



EMPIRE CITY VAMPIRES
BOOK ONE

IMMORTAL
EXILE

EDEN HART

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✿ Created with Vellum

To vampire and witch fans everywhere...

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Two souls intertwined by fate. An ancient curse. And a mystery that spans centuries.

When Cristian Lazar, a centuries-old vampire, is sent to New York City to stop a dangerous faction of vampires planning to instigate a war with the human world, he discovers much more than he anticipated. A centuries-old curse between vampires and witches has resurfaced, and the shadows of his past beckon. Consumed by guilt and driven by a need to put right what was once wronged, he must navigate a world that has changed since this time yet still hides the same dark secrets. But what he didn't expect was to cross paths with a stranger, a woman whose soul calls out to his.

Samantha Baker, a driven investigative journalist, is obsessed with unraveling the mystery of a pattern of murders that have no explanation. Her research leads her to something that seems more fiction than reality. Yet, her logic cannot dismiss the pull she feels toward a stranger in a café, a man with an inexplicably familiar aura. A man who might be the key to solving the puzzle that has consumed her life.

Their worlds collide in a dance of destiny, love, and danger. As they embark on a quest to end the vampire and witch feud and confront the darkness that has awakened, the stakes are higher than they ever imagined. The past and present intertwine in a game played by unseen forces. Will they succeed, or will they become the next victims of the wickedness that threatens to engulf them?

PROLOGUE

EVELINA KNELT AT HIS FEET, her voice quivering, her fists pressed against her chest as if to contain her rabbiting heart. The vampire could hear it banging against his eardrums. “Radu, I’m afraid,” she whispered.

“Fear, Evelina,” he murmured, “is but a portal to the unknown.” He slid his hand over her blonde head, letting the strands drift through his fingers. With her tear-filled green eyes and slender figure, she’d reminded him of someone else, a woman he’d known long ago. He held on to the memory in his mind, so that when he slit her throat, he could imagine...

She lifted those grass-green eyes to meet his. “This will make me immortal, won’t it? Our love will be eternal.”

“Naturally, my lamb. I can’t say there won’t be some pain involved”—she flinched back, and he caught her hand and helped her to her feet before she started crawling for the door—“but when you awaken, you will be a vampire, like me. We will be together for all eternity. And I will show you all the wonders that await.”

Greed edged into her eyes, pushing back the fear, as she licked her dry lips and followed him into the mansion’s sitting room. The place was in a state of terrible disrepair. The wallpaper was peeling, the floorboards were coming up. Black mold spread in one corner where the roof must have leaked. He’d been a proud owner of this place once, hundreds of years ago. He’d bought up many such residences, which were impressive homes in the 1700s. Hosted parties attended by the

powerful elite, charmed them, drained them, cheated them out of their wealth, amassed a fortune. Yet always, he'd had to play the obsequious human, something that had come to disgust him over the centuries.

Like a wolf pretending to be a sheep, like a lion wearing the skin of a harmless gazelle. Well, he was done pretending. With the long foresight born of having lived six hundred years already and anticipating a day such as this, he'd bespelled this and all his other holdings so that when he was ready, the dark magic would be here, waiting for him to summon it. And today, unfortunately for Evelina, was one of those days.

From around his neck, he lifted a crimson stone. As if scenting the coming fresh blood, a light began to whirl inside it. Every time he made a sacrifice, it grew more animated, this remnant of an ancient curse. He would resurrect it. He would master it. And then he would rule the world.

Well... One thing at a time.

First, the sacrifice.

“Are you ready for your journey into immortality, Evelina?” he intoned. He'd found that his victims tended to be more docile if he put on a show for them, with somber voice and dramatic wording.

Shivering in her thin white dress, she nodded.

“Sit within the pentagram.” Which meant nothing. It was simply for show. “Relax. Listen to my words. I'll be waiting for you on the other side.” As he spoke, he stroked her hair, finding it irresistible.

He slowly walked around her, instructing her to breathe, to close her eyes, to imagine them entwined, him kissing her, caressing her. “Do you love me, Evelina?” he whispered harshly.

“Yes!” She nodded rapidly. “Yes, with all my heart. Forever, Radu!”

He slid the athame across her throat before the last syllable died on her lips. Words of ancient incantations slithered off his tongue, each syllable dripping with dark power. The

atmosphere thickened with a charge so potent, it was as if the derelict mansion itself reacted to his malevolent call.

Evelina gagged and thrashed, but he held her tight, held the stone in the river of her blood. The light within it whirled wildly. He wrapped his dark magic around her, whispering broken promises. Radu sensed the very fabric of fate twisting, binding her essence to the ancient curse he longed to activate.

As Evelina's drained body slid to the floor, the moonlight pouring in through a cracked window seemed to intensify, casting a spectral light over the tableau. He glanced out at the waxing moon, tempted to give the goddess the finger. But he restrained himself. Gently, he arranged Evelina's corpse into a more natural position, as if she were merely asleep. As if she might awaken to that immortal life he'd lied to her about.

Evelina's sacrifice, fueled by love distorted into blind trust, fed the curse bound within the stone resting in his palm. It was growing stronger. But still not strong enough. Without the original spell that had created it, he might never unleash it. But he was a patient vampire. He closed his fingers around the stone, then hung the chain again about his neck, feeling it pulse and writhe against his cold skin.

"Soon," he murmured, knowing that the next act in his dark play was about to unfold.

CRISTIAN

THE EVENING AIR was thick with mist as I stood at the edge of my ancestral land. A bitter chill nipped at the edges of my consciousness, a reminder that I was leaving behind a world that had cradled me for centuries.

Below me stretched the fecund valley that had once been green with the vineyards I'd given my mortal life to protect. Then, in a cruel twist, I'd lost them to my enemy to protect the beautiful witch who'd carried my heart to the grave with her. The promise I made to her, to wait as many lifetimes as it took to find her again, rang hollowly in my mind. For though many centuries had passed, I had never again seen my beloved Sage.

To live so long created myriad issues. In 1462, the year I was turned, acceptance of the reality of vampires was common. As decades passed, for the majority of people, my kind became a legend, a myth, a topic for popular literature and "modern reimagining." I turned my face to the moon above, absorbing her light. She too had once been regarded with awe and respect, even as a goddess—and was now reduced to a lump of stone. I felt as if all the beautiful magic had left the world.

Tonight, the valley lay still and quiet, the songs and cheerful voices of the villagers long gone. As time unfurled, I watched from the shadows as Wallachia became Romania, and the world filled with technology and traffic.

Castle Ravenscroft evolved into a prison rather than a haven. Being so isolated in the treacherous mountains allowed

me to at least exist in peace, but existing was all I did. I lived off the blood of animals, never forsaking my vow to my beloved Sage not to take a human life. Perhaps that saved some sliver of my soul, but if it had, that sliver still belonged to her.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving, Cristian,” a voice said from behind me.

I turned to face Vasile, my oldest friend and confidant, his craggy face pale in the moonlight. He’d been older than I when he became a vampire, and so his features would always bear the marks of age, though he would never grow any older. His shaggy black hair and heavy eyebrows would never silver, nor would his clever dark eyes lose their spark.

