. She drew in a deep breath before she set the cab on fire. She hit the answer button. "You bitch."

Morwen actually had the audacity to sound surprised. "Excuse me?"

"You knew what he was, and yet you told me to trust him."

She paused a second before replying, "What did Luc do?"

"He made me his snack."

A string of curse words followed. Apparently, this was becoming the norm every time they talked. "Are you all right? Did he hurt you? Did he turn you?"

For a moment, Daniela almost believed the concern in the Head Witch's voice. "Not to my knowledge. In fact, I don't even remember him biting me. I just woke up with two bite marks on my neck and blood on my pillow."

"He must have enthralled you."

She vaguely remembered her conversation with him last night. He'd mentioned that the clever vampires would trick their victims into thinking it was a pleasurable experience. No lie. She never believed such a powerful orgasm was possible. But something still troubled her. "Morwen, when they feed on you, can they enter your mind?"

"Yes, why? What did you show him?"

Only my most painful memories.

Daniela blinked back her tears. She couldn't appear weak now. "Nothing that would endanger the Foundation, if that's what you're worried about. But after I find the headpiece, I'm finished. I'm the third most powerful—" she glanced up at the taxi driver, wondering how much of this conversation he understood—"person in my field, and I'm tired of being your pawn. In the last twenty-four hours, I've been chased, beaten, attacked and betrayed."

"Tell me where you're going and I'll send a team of hunters to protect you."

"I don't need them. I can take care of myself as long as I don't let my fucking guard down."

"And you don't know what Colette is capable of doing."

The image of the fireball at Gare de Lyon replayed in her mind. Could Colette have survived the explosion? "If she's still even a threat."

"Daniela, be reasonable. There's no need to put yourself in any unnecessary danger."

Morwen practically sang the words in a hypnotic melody, and a warm hum vibrated up Daniela's arm from the phone.

She threw it down on the floor. How dare Morwen try to cast a spell on her? "I'm done," she said from her seat and hit the end button with her foot.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and wiped her eyes. They were all the same, no different than her parents. All ready to abandon her once they were finished using her. She was a fool to think Luc would be different.

And yet, some part of her wounded heart secretly hoped he was. The deep ache in her chest continued to throb, even after her flight left for Copenhagen.

The full moon illuminated the marble veranda, making it easy for Luc to spot Daniela on the other end. Her flowing stola danced in the salty sea breeze. The scene struck him as odd, like she belonged in a Roman fresco, but his arms still longed to hold her.

Her eyes widened when she saw him. "What are you doing here?"

"I had to see you again, to explain my side of the story." He pulled her into an embrace, but she wriggled away from him, leaving him alone and cold.

"You could be killed for what you did. I could order you executed."

He froze when she narrowed her eyes. Would she be so cruel?

Then her angry expression faltered and she turned away. "Please leave before they catch you. I don't know if I will be able to save you again."

"I never meant to deceive you." This time, she didn't pull away when he wrapped his arms around her. The soft silk of her stola contrasted with the rough, homespun fabric scratching his skin. "Petrus ordered me to pose as him and report my findings."

"So he could have a laugh at my expense?" A splash of wetness on his shoulder followed her bitter words. "He must have thought it was hilarious to have a Senator's daughter fall in love with a slave."

Something squeezed so tightly in his chest, he couldn't breathe. "So you really do love me?"

She shoved him away and retreated to the darker end of the veranda. "If you continue to mock me, I will call for my father's guards."

"I'm not mocking you," he said as he chased after her. "I just find it amazing that someone like you could ever love someone like me."

"That's beside the point. Nothing can ever come of this. I'm promised to your master." She turned and raked her gaze over him, her brows knitting together while the corners of her mouth angled down. "And you're a runaway slave now. It's only a matter of time before they catch you. You should leave."

"Not without you." When she tried to interrupt him, he placed his finger over her full lips. He was so tempted to taste them once again, but first, he needed to tell her the reason he snuck into her father's villa tonight. "I have a friend in Herculaneum that's willing to lend me a boat. Meet me there tomorrow morning before dawn. We can go anywhere in the Empire, start fresh. Together, just the two of us."

She shook her head. "You're asking me to give up everything to be with you. How will we eat? Where will we sleep?"

"I'm a hard worker. I'll provide for your every need. As long as we love each other, that should be enough."

She sighed and stared out at the glittering sea that stretched for miles to the east. Her silence troubled him. He'd expected her to say yes, to follow her heart instead of remaining trapped in the gilded cage she'd complained so much about during their time alone. Apparently, the cage seemed more appealing to her than a simple life with him.

He hung his head and backed away from her. Bitterness seeped from his breaking heart and filled his mouth. How could he have been such a fool?

"Wait."

Her whispered word held him prisoner like a thousand chains.

Tears glittered in her eyes when she approached him. She stroked his cheek and pressed her lips against his. "Tomorrow morning, you'll have my answer."

She returned to the house, leaving him alone with the hopeful flutter in his chest.

Luc awoke from his dream and reached for Daniela, but found only cold sheets. He sat up and called her name. Silence answered him. Then he noticed the wooden stake on her pillow.

His heart skipped a beat. *She knows.*

He jumped from the bed and searched for his clothes, his pulse racing in his ears. *I need to find her, to catch her before they do.*

The ringing of his cell phone from across the room interrupted his thoughts. He dove for it, praying it was her. "Hello?"

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't personally hunt you down and drive a stake into your heart."

Morwen's threat didn't rouse the fear in him it would in another of his kind. "Where's Daniela?"

"Looking for another drink?"

"Damn it, Morwen, I need to find her before Colette does."

"You should have thought about that before you bit her. I warned you not to taste her blood. You have no idea what the consequences of your actions are."

He dropped onto the bed. He may have dismissed her warnings earlier about soul mates and past lives as the ramblings of an ancient witch, but the truth was beginning to dawn on him. His dreams seemed more like awakened memories. He physically ached for Daniela now. A shiver worked its way through his body before he repeated in a slight whimper, "Please, Morwen, I need to find her."

"So do I. I have a group of hunters en route to Paris as we speak. Where is she?"

A spark of anger flared inside him, and he stood, grabbing a shirt as he left the bedroom. "How the hell should I know? I woke up and she was gone."

"She said she was going to retrieve the headpiece."

He pounded down the stairs and searched his pocket for his notebook. It was missing too. *That sneaky little witch!* His mind debated between keeping Daniela to himself and having all the reinforcements he could get. "Copenhagen."

"Thank you. Now leave her to us. You've done enough damage."

The phone clicked dead, but that didn't deter him from his mission. Night was falling over the City of Lights, and he had a plane to catch.

Chapter Eight

Daniela reread the faded words on the crinkled brown pages.

Beneath Charity's breast, the treasure lies.

She snapped Luc's notebook closed and frowned. It had taken her most of the afternoon to decipher the cryptic lines. The treasure had to be the headpiece, but the rest of his clues lay buried beneath an elaborate poem. If she hadn't been in such a hurry to find the headpiece, she might have marveled at the beauty of the lyrics, the way he played with words and wove them into stunning rhymes.

Of course, having to translate everything from Latin didn't help. It reminded her too much of her dreams with the two of them in Ancient Rome. Even now, the image of Luc with a sword pressed into his neck still haunted her. It felt so real.

Stop it, she scolded herself. Consider the dream a warning. If you stayed with him, you'd only get burned.

Or bled dry.

But oh, what a way to go.

She found an empty bench in Copenhagen's Old Square and pulled out a map. Considering her new knowledge of Luc's immortality, she had no idea when he hid the headpiece. It could have been centuries ago. But she doubted it was hidden under the statue of the Little Mermaid down by the harbor.

So far, her exploration of the heart of Copenhagen had yielded nothing, not a hint of the clues she'd extracted. She leaned back against the bench and rubbed her temples. Perhaps it would have been easier to have stayed with Luc until he showed her the hiding place.

No, she thought, shaking the idea from her mind. He was too dangerous, too seductive. She'd fallen under his spell too easily. Perhaps when she got back to the States, she'd take a lover. Maybe a whole stable full of them. That way, she wouldn't fall so hard and fast for the first man who'd made her come in the last decade.

She closed her eyes and listened to the gurgling fountain in the center of the square, trying to take her mind off of Luc. When her burning skin finally cooled, she opened her eyes and soaked in the scene that played out before her. Happy couples strolled hand in hand through the square. Bicycles whirled past the crowds. Groups of tourists snapped pictures of the fountain of a pregnant woman with jets of water streaming from her breasts. She almost laughed at it all. That fountain must have been considered scandalous years ago.

She searched her map for the name of the fountain. *Charity.*

Beneath Charity's breast...

Daniela jumped up from the bench and ran straight for the fountain, ignoring the startled gasps of the bystanders when she splashed into the pool. Luc had hidden the headpiece inside the fountain—there could be no other explanation for it. She ran her hands along the wet marble, searching for an opening, a weakness in the stone, anything she could find that would reveal what she sought.

A shrill whistle ended her search. A policeman ran toward her, his face florid as he said something to her in Danish. When it became clear she didn't understand him, he repeated in English, "Get out of the fountain or I'll have to fine you."

She backed away from the statue, her cheeks flaming, and glanced around the crowd who'd witnessed her brief moment of insanity. One escapade hitting the news station was enough for the day. The last thing she needed was another lecture from Morwen about drawing unnecessary attention to the Foundation. She'd return when the city slept.

As she ran back to her hotel, she couldn't shake the feeling that someone was following her, but every time she turned around, there's wasn't even a stray shadow. She silently cursed leaving her stake behind at Luc's. But there was more than one way to kill a vampire, and thankfully, fire was her strongest element.

Luc hid in the shadows and watched Daniela disappear into her well-lit hotel. He was tempted to follow her upstairs, but he suspected she'd have her vampire alarm up in seconds based on the way she kept looking over her shoulder as she moved through the crowded streets.

He should have known she'd find the hiding place quickly, despite the fact he'd concealed the clues in his poetry. As soon as he'd landed in Copenhagen, he'd grabbed a taxi to the city's center. By the time he reached the fountain, she was already splashing through the water. Thankfully, the policeman had stopped her before she found it in front of the crowd gathered there.

A shadow appeared across the street and his skin crawled. Another vampire. It never took him long to detect one of his own kind, but very few of them paid any attention to him. Perhaps he lacked the stench of death that seemed to cling to them, a mark of all the lives they'd taken. A badge of their sins.

The other vampire entered the hotel and spoke to the desk clerk before jogging up the stairs. A knot formed in Luc's stomach. The vampire was looking for Daniela.

A possessive urge flared deep inside him and fanned across his skin. Daniela was his and his alone. No one else would taste her sweet blood as long as he roamed the earth.

Luc had just entered the lobby when a shriek rang out from upstairs, followed by the shrill whine of the fire alarm. The guests ran for the doors, shoving him into the street. He searched their faces for her, panic coiling in his muscles so he could spring to her rescue if needed. A distraction like this would provide

more than enough time for a vampire to drain her dry. His muscles unlocked when she came out of the building with a smug grin on her face.

Half an hour later, the fire department declared that the cause for the alarm was a small fire that had started on the third floor. The damage was limited to a small burn on the carpet, prompting them to blame a lit cigarette. He laughed to himself when he heard their hypothesis. More like a witch's vampire alarm.

Once the crowd filtered back inside, he finally caught a glimpse of her victim. A streak of black slanted across the vampire's face, and his fingers still smoldered. But Luc easily recognized him. One of Colette's henchmen.

Luc took a step to follow him, but then withdrew back into the shadows. They already knew Daniela was here in Copenhagen, and she needed his protection more than ever now.

The streets had grown cold and still when Daniela re-emerged from the hotel. She snapped her fingers and smiled at the sparks that flew from the tips. If Colette or any other bloodsucker wanted to wrestle with her, they'd best be prepared for the bonfire she would start.

She ran back to the fountain of Charity. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up a few blocks away from it, and she stopped to survey the area. Someone was watching her. She sent out her magical feelers, but the sensation passed before she could discover the source of her unease.

When she reached the square, she was alone. No love-struck couples. No throngs of bicyclists. No gaudy tourists. Just the sound of her footsteps on the cobblestone and the gurgling of the water. She sent out another set of feelers but detected nothing. Relief eased into her limbs. It was one thing to set up an alarm around a small hotel room, but she doubted she could cast one around the entire square.

She circled the fountain, no longer admiring its beauty. There had to be an entrance inside, but when her eyes found none, she knew she needed to use her magic. She grabbed a wad of paper from a nearby rubbish bin and lit it in her hands. Then she blew the smoke toward the statue. The tendrils snaked and twirled around the fountain, collapsing under the weight of the water. Just before the fire consumed the paper completely, a small crack appeared in the stone, sucking in the smoke. The opening.

Daniela jumped into the icy water and dug her nails into the crack. Sweat trickled along her forehead, and her internal warning bells went off, but the moment the stone scraped loose, she ignored them. She'd have the headpiece in a matter of seconds.

At last, she'd produced a gap large enough to squeeze her hand through. She felt around the dark recesses, her heart pounding wildly. Her fingers brushed against something cold and smooth, and a rush of magic raced up her arm. The headpiece. She grabbed it.