“I’m glad Edeline called upon me,” I replied, slipping my hands into the leather jacket I wore. The leader of the Romanian vampires had summoned me several nights ago and told me what she’d learned from the New York council. “Ritualistic murders. Stirrings of dark forces. A threat against the order that unites us all. I can’t stand by and do nothing.”

Vasile stepped closer, reaching out to grip my shoulder. “And you think you can stop it alone?”

“I have to try,” I said. “The council knows they can trust me with this task.”

“You don’t owe them anything.” Vasile shook his head. “Not after what they did to you and Sage.”

“They did what they thought was best, which was stopping the curse.” But even as I spoke, the words tasted bitter in my mouth. “It’s not about that, anyhow. It’s one thing to take a human to feed upon, but to slaughter them needlessly and in numbers...”

Vasile grunted in acknowledgment. He knew of my personal vow, to protect life because that was what Sage had done as a healer. It was my way to honor her memory. Of course, it had brought me into conflict with many a rapacious vampire over the years, but I’d always been willing to fight for what was right. To fight for the living.

Knowing of my pledge, Edeline had implored me to go to America and discover who was slaying humans and why. Rumors had reached her of a rebel group plotting to overthrow the New York council, which would leave a great number of vampires leaderless and lawless. Or worse, under the thrall of a new, dangerous warlord seeking dominion over the entire eastern half of the country, whose power-hungry tendrils could reach around the globe.

“You may be strong, but the modern city can be a dangerous place, even for one of us,” Vasile said, gazing out into the night, seeing what I did: unfettered wilderness that hadn’t known a human hand in hundreds of years, infested by bears and wolves. It seemed far tamer and safer than the gleaming technological world that awaited.

“I know. But I’ve faced many dangers before. This is a battle I cannot—can’t—avoid.” I still struggled to use more casual contemporary language. Vasile and I spoke to each other in perfect English, which, well, let’s face it, we’d had eons to practice. Still, best to stay sharp.

My bobble brought a small smile to Vasile’s lips. “Then take this,” he said, reaching into his pocket and handing me a small silver amulet. It glimmered with an inner light, a piece of the Old World I was leaving behind. “May it keep you safe.”

I clasped the amulet, feeling its weight in my palm. “Thank you, my friend. You never cease to surprise me.”

Vasile chuckled. “It was crafted centuries ago by a skilled vampire enchantress and was designed as a tool for subterfuge and protection during the turbulent times of vampire wars and internal strife. During one of my trips into the mountains, I saved one of her descendants from a treacherous vampire who sought to misuse the charm. In gratitude, she gifted it to me to keep it from falling into the wrong hands.”

I quirked a brow. “You never told me this.”

“I was sworn to secrecy until the time arose to use it. I fear your trip will be fraught with danger, and its cloaking power will shield you from being detected by other supernatural

beings. It will conceal your unique scent, making it more difficult for other vampires to detect you.”

I rubbed my finger over the amulet’s intricate filigree pattern. “That’s sure to come in handy.”

“Indeed, my lord. It can also bind, making your enemies unable to use their supernatural abilities against you. However, the effect is temporary, so use it wisely.”

My throat tightened, and I nodded, trying to keep my emotions in check. We’d been through a lot together. Vasile was much more than a companion. He was the only family I had. “I’ll keep my guard up,” I assured him as I slipped the amulet into my pocket.

“Your steed awaits.” He swept his hand toward the waiting vehicle.

I gave a short laugh and shook my head. “I still miss Dragos,” I said, thinking back to my courageous gray stallion who’d carried me through many battles at Vlad Dracula’s side. But now, I must ride...in a Toyota Land Cruiser.

“It’s definitely not as much fun,” Vasile said, “but at least it’ll get you to the airport in less than a day.”

“Indeed. Or, how do they say it now? For sure.”

Vasile slapped my shoulder and accompanied me to the vehicle. He’d taken to driving like a bird to air, thankfully. As I settled in on the passenger’s side and he in the driver’s seat, I took one last look at Castle Ravenscroft. The towering structure of stone and history seemed to watch me go. My heart ached with longing for what I was leaving behind, but also with excitement for the challenge that lay ahead.

A few hours later, having said farewell to Vasile at the Henri Coandă International Airport, I settled into the plush leather seat of the private jet I’d chartered, the hum of the engines a soothing background to my tumultuous thoughts. Of course, with eternity on my hands, I’d had time to learn to invest and grow my fortune. Such luxuries as this were well within my reach. The plane soared into the night, leaving behind the familiarity of Romania for the wild unknown of

New York City. Without thinking, my fingers found the charm Vasile had given me in my pocket. It seemed to warm my cold fingers. Perhaps there was still some magic left in the world after all.

My mind turned to the problem at hand. The truce between vampires and humans had been in place for hundreds of years, but this wouldn't be the first time a rogue vampire had objected to it. Arrogance and ambition were prominent traits in many immortals. For many of us, the desire for power was what had driven us to be turned in the first place. Such desires were only compounded once coupled with immortality. Maintaining control over the vampire population was like sitting on a tinderbox at times. It seemed now that someone, or several someones, were eager to light the fuse.

I'd fought such vampires before and emerged victorious every time. The council had come to rely on my strength and integrity to maintain the peace. I'd never had to leave my Romanian territory, though. America would be an interesting change of scenery.

My mission was clear: I had to infiltrate the ranks of the rebel faction, learn their plans, and stop them before it was too late.

It wouldn't be easy. The modern world was a labyrinth of temptations and dangers, where I would be out of my element. But failure would be disastrous. Most of my kind fed freely off humans, leaving a trail of corpses centuries long. Despite many years of vampires being portrayed as sympathetic, easily killed dark heroes, the truth was, we were monsters. Only the truce kept us in check, which in turn protected us from the wrath of the human world. A world that was never kind to predators. Our very survival depended on my success.

I would be dishonest if I didn't consider that vampires going extinct might not be a bad thing. And yet...we had a right to exist, did we not?

I steepled my fingers and gazed out at the perfectly black night through the plane's window. And then there was my vow to Sage... My mortal beloved, whom I watched marry another

man, bear his children, love her grandchildren, then wither and die. I knelt by her bedside one last time before she passed. Her rheumy eyes had turned to me, and though she was too frail to speak, I saw the flicker of recognition there in those once-brilliant green eyes, and she'd lifted a thin hand to caress my cheek.

Condemned to death by her mortality, it was nevertheless her mortality that had made her so beautiful, so precious to me. And I know she would want me to defend the truce between vampires and humans. Above all else, Sage, a witch and healer, had served the living. My loyalty to her memory drove me on.

For centuries, I'd looked for her, hoping our promise to find each other in another lifetime would be realized. However, all my searching had been in vain. For hundreds of years, the hole in my heart remained, until I filled it with something less painful, something that would never break it: the fight for justice.

Hours later, as the lights of New York City appeared on the horizon, I steeled myself for the battle ahead. The city was a maze of secrets and lies, a place where I would have to navigate the dangers of both the vampire and human worlds.

But I was ready. The stakes were too high, the mission too vital. The whispers of treachery had become a roar, and I was the only one who could silence it.