"Leave it alone," a voice hissed in her ear just before a pair of strong arms hauled her out of the water.

The familiarity of his voice, his touch, his clean male scent all overwhelmed her, and her body went limp. The headpiece fell into the water with a dull splash before she had a chance to look at it. How could Luc have this effect on her? How could he render her helpless from just a touch?

A well of rage simmered inside her, giving her the strength to break free of him. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Then use your head,” he snapped back. “They’re following you, and you’re practically handing them the staff on a platter.”

He lunged for her, but she dodged his grasp. Fire erupted from her palms. She held them out in front of her, daring him to come closer. “And how do I know you aren’t here to keep me from finding it first? After all, you are one of them.”

He winced as if she’d lashed a cat-o’-nine-tails across his back. Yes, she’d found his weak spot. The truth caused him more pain than any spell she could cast, and pity began to claw away at her resolve. He may be one of them, but he wasn’t like them at all, was he? He’d had so many opportunities to kill her, and yet he kept his distance now.

He held out his hand. “Please, Daniela, come with me before they hurt you.”

“And how do I know I’m safe with you?” She angled her neck and pointed to the two bite marks. “One taste wasn’t enough?”

The blue of his eyes intensified, practically glowing in the dark. The streetlights flashed on the sharp white fangs that dug into his bottom lip, and his nostrils flared. It was beautiful and terrifying at the same time to witness these changes, to see him in all his vampiric power. He wasn’t hiding what he was anymore, and a shiver of fear gripped her when she realized what was happening. The feeding frenzy had seized control of him.

But instead of pouncing on her and finishing what he had started, he clasped the wooden cross around his neck and closed his eyes. The tight lines of his face eased. When he opened his eyes again, all traces of the feeding frenzy had vanished. “I lost control of myself. I promise it won’t happen again.”

“You’re right about that.” She spun around to retrieve the headpiece. The sooner she gave that to Morwen, the sooner she could forget about the ache that formed deep inside her every time she saw Luc. *The mission needs to come first, after all*, she thought bitterly.

“Daniela, we need to go now.” He grabbed her free hand as she reached into the water and pulled her back. “They’re coming.”

The words had barely left his lips when a blurred shape rammed into them. The air left her lungs with a sharp *whoosh*, and black spots bloomed in the corners of her vision. Someone wrestled Luc away from her. The cold damp of the cobblestones crept under her skin, heightening the impending sense of dread clawing at her soul. They had lingered here too long, and she was the fool that had kept them here.

She lifted her head and called on her magic. The first fireball hit one of the dark figures obscuring Luc from her view. A squeal of pain pierced the silence of the night, followed by the scent of burning flesh.

The two figures that remained turned their heads toward her. The bright glow of their eyes confirmed her suspicion—vampires. A second fireball gathered in her palm. If they wanted trouble, she'd gladly give it to them.

As she drew her hand back to fry the next vampire, a dart of magic pricked the back of her neck, stinging her skin. The spell rushed through her limbs faster than water pouring out from a broken dam. Her muscles locked so that even drawing in a breath became a challenge. She stood stone-still like the statue in the fountain, unable to move. The fireball in her hand cast eerie shadows on the buildings around them, and she finally sensed the presence of the other witch.

"Didn't Morwen ever teach you to watch your back?" Colette taunted. She circled Daniela, her white fangs pressing into her ruby-colored lips. No scars marred her face. No evidence remained from the explosion earlier that day. "This was almost too easy."

Daniela strained against her magical bonds, but Colette reinforced them by merely touching her finger to her prey's cheek. "Naughty little witch. You should know better than to play with the big kids." She doused the fireball in Daniela's hand.

"Let her go, Colette." Luc struggled against his captors, earning him an uppercut across his jaw.

"Shut up, you disgrace to our name." The male vampire punctuated his words by ramming his fist into Luc's gut. "As soon as the sun rises, you're ashes."

Tears welled up in Daniela's eyes while the two vampires continued to beat him. As much as she knew she should despise him for what he was, she saw with each agonizing second how different he was from the monsters the Foundation hunted.

"He's not as pious as he wants us to believe." Colette ran her finger across the bite marks on the side of Daniela's neck. She laughed and turned to him. "Couldn't resist a taste, eh, Père Luc?"

Luc hung his head and looked away from his accuser. Blood dripped down his face onto the cobblestones below, but he said nothing. No apologies. No excuses. Just a silent admission of guilt, tinged with shame.

Colette moved out of Daniela's line of sight. The vampire witch's breath bathed the back of her neck, sending rivers of gooseflesh down her arms. "Was she as delicious as you imagined, Père Luc? Was she worth destroying your vows never to feed on another human again? To know you're no better than the rest of us?"

He lifted his head and locked his gaze with Daniela. For a brief second, she knew the same reassuring warmth she'd known in his arms, the connection that had been forged between them. And then she felt his anguish, so intense that she wanted to pull her heart from her chest. He regretted hurting her, and she longed to whisper to him that she forgave him.

“Perhaps I should have a taste too,” Colette murmured, ripping her away from her shared moment with Luc.

Icy fear replaced the warmth, and pain blinded Daniela’s vision.

“No!” Luc shouted as Colette sank her fangs into Daniela’s neck. He managed to shove off one of his captors and take a step forward before they pinned him to the ground once again. He silently cursed his years of abstaining from human blood, for drinking only enough to survive and not glutting himself like they did. “I’m the one you want, not her.”

Colette jerked her head back. Blood tainted her feral snarl, but Luc remained focused on the limp form in her arms. He strained to catch the faint sound of Daniela’s heartbeat, to know she still lived.

The vampire witch dropped her prey on the cobblestones and approached him. “What are you talking about, you pitiful excuse for a vampire?”

A protective growl rose from his chest. He would save Daniela, even if it meant his own destruction. “I’m the one who tore apart the Staff of Octavius. I’m the one who hid the pieces. But if you harm her, that information dies with me.”

Colette wiped the blood off her face and smeared some of it across his lips. Her cruel laughter mocked him while his baser instincts took over. His heart pounded. His fangs grew longer, and he dared to flick his tongue out to taste the precious nectar she’d given him. What he wouldn’t give to consume every last drop of Daniela’s blood, to share his own with her and know she’d always be with him. He closed his eyes and let out a cry of frustration.

“Yes, Père Luc, I know your weakness. I’m the one who holds all the cards, not you. I’m the one who makes the demands. I haven’t taken her to the point where you must turn her or watch her die, but she’s close. So very close.”

Luc sucked a breath in through his teeth, drawing in Daniela’s warm vanilla scent. It swirled inside his nostrils, making his mouth water and his cock stiffen. *Mon Dieu, I’ve never craved a person this much.* “Leave her here and I will take you to the other half.”

She shoved him back into her henchmen and stood over him with her hands on her hips. “Why should I trust you? You’ve clung to your humanity instead of embracing your power, your true nature. We are the lions, and they are the lambs.” She pointed to where Daniela lay in the middle of the square, and a look of pure disgust twisted her features. “Why would you put her before yourself?”

“She’s just Morwen’s pawn. She knows nothing. But if you touch her again, I’ll go into the sun and take my secrets with me.” He gritted his teeth and waited to see how she would react to his ultimatum.

Colette grabbed Daniela by the hair and dangled her like a rag doll. “You actually care for this little witch, don’t you? How pathetic.”

She snapped her fingers and another vampire appeared from the shadows to retrieve the headpiece from the fountain. She examined the golden bird, once a representation of Osiris that Octavius Caesar had transformed into a Roman eagle when he seized it. Her eyes widened and she licked her lips. He knew what she wanted, and he only hoped it would be enough to make her forget about the woman in her other hand.

Colette turned her attention to him. “So, what’s it going to be, Père Luc? The other half of the staff, or her?”

His heart, which had remained frozen in his chest for centuries, now wanted to lodge itself in his throat. His gaze travelled between the headpiece and Daniela. As much as he wanted to protect his lover, he also understood the consequences if Colette got her hands on the other half of the Staff of Octavius. But at least he could control how quickly she gained access to it. Maybe that would give Daniela enough time to find it first. “It’s in Romania.”

Colette started laughing so hard he wondered if she’d lost her mind. “How ironic. The next thing you’ll tell me is that you hid it in Transylvania.”

“I’ll lead you directly to it if you let her go.”

She dragged Daniela behind her, still holding a fistful of her hair, and leveled her eyes to his. “That’s too easy. There’s no leverage anymore. Why don’t we invite Daniela to join us? That way, if you’re lying, I can at least enjoy a little snack. Or better yet, I could make her my pet.”

Luc roared with fury and broke free of his captors. He closed his hands around Colette’s neck, determined to rip her head from her body.

A bolt of lightning arced off her skin and sent him flying halfway across the square. “You arrogant fool! Do you think you can defeat me? You don’t even have the strength to fight off my troops. Try that again and I’ll drain her dry.”

“Colette,” one of her men said, the light of his phone casting an eerie illumination over his face, “I can’t book any flights for us.”

She snapped her attention to him. “Why not?”

“Because we’re apparently on Interpol’s most wanted list for a terrorist attack on Gare de Lyon this morning.”

Now it was Luc’s turn to laugh. “Morwen’s craftier than you think. She has powerful connections.”

“She’s a fraud, and we both know it. Besides, Marcellus is just as well connected. This will be resolved by tomorrow night.” She tossed Daniela to one of her henchmen. “Let’s find a way out of here before the sun rises. That pathetic martyr may want to fry, but I have too much to live for.” She hugged the headpiece to her chest like a child’s teddy bear and grinned.

His captors pulled him to his feet and shoved him after her. He remained focused on Daniela. If he had a moment’s chance to help her escape, he’d take advantage of it.

Luc sat huddled in the corner of an open rail car, watching the mid-morning shadows flicker across the floor. The rest of the night had passed in a blur. He vaguely remembered stumbling through a train yard and being shoved into this car. Colette's face loomed in front of him, her words humming together and lulling him into a trance. He remembered her asking him over and over again for the staff's location, but as far as he knew, he'd revealed nothing. His continued existence testified to that.

He awoke just before the first rays of the sun rose above the horizon and ran toward the nearest shelter he could find—a broken crate with a torn tarp draped over it. It wasn't until he peeked out of his makeshift tent that he realized he wasn't alone.

Daniela lay in the center of the car, fully bathed in the bright sunlight. Even though she still slept, her presence taunted him. He longed to touch her, to reassure himself that she'd recover from her blood loss.

To beg for her forgiveness.

But to reach her meant battling the sun, so he sat there for hours, watching the subtle rise and fall of her chest.

He replayed the events of the last few days in his mind, wondering what he could have done to change things. Perhaps he should have left her alone in the catacombs. Perhaps he should never have offered to show her where the pieces of the staff were located. Perhaps he should never have tasted her lips.

His chest tightened. No, he wouldn't trade any of those moments with her, save one. The day he gave in to his bloodlust. The day he drove her from his arms and opened the rift inside his soul that made him ache for her all the more.

And yet, he doubted he would change the course of that afternoon. He'd tasted perfection. The sweet moments of pure pleasure he'd found when joined with her on every intimate level possible was worth what he suffered now. He knew her better than he knew himself, and he'd caught a glimpse of what true happiness could be.

The steady hum of the diesel engine several cars ahead mimicked the whispered doubts in his mind, and he sought a way to push them out. He honed in on a different rhythm—the rapid pulse that beat in time to the dull thud inside him.

It was nearly noon when the shrill whistle of the train pierced the air, followed by an echo. Luc sat up. A tunnel. He pulled his feet under him, preparing to spring as soon as the darkness surrounded him.

He'd been hoping for a longer tunnel than the one he got. By the time he gathered Daniela in his arms, the sting of the sun tore across his back, followed by the smell of smoke. He raced back to his shelter, tears burning his eyes and pain threatening to overwhelm his consciousness. Then the blessed cool of the shade bathed him.

Luc glanced at his shoulders. Smoke still rose from under his clothes, and every movement sent waves of agony through his body. He'd been burned, but he would heal given enough time and blood.

Blood. He looked down at Daniela and could practically taste her blood on his lips. Just a small sip could restore him to perfect health. He bent over her, staring at the faint pulsations of the artery in her neck. His fangs dug into his lip. *Just one sip.*

Luc jerked back in horror. *What am I thinking? It was my own greed, my selfish lust that got us in this predicament.*

He wrapped his hand around his cross and took several deep breaths. Just holding it reminded him of the man he once was and gave him the strength to keep his inner monster at bay. He could overcome his pain, his hunger. Right now, he needed to help Daniela.

She didn't stir when he spoke to her, nor when he kissed her forehead. Her skin felt cold and clammy, and an ashen pallor leached the normally healthy glow from her olive complexion. He could already smell the stench of death creeping in on her spicy vanilla scent. She needed blood, and soon.

He racked his brain for the memories he'd forced himself to forget, the events leading up to the one night where his life had been altered beyond repair. The night Marcellus had turned him into the creature he was now.