CRISTIAN

THE FIRST THING that hit me as I stepped off the plane was the noise. The city's heartbeat was a relentless symphony of honking horns, distant sirens, and the incessant murmur of human voices. The scent of fuel, food, and a million other smells mingled in the air, a potent cocktail that was both invigorating and overwhelming.

I made my way through the airport, my senses assaulted by the foreignness of it all. Bright lights, colorful billboards, and the ceaseless movement of people going about their lives. It was a far cry from the ancient pastoral beauty of Romania.

I hailed a cab and gave the driver the address of the hotel I had booked, attempting to ignore his jarring accent and brusque manner. As we weaved through the bustling streets, I couldn't help but stare out the window, taking in the massive skyscrapers, the sea of yellow taxis, and the throngs of people, all in bright focus due to my vampiric sight.

I felt the stirrings of the old blood hunger and quickly tamped it down. Surrounded by such a buffet of life, I'd have to be mindful not to let it overwhelm me. I'd fed well on deer and boar before I'd departed, so I should be fine. Still, the hot, pulsing breath of the living pummeled me from every angle.

I arrived at the hotel, a testament to modern opulence, towering high with glass and steel. I checked in and made my way to my room, the luxurious decor a stark contrast to the centuries-old castle I called home. I hefted my valise onto the

comfortable-looking bed and tested the mattress. So plush. Well, even a vampire can enjoy a little luxury now and then...

I tapped out a text to Vasile to let him know I'd arrived and was safely at my hotel. I couldn't help but smile when he responded immediately, as if he'd been waiting, phone in hand, for news. Likely he had. My old friend was like a *cloșcă* sometimes, a mother hen who fussed and fretted over her charge.

I sent another message to the vampire Alexei Baranov, my contact here in New York, arranging a meeting. He also responded quickly, saying he'd been delayed in New Orleans, but I was welcome to visit his nightclub, Blue Dawn, and get situated. He'd see me the following evening.

As the sounds of traffic drifted through the window, I stared out at the sea of lights. The moon-drenched city was calling to me, beckoning me into its depths.

Before I left my room, I glanced in the mirror. The legends of us not having reflections simply weren't true. More likely, they arose because a hunting vampire moved so quickly, the victim never saw them coming. I took time to assess my appearance. To anyone casually glancing at me, I was a man of about thirty, with thick, longish dark hair and eyes so dark, they were almost black. After I was turned, my features became more angular, my cheekbones and jaw sharper. Never vain about my looks—in fact, I'd never owned a decent mirror to gaze into until well after my turning—I cared little for them now, but I acknowledged that I would be called handsome. Hot. Wasn't that what they said nowadays? I laughed a little, showing blunt white teeth. My fangs only extended when feeding. One less thing to worry about. There wasn't much I could do about my unnatural paleness, but I could always say I worked nights and slept all day, so I didn't see much of the sun. That was the truth anyhow. All I cared about was that I would fit in with the mortals in New York.

Despite the later hour, the streets were filled with energy. Neon signs blinked, street performers played, and the city dwellers moved with purpose, each absorbed in their own world. The scents of food from diverse cultures mingled with

the underlying aroma of asphalt and exhaust. I'd been to Bucharest, of course, and Constanța, the largest cities in Romania, but New York outshone anything I'd ever seen before.

I found myself drawn to Times Square, the vibrant heart of the city. The giant screens flashed advertisements, faces, news, a never-ending stream of information. People took selfies, laughed, and argued. The surging tide of humanity was on full display, and I felt both a part of it and utterly alien.

My first stop was Blue Dawn, a vampire nightclub, one of several situated around the city, a sanctuary within the chaos. The dimly lit interior, pulsing music, and intoxicating mix of vampire and human patrons were both familiar and strange.

I mingled, exchanged pleasantries, hiding my true purpose beneath a facade of casual interest. Not wanting to gain undue attention, I put on the air of a wide-eyed, rustic Romanian vampire, still wearing the heavy antique gold ring that bore his family's crest, enjoying an exciting vacation from his unsophisticated backwater existence. Those around me would, I hoped, dismiss me from their thoughts as quickly as I entered them, until I was ready for the next step.

In truth, I did feel a bit rustic. The vampires here were sophisticated and sleek. They wore makeup and spoke animatedly and drank cocktails mixed from blood and liquor. Some even smoked cigarettes and danced wildly to the loud music. The humans who mingled among them knew what they were too, and hung around them like adoring puppies. It was a bit chilling. Perhaps the danger of a war between our kind was not that one side would destroy the other, but that vampires would absorb and enslave the human population. I shuddered to think that mortals would give up their freedom so cavalierly, but here was evidence that at least some would.

The night wore on, and I gathered information, names, and hints that would guide me further into the faction's web.

Before returning to the hotel, I stopped at a quaint little café. The intoxicating smell of coffee lured me inside. For hundreds of years, I'd been surviving on animal blood, but I

could consume human food. It wouldn't provide sustenance, but the flavor was alluring. Coffee was a beverage I especially enjoyed, and after all the work I'd done tonight, I was going to savor a cup in the city that truly never slept.

SAMANTHA

IN THE PAST TWO MONTHS, New York had been plagued by a string of gruesome murders, but the details didn't add up. Patterns emerged that couldn't be mere coincidences. I'd always been drawn to mysteries, to the unknown, to the stories that were hidden beneath the surface. That was why I became a journalist. There was something thrilling about unraveling secrets, exposing truths, and giving voice to the voiceless.

As I sat at my cluttered desk, sifting through police reports, articles, and witness statements, I felt a familiar itch, an intuition that told me something was off.

I grabbed my notepad and started jotting down connections, piecing together fragments of information, feeling the adrenaline rush that came with chasing a lead.

"You're still working on that?" My colleague, Mark, looked over my shoulder, a playful smirk on his face. I glanced behind him at the clock and realized he was on his way home. But I still had a lot to do.

"I'm on to something," I insisted, feeling the excitement bubble up. "There's a pattern here, something everyone else is missing."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Always the detective, Sam. Just don't lose yourself in it."

"I won't," I promised, though I knew the allure of the mystery was too strong to resist.

Around me, the newspaper office that hummed with activity during the day began to quiet as people went home. By the time I picked my head up again, the streetlights were shining and, my gosh, it was past nine o'clock. I'd been at my desk for hours without a break. I realized I needed fresh air and, my grumbling stomach snarled at me, something to eat.

I decided to head out into the city and remind myself why I loved New York.

The streets were humming with activity, and I wandered aimlessly, soaking in the atmosphere. I wasn't a native New Yorker. I'd grown up in a little town in woodsy northwestern Connecticut, just two and a half hours away from the Big Apple. So close, yet so far. I rarely had the money to come into the city—between the train ride and the price of hotels, it would have put a big dent in my small budget as I worked my way through college. But as long as I could remember, my dream had been to live and work here, and that kept me going.

I couldn't dance and sing, so Broadway was out, and I wasn't money-motivated, so there went Wall Street, but I'd always had an inquisitive mind and a thirst for justice, so journalism fit the bill. Though traditional newspapers were a dying breed, I made a name for myself online investigating local happenings, including crimes the cops either couldn't solve or didn't want to bother with because the victims were poor or otherwise deemed unimportant.