Night after night, he'd watched the red-haired woman sobbing in his church. The rich silks and velvets of her clothing proclaimed her to be a member of the aristocracy, but he had no idea who she was and what chateau she came from. One evening, he gathered the courage to ask her what was wrong.

"My lord and master holds me prisoner, torturing me if I do not bend to his will," she replied, wiping the tears from her unusually bright blue eyes.

His tongue flapped in his mouth, unable to form a coherent word. She was too beautiful to be human. An angel. And yet, once he recovered from his initial awe of her, he saw the anguish that added decades of experience to her youthful face.

He sat next to her and noticed the tarnished metal band that dug into her ring finger. "Is there anything I can do to help? Perhaps I should speak to him and remind him of his duties as a husband."

She shook her head. "You do not know my husband. There is no honor in him, no kindness. But I appreciate your offer, Père Luc."

A shiver coursed down his spine. How did she know his name when he knew nothing of her?

She stroked his cheek. "Do not be afraid. I have heard of your compassion. The people of this parish speak very highly of you and your work with the poor."

Her words filled him with an inner peace, quelling any lingering fears. Yes, she had to be an angel. "But what can I do to ease your suffering?"

"Nothing." She turned away, her dress rustling as she stood. "I've almost lost any hope of escaping him."

He rose and followed her, amazed how quickly she moved toward the door. “There is always hope. To surrender to despair is to fall into the hands of the Dark One.”

“What do you know of the darkness?” Her reply seemed to catch even her off guard, and she gave him an apologetic smile. “Perhaps you are right. I should cling to hope, no matter how fragile it seems.”

“And if I can help you find redemption—”

Her laughter cut him off. She pressed the simple wooden cross around his neck into his chest. “You find hope in your faith, but I have seen too much to believe in anything anymore. There is only the here and now.”

She disappeared into the night, leaving Luc to ponder over their odd conversation. He found it difficult to believe that she didn’t worry about her afterlife, about her salvation, so when he saw her the next night, he asked her, “What about when you die? Where will your lack of faith lead you?”

“In death, I can find freedom,” she replied without a hint of emotion. “As it is, I’m living just a half life, a mockery of what my life was before he entered it.”

“And yet, you are free of him here.”

“For now.” She released a heavy sigh. “I suppose I’m waiting for some sort of sign, something that will let me know I’m still the person I was before he destroyed everything.”

He felt helpless. Normally, his parishioners came to him when their bellies were empty or when their clothes had been worn bare. She was more of a challenge. It seemed her soul had been worn bare, and that would take more than he could offer to repair it. “Then I will pray that you get your sign soon.”

Several nights later, she rushed into the church. The despair had melted from her face and the light had returned to her eyes. The transformation caught him off guard. She almost didn’t appear to be the same woman.

She smiled and took his hand. “I received my sign. Look.”

He offered little resistance as she dragged him outside. The chilly wind whipped at his robes, reminding him that winter would be here soon, bringing with it the hunger and disease that claimed so many lives during the long, dark nights.

She stopped in front of a dying rose bush. “Watch.”

What he witnessed that night made him want to run back into the church and pray for forgiveness, but his feet remained fixed to the ground while he watched. A yellow glow radiated from her hands, mimicking the warm rays of the sun. The faded blooms filled with color, and a summer’s worth of new buds appeared on the bush in the time it took him to draw breath. By the time she dimmed the light, the bush stood in full bloom, like it would in the height of midsummer. He backed away from her. “What kind of witchcraft is this?”

“The kind I thought died many years ago.” He tried to run back to the sanctuary of the church, but she moved faster than him, cutting him off before he reached the door. She placed her hands on his shoulders.

Although he did not see the same glow, a wave of reassurance rolled through him, chasing away the dread that wanted to climb up his spine. “Please, do not be afraid. My hope has returned, and I only ask one thing of you.”

His voice shook when he said, “And that is?”

“Will you help me fake my death?”

“What?” He shrugged her hands off. She’d gone from being a suffering angel to bordering on madness.

“Gather a bucket of ashes and meet me back here in an hour. We have to do this before dawn breaks.”

Luc shook his head. “First you must tell me what you want with a pile of ashes.”

She was already halfway across the church yard. “I’ll tell you when I return.”

An hour later, she emerged from the shadows wearing men’s clothing. She handed him the dress she wore earlier and the tarnished ring. “Pour the ashes around these once the sun rises.”

He glanced down at the wound left by the ring. The skin looked like it had been cut away from her finger. What would possess her to inflict such pain on herself? Was her marriage truly that bad? “And what should I say when your husband comes looking for you?”

“Tell him I went into the sun. He’ll know what that means.”

His mind screamed at him to tell her he wanted nothing to do with her witchcraft, but when he read the inscription on her ring, he found his courage. *Vos es mei tempero*. You are mine to control.

He wrapped his fingers around the ring and took a deep breath. Although he didn’t understand anything of what had passed tonight, his heart told him she wasn’t a monster. The sweet perfume of the roses wafted toward him, reminding him of her request. She’d been granted her sign, and now it was time for him to help her complete her escape. When the sun rose, he did as she asked, scattering the bucket of ashes over her dress and ring in the middle of the church courtyard. He offered a quick prayer that she would have safe travels and find the freedom she sought.

Less than an hour after the sun set, angry voices filled the courtyard. He cracked the door open and saw three men—a lord and two servants—standing around the pile of ashes. One of the servants held out the ring. “It’s hers, my lord.”

Luc peered closer at the tall man dressed in rich velvet. His skin appeared waxen in the moonlight and cruelty twisted his mouth into a scowl. Without a doubt, this had to be the man the woman wanted to flee from.

The lord snatched the ring and held it up to his face. His frowned deepened. “I find it hard to believe Morwen would be so foolish. Or that you two let her out of your sights long enough to allow something like this.”

The other servant stepped forward. “She returned like she always did, my lord. We thought she’d retired for the night after talking to that priest.”

“Then you are a bigger idiot than I thought.” The lord grabbed him by his shirt and hurled him across the courtyard into the wall of the church. The building shook from the impact, and when the servant fell to the ground, part of the stones crumbled away, leaving a man-sized dent in the masonry. And yet, the servant shook his head and crawled to his feet as if he’d only tripped over a tree root.

Luc backed away from the door in fear. Something was wrong about this. First a witch who could revive rosebushes, and then a man walking away from an injury that would have killed most people. And if the lord could toss a grown man around like a bale of hay, what else was he capable of doing?

“My lord, the priest is near,” the uninjured servant said. “I smell him.”

The lord spun around and stared right where Luc stood. His amber eyes glowed with sinister intent in the darkness, and fear edged into Luc’s soul. He was looking into the face of death.

He tried to run, but something grabbed his robes and flung him into the courtyard. Pain exploded through his chest when he collided with the stone cross, breaking it in half. Ashes choked his lungs, and his stomach churned from the blood that filled his mouth.

The lord pulled him from the ground and gave him a cold grin. A pair of fangs pressed into the lord’s lips. “So you’re the meddlesome priest who’s been telling my wife to look for hope.”

Luc made a sign of the cross, thinking it would offer him some protection from the demon before him.

But the lord only laughed. “Your pitiful rituals mean nothing to me.” He pointed to the ashes. “Where is she?”

His mind raced to remember what she’d told him to say. “She went into the sun.”

“You lie.”

In the brief moment that passed, Luc weighed telling the truth against continuing her deception. Either way, he knew he would die. But there was one way to ensure her safety. “She did. I watched her burn into ashes.”

The roar that came from the lord’s chest quickly doused any courage Luc may have gathered. It was completely inhuman. And once again, he found himself flying through the air. The unmistakable crunch of bone filled his ears on impact. From his waist up, daggers of pain tore at his flesh, but his misshapen legs lacked any feeling at all.

The lord yanked him off the ground. “You shouldn’t have delved into things beyond your understanding, priest.”

Every breath Luc drew made his chest rattle. Death was so close, he could almost feel its dark embrace wrapping around him. “I know my soul will find peace in heaven.”

The lord’s eyes widened, and his lips curled up into a malicious grin. “No, you will be trapped in hell. I’ll see to it personally.”

The initial pain of the bite seem mild compared to the damage Luc’s body had already suffered. A sharp sting and nothing more. But as the lord began to drink, shadowy images flooded his mind. Images of

blood, of bodies scattering fields and filling streets. They tore at his soul like a clawed beast, determined to rip it to shreds. And in those agonizing moments, he knew his tormenter's name. Marcellus.

The darkness faded and Marcellus's face hovered above his. "Yes, Père Luc. Now you know what I am and what you will become."

The face disappeared, and a bitter liquid filled his throat. He choked on it at first, but when he swallowed, the pain receded from his consciousness. A new sensation burned through his limbs, one of power, of invincibility. His broken bones began knitting back together. His mind screamed for him to stop, but with each gulp, the feeling grew stronger. He no longer knew suffering. Just a thirst that could never be quenched.

Marcellus's laughter mocked him. "Greed does not become you, Père Luc."

The stream of liquid abruptly stopped, and Luc found himself staring at the stone tiles of the courtyard. Spasms racked his body. His pulse pounded in his ears at a frantic pace. The world began swirling, changing. The scent of the roses grew so strong, it sickened him. He gagged and tried to purge himself of the poison he'd been given, but his stomach refused to cooperate. Tears prickled his eyes as he curled into a ball. There was nothing comforting about this route to death.

And then it all stopped. His heart stilled and his vision cleared. He waited for the bright light, for the sensation of his soul floating up into Heaven, but it never came. Instead, his tormenter towered over him.

"Who's the demon now?" he asked and lowered his lips to Luc's ear. "From now on, you will fear the sun and crave only blood. You are now one of the monsters who plague this land, and you will have to choose to live this way or suffer the same fate as Morwen."

"You're wrong." He managed to get to his hands and knees, wondering why he still moved when his heart no longer beat. "I will never be like you."

"But you already are." He turned to leave with his two servants trailing behind him. "When you accept what you've become, you can join my army."

The words echoed in Luc's mind as he sat there alone in the night. He pressed his hand against his chest, searching for the familiar thump, but felt nothing. Panic choked his throat. If he was dead, why was he still here? For what seemed like hours, he pondered this question, refusing to believe he'd been changed into one of them.

"Père Luc," a child's voice shouted from the other side of the church's walls. "Come quick. My papa is ill."

Luc ran through the church and opened the door to find Simon, one the village children, standing there. His mouth started to water as he stared down at him, and a dull ache filled his teeth.

Simon backed away. "Père Luc, what's wrong with you?"

Luc stared at the boy's neck. The increasing flutter of Simon's heart filled his ears, and the earthy smell of fear tickled his nostrils. He took a step toward the boy and Simon screamed.

“Père Luc, don’t!”

But the thirst became uncontrollable. He snatched the boy into his arms and sank his new fangs into the soft flesh of his neck. Sweet blood flowed into his mouth while Simon’s cries grew louder. The burning in the back of his throat eased with each sip.

Simon tugged on the cross around Luc’s neck, breaking his bite. “No, please don’t,” he whispered.

Luc stared in horror at the blood that stained the boy’s neck. “*Mon Dieu*, what have I done?”

He pressed his fingers against the small wounds to staunch the flow of blood. Simon started up at him with heavy eyes, but said nothing.

“Please forgive me,” Luc begged. He wished that the boy would fall asleep and awake later, thinking this was all a bad dream.

“Take me home, Père Luc.” Simon closed his eyes and went limp in his arms.

For several minutes, Luc listened to the boy’s breath and the rapid flutter of his heart. Once he reassured himself Simon would live, he cleaned the blood from the boy’s skin and carried him back to his house. The distance seemed to vanish as he practically flew through the deserted streets.

When he reached the house, the smell of the others hit him, and the thirst returned with a vengeance. He dug his fingers into his palms, refusing to harm another person. He laid Simon on the ground in front of the door and rushed back to the church. The sound of Marcellus’s laughter tormented him as he locked every door, every window. He crawled into a little ball in the center of the church and covered his head. He refused to give in to temptation. He would not become a monster like that demon, even if it meant shutting himself off from the rest of the world until he died of thirst.

Now, over six hundred years later, the memories of that night still shamed him, but Luc found what he was searching for. Vampiric blood had healing properties, and it would hopefully be enough to keep Daniela alive until she got a transfusion.

He bit his finger and smeared the blood across her lips. Her tongue flicked out and cleaned it away. A soft moan rose from her throat, the first sign of life he’d seen from her since last night. He pressed his finger against her mouth again. She drew him in, gently sucking on his finger in a way that made his cock stiffen.

He gritted his teeth. It would be so easy to let her continue to drink until he turned her. Then he wouldn’t have to worry about Colette’s threats or finding a way for Daniela to escape. She’s be safe, healed. His.

He yanked his finger from her mouth. No, he wouldn’t force her to change. He wouldn’t become like Marcellus, no matter how much he wanted her. As long as her heart still beat, he’d let her choose what fate she wanted.

Luc pulled her closer to him, ignoring the sting the movement produced in his charred back. The gentle, warm rush of her breath eased both his pain and his conscience. She would wake soon, and he'd find a way to get her off this train.

Chapter Nine

The earth rumbled under Daniela's feet and a dark pillar of smoke erupted from the mountain. Her pulse quickened, impeding her ability to draw in air.