By the time I applied for a position at the *New York Voice*, I had a great portfolio, or so I hoped. My heart shattered when I didn't get the job at first, but I persisted and broke a big case involving a corrupt politician taking money from a local drug gang who bullied people into voting for her. That finally got the attention of the head of the *Voice*, and that was how I got my dream job in my dream city, with dream food on every corner.

Speaking of which, I reached my favorite little café, tucked away from the main streets. The soft glow of the interior, the gentle hum of conversation, the inviting aroma of coffee and pastries drew me in.

As I settled into a corner table, I couldn't shake the feeling that the city felt different tonight, charged with an unseen force. My thoughts reeled back to the murders I'd been investigating. Each victim had been found drained of blood, something I found out through my contacts at the coroner's office. It sure wasn't a detail the cops had released to the public. That'd cause a panic, even among these hard-nosed New Yorkers. Also, every victim was a young, strong, healthy person, not the kind who would go down without a fight. And yet, it looked like they'd done just that. No drugs in the systems and not a mark on them other than what appeared to be puncture wounds on their throat. Yeah, I know what you're thinking. Vampires, am I right? Ha, as if the sparkly ones would be so obvious. But even though vampires weren't real, a person with a vamp fetish and fake fangs definitely could be. The way the undead were heroes and love interests in movies nowadays, who wouldn't want to be one of them? Besides, getting old sucked. I was only twenty-seven, but seeing my Grammy struggle with arthritis and a fading memory, it seemed like it was nothing to look forward to.

Hmm, could the killer have an immortality fetish? Just where did the blood go and what was he using it for? Or she. Didn't want to be sexist...

I pulled out my notepad and began jotting down my thoughts, letting my mind wander and weave connections.

The waitress brought me a steaming cup of coffee, and as I looked up to thank her, my eyes were drawn to a stranger across the room. He seemed out of place, distinctly European in appearance, with thick black hair brushed back from his forehead and deep dark eyes that held an unfathomable depth.

Even with him sitting, I could tell he was tall, with wide shoulders and strong-looking, long-fingered hands, well-built, and classically handsome. But it was more than his physical appearance that caught my attention. There was something timeless about him, an air of elegance and grace that seemed at odds with the modern city. His eyes were fixed on something outside the window. He looked lost in thought or in memories of a faraway place.

For a fleeting moment, our eyes met, and a chill ran down my spine, a thrill of something unknown, something... extraordinary.

I glanced away, my heart racing, my thoughts a whirlwind. Who was he, and why did I feel this inexplicable connection?

My curiosity piqued, I continued to steal glances at him. His features were striking, his demeanor composed, yet there was a vulnerability in his eyes, a longing that resonated with something deep within me.

He was dressed simply in black slacks and a plain black leather jacket over a gray Henley, the only spot of color a chunky gold ring he wore on his right hand. I wondered if he, like me, felt out of place. I was small-town girl driven by ambitions and dreams that set me apart from others. I was a seeker, hungry for knowledge, for truth, never quite satisfied with surface appearances. I didn't know why I got such a feeling of familiarity from this man sitting alone with almost eerie stillness, but somehow...it felt right. I'd always had strong instincts. My journalism professor used to laugh and say I must have magic powers to uncover all the details other investigators couldn't see. I don't know, I always just chalked it up to paying attention.

The stranger eventually stood and left, his movements graceful, his presence lingering in the air. I found myself wishing I'd spoken to him. But what would I have said?

Realizing I was being foolish, I checked my phone for messages, hoping in vain that any of my contacts had news for me. My investigation into the murders had hit a wall, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was on the cusp of a breakthrough.

Besides the blood loss, the victims had one other thing in common: they were all found in a series of old, abandoned houses throughout the city. What was the connection? Why were these locations significant?

I spent the next few days delving deeper into the city's history, visiting libraries, talking to local historians, and even venturing into the archives of the city hall.

I discovered that the houses had a rich and dark history, dating back centuries. Most had once been grand mansions, you know, the kind you see in movies about the Gilded Age? Some had been repurposed over the years into offices or even warehouses, but since it was hella expensive to convert these old manses to current building codes, all were now falling into decay. But a pattern began to emerge, a trail that led me to the shadows of the city's past.

At night, I would find myself wandering near the buildings, drawn by an unseen force as if the walls themselves were calling out to me. I'd stand there, feeling the weight of history and the echoes of lost souls...and then the image of that lost soul in the café would come to mind.

He seemed to be everywhere and nowhere, a ghost haunting my thoughts. I'd catch glimpses of him in crowded streets, his eyes meeting mine for a brief, electrifying moment, and then he'd vanish into the throng. Was he really there, or was it just an illusion? If I was really going to trust my gut, then I had to listen to it now. Either he was connected to my investigation somehow, or I had a serious crush on a guy I'd never even talked to.

Heck, I hadn't had a date since I came to work for the *Voice*. Guess it wasn't unexpected my girly parts would be perking up at the sight of a sexy stranger, but honestly, that just wasn't like me. When I worked, I *worked*, full stop. I'd never been one to drool over the hometown football hero (who was a nice guy, contrary to clichés), or to hang posters of *Twilight* heroes on my wall. The last guy I'd dated only lasted a couple of months, until he realized my job came first in my life and I just wasn't there enough for him. I felt kind of bad, but hey, I'm fighting my way up the ladder of one of Gotham's oldest and most respected newspapers. I can find love later. Maybe. To be honest, I've never really felt that *click* with a guy. Until now...

Ugh, I had to knock the stars out of my eyes. There were murders to be solved, darn it! The truth was out there, hidden in the dark corners of the city, waiting to be found.

Still, the more I immersed myself in work, the more the stranger's image intruded into my thoughts. What was my gut trying to tell me? Was it a coincidence that he'd appeared just as I was on the brink of something significant? It seemed too synchronous to ignore.

A couple of nights after I'd seen my dream man, I decided to poke around at the site of the first murder, hoping to find a clue that would help my investigation. Since it was a crime scene, and abandoned, naturally I had to sneak in. No problem. I'd done it plenty of times before. This hulking stone mansion had most recently been the office for a construction company. The fenced-in yard around it was still full of construction equipment, but the house itself stood black and silent as I sneaked through the hallways and into one empty room after another.

Finally I found one room that still had a desk and chair and some file cabinets. By the light of my flashlight, I was nose-deep in a sheaf of papers when another flashlight suddenly shined in my face. I just about leapt out of my skin.

"Well, hello, there," said a deep voice.

I jerked up my own flashlight and gave the unseen man my most charming, albeit nervous, grin. "Hey! Umm... I guess you're wondering what I'm doing here..."

"Mmhmm. I've seen you sneaking around before. Thought I'd keep an eye on you, see what you're up to." He swept his flashlight beam around the decaying office, hitting on the sagging ceiling panels and water-stained walls. "Don't think there's anything worth stealing in here."

I stood up straighter, infusing my voice with confidence. "Oh, I'm not a thief. I'm a reporter."