Luc grabbed her hand. "Run to the water."

She looked at him in confusion. Yes, the man in front of her resembled Luc, but why was he wearing an outfit that belonged in Ancient Rome?

"Move," he barked, dragging her along with him.

The smell of smoke singed her nostrils. When she looked behind her, she saw a wall of gray ash tumbling down the mountainside toward them.

She stumbled over a rock and collided with Luc. He caught her and tossed her over his shoulder, continuing to race down the hill. The rest of the town clogged the narrow road, slowing their progress.

At last they made it to the boat houses that lined the shore. The screams of those behind them echoed in her ears and chilled her heart. Screams of pain, of torment, of death. Rocks rattled on the roof, punching holes through it and bruising her skin. The world was ending, and she was witnessing the full extent of the gods' wrath. They were going to die.

She started crying. She'd fought so hard, had been so brave for so long. She wasn't ready to meet her end.

"Shh, my love." Luc pulled her into his arms and rocked her. "I'm so sorry. I never meant for you to get hurt."

His arms tightened around her as her skin burned from the blast of heat that engulfed them. The hot ash choked her throat, smothering her cries. Blackness descended around her, and the last thing she remembered was the dying beat of his heart.

The smell of burnt flesh still lingered in her nose when Daniela opened her eyes, and she flung her arms in alarm.

A groan stilled her. "It's okay, Daniela. You're safe."

Luc. Relief washed over her and she wrapped her arms around his neck to hug him. Instead of returning her affection, he stiffened under her and drew in a hiss.

"What's wrong, Luc?"

“Nothing that won’t heal on its own.” He pulled her arms away, and she noticed the soot covering them.

“You’re hurt.”

“Sunlight will do that to someone like me,” he said with a lopsided grin. “But I had to hold you, to make sure you were safe.”

The images of her dream flashed before her. He’d willingly suffered to protect her, and something in her heart softened. “I’m glad you’re here with me.”

“Me too.” He brushed her hair out of her face, and the corners of his mouth tilted down. “Although I wish we weren’t in this predicament at all. You’ve lost too much blood.”

The initial adrenaline rush from her dream fled, leaving her limbs slow and heavy. How much had she lost between Luc and Colette? “Just don’t take any more,” she teased.

He winced, and she instantly regretted her halfhearted joke. “As long as I live, I will try my hardest to not drink from you again, Daniela. The consequences would be...” His voice trailed off, and neither one of them dared to mention what the consequences would be.

“Where are we?” she asked, hoping to turn the conversation away from her blood.

“Somewhere in Germany, I believe.” He looked down at her. “I’ve noticed the train slows down when we pass through towns. The next one we come to, I want you to get off.”

“No.” Daniela dug her fingers into his shirt, clinging to him as if her life depended on it. “We need to stay together.”

He pried her hands off of him and covered them with his own. “Wrong. You’re not thinking clearly.”

“Yes, I am. Don’t you see? Neither one of us can take on Colette on our own. But together—”

“As long as we’re together, she’ll use you to manipulate me.” He pressed his lips against her forehead. “Believe me when I say letting go of you will be the hardest thing I’ve ever done, but it’s the only way. Once you’re gone, she has nothing to threaten me with, no way to extract the location of the second piece of the staff.”

“Then she’ll kill you.”

He nodded, his expression solemn. “Perhaps, but that’s a risk I’m willing to take as long as you’re safe.”

Her mind seemed too fuzzy to make sense of all this, and fatigue was already threatening to claim her. She nestled closer to his chest. “Come with me.”

“I can’t go out into the sun.”

“Then let’s wait until night.”

“And have them chase us down like a group of hounds going after an injured pair of foxes?” He combed his fingers through her hair. “I’ve thought this through, and this is the best solution. You escape

and get some medical attention. Once you're well enough, find the second part of the staff before Colette. I'll join you as soon as I can."

As much as she hated to admit it, he made more sense than the stupid, childish voice in her head that demanded she stay with him. She lifted her face to him. "You promise?"

"With all my heart. I'm not letting you go that easily."

"Good, because you owe me one hell of an explanation." She tilted his face down until their lips met, and the rest of the world faded from her consciousness. All she knew was him—the intensity of his kiss, the scent of his skin, the taste of his tongue as it delved into her mouth. A moan rose from her throat and she tightened her hold on him. It was moments like this when she never wanted to let him go.

At last, he pulled away, leaving them both breathless. "You're not making this any easier."

"That's the whole idea." If she had to leave him, she wanted to make sure he didn't forget about her when she was gone.

"And I'm forgiven?" When she didn't answer him right away, he added, "I know I don't deserve your forgiveness, that I'm just like them—"

"You're nothing like them." She stroked his cheek. He was no more of a monster than she was. They were both given to moments of weakness and had unconsciously hurt people. She pushed the memories from her childhood deeper into her mind, not wanting to resurrect them. "And I know what I am too. Perhaps one day I'll share the darkness of my past with you."

"When you are ready. In the meantime," he continued, pulling his cross over his head and placing it around her neck, "hold on to this. It's given me strength when I needed it, and now I don't need it anymore."

She cradled the small piece of carved wood in her hand. It seemed too light when she took into account all it stood for. "I'm just keeping it safe until I can give it back to you."

"Fair enough."

They sat in silence as the countryside whizzed by outside the busted crate that sheltered them from the sun. But the moment the train started to slow, fear gripped her and made every muscle in her body tense.

"Are you ready to jump?" Luc asked.

"No." But her mind argued with her. It was selfish of her to want to stay with him. He'd already suffered too much because of her. "But I will when the time comes."

"That's what I need to hear." He tilted her chin up and brushed his thumb across her bottom lip. "I love you, Daniela. You've made me feel more alive than I have in centuries."

His confession forced the air from her lungs. He loved her, and knowing that made their parting that much more painful. "I love you too, Luc."

The tight lines of his face relaxed. "Thank you."

The train continued to grind to a slow crawl, but Daniela's pulse raced. It was time for her to leave, time for her to continue on without him and hope for the best. "Where do I need to go to find the second half?"

"The Gates of Hell in Houska Castle."

"Houska Castle," she repeated and gave him one final kiss. Tears stung her eyes as she tried to commit these final moments to her memory in case she never saw him again. "And where should I find you afterward?"

"I'll find you."

She nodded and stepped away from him. The sun warmed her back and loosened the knots that had formed in her legs. The train was moving slow enough for her to jump without getting hurt if she timed her escape carefully. She sat poised on the edge of the freight car and cast one more glance over her shoulder at him. He waved to her, and she jumped.

The ground rushed to meet her, and the impact pushed the air from her lungs. She rolled several times, the gravel crunching in her ears and digging into her skin. She stopped and waited for her pain to ebb before moving. By the time she lifted her head, the train was almost out of sight.

She crawled to her hands and knees and waited for the world to stop spinning. Luc was right. She needed medical attention, but Foundation witches would heal her faster. She felt around in her pockets for her phone and let out a wail of frustration when she didn't find it.

A small town lay across the tracks. Maybe someone would have a phone. She stumbled to her feet, reciting the Foundation's number to herself with each step. She blindly moved forward until she ran into a chain-link fence. With the last bit of magic she could gather, she melted the metal and pushed her way through the brush to reach the road ahead. The spell, which would be so simple under normal circumstances, drained her, and her knees buckled.

The screech of tires filled her ears and she fell to the ground.

"Yoo-hoo, Daniela. Wake up!" an unfamiliar voice called. A soft slap stung Daniela's cheek and pulled her from her dreams of Luc and ancient Rome. "Hospitals give me the creeps."

"Leave her alone, Espe," a more familiar voice replied.

What is Jen doing here? Daniela asked herself. Her fellow witch should be in New York.

"Then do some of that healing magic voodoo stuff and wake her up."

Jen laughed. "I'm not that type of witch."

"Can't we just starting pulling out the IVs and sneak her out?" the woman called Espe asked. "Morwen just said to bring her back to New York. She didn't say she had to be conscious."

"Touch that IV and you'll answer to me," a deep male voice warned.

“Besides, it looks like she’s stirring anyway,” Jen added. “Daniela, can you hear us?”

“Yes.” The word sounded gruff and harsh, even though she didn’t intend for it to sound that way. The bright light stung her eyes when she first opened them. Three faces slowly came into focus. “Where am I?”

“In a hospital in Germany.” Jen brushed her hand across Daniela’s forehead, and a surge of magic awakened her senses. “Do you know who I am?”

“Yes, Jen,” she replied, this time with every bit of intended grumpiness. The younger witch was treating her like a child instead of a senior witch. She looked from Jen to the petite Latina woman and the tall black man in her room. “Who are they?”

“Espe and Demarcus. Hunters.”

Figures. Espe bounced from one foot to the next like she expected a vampire to appear from behind the curtain. Demarcus, on the other hand, bore the marks of an experienced hunter, from his cool, assessing gaze to the multiple scars that crisscrossed his beefy forearms. “What day is it?”

“Tuesday,” Demarcus replied.

“I’ve already lost a day.” She sat up and tugged at the tube pumping blood into her arm. “We have to get going.”

“Finally.” Espe jumped to the door. “I’m going to see if I can find the doctor.”

“Wait.” Espe froze as Demarcus uttered the single word. He narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms. “Where do you think you’re going, Daniela?”

“I need to find the other half of the staff before Colette does.” She started pulling the tape off her arm. Every second they wasted here meant one less second she had with Luc. But first, she needed to complete the mission.

Espe jumped up and down. “You mean we get to go hunting instead of playing wounded witch retrieval service?”

Irritation crackled along Daniela’s skin and small bolt of lightning sparked from her fingertips, hitting the young hunter squarely in the chest. A yelp filled the room. The look of shock on Espe’s face made Daniela feel slightly apologetic, but not enough to say the words.

“I’ve warned you to watch your tongue around these witches.” Demarcus led Espe out of the room, but his tone let Daniela know he wasn’t done talking about this. “Let’s go find a doctor.”

As soon as the door closed, Daniela resumed yanking on the tubes. “Help me remove all these things.”

“Why don’t you at least finish tanking up?” Jen gave the bag of blood a squeeze, and the room spun with such ferocity, Daniela was sure she’d lose the contents of her stomach if it wasn’t already empty. “Morwen said you’d been used as a snack.”

The bag emptied in a matter of seconds under Jen’s spell, and Daniela pulled out the IV. “Twice. But there were special circumstances the first time.”

Jen stepped back and tilted her head to the side. “You seem different now. That spell you used on Espe, for example. It wasn’t your usual element. What really happened?”

Daniela stopped and took a deep breath. How could she explain to the young witch that she’d fallen in love with a creature they’d been trained to destroy at all costs? And having two hunters in their entourage didn’t make things easier. If they saw Luc, they’d probably stake first and ask questions later. “It’s complicated.”

“No shit. I’ve never seen Morwen so wound up before. She had us on a plane to Paris two days ago, then had us re-routed to Copenhagen, and when the Foundation got the call you were here last night, we were uprooted and told to not let you out of our sights. I always wanted to take a tour of Europe, but this is a bit ridiculous.” Jen flipped her hair back. “You must have done something to really piss her off.”

“I told her I was leaving as soon as I finished this mission, so the sooner we find that piece of the staff, the sooner I can resume my normal life.” *As if there was anything normal about my life.* She got out of the bed, and a cool draft bathed her bare buttocks. “I don’t suppose you have a change of clothes for me, do you?”

Jen bit her bottom lip and color rose into her cheeks. “Um, no, not really, but I have a dress in my bag that might fit you.”

Daniela eyed the small, curvy strawberry blonde and inwardly groaned. Jen’s dress would probably cover less than the hospital gown. She held out her hand, though. “It will have to do until we can find something else.”

Jen was rummaging through her backpack when Demarcus came back in. “Espe’s tracking down someone to sign your discharge papers. So tell me, where are we going now?”

She had no idea where the journal went, but it didn’t matter now. Luc had told her where the other piece was. “Houska Castle.”

Demarcus arched one brow. “And where is that?”

“Google it.” Daniela grabbed the dress from Jen and disappeared into the bathroom. This mission couldn’t end soon enough.

Chapter Ten

The Land Rover rumbled along the crude Czech countryside road as the sun hung low on the horizon. Daniela stared at the lopsided square castle looming in the distance and tensed. She looked up in her mirror at the backseat. Jen and Espe prattled about some celebrity gossip as if they were sitting in a coffee shop back home. The only person that seemed as nervous as her was Demarcus. He gripped the steering wheel hard enough to blanch his fingertips.

Daniela squirmed in her seat. Her mind told her to think positive. They'd go in, grab the rod, and leave before the sun set. Her gut argued otherwise. And if she continued to listen to it, she'd be a nervous wreck by the time they got to Houska Castle.

"Demarcus, do you think all vampires are the same?" she asked in an attempt to ignore the churning in her stomach.

He continued to stare straight ahead. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you think they're all evil?"

That made him turn his head. He stared at her as if she'd lost her mind. "Daniela, they're all bloodsuckers, and we're nothing but dinner to them. If one of them tricked you into thinking you were something more, then you need some serious help."

"And what if you're basing that assumption on a stereotype?"

All she got was a low grunt in reply. Obviously, he'd had some experience in that matter. After a few minutes, he said, "I will concede that there may be one or two that want to overcome their natures, but you've seen vampires when the bloodlust consumes them. All conscious thoughts leave them. They become more like animals than humans."

"Daniela, you must have had your brain really fried if you think there's such a thing as a good vampire," Espe added from the backseat.

Daniela squeezed her hand around Luc's cross and swallowed back the defense that filled her mouth. The hunters were wrong. And when she saw Luc again, she'd asked him what had caused him to be different from the others of his kind.

They reached a gate and a man ran over to unlock it for them. As soon as they drove past, he closed it back up again. "Morwen must have gotten permission for us to be here," Demarcus muttered. "That woman has so many connections, it's a wonder she doesn't run for political office."

“And compromise the secrecy of the Foundation?” Daniela asked with a hint of sarcasm. “Never. The Foundation comes before everything as far as she’s concerned.”

Demarcus drove toward the main building at a snail’s pace, cocking his head to the side. “It’s an odd place to build a castle. It doesn’t seem to be near a river or any major trade routes, and there are no fortifications. You’d normally see some kind of defensive wall around a thirteenth-century castle.”

The feeling of a dozen spiders crawling up her back caused Daniela to stiffen in her seat. Judging by the gasp she heard behind her, Jen felt it too. It was far stronger than the signature of a coven of witches. “That’s because there’s magic guarding this place.”

“Dark magic,” Jen added. “And it seems to be coming from the chapel.”

Daniela wondered if that was the reason Luc had chosen this place to hide the other part of the staff. With the overlying magical barriers being so strong here, no one would be able to detect it. “Then let’s start looking there.”

Demarcus pulled the Land Rover in front of the chapel, and they all got out and grabbed their gear. They had maybe an hour before nightfall. She grimaced. Not as much time as she would’ve liked, but hopefully it would be enough.

The chapel seemed deserted when they entered, which suited her just fine. The fewer witnesses, the better.

Jen ran to the center of the room and crouched down, patting the stone tiles on the floor. “It seems to be the strongest here.”

Daniela knelt next to her and sent out a few magical feelers. A chorus of dissonant whispers answered back. The longer she listened, the clearer their message became. *Go away.* “Luc said he hid it in the Gates of Hell. I think this fits the description.”

“What are you two witches talking about?” Espe tried to sound irritated, but she pulled her jacket tighter around her chest.

Daniela ignored her and started feeling around the grout for any weaknesses. “I think we need to go lower.”

“Agreed.” Jen joined her in scouring the floor. “It seems pretty solid.”

“Only to normal humans.” Daniela reached deep inside and called on her magic. If she had been an earth witch, this would’ve been simple. She focused her spell on where the magic barrier seemed to be the strongest, and the ground rumbled. The grout turned golden and crumbled away as the tile rose a few inches up in the air. She slid it to the side and released the spell.

Espe ran over to the hole and looked down into it. “Holy shit. I can’t see the bottom.”

Daniela massaged the ache out of her muscles and joined the other three at the hole. The energy required to move that tile left her drained, but the feeling would wear off in a few minutes. A rush of magic plumed from the opening and sent another round of shivers through her. “But that’s where we need to go.”

Demarcus flipped a few coins into the hole and listened for the sound of them hitting the ground. A sound that never came. "I have about fifty feet of rope in the truck, but I'm not sure that's going to be enough." He turned to Daniela. "Are you sure you want to go down there?"

She swallowed past the fear lodged in her throat and nodded. She was the one that had been given this mission, and she had to be the one to complete it. While she waited for the others to come back, she closed her eyes and focused on blocking out the voices trying to dissuade her from entering the Gates of Hell.

Then a wave of reassurance washed over her, blocking the dark whispers from her ears. She looked up and saw Jen standing next to her. "I thought that would help," she said with a sheepish smile.

"It did." She ran her hand over Luc's cross and her courage returned. The sounds of dragging rope and clanking metal grew stronger. She glanced over her shoulder at Demarcus and Espe. "How long do you think it will take to set up this stuff?"

"A few minutes." Demarcus tossed her a harness. "Put this on and we'll have you rappelling down there in no time."

Ten minutes later, Daniela stood on the edge of the hole with the rope in her hands. She glanced down into the blackness below. Would her small headlamp even penetrate that?

Demarcus tightened his grip on the other end of the rope. "Ready?"

She nodded and jumped back into the hole. The rope whirled through the pulleys, and she caught the flash of light on one of the damp walls as she fell. She steered toward it and breathed a sigh of relief when her feet touch solid rock.

"You okay down there?" Espe called.

"Yes." But it was a lie. The scent of brimstone singed her nostrils and sweat prickled along her forehead. Everything about this place screamed for her to climb back up and take off running. She drew in a shaky breath and fell deeper into the void.

Get out. Go away. Leave before the demons eat your soul. One by one, the voices hissed in her ears and tried to shred her resolve. She ignored them and continued lower until one statement stopped her in her tracks. "Leave now, witch, before you venture too close to hell."

Unlike the sexless whispers of before, this voice was clear, male, and sounded like he was standing right behind her. She whirled around on the rope to look for the source, but saw nothing. A current of air rushed past her face. "Who's there?"

"You have no business being here," the voice replied, followed by what sounded like the flutter of wings. The rope shook, and she started swinging like a pendulum in the pit. "Humans should not tempt the powers of hell."

No wonder they called this the Gates of Hell. Whoever was defending it wanted to make sure no one found the bottom. She clung tighter to the rope and prayed Demarcus would continue to hold her. "I don't want to find the opening to hell. I only want to find an object that was thrown down here. A metal rod."

The silence stretched for several long seconds before a hazy face appeared in the darkness. A scowl marred the otherwise handsome features, and a pair of black leathery wings flapped behind him. “You are telling the truth,” he said, more to himself than her. “Stay here and I will get it for you.”

He disappeared back into the darkness, and the rope finally stilled.

“Daniela, what the hell is happening down there?” Demarcus shouted.

“You don’t want to know.” She’d have a hard time telling anyone about her winged delivery boy and wondered if she’d just hallucinated. Several minutes stretched by before she felt another rush of air.

“Is this what you wanted?” the voice asked.

Daniela shined her headlamp on the golden rod decorated with hieroglyphs. She clasped the cool metal and reassured herself it was real when the subtle tingle of magic raced up her arm. “Yes, this is it.”

“Good. Now leave.”

A pair of strong hands grabbed the top of her borrowed sundress and pulled her out of the hole with a nauseating speed that made her stomach drop. She collided with Demarcus and caused them to slide several feet from the impact. The clatter of the stone tile falling back over the hole echoed through the stunned silence that filled the chapel.

“That just registered a 9.2 on my weird-shit-o-meter.” Demarcus pushed her off of him and rolled to his side. “What was that?”

“Someone who wants us gone ASAP.” Daniela sat up and traced the carved pictures on the rod. “At least he gave me what I wanted.”

“That was very kind of him,” a new voice sneered from the doorway. Colette stood at the entry of the chapel with her hand on her hip. She snapped her fingers and two of her henchman tossed a charred body into the center of the chapel. “And to think, if Luc had told us where it was sooner, I would’ve had to fetch it myself.”

A groan came from the body and Daniela’s heart lurched. The mostly burnt person was Luc. He lifted his blackened face and stared at her with hollow blue eyes. Tears stung her own, but she fought the urge to run to him and pull him into her arms.

Colette entered the chapel, followed by six other vampires who flanked her sides. “He was very stubborn, you know. Tried to lead us to the wrong place. But even with you gone, I found a way to get the truth out of him.” She grinned so her fangs sparkled in the flashlights. “In his folly to cling to his human past, he forgot that when we feed, we enter the minds of our victims.”

A new wave of disgust rose up inside of Daniela. How dare Colette violate Luc in that way? She channeled her anger into her inner fire and unleashed it on the vampire witch. Her adversary easily deflected it, but Daniela converted the spell and formed a wall of flames between her group and the vampires.

“Nice try, little witch, but you’re weak.” The flames parted and Colette stepped through them. “Give me the other piece of the staff and maybe we’ll let you and your friends live.”

Espe and Demarcus pulled out their stakes, and Jen tensed. They were all ready for the battle Daniela knew was coming. The only person who didn’t move was Luc. He remained a motionless ball on the floor, seemingly unconscious to the events occurring around him. As wounded as he was, she couldn’t count on him to fight. Four against seven weren’t good odds, but at least she had experience on her side. She cast a quick spell to bind the rod to her hand so she wouldn’t drop it. The metal stung her palms and her fingers locked around it. “If you want it, you’ll have to pry it from my dead hands.”

Colette sneered at her. “That can easily be arranged.”

Figures poured through the opening Colette had created in the wall of fire, but Daniela managed to summon a fireball before Colette tackled her to the ground. The vampire witch rolled off her with a flash of light and a squeal of pain.

Daniela pulled herself back to her feet and surveyed the battle around her. Each of the hunters wrestled with one of Colette’s henchmen, and two piles of dust already littered the floor. Jen, on the other hand, seemed to be allowing the remaining vampires to herd her into a corner, but Daniela recognized the focused squint on the younger witch’s face. She was gathering her magic until she had enough to unleash her spell on them. When she did, the rush of dark magic that filled the chapel nearly froze Daniela’s blood. Where had Jen learned such a spell?

She was so busy watching the dark shadows that consumed the two vampires from Jen’s spell that she only caught a blur of motion out the corner of her eye before she hit the ground again. A feral snarl adorned Colette’s half-burned face while they wrestled over the other half of the staff. Colette pinned Daniela to the ground, digging her knees into Daniela’s chest for leverage. As hard as the vampire pulled, the rod didn’t budge.

Realization finally slackened Colette’s features. “You think you’re clever, using a simple binding spell. But you’re still a fragile human.”

Colette gave the rod one final tug before slamming it against Daniela’s throat. Stars bloomed on the edges of Daniela’s vision and coalesced to form a curtain that fell lower and lower with each second. Her lungs burned for air and the metallic taste of blood filled her mouth. She strained against her captor, trying to lift the rod a few inches so she could gulp in a breath.

“So I didn’t break your neck, but I think it’s much nicer this way, watching the life slowly drain from your eyes and knowing your pathetic lover is witnessing it. Just having to endure his feelings for you when I fed from him made me want to vomit.”

Luc. Daniela had almost forgotten about him. She rolled her eyes toward the burned body a few feet away and silently reached out to him. She was the reason he’d been tortured. If he’d just left her alone, he

would be strong and healthy. But would she still feel the same emptiness she'd known before she met him? Was the pain they now shared worth the few precious moments of joy they'd known?

Luc stirred as if he heard her thoughts and rose to his hands and knees. The white of his fangs contrasted with his charred lips, but there was no mistaking the snarl that they formed. He rocked back on his feet once and leaped into the air, pouncing on Colette and yanking her away.

The first rush of air that filled her lungs made Daniela cough. She rolled over and sucked in the precious breaths she'd feared she'd never get.

"Run," Luc shouted while he struggled to restrain Colette. Sparks flew off his body from the vampire witch's spells, but he continued to hold on to her with teeth-gritting tenacity. "Get out of here while you can."

Jen rushed over to help Daniela to her feet. They'd taken only a few steps before the sound of metal scraping across the floor made Daniela dig in her heels. The headpiece lay just out of Colette's reach. She clawed at it as Luc yanked her back by the ankles. Colette would never rest until she got what she wanted. Perhaps she should know the full power of the Staff of Octavius before she died.

"Uh-oh, I don't like the look on your face." Jen tugged on her hand one more time, but Daniela wiggled free and dove for the headpiece.

Luc's face bore a mixture of pain and frustration. "Daniela, what the hell are you doing? Go before she hurts you."

Maybe it was the lack of oxygen to her brain a few moments before that made her think repairing the staff made sense. Maybe it was her desire to fry Colette to a crisp for all the pain she'd caused her and Luc. Or maybe it was her desire to wield that kind of power, just once in her life, but the instant the severed end of the rod touched the headpiece, a blinding flash of light filled the chapel. The blast that followed knocked everyone to their feet.

Daniela rubbed the dust from her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief that her binding spell still held. She stared at the repaired Staff of Octavius in awe. The lapis eyes of the winged headpiece winked as if the staff knew what she was thinking. Magic like she'd never imagined flowed through her body, sharpening her senses and whispering in her mind that she was invincible.

"Give me the staff!" Colette shrieked and lobbed a ball of lightning toward her. As soon as Daniela thought the word *shield*, an orb of blue light surrounded her, and the spell fizzled into a shower of sparks on impact.

Luc's jaw dropped, and his grip on Colette slackened enough for the vampire witch to spring at Daniela.

With a swipe of the staff, Daniela sent Colette flying to the opposite wall. A grin curled the corners of her mouth. *A girl could get used to this kind of power.* Indeed, it called to her like a sweet serenade and

filled her mind with images of conquest. A brand new Ferrari. A penthouse suite in New York. An estate in Tuscany surrounded by fertile vineyards. They could be hers if she held on to the staff.