The man tsked and shook his shadowed head. "Damn. Why couldn't you just have been a thief? Reporters are even

more trouble.” Then he chuckled, a low, warm sound, and my tense shoulders relaxed. “Find what you were looking for?”

I put down the file folder I was holding. Empty, like all the others. “No. Seems like when whoever was in this building left, they took every scrap of information with them.”

The guard came farther into the room, and in the combined glows of our flashlights, I could see him better. He was a Black man, his face kind and weathered, with curly gray hair and brown eyes that had definitely seen some shit. “Name’s Luther,” he said. Then he reached behind him and flipped a switch, turning on one of the working overhead lights.

I squinted, though the sputtering light wasn’t much better than a flashlight. “Thanks for that. Luther, right? I’m Sam. From the New York *Voice*.” I held out my hand, and he shook it. I turned off my flashlight and put it back in my backpack.

One of Luther’s eyebrows spiked. “Oh, the *Voice*. What’s a fancy reporter from that rag doing here, digging around in the ruins?”

I decided to come clean. I mean, Luther worked nights, so maybe he’d seen something. After I showed him my ID, I asked, “Were you working the night of the Mackinaw murder?” Philip Mackinaw, thirty-two, banker, white, single, was the victim found here. His body had been located in another office. The crime scene tape was still hanging off the doorway I’d passed on my way here. Trust me, there was nothing left to explore in that room. Not even bloodstains on the floor, which gave me the willies more than if there had been.

Luther nodded. “Mmhm. I was the one who called the cops. Though I’ll tell you, I never heard a thing. I was doing my rounds and saw the door was open. That was my only clue that anything was amiss.”

“And...” I swallowed. “What condition was the, uh, body in?”

“Curled on his side, peaceful as a baby. I thought maybe the guy was drunk and just wandered in to sleep it off.” He

rubbed his chin. “When I tried to shake him awake, he was cold and stiff. And white as that piece of paper there.” He flicked his extinguished flashlight at a blank sheet on the old desk.

“Who do you think killed him?”

“Not a who. A *what*.”

I crossed my arms and leaned my butt back on the desktop. “Like...an animal?”

He chuckled again. “Sam, I’ve been around a long time. I grew up in this city. I used to live not far from here with my grandma and three brothers. We all heard rumors growing up. Stories about...” He took in my crossed arms and what was undoubtedly a skeptical expression and clicked his tongue again. “Never mind. Bottom line is, I have no idea what happened to the guy.” He shrugged. “It’s New York. Weird shit happens all the time.”

No way was I letting him off the hook. “What rumors? What stories?” I stood and lowered my arms into a less defensive stance, one hand hooked in the strap of my backpack. “The murder victims have all been found in these abandoned buildings, and I can’t find a connection. If you think it’s not a person who’s been killing them, then...what?” When his face closed up even tighter, I took a step forward, pleading with my eyes. “Their families need to know. The cops need to know so they can stop whoever, or whatever, is doing this. Maybe your stories are the link that’s missing. Please, Luther...” I gave him my most ingratiating puppy-dog eyes. “I’m a new reporter. This break sure would mean a lot to me and my career.”

He snorted and looked to the ceiling. “Oh Lord. You had to go and say that. I’ve got a daughter around your age. She’s a writer, kind of like a journalist. She’s always talking about getting her big break.” His shoulders rose and fell on a sigh as he contemplated me. “Okay. My shift’s just about over. Let’s grab a coffee, and I’ll tell you what I know.”

Coffee with Luther turned out to be strong black brew poured from his giant-ass Thermos into a Styrofoam cup in the

old break room. We sat on rickety orange plastic chairs around a small square table, and I waited with my pen poised over my notebook for him to start.

“The curse,” he said, weathered hands wrapped around his steaming cup, “was cast by a vengeful sorcerer, forbidding the union of vampires and witches, condemning them to a lifetime of longing, but never fulfilling their desire. It was a curse that resonated through time.”

Curse, I wrote down. Oh man, this was going to go nowhere fast. Sounded like his daughter wasn't the only storyteller in the family. But I respectfully listened. If nothing else, this should be entertaining.

“I suspect the victims of the murderer so far have all been descendants of those who were involved in the casting of the curse. Those who had been marked by fate. If you look at their social media pages, all of them have brushed up against one another at one time or another. That's something the cops know. What they don't know is that they're all related to the original people who owned these buildings, or if they do know, they've dismissed it. The original owners are long gone, and the buildings have passed through a lot of hands since. But that's why I think the curse is involved in all this.”

A chill zipped down my spine. Was the black-haired stranger a part of this cursed legacy? In my mind, I saw those fathomless eyes that seemed to call out to me, as if he knew me, as if we were connected by the very fabric of time itself. I shook myself and cleared my throat. “Go on,” I said.

Luther continued. “The curse was born of jealousy and anger, the bitter emotions of a sorcerer whose love had been spurned. According to my grandma, who heard it from her grandma, who most likely heard it from her grandma, way back in the fourteenth century or so, this sorcerer had once loved a witch, a beautiful and wise woman who had instead fallen in love with a vampire.

“Enraged by her betrayal, the sorcerer invoked forbidden magic to cast a curse that would forever separate witches and vampires. Any love between them would cause misery to

befall the people all around them, including their covens and...well, whatever a group of vampires is called.” He grinned wryly. “Some details have been lost to the mists of time.”

I smiled back, then sobered. “This is great stuff, but...it doesn’t really tell me who the killer is, or why they’re doing it.”

“Well, that I can’t tell you.” He drew in a deep, contemplative breath. “But I have no doubt there’s a connection. These buildings”—he circled his finger in the air as if encompassing this building as well as the others where bodies were found—“were once all owned by the same company. A company based out of Romania. And you know what else is based out of Romania?”

I shook my head, sucked into his tale despite myself. “No, what?”

He leaned forward. “Vampires.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed, a short bark of disbelief, before I saw he was dead serious. “Those don’t...they aren’t real.”

“Oh yes they are.” He sat back again, crossing one leg over the other. “You hang around the shadowy edges of New York long enough, you’ll see things. Things that will convince you that vampires, witches, demons...they’re all real. Just hidden now, deep beneath the lights and glitz. But they still walk among us. Some of these nightclubs round these parts? Let’s just say their clientele isn’t always one hundred percent human.” One eyebrow rose on the last word.

Wow, I hoped his daughter was half the tale spinner he was. She might be the next Stephen King. I looked down into my now-cold coffee, gray with powdered creamer, and said, “I...want to believe you, but... I don’t think the paper will print that.”

“Course not. And that’s how they’re able to stay hidden.” He caught my gaze with his intense brown eyes. “But trust me, they’re here. And something has stirred them up, stirred up

this curse. That's the only reason they'd be so obvious with all the killing. They're feeling...*bold*." He arched an eyebrow again and finished his coffee, just as the overhead lights twitched and blinked as if on cue.

"Well, I'll keep all this in mind, Luther. I really appreciate your time." It was a great story, but it *was* just a story. Right? The goose bumps prickling all over my body said no. What was worse was that it felt...familiar, somehow. Like I'd heard this before. But I knew I hadn't.