“Daniela, don’t listen to it.” Luc crawled toward her, every movement causing his burned face to wince. “Remember its history. Absolute power corrupts.”

His words pulled her from the siren song of the staff and brought her back to reality. The two hunters were faltering against their foes. Blood stained the floor and walls of the chapel from the fight. Jen’s spells grew weaker each time she cast them, the effort draining what little strength she had left to defend herself. And along the far wall, Colette struggled to rise to her feet.

“Do it, Daniela,” Luc murmured. “Don’t worry about me. Just do what you need to do to escape.”

She brushed her fingers across the wooden cross she now wore. His cross. And she had promised to return it to him. No, she wouldn’t destroy him with the other vampires. He was different. He wasn’t one of them. He loved her, and her heart belonged to him.

A hum resonated in her ears. She closed her eyes and focused on the words. *I call on Ra, god of the sun, to fill me with his light. I call on Sekhmet, goddess of fire, to burn deep within me. And I call on Maat, goddess of justice, to sow vengeance on my enemies.* Her lips moved in time to the chant, her voice growing from a whisper every time she repeated it.

A ball of light formed at the heart of the headpiece. The blue stone eyes pierced the darkness and shot beams of light toward Colette and her henchmen. They froze under the scrutiny of the metal bird and stared at it with mouths agape, mesmerized by its spell.

The magic churned inside Daniela’s chest, begging for release. She glanced at Luc, who merely nodded as if he accepted his fate. Her heart ached. He was willing to die to let her live, but she couldn’t imagine living without him. The dream of the volcano raced through her mind. He had risked everything to save her then. But this time, she’d be the one to save him.

“Hide.” Her word thundered like the voice of an irate goddess. *What is happening to me?* She opened her free palm toward Luc, and with a mere thought, sent him flying out of the chapel. Jen, Espe and Demarcus ran after him, and the door to the chapel banged closed with a hollow thud.

Once it was just her and the vampires, she finally released the spell that had been building inside her. She cried out the words one final time while the room filled with a light that wielded the white-hot intensity of a thousand suns. Her skin tingled at first and then burned as if all her sins were being scoured from her flesh. The magic of the staff pulled at her like it wanted to drag her soul from her body and consume it. She struggled against the staff, against being overwhelmed by its power, and finally shouted the reversal to her binding spell.

The Staff of Octavius slipped from her hand and clattered to the ground. She fell to her knees, sending waves of jaw-clenching pain through her body. The light faded from the room and the shadows grew

longer. She lay still for an unknown period of time, listening to the sound of her breath coming and going through her nose. She'd fought her enemies and she survived.

The chapel door creaked open and three pairs of feet stood in front of her. "Is she alive?" Espe asked before nudging her with her foot.

"Touch me again, little huntress, and I'll make what just happened seem like a day at the spa." Daniela lifted her head and scanned the room. Jen was bending over to pick up the Staff of Octavius, but she reached out and grabbed it first. "You have no business touching this."

The younger witch narrowed her eyes. "Why not?"

"Because I've seen what you're capable of doing." When she turned the staff over to Morwen, she needed to make sure she mentioned how Jen called upon dark magic to battle the vampires. If left unchecked, the consequences could be dangerous. "Where's Luc?"

"You mean the crispy bloodsucker?" Espe jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "He took off that way like all the demons of hell were after him."

Daniela shoved them aside, using the staff to gain extra clearance from them. Her heart pounded. *Please let him still be here. Please don't let him be hurt by the spell.* She took note of the piles of ashes that littered the chapel floor and how they curled in the draft made when she tugged the door open. Colette was nothing more than a memory, but she prayed that Luc would remain more than that.

She called out his name and paused, listening for a response. None came. She ventured into another room and repeated her cry. This time, the sob that had been choking her throat came out with it, and a weak response followed.

"Go home, Daniela."

She traced it back to its source and found Luc standing in the center courtyard, bathed in the light of the full moon. He turned to her and winced. "Please, I don't want you to see me this way. I'll find you once I'm healed."

"And how will you heal?" She took a step toward him, gauging his reaction. When he didn't run away, she moved closer. "I can help you."

He squeezed his blackened eyelids shut and hissed. His fangs elongated, pressing into his lips. He didn't need to say what he needed. She already knew the answer. Blood.

"How will you get enough to heal you? Do you just randomly kill anyone you come across?"

His blue eyes flashed in anger when he opened them. He grabbed her arms and shook her, causing her to drop the staff in surprise. "What kind of monster do you think I am? I have been in this state of undeath for over six centuries and I have never taken a human life, not even when my thirst was the strongest."

"Then how did you survive?"

Luc released her and turned away. "By entralling my victims and taking only what I needed. When my thirst was the strongest, I even fled into the wilderness to feed on animals. Anything to keep me from

committing the unthinkable. From becoming one of them. Now I keep expired pints of blood from a local hospital at my *maison* in Paris. It tastes stale, but it sustains me. I was content until I met you.”

“And then?”

“And I craved your blood to the point of madness.”

Daniela took a step back, letting his confession slowly sink into her mind. An icy chill crawled through her, robbing her of all emotion except heartache. “So I was nothing more than a snack to you?”

He had her back in his arms faster than she could blink. “No, *ma chérie*. I want all of you—your mind, your body, your heart and your blood. I want you so much that I’m thinking things that should never enter my mind. I want you with me for eternity, but I refuse to give in to the temptation. I cannot turn you.”

“Why not?” The words slipped out before she realized she’d said them. *This is madness. He must be enthralling me again.* And yet, the longer she thought about it, the more tempting it seemed. She’d no longer have to worry about tormenting him with the scent of her blood, of making him feel guilty when he indulged in his cravings. She’d be able to fight with him and sleep in his arms for more than just one fragile human lifetime. She’d be his, now and forever.

“I know what you’re thinking, and it’s not that simple.” He kissed her forehead with his blistered lips. “I suggest you have a frank discussion with Morwen about this before you decide anything.”

“I will, but in the meantime, I know what I can do now.” She tilted her head to the side, exposing her throat to him. “Take what you need from me so you can start healing.”

He sucked in a breath through his teeth. “You shouldn’t say such things, Daniela. What if I take it too far? I’ve already held you in my arms and listened to the dying beats of your heart once. If I take you to that point again, I’ll...”

“I trust you, Luc.” She lowered his mouth to where he’d bitten her before. She’d let him turn her if things got out of hand. In fact, she welcomed it. “Bite me or I’ll slit my throat open for you.”

He chuckled but pressed his lips to her neck. The flat of his tongue bathed the area around the almost healed wounds as if he was prepping her skin. When he bit her, she felt only a slight sting, so much more pleasant than when Colette bit her. She melted into his embrace and allowed herself to float away in the bliss that followed.

Her mind wandered back over the last few days. She forgot about the pain and betrayal, about the heartbreak she’d known. Instead, all she could see was the joy she felt when she was with Luc. She remembered how he’d comforted her when she was about to give up hope, how he’d given her strength when she faltered, how he made her body seize in pleasure when he made love to her.

“You need to be careful with such thoughts, *stregnini*,” Luc whispered in her ear. “I’m getting so aroused, I could fuck you right here.”

Her sex grew damp just thinking about it, but how would that be possible with him still burnt? She opened her eyes to ask him that, but the words froze on her tongue. Instead of the blackened flesh that had

marred his face moments before, pale white skin now replaced it. She traced the lines of his face, marveling at how quickly he'd healed. The wicked gleam in his eye reminded her of his threat. "Are you sure you're up to it?" she teased.

"Are you challenging me?" He pressed his erection against her mound, and the ferocity of her desire almost made her knees buckle. Surely, he had to be enthralling her to make her want to rip her clothes off and let him have his way with her right there in the courtyard. "I'm already practically naked, but you seem to have too many barriers in place."

She looked down and saw his clothes hung in singed tatters off his body, ready to scatter in a strong breeze. She was still wearing the rappelling harness from earlier. "Quick! Help me get this off."

"Gladly." The reinforced nylon straps ripped like a spider's web under his grasp. Her flimsy underwear under the borrowed dress soon followed. "I want to be inside you so badly, I don't know if I'll be able to think clearly until I come."

"What are you waiting for?" She jumped up into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist. He pushed her against the courtyard wall and entered her in one swift thrust. For a few seconds, neither one of them moved. They stared at each other, enjoying the simple pleasure of being joined in such an intimate matter. But the novelty quickly faded for Daniela as the tension deep inside her womb coiled tighter, demanding release. She dug her heels into his ass. "Luc, we don't have much time. The others will come looking for us."

He laughed and pulled back. "And what if I want to draw things out a bit longer?" He slid into her slowly this time, inch by agonizing inch. His breath came out in a shudder. "You feel so wonderful, I'd come too quickly if I fucked you like I want to. Then where's the pleasure for you?"

"Every second with you is so much pleasure, I never want to let you go." The words shocked her as soon as she said them, and she almost felt embarrassed at revealing how much she'd truly fallen for him. It went against the cautious reserve she'd practiced for so many years, never letting anyone get close enough to hurt her once again.

Yet, when she said those words to him, his grin made his eyes crinkle. "I feel the same way, *ma chérie*."

He began moving inside her in earnest, as if he took her at her word and ignored any shreds of restraint that he might have had left. Every powerful stroke sent tingles of pleasure racing to her limbs, building on each other until her breath hitched. The orgasm welled up inside like steam in a kettle. When it erupted, Luc had to muffle her scream of ecstasy with a lip-lock that only a vampire could perform. His fangs grazed her bruised lips, the slight sting only heightening the sensations rolling through her. His body stiffened and then melted with a guttural moan that rose from his throat.

And then there was silence. She leaned her forehead against his so the tips of their noses touched. Sweat trickled down Luc's face, coating his lips with the taste of salt when she kissed him. Feeling his

strong arms around her and listening to how his heart thumped in time with hers filled her with a content hum.

“Daniela, we’re getting ready to— Well, hello, Mister Nice Ass.” Espe stood on the edge of the courtyard and gave them a saucy wink.

Daniela tumbled from Luc’s embrace, and she could have sworn she saw a hint of color rise into his pale cheeks. He hid behind her to cover his nudity. A smile touched her lips. She’d have to tease him about his sudden modesty later. “This is Luc.”

Espe took a step toward them and frowned. Recognition flashed across her face when she realized what he was. Her hand grazed the stake-shaped bulge in the pocket of her cargo pants, but she didn’t retrieve it. “He can’t come with us.”

“I know, which is why I ask that you go on without me.” When Espe moved toward the Staff of Octavius, Daniela added, “And without the staff. Tell Morwen I’ll give her part of it once Luc and I break it again.”

A snarl formed on the young hunter’s face. “You know what he is and you choose to be with him?”

Daniela looked over her shoulder at her lover. “He’s not what you think. Come feel his heart if you don’t believe me.”

Espe skirted along the edge of the courtyard, her hand never straying more than a few inches from her stake as she approached them. She held out her hand.

Daniela moved aside so Luc could close the gap between him and his potential hunter.

Espe’s eyes widened a few seconds after she touched his chest. “This shouldn’t be happening,” she gasped. “He’s undead.”

“He’s as alive as any man.”

“No kidding.” Espe took a step back and cast a quick glance below Luc’s waist. “It looks like he’s ready for the next round.”

A possessive hunger ate away at Daniela’s gut, and she shielded Luc from Espe’s prying eyes. *Funny, I’ve never been the jealous type, she thought. But then, I’ve never had a relationship like this before.*

“Very nice,” Espe added with a grin. “It almost has me wanting to forget my training if I could find someone like him.”

Luc pulled her against him, pressing his growing erection into her ass. He placed a gentle kiss on her cheek. “Unfortunately, I’m already taken.”

Santa Maria, whatever did I do to deserve him? Her heart fluttered and she sank further into his embrace, savoring the heat of his skin through the thin material of her dress.

“Suit yourselves. I’m out of here.” Espe turned on her heel and disappeared back into the castle.

Once they were alone, Luc nuzzled her ear. “Do you have any idea what a pain it was to break the staff in the first place?”

“No, but it needs to be done, Luc. If any witch gets her hands on it...” Her words trailed off as a shiver coursed down her spine. Even now, she dreaded touching it again. What if the voices began to whisper their sweet song of conquest in her mind again? Would she be able to resist it?

“I understand. But first, we need to find a place to hide before the sun comes up. I’d hate to be burned again.”

“What about finding you some new clothes?”

He chuckled. “For the next few days, I don’t think either of us will need clothes.”

The growl of desire in his voice made her sex quiver in anticipation. For the next few days, she’d gladly stay in bed with him, enjoying his touch as they made love until they both collapsed from exhaustion.

Chapter Eleven

Luc caught Morwen's scent a split second before he heard her steps echoing through the catacomb tunnels. At least she wasn't trying to sneak up on them. Stealth had been her friend for so long, he found it hard to imagine her without it.

Daniela lifted her head a few minutes later and looked in the direction of the sound. "She's coming."

"I know," he replied and dropped a kiss on the top of her curly head. His lover's hands trembled ever so slightly, betraying her anxiety over meeting with her former teacher for the first time since she went searching for the Staff of Octavius. "Do you wish for me to handle this?"

"No, I can do it." She stiffened her spine and erased all emotion from her face.

When Morwen came into the light, it seemed like time had stopped centuries ago. She still appeared as she had the last time he'd seen her, in a Baroque Venetian salon. The same flowing red hair, the same porcelain skin, the same bright blue eyes that seemed to rip straight to his soul. The only things that had changed were her clothes. He almost laughed when he took them in. Only Morwen would climb down into the Roman catacombs wearing a tight skirt and high heels.

She stood a safe distance away from them and placed her hand on her hip. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever give me the staff."

"It's only been a month since we found it, Morwen." Daniela mirrored the Head Witch's posture. "It took us that long to break it again and dispose of the rod."

Morwen's mouth fell open. "You broke it? But—but—"

"But nothing." Luc stepped between the two witches. He'd seen Morwen lose her temper before, and he wanted to make sure he shielded Daniela from her wrath if she chose to display it. "The Staff of Octavius is too powerful to belong to anyone. Why do you think I broke it and hid the pieces all those years ago?"

Morwen took a few seconds to regain her composure. "But I understand you have at least part of it to give to me, correct?"

Daniela pulled a cloth-wrapped object from her satchel. "Just the headpiece."

Morwen pulled away the material and stared into the bird's glittering blue eyes. She traced the lines of the feathered wings carved into the gold and appeared as mesmerized by the headpiece as everyone else who had held it. "And where's the rest of it?"

“In a place where no one will dare look for it.” Daniela glanced over to him and smiled. They’d spent almost a week debating where to hide the rod before deciding to toss it into the Mariana Trench.

Morwen wrapped the headpiece back up in the cloth and turned her attention to them. “So, he hasn’t turned you yet?”

It’s not like he didn’t want to. Every night he spent in her arms only strengthened his desire to make sure she’d spend centuries at his side, but he had to admire Daniela’s reserve. Although she hadn’t told him no, she had said she wanted to learn all she could about living as a vampire before she committed to that lifestyle. At least he never questioned her love for him, and that was enough to keep him calm. “It is her choice.”

“And did he tell you that you would lose your powers as a witch?” Morwen closed the gap between them, her face softening. “It may take a few decades or a few centuries before you regain them, but you’ll physically mourn the loss of your magic. It can destroy your hope.”

At the last word, she turned her attention to him, and his mind was taken back to their conversation years ago at the church. Just being able to revive the rose bush had been enough to restore Morwen’s hope. It was a sign her powers had finally returned. But would Daniela suffer the same despair if she lost her magic?

His lover lifted her chin, and his concerns vanished. Because it was her choice, she’d never be forced to suffer the same experiences he and Morwen had. “I will consider that piece of information before I make the decision.”

“Good, and remember, you are always welcome at the Foundation as long as you’re still human.”

Hypocrite, Luc mentally snorted. He’d taken care not to reveal Morwen’s secrets, but times like this made him want to tell every member of the Foundation what kind of monster was truly running things. On the other hand, she’d gained the power to do things he never thought possible before he met Daniela. If he could find his reflection again and have a beating heart, perhaps one day he’d learn her secret of walking in the sun without getting burned.

Morwen watched him as if she knew exactly what he was thinking. She nodded. “Remember what I told you, Luc. If you resist the temptation, the unthinkable is possible.”

She’d uttered the same words to him that night in Venice. He’d spent his first two hundred years as a vampire avoiding society, living in wilderness and feeding off wild animals. The shame over what he’d become—a bloodthirsty monster—had haunted him from the moment he’d first fed off of Simon. But the need to be around people finally broke him, and he ventured into Venice during Carnival wearing a mask to hide his face and conceal his fangs.

The smell of hundreds of humans clogging the streets sent him into a violent bloodlust, and he’d grabbed the first drunken reveler he saw. The sweet taste of human blood awakened the beast within him, and he would’ve lost control if a redheaded woman wearing a moretta hadn’t pulled him away from his

victim. For such a tiny woman, her strength had shocked him, and he'd allowed her to drag him to a rich salon.

When she removed her mask, he recognized the sorrowful angel he'd once shown pity. Only now, the situation was reversed. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. "Oh, Père Luc, what did he do to you?"

"Do not call me that!" he snapped and turned to leave.

She blocked his exit with a speed no mere mortal could possess.

"It's because of you that I'm forced to live like this."

"And for that, I am truly sorry. I never dreamed he would turn you for helping me." A single drop streaked down her cheek as she touched his face. A wave of calm washed through him, but he ground his teeth together. He refused to fall under her spell again.

"But what's done is done." He grabbed her wrist and yanked her hand away from him. "If I had more courage, I'd walk into the sun myself."

"You don't have to live this way, Luc. If you can resist temptation, the unthinkable is possible."

He'd stayed with her for several months, learning how to blend in without revealing what he was. She'd introduced him to the glittering society of seventeenth century Venice, to poets and artists that brought the light back into his soul. She'd restored his hope, and by the time she retreated into the countryside for summer, he felt confident enough to no longer need her instruction.

The unthinkable was already happening. He threaded his fingers through Daniela's and listened to the steady rhythm of his pulse. "So I will continue to change, Morwen, to become more human?"

"Possibly."

Her cryptic answer rankled him. It was another game, one where she held all the cards, and she would use them to manipulate them. "What do you mean?"

She toyed with something hanging around her neck, and when she removed her hand, he recognized the same tarnished ring that she'd given to him years ago. Hanging next to it was a band of smooth, polish gold. "I mean your heart will continue to beat as long as your soul mate lives. But if you lose her..." Morwen's voice cracked, and she once again ran her fingers over the smooth golden ring.

He turned to Daniela. What would he do if he lost her? She'd filled his life so completely, he doubted he'd find anything but emptiness if she was suddenly taken from him.

Daniela gave him a small smile and squeezed his hand. "Do not worry so much, Luc. I will not leave you."

He tried to return her smile, but the ugly truth still haunted him. Unless he turned her, she would grow old and die. Would he be able to stand back and watch her do that if she refused to be turned?

The sound of Morwen clearing her throat broke his morose thoughts. "Again, I encourage you not to make any rash decisions, Daniela. As much as I hate to lose a witch with your skills, I will respect your decision. And if that is all, I need to get this back to the Foundation." She tucked the headpiece under her

arm and disappeared down one of the tunnels, the clack of her heels lingering long after she faded from the view of their flashlights.

Daniela glanced around the dusty catacombs. "I'm glad we came back here, Luc. It seems fitting."

He nodded. After waking up from one of his dreams of Ancient Rome, he'd mentioned it to her and was surprised to learn that she'd been having the same dreams. As they discussed them, he finally admitted that perhaps there was some truth to Morwen's claim that they'd been lovers in a past life. He only hoped this one wouldn't end the same way the other did.

Daniela gave his hand another squeeze. "Shall we go back to Sophia's?"

The sultry hint in her voice reawakened the desire he thought he'd satisfied that afternoon before they'd crawled out of bed. Even though he hadn't tasted her blood since that night at Houska Castle, he still carried an insatiable appetite for her body. Thankfully, she seemed to have the same problem as him. "Sounds good to me."

But instead of racing back to the small pensione, he led her down the Via Agrippa and stopped in front of a familiar café. "Remember this?"

Her brows furrowed together. "Should I?"

"Perhaps I should revive your memory." He pushed her against the window like he had over a month ago and covered her mouth with his own. This time, however, there was no hesitation in her kiss. She returned his affection full force, her tongue coiling with his and fanning the slow burn of lust warming his blood.

Daniela broke away, gasping for air. "I think I remember now."

"I remember that young punk asking if I was going to fuck you."

She shivered when he said that, the same way she always responded when he used such coarse and blunt language with her. The only thing he'd discovered that aroused her more was a good spanking. "And are you going to fuck me?"

"Maybe." He traced the seam of her trousers. The heat from her sex already hinted how much she wanted him, and he toyed with the idea of taking her right then and there.

She bit her bottom lip and wiggled free from his arms. "First one back to Sophia's gets to be on top."

She took off running down the street, but he caught up with her in a matter of steps and hoisted her over his shoulder. Her giggles grew louder as he sped back to the pensione, and by the time he was carrying her up the stairs, she'd developed full-blown belly laughs.

"Luc, when are you going to do the right thing and marry Daniela?" Sophia called after them.

"When I can convince her to say yes," he replied and closed the door behind them. He tossed her on the bed. "I'm sure Sophia is praying for us right now so we won't be living in sin anymore."

Daniela waited until she stopped laughing before beckoning him to come closer. She grazed her finger over the ridge of his erection. His breath hitched from the sweet agony her touch provoked. Her grin widened and she lowered his zipper. "I can be rather stubborn. It might take you a while to convince me."

"What do you have in mind?"

She pushed him back on the bed and removed her clothes before she straddled his waist. The softness of her bare ass teased his exposed cock as she leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. "I think this is a good start."

He allowed her to cover his body with chaste kisses and meek caresses until he couldn't stand it anymore. He shed the last of his clothes and lifted her hips until the head of his cock sat at the opening of her slick cunt. "Please, Daniela."

She slowly eased onto him, taking him in inch by inch until he was fully seated inside her. A sigh broke free from her lips and she stared down at him. "I love you, Luc, and I thank you for being patient with me while I make up my mind. I promise I won't keep you waiting long."

He gulped and soaked in how beautiful she was while rocking on top of him, moving her hips in a seductive rhythm that had his balls already tightening from the orgasm building inside him. Even if she never agreed to be turned, he'd always remember moments like this.

Her movements became more frantic, more irregular, and the walls of her sex tightened around his cock. Her body shuddered.

"Yes, Luc, please." She arched her head back and pulled his mouth to her neck. "Please take me. I'm ready."

He could no longer resist her. His fangs pierced her skin. The sweet taste of temptation filled his mouth, and his world exploded in light.

About the Author

Growing up in small-town Alabama, I relied on storytelling as a natural way to pass the time and keep my two younger sisters entertained. Of course, that also means I'm inclined to suffer some of the same maladies of many Southern writers, which may include overuse of simile and metaphor, exaggeration, melodrama and the ever-popular long-winded sentence.

I currently live in Western Washington with my husband and daughter, maintaining my alter ego of mild-mannered physician by day while I continue to pursue writing on nights and weekends. I refer to it as "therapy".

To learn more about me, please visit www.cristamchugh.com. Send an email to crista@cristamchugh.com.

Look for these titles by Crista McHugh

Now Available:

Heart of a Huntress
Angelic Surrender

A legend...a myth...a high stakes game that could shatter them both.

Heart of a Huntress

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The Kavanaugh Foundation, Book 1

As one of the oldest surviving vampire hunters in the Foundation, Lana has learned the toughest lesson: success comes at a price. So while the yummy stranger she bumps into at Caesar's trips all her temptation switches, duty comes first. Better to be alone than to gamble with someone else's heart—or her own. Although maybe a one-night stand won't hurt...

Byron has set a one-way course for revenge against the Vegas vampire who murdered his uncle. When he collides with Lana, though, her scent calls to him like a potent aphrodisiac. The only explanation: she's his true-mate. And the timing couldn't be worse. He can't afford any distractions—not to mention it'll be hell convincing her to love someone who sprouts fur and fangs every full moon.

One drink together turns into a daring night of passion. Their erotic interlude ends abruptly with the news that Lana's partner has been abducted by the very vampire Byron seeks. Now Byron has no choice. He must reveal what he is and risk a rejection that could spell his own destruction...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Heart of a Huntress:

His voice almost growled the last sentence, like he wasn't used to people challenging his orders. A shiver coursed down her spine. Normally she didn't like domineering men, mainly because she could kick most of their asses when push came to shove. But Byron looked like the type that could match her, tit for tat. An equal. A challenge. She rattled off the address to her condo just off the Strip and nestled into his arms. It would be a short ride, but she might as well enjoy it while she could.

His arms wrapped around her, warm and comforting. How long had it been since she allowed herself to get physically close to someone like this? She knew getting involved with him was out of the question—too many complications—but would one night disrupt the balance of her life?

"Let me take a look at your ankle."

He slid his hand down her leg and her sex tightened. An amused light shone in his eyes when she met his gaze, like he knew exactly how horny he was making her. And if she wasn't mistaken, he was struggling to contain his arousal as much as she was.

He cleared his throat. "It's already starting to swell a bit. Can you move it, wiggle your toes? Do we need to take a detour by the hospital to make sure it's not broken?"

She followed his commands, wincing as she did. "I think I'll survive. It's just a sprain."

"Good. Anything else?"

"Maybe some bruised ribs," she admitted. Her mind played back the encounter with the last vampire, and a cold chill washed over her insides. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For saving my life. And for taking care of me afterwards." God, she hated to admit she needed help. It gnawed at her gut, but if she had to be rescued by anyone, she would've picked him. "But you need to be careful. You saw what they're like, and from what I overheard, they were setting up a trap."

"For me or for you?"

"Me."

A reckless grin spread across his face. "Then maybe you're the one who needs to be more careful. Maybe you should take someone with you when you hunt."