As I sat there frozen in thought, Luther eyed me and nodded slowly. "Mmhm. You know it's the truth, Reporter Sam. That curse is awake. And it's not gonna stop until its hunger is satisfied."

SAMANTHA

AS I CONTINUED MY INVESTIGATION, my mind kept circling back to the ancient love story between a vampire and a witch and the curse that refused to die. Even worse, my nights were filled with restless dreams, echoes of an ancient world of mystery and magic, filled with people whose faces would almost take shape, then flow away like mist. It was like having a word on the tip of your tongue, so close, but I couldn't make those faces solidify in my mind. I couldn't shake the inexplicable feeling of familiarity, though. Maybe I shouldn't have been so quick to dismiss Luther's story. Clearly, my subconscious was fully onboard with his crazy tale.

Not gonna lie, that paranormal stuff has always fascinated me. When I was a little girl, every Halloween, I dressed up as a witch. I used to try to make things happen with my mind. I inhaled the Harry Potter books and wished an owl would come to my window to whisk me away to Hogwarts. Alas, none of that happened, and I remained disappointingly ordinary.

The files on my desk had grown into a mountain of evidence, newspaper clippings, and notes. Biting my lip, I considered the mess. What if... What if I just went with it. Accepted Luther's story, and...looked at the murders within the framework of this ancient curse?

Logically, it felt ridiculous. Curses, vampires, and witches didn't exist. Okay, well, witches did, but I doubted modern ones could do any real magic. Still, there was one thing Luther had mentioned that I could definitely confirm, and that was the

history of ownership of the buildings where the murders had taken place.

My research took me to the Patricia D. Klingenstein Library, home of the New-York Historical Society, and after many hours digging through old records...I discovered he was right. A couple of the fancier homes had been built during the Gilded Age in the 1870s, but the run-down warehouses went back even earlier. And all of them had once been owned by a single company called Mirea Holdings, whose origins predated even the records I found in city hall. But for sure, the original company address was some obscure town in Wallachia... I thought for a moment, my chin in my hand. That's what Romania was called before—I googled it quickly—1862. A shiver swept my shoulders as I recalled Luther's words. Maybe he didn't know about Wallachia. It was possible. But still, he'd correctly identified that part of the world.

From there, I went to the grand New York Public Library, where I started yanking books about vampires off the shelf. Sitting at a long table with a green desk light for company, I flipped through the pages. Of course, most mentioned Vlad the Impaler, who was immortalized, no pun, by Bram Stoker in his novel, *Dracula*. The actual Vlad wasn't a vampire, but he was a bad dude. But also an educated, clever man, and a forward-thinking leader. Good and evil wrapped together as tightly in one person as they could be. The history of vampires walked in lockstep with the tumultuous history of Wallachia as it endured revolutions, invasions, wars, and upheaval. Amid all that chaos, it would be easy for an immortal predator to hide and feed and... Ugh. I couldn't believe I was actually entertaining this possibility. But I was.

And then, at the bottom of my stack of history books, I reached a crusty tome that could have come from ancient Wallachia itself. The cracked red leather cover, embossed in gold with a crest I didn't recognize, was filled with yellowed yet well-preserved pages and had no date on it. I studied the crest, an eagle with its head in profile, holding a shield in one claw and a cross in its beak. It looked ferocious and medieval. The scent of musty old book, which I loved, mixing with an

herbal aroma, reached my nose. And now that I turned it over in my hands, I realized I wasn't sure I remembered taking it off the shelf. Weird. I glanced around, but there was no one there who would have slipped it into my pile.

Ah well. I opened the book, turned the first few pages. And it was as if I'd plummeted into a whirlpool of time.

It was a handwritten journal, in English, though an older English than I was used to, that talked about a vampire named Cristian Lazar and a witch named Sage Hawthorn. In 1462, they fell in love, made great sacrifices, and managed to lift the curse that had haunted their land. Was that the same curse that I was investigating? If they had lifted it, then somehow, it must've returned. But how? And why?

As I gently turned the fragile pages, my heart skipped a beat when I stumbled upon a delicate ink drawing. It was Cristian Lazar, the vampire. But I knew those features. Dark hair and brooding eyes. A classically handsome face with a European look about him. And on his right hand, the big gold ring with the same crest upon it that graced the cover of this book. It was him. The stranger from the café.

My hands trembled as I stared at the picture, my mind whirling with the impossibility of it all. It couldn't be him, could it? The mysterious stranger who lingered in my thoughts was here, immortalized within the sepia pages of a centuries-old book.

The room seemed to close in on me as I couldn't tear my eyes from the drawing of Cristian. The weight of history pressed down on me, and I felt a connection to the past that was both thrilling and terrifying. The stranger from the café was no longer just a fleeting curiosity; he was a mystery that demanded to be solved.

My heart was pounding as I carefully closed the book. Who was Cristian Lazar? How were the murders connected to this curse and to him? Was *he* the murderer?

I wondered if he was a regular at that café. I needed to talk to him. I had to know if the picture was of him or just someone that looked like him, a descendant, maybe, not just for the sake

of my investigation, but for something deeper. Something that connected me to him in ways I couldn't understand.

Somehow, I didn't think my boss would appreciate this weird turn in my investigation, but I just had to know... I had to follow this lead to the end. The world of vampires, curses, and ancient magic was calling to me. I knew I was about to cross a threshold from which there was no turning back.

CRISTIAN

THE PULSE of the music thrummed through my veins as I stepped into the Blue Dawn nightclub, a mesmerizing chaos of color and sound. Neon lights painted the dance floor, casting erratic shadows as bodies swayed and twisted in time to the beat. Beneath the scent of sweat and alcohol was the subtle musk that only a vampire could detect, the aroma of immortal presence.

I'd decided to leave Vasile's amulet at the hotel, concerned that if I masked my scent, it might attract more attention rather than dissuade it. It was a calculated risk. For now, better to blend in, I thought. I didn't expect anyone here to recognize my olfactory signature.

Tonight, I would meet Alexei. I glanced at his picture on my phone and knew he wouldn't be hard to find. As I made my way to the bar, I scanned the crowd for him. Garbed in a bespoke black suit and black silk shirt, his tall, lean form was not difficult to pick out of the crowd. He must have sensed my gaze on him and turned, his eyes widening briefly with recognition before he crossed the busy bar space to reach me.

"Cristian," Alexei greeted, his pale eyes flickering with urgency. He waved to the bartender for two drinks. "The leader of the faction is here tonight. I've played innocent in all this, following the council's instructions to let him meet here in the hope we can figure out what's going on. But I have to tell you, he's giving me a really bad vibe. And his followers are some of the worst of our kind."

“I’m sorry this trouble has come to your doorstep.”

“Blue Dawn has a reputation as a place where vampires and humans can come to mingle. It’s exotic, erotic, but...safe, for the most part. I don’t like that he’s set up shop here.” He moved aside for a server to hand us drinks smelling vaguely of blood and vodka, then bent his head toward me. “I’ll introduce you as a fellow Romanian vampire. The rest is up to you. If you can infiltrate this group and get them to meet somewhere else, you’ll have done me a favor.”

Fellow Romanian...? A shiver of unease caressed the back of my neck. “Where is he?” I asked, holding the drink I took from him without tasting it.

“There.”

I followed his gaze to the end of the bar, and my already almost-still heart froze completely. The man nursing a cocktail, eyes hooded and posture deceptively casual, was one I never thought I’d see again. My old nemesis, Radu Mirea himself. He didn’t see me, and I stepped back from the bar into the shadows, behind some other patrons.

Had the Romanian council known of his identity before they’d sent me here? Was this why I was chosen? They knew of the bitter blood between us.

I hadn’t seen Mirea for centuries. When we were both young and mortal and I’d been off fighting the Ottoman Turks, he’d cheated my father out of acres of our land. The stress had led to my father’s death, at which time I’d come home and demanded those acres be returned to me. Mirea had refused. Had, in fact, attempted to cheat me out of more. By that time, I was in love with the village healer and witch, my beloved Sage. Needing the power to fight him and secure my holdings, and covetous of Sage’s magic, I’d foolishly gone to a vampire named Seraphus and begged him to turn me. I hadn’t known at the time what a terrible mistake I’d made.

I’d unwittingly evoked the curse that had inspired a thousand-year feud between witches and vampires. Because of that, because of Mirea, because of his deception and greed, Sage and I were parted. The vampire elders ordered that I turn

my vineyards over to him to break the curse, and I lost everything. *Everything!* I gripped my glass of blood liquor tightly as it took all my considerable will not to stare at him until he met my eyes. I would love to see the shock on his face when he realized his oldest enemy was standing in the same room with him.

Alexei had followed me into the shadows. “The council in the city is weak, and New York vampires are only loosely organized. That’s why he chose to stage his coup here. They’re vulnerable to his kind of influence.”

I forced myself to breathe slowly, relax my fingers before I broke the glass. I was foolish to let him provoke me. “This is a nightmare,” I muttered, trying to keep my voice steady. “I can’t go undercover. I know him. He knows me.”

Alexei frowned. “Seriously? Damn. What now, then?”

“I don’t know. I’ll figure something out. What else have you got? I need to start somewhere.”

“One of my men is planted within the NYPD. An investigative reporter is doing a story on the recent killings. I had him follow her. She’s been seen researching vampires and digging around city hall and the libraries for records on the buildings the victims were found in. They were all owned by Radu Mirea at one time, starting in the seventeen hundreds.” He shook his head. “I have no idea how she made the connection, but if he finds out about her”—he tipped his chin toward Mirea—“she’ll be hunted down and killed. We have to warn her. But if I send one of my people to do it, Mirea might find out.”

“What’s her name?”

“Samantha Baker,” he said. “She works for the *Voice*.”

I only half listened. My body tensed, every muscle screaming at me to move, to confront Mirea right here, right now. The old anger, the centuries-old feud, all boiled to the surface. “Mirea can’t hurt her with his head cut off,” I growled.

“Cristian, wait!” Alexei’s hand shot out, grabbing my arm, his eyes wide. “You can’t just go after him. Not now. Not here.”

Mirea had turned to converse with another patron, and I glared at his back, my teeth clenched as I tried to control my rage, a surge of emotions I hadn’t felt in hundreds of years. “I can’t just stand here and do nothing, Alexei. We could stop this all here, now, tonight.”

Alexei’s grip tightened. “No, Cristian. Mirea’s faction is a many-headed snake, and killing him would only bring allies to his cause. We need a plan that will stop them all. Not just Mirea.”

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to look away from Radu and meet Alexei’s concerned gaze. He was right. As much as I wanted to rip Mirea apart, I had to think things through. The longer he was unaware that I was in the city, the better our chances of stopping him.

“Yes,” I admitted, my voice ragged. “I need to be smarter about this.”

Alexei’s face softened, and he released my arm. “We’ll figure this out. But we can’t let Radu know we’re on to him. Not yet.”

“Let’s get out of here,” I said, my voice low. “We have a lot to plan.”

Alexei agreed, but before we left, the nightclub’s entrance opened, and a group of vampires walked in. They were hard to miss with their pale complexions, sharp features, and an aura of danger that seemed to pulse around them. Their eyes were cold, predatory, and their movements deliberate and controlled. Even in the dim lighting of the bar, their grace and power were evident.

They moved as a pack, each one radiating confidence and arrogance. They were dressed eclectically, a blend of modern American and polished European. Their leader, a tall and imposing figure with a chiseled jaw and silver eyes, swept his gaze around the nightclub, then led them straight to Radu.

I could feel my cold heart pounding as it hadn't in ages as they approached, a premonition of danger washing over me. While they gathered around Mirea, exchanging greetings and subtle nods, one of them, a younger vampire with piercing blue eyes and jet-black hair glanced in my direction.

He leaned closer to Mirea, his lips moving as he whispered something in his ear. I couldn't hear what was said, but the look in his eyes, the way his nostrils flared, told me everything I needed to know. He knew I was not one of the usual vampires who frequented this bar in their territory, and he was alerting Radu.

"We have to go. Now," I hissed to Alexei, my eyes never leaving the vampire who had spotted me.

Alexei followed my gaze and understood immediately.

As we made our way to the exit, I glanced back. Radu was turning, his eyes narrowing, his head tilting as if catching a distant scent. He was looking right at where I had been standing a moment earlier.

We made it to the door just in time, slipping out into the night before Mirea's gaze found us. This situation was even more dire than I'd anticipated. They were here, and they were organized, and they were dangerous.

And they were close. Too close for comfort.

The game had changed, and the stakes had never been higher.

CRISTIAN

“WE NEED someone else to infiltrate the faction,” I said, barely able to contain my anger that my plan had been thwarted.

“That won’t be easy,” Alexei replied. “Most vampires stay away from that group. Their ruthlessness is known throughout the city. I’m sorry. I should have picked a different meeting place. You weren’t expecting it to be Radu? But the council —”

“Yes, they must have known. Their ways are beyond our understanding. Perhaps they hoped my hatred for Mirea would be motivation.” I ran a palm over the back of my neck. “I’m glad I saw him. Now I know more of what we’re up against. Mirea’s greed knows no limits. Even after he left my part of Wallachia, I heard tales of him conning, cheating, and outright stealing anything he thought would bring him more power and prestige, even if he left a trail of death behind him. I have no doubt he became a vampire out of jealousy because I did.”

I took a breath to calm myself, then studied the man beside me, his ash-blond hair glimmering under the streetlights. “What about you? You know them, and they must trust you since they’re frequenting the Blue Dawn.”

There was a pensive shimmer in the shadow of his eyes before he looked away hastily. When he finally returned my gaze, his voice broke slightly. “I have no choice, Cristian. This is as much as I can do to help. If they find out that I’ve betrayed them, you have no idea what they’ll do.”

I pressed my lips into a line. “This is for the good of all of us.”

“It’s not for myself that I’m worried. It’s for my sister, Julia. They would torture her until she took her very last breath. I just don’t want any trouble with them. You understand?”

This was a different world from my own, but familial ties were universal. I clasped my hand on his shoulder. “Yes, all right. We’ll proceed with caution and protect your sister. What about that journalist? Do you know where she lives?”