She glanced up at the driver, wondering how much he'd overheard and understood. "Let's change the subject."

"Of course," he said as he ran one callused hand over her legs and massaged the base of her neck with the other. "What did you have in mind?"

One look told her exactly what he had on his mind. Even if she closed her eyes, the firm ridge in his pants pressing against her thigh made her all too aware of his thoughts. "Are you always this forward with women?"

"Sometimes. Actually, I'd say I've been holding back on you."

"Why is that?"

"Because you're different than most women."

That was an understatement. How many women prowled the streets at night with a wooden stake in their purse?

"You seem to be the type who likes to call the shots," he continued. The sensuous curve of his lips rose into a smile, making his implications clear. He was waiting on her to make the next move.

Her heart raced. One kiss wouldn't cause too many problems, would it? Plus, it might calm the growing curiosity inside her. Before common sense could talk her out of it, she gently brushed her lips against his. They were warm, soft, yielding to hers.

When she tried to pull away, his fingers threaded through her hair. Her breath caught. The hunger in his hazel eyes told her he wanted more than that, and frankly, so did she. This time, when their lips met, she did the yielding. Her mouth parted and his tongue swept in.

Mmm...this is how a kiss should feel. Each sweep of his tongue, each nibble of his teeth, fanned the smoldering fire inside the lowest pit of her stomach. The stubble on his chin grated against her skin, adding a new sensation to her already hyper-aware brain. She curled his short hair around her fingers and held on for the ride, not wanting it to end.

A soft moan formed in his throat and he grew bolder in his advances. The hand on her leg worked its way under her dress. He stroked her seam through her already-soaked panties. Now it was her turn to moan. He repeated the action and she pressed against his hand, urging him to keep doing it, to go deeper next time.

A loud cough interrupted them, and Lana pulled away. The taxi was idling in the driveway of her condominium complex. Her cheeks burned. Had she really been so caught up in making out with a relative stranger in the backseat of a cab that she hadn't realized they'd reached their destination?

Byron's hand withdrew from under her dress. "Let me walk the lady upstairs, and I'll be back in a moment."

"Yeah, right," the driver replied. "Just so you know, the meter's running."

"No problem." He opened the door and scooped her back into his arms. "Got your keys, Lana?"

She searched her purse while she gave him directions to her unit. Despite the fact that she'd been sucking his face a few seconds ago, she couldn't meet his eyes now. Once they entered the elevator, she whispered, "Sorry."

"For what?"

"For acting that way in the cab. I usually have better control over myself."

His laughter echoed off the stainless-steel walls. "So you're saying you don't normally hook up with random strangers?"

"You don't have to say it that way!" She tried to wiggle out of his arms, but he held on to her tighter. "You really don't have to carry me all the way up to my condo, you know."

"What if I want to?"

Although she hated to admit it, she wanted to stay in his arms. For once in her life, she felt less like a tough-as-nails huntress and more like a fairy-tale princess. Of course, what she wanted to do to him didn't belong anywhere near a Disney movie.

The elevator doors opened, and something sank into her stomach like a lead weight. The end of the line. The end of the night with Byron. Why did that disappoint her so much? She should be focused on work, on composing a report to the Foundation about what had happened tonight and researching whoever this Klaus fellow was, but all she wanted to do was taste his lips again. Years of sex deprivation had finally caught up with her.

He set her down in front of her door. "Will you be okay from here?"

No, her mind screamed. He'd left her body aching and needy for more than just a kiss. She should be flattered that he'd left the taxi waiting downstairs, a sure sign that he didn't want just a random hookup with her. Oh, dear God, was he disappointed with her? Had it been so long since she'd kissed someone that she sucked at it? Only one way to find out.

She seized the collar of his blazer and pulled him against her, her mouth devouring his. She tasted traces of the Jack and Coke he'd drunk earlier, along with something more primal, more sexual. Desire.

All semblances of self-control got tossed to the side. He pressed her against the door, pulling her injured leg up until it hooked around his waist and the hem of her dress gathered around her waist. His erection rubbed against her intimate areas, tormenting her with the layers of material that separated them.

He broke his lips away from hers and trailed them down her neck. The combination of his rough stubble mixed with the gentle flicks of his tongue and teasing nips of his teeth nearly sent her over the edge. Who cared if they were humping in the middle of the hallway? She wanted him to fuck her right here and now.

"Lana." He moaned her name like a starving wolf presented with a haunch of fresh meat. His hands cupped her buttocks, raising her ever so slightly so his cock stimulated the exquisitely sensitive nub between her legs.

A shudder ripped through her body. She reached for the door handle, eager to continue this in her bed. Screw the cab waiting downstairs. She'd pay for the running meter at this point, so long as he left her a satisfied and exhausted puddle of flesh when he finished with her.

The door flew open beside her, and if Byron hadn't caught her, they would've landed on the floor in a tangle of limbs. A petite Hispanic woman stared at them with round brown eyes.

Oh, shit, is this the wrong condo?

Her blood is his lifeline. His love could be her salvation....

In the Blood

© 2011 Abigail Barnette

Call girl Cassandra Connely drifts through life in a haze of guilt and sedatives, burdened by a deadly mistake from her past and plagued by nightmares of horrific, clawed creatures. Her newest client is a mouth-watering distraction, and she finds herself intrigued by Viktor Novotny's eccentric...tastes. Until he touches her, and her nightmares become real.

One look at the woman in the hot red dress, and Viktor rests assured he will hang onto his humanity at least one more night. In the century since an attack turned him into a vampire and killed his wife, regular sexual encounters are his only defense against becoming a mindless Minion. Yet when Cassie agrees to be his companion—and meal—for the evening, she stirs his soul in a way he hasn't felt since his lost lover.

Viktor's haunted eyes pull at her heart, but Cassie cannot bear to feel anything, ever again. When she flees his apartment, though, she is in more peril than she knows. Tasting her blood without completing their union has left Viktor hungry for no other but her. And vulnerable to the very Minions that wait to drag him into the void. Worse, Cassie is their next target...

Warning: Contains explicit love scenes that will make your blood boil over, including a brief m/m encounter, ill-advised (but oh-so-sexy) use of sharp objects, and hypnotic kisses that could—just for a moment—make you imagine you are Viktor's lady of the night.

Enjoy the following excerpt for In the Blood:

Viktor laid a hand on her knee, and it was cold through her jeans. "Are you all right?"

She nodded stupidly. Of course she wasn't all right. Nothing was all right. Either the monsters of her dreams were real or Viktor was part of her hallucination. In either case, she was crazy, and she had no clue how long she'd been that way.

For a long time, she said nothing, and he did not try to engage her. She stared out the window, imagining that all of the people on the sidewalks would turn to her with blank faces and yellow teeth. A woman juggled a paper bag of groceries on her arm, and Cassie watched with terrorized fascination, waiting for her to expose her startling lack of features. When she did turn her head, she was only another human being, but Cassie still startled.

Finally, she had the courage to ask Viktor. "What were those things?"

"Vampires." The word was hard and unapologetic.

She nodded again, content to withdraw and continue staring out the dark-tinted glass as she slowly lost her mind.

Viktor was not as content to let her. “It was my fault. My mark is on you now, from feeding. They can track you, as they can track me.”

“Your mark?” Cassandra shook her head. “Did you know that would happen to me? That monsters would try to attack me? And you drank my blood anyway?”

Jesus, what was she saying? She couldn’t possibly believe a word he had to say.

“Usually, it does not happen this way. If we had—”

“Why would they be tracking you? They’re my nightmares. I’ve been dreaming about them my whole life.” Well, not her whole life. Ever since the accident. But she didn’t feel like rehashing those details with a stranger.

“They’re tracking me because they wish to make me one of them.” He cleared his throat and looked away, out the window, as though he were ashamed to meet her eyes. “I have taken a life before, out of hunger. It fractured my soul, as such an act always does, and they are...attracted to that kind of despair. I carry a scent that is irresistible to Minions. When I fed off you, it mingled our essences. If we had...finished our business together, the humanity restored to me through the act would have lessened my connection to you. But I let you leave my apartment. Then, stupidly, I led them to your home.” He looked out his own window, hopelessness lining his face. “I should have known better.”

An angry laugh burst from her throat. “About what? About vampires?”

“Yes, about vampires.”

The authority with which he spoke was dangerous, pulled Cassie in, made her want to believe every word he said. Yet her brain refused to adapt to this new and absurd reality. “You can’t just say that to me. My life can’t be part of your sick fantasies. There isn’t enough money in the world to—”

“What do you think they were, then?” he asked calmly, cutting her off as though he were a patient father dealing with a toddler’s screaming tantrum.

The monsters from her nightmares were vampires. Or Minions or whatever. They existed, like humans and dogs and cats and trees. And not just tonight. Probably forever. And she’d never had a clue, besides her dreams.

Though she wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer, she asked him anyway. “What are you? Why could you fight those things the way you did?”

He let go of her hand then, as if suddenly uncomfortable with their closeness. “I am a vampire.”

Confusion spurred her curiosity on. “But those things were vampires. If you’re the same...species—”

“We are not the same!” His voice was too loud, even in the spacious interior of the car. He took a deep breath and continued, more gently, “A new vampire possesses all the instincts of an animal. If he suppresses those instincts—to hunt and kill—then he will retain his humanity. For a little while, anyway. Those that seek only to satisfy their hunger do not. They become Minions. The ones that attacked you are little more than animals, and they would have killed you had I not intervened.”

“How did you know they would come for me?” If it was him, if something in him had tainted her, was she...oh, God, she couldn’t be—

“You are not one of us. I swear to you, I would never...not without some...assurance...” He shook his head, as if to clear it. “They enjoy the despair. The smell, the taste. And you have a limitless well of that inside of you. Only the blind and mortal would not see that. The look in your eyes.” He touched her face, his fingers curving over her jaw. “You do not look like yourself this way.”

“How do you know what I’m supposed to look like?” She pushed his hand away. “You don’t know me.”

He closed his eyes briefly, sorrow crimping the space between his eyebrows. When he returned to the moment, the sadness in his expression was all for her. “They could not resist. I should have known better than to leave you.”

They pulled up outside of Viktor’s building. “Mr. Novotny, you’re all clear,” Anthony said over the intercom.

“We should walk quickly. Do not run. If any are near, running will attract their attention.” Viktor reached for the door.

“Wait, just wait.” She dropped her head to her hands. “I’m sorry, I can’t... Drive me home. I can’t get wrapped up in whatever weird game it is you’re playing.”

“It is not a game.” Something in his voice had changed. It was still deep and gentle, but command warped the edges. “You will not be safe on your own. Come upstairs, where I can protect you.”

She wanted to argue, but she couldn’t find the words. Even if she could have, she couldn’t have said them. Despite her fear—of him, of the creatures he was sure had followed them—she slid from the car, let him put his arm around her shoulders and guide her into the building, into the elevator, straight to his penthouse tomb. She had no choice. It was as if her body had decided, independently of her mind, to obey him.

Once they were out of the elevator and standing in the marble foyer, the mental paralysis lost its hold, and rage seized her.

Before she could utter a word, he held up a hand. “I am sorry. I promise I will not use such a cheap trick again.”

“Trick?” She turned to the elevator, pressed the button furiously. “That wasn’t a trick! That was a violation! People don’t just do that, they don’t just get to—”

“You are right,” he said, loud enough to break through her angry tirade. Then, softer, “People do not do that.”

The cold shock was like ice water pumping through her veins. She turned to face him. She’d never seen eyes so sad, an expression so despondent.

Yes, she had.

She turned to her reflection in the polished black marble wall. The image was distorted, twisting her face into a pale skull with sunken eyes. She saw it again, in the floor.

And in the black marble world at her feet, her reflection was alone.

She walked to him, looking at the walls, the floor, the gleaming brushed-metal of the elevator doors. No hint that he stood there except his actual, physical presence. She came close enough to touch him, and did, pressing her palm to the side of his cold face. "You don't have a reflection."

"It makes it easier to stalk prey." He gave her a grim smile. "I have lost too much humanity to have retained something so unnecessary as my reflection."

Though his statement thoroughly creeped her out, she couldn't move her hand from him. Maybe there really was some kind of connection between them, like he said. She couldn't stop staring into his eyes, despite the limitless well of pain she saw there. "You really are...what you say you are."

He leaned into her touch, took a breath that sounded like a sob. When he spoke, though, his words were controlled, almost polite. "Yes. A vampire."

His hand captured hers and pulled it to his lips. For a weird, frightening moment she thought he would bite her. Instead, he kissed her palm on the fleshy pad below her thumb. Before she could react, his other arm snaked around her waist, pulled her tight to him, and he covered her mouth with his. He was hungry, desperate, his hands sliding to her shoulders, then down, capturing her arms to her sides, releasing her the next moment.

It had been years since Cassie had been kissed like this, like a woman and not an employee. The carefully drawn lines she'd put down for herself in black and white faded to gray and disappeared altogether. It was dangerous, angering, even, that he could do such a thing.

But this was not another of his hypnotic tricks. Maddening though it was, she could not resist. She opened her mouth under his, found herself just as wild and desperate as him.



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