“That I can help you with. I followed her home from work last night.” Alexei reached into his pocket and then handed me a piece of paper with an address on it. “She lives in Washington Heights. It’s too far to walk. You can catch an Uber.”

Despite the tension surrounding us, I almost laughed. A vampire taking an Uber. What had the world come to? I shook his hand. “Thank you. We’ll stay in touch.” After exchanging numbers, I watched him disappear into the night.

A little while later, in a more working-class part of town, I found myself outside Samantha’s apartment, a plain multistory brick building that looked as if it had been built to last but not to charm. I supposed on a reporter’s salary, this was what she could afford.

I knew that approaching her would be dangerous, that I was risking everything by involving her in my battle. But I had to warn her about Mirea and the danger she was putting herself in by pursuing her story. Unsure of how I’d present my case to her, I decided to find a quiet place to consider my best course of action. With that in mind, I climbed to the rooftop, gazing out at the quiet, tree-lined streets below, lost in thought. It was then that I felt a presence, a shadow lurking in the dark.

“Who’s there?” I called out, my senses reaching out.

A lithe figure slipped silkily from behind a chimney, his face hidden in the shadows. “You’re a long way from home, Cristian Lazar,” the voice said.

I recognized him instantly—a vicious vampire known only as Janusz. We'd been on opposite sides of several battles in the past. Had all my enemies found a home in Manhattan? Or was he also working with Mirea? I had to be careful.

“I didn't know you were in New York,” I said coolly. Had Mirea seen me after all and sent Janusz to track me down?

He moved closer, his blue eyes gleaming with a cold fire from beneath the hood of a long black leather coat, which he now slid back to reveal a hard pale face and dark hair caught back with a clip. “Nor I you, until I saw you in the Blue Dawn with Alexei.”

“I have business in the city.”

His eyes glowed aggressively red. “Do you, now? And what business might that be?”

“None that concerns you.” I held his gaze without wavering.

“Are you sure about that?”

“I'm growing tired of this game, Janusz. What do you want?”

“If you're thinking of joining forces with Mirea, I'd advise against it. What he's planning could destroy us all.”

Interesting... I studied him carefully. “How do you know what he's up to?”

“The Blue Dawn isn't the only club he frequents. He has a tendency to hang at my haunt too. At first, I just thought they were regular council meetings, until one night, I overheard him plotting something that had to do with an old curse. He was talking about regenerating it and making it more powerful than before.”

His words were a dagger to my heart. There was only one curse I knew of that had the power to destroy vampires, but I had eliminated it centuries ago. To think that Radu Mirea and his faction were here for the curse, for the dark power that it held, cast a chill over me. “How do I know you're telling me the truth?”

“What reason would I have to lie about such a thing? Besides, I’m taking a huge risk telling you about it. The only reason I did is that, despite our differences, you’ve always been honorable. I don’t think you’d get involved with Mirea if you knew what he was up to.”

I wasn’t sure he was telling the truth, but if he was, he could be a good ally. Janusz was a fierce warrior. “Thank you for warning me, my friend.”

He laughed, a chilling hiss that whispered through the night. “Don’t mistake me for a friend. In Romania, you might be a lord, but here, I’m the one who’s respected and feared. Remember that, Lazar.”

Before I could reply, he vanished into the night, leaving me with questions and a growing sense of dread. The war. The curse. This reporter’s investigation poking the hornet’s nest. It was all connected.

With a newfound determination, I made my way down to Samantha’s apartment. It was time to face the truth, to unravel the mystery that had brought me here.

CRISTIAN

I STOOD outside Samantha's apartment, my hand hovering over the doorbell. Was I doing the right thing? Should I involve her in this deadly game?

But I knew that I had no choice. She was already part of it, already caught in its web.

I pressed the doorbell with a long pale finger. The peephole darkened as if someone was peering out, then the door opened, and there she stood, fiery red hair streaming over her shoulders in long waves and brilliant blue eyes wide with surprise. Her appearance was so striking, it took me a moment to understand that she was speaking to me.

"It's y-you," she stammered, her voice filled with disbelief. "What are you doing here?"

Why did she act like she knew me? I would've remembered someone as beautiful as this woman. "Have we met before?" As soon as I uttered those words, I *did* remember. The coffee shop. The briefest of moments when our gazes crossed. She'd had her hair up then, had been sitting by herself. Yet something had pulled my eyes to her, as if an unseen hand had turned my head. The breath caught in my throat and the hallway began to spin. I grabbed the doorframe to steady myself.

"I'm sorry. I must've mistaken you for someone else," she said quickly, and started to shut the door.

I could see in her expressive eyes, though, that wasn't entirely true. Regaining my equilibrium, I put my hand on the

door to stop it from closing. “I need to talk to you,” I said. “It’s about your investigation.”

Her eyes narrowed. “How do you know about that?”

I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. “I know about the curse. I know about the murdered people. And I know that you’re in danger.”

She stepped back, her hand going to her mouth. “You *are* Cristian Lazar, aren’t you?”

“I’m someone who can help you,” I said, masking my shock that she knew my name. “But we need to talk. Now.” Then, when she hesitated: “I promise, you’re safe with me.”

She stared at me for a moment longer and then nodded, stepping aside to let me in.

Her apartment, though small, was cozy and warm, filled with the scent of vanilla and the soft glow of lamps. She offered me a seat in a worn but comfortable chair and sat across from me on her sofa, a mismatched coffee table between us, her eyes never leaving mine.

“Why are you here?” she asked. “What do you want with me?”

“I want to help you,” I said. “Your investigation has led you to something much bigger than you realize. There’s a dangerous game that’s being played by forces you can’t even imagine.”

Her brows came together, and she tipped her head. “What are you talking about? What game? Who’s playing it?”

If what Alexei had told me was true, there was no point in deceiving her. “Vampires, Samantha,” I said bluntly. “Vampires who want to use the curse for their own gain. Who will stop at nothing to get what they want.”

“And are you one of those vampires?”

“I...” I thought a moment. “I’m not one of that faction.” I left that hanging in the air between us. Let her fill in the blanks as she may.

Now she sat back and truly looked at me, her gaze moving from my booted feet to my hands clasped over my knees, lingering on the signet ring, up my chest, to my face. I let her look, take in the marble whiteness of my skin, the unnatural stillness that resulted from lacking the need to breathe. “But you are...” She wet her lips, bit the lower one. “A vampire?”

Slowly and gravely, I nodded.

And then I swear, a light of excitement filled her face, and she dashed out for a notepad and pen, returning in a heartbeat. “Tell me everything.”

Most people would scream or cry or seek out the last clove of garlic in the vegetable bin if confronted by a genuine, bona fide vampire, especially if said vampire informed them that an army of the undead was about to hunt them down, but no. This young reporter showed no fear at all.

I leaned back, preparing to tell her that under no circumstances could she use what I was about to tell her in one of her news articles, but she interrupted me. “So, these vampires want to start a war with humans,” she said, the words falling from her lips like a secret. “I can’t believe it.”

“How did you find that out?”

“Lu—uh, a friend told me. I’m not sure, but I think he has connections with the, uh...your people. He told me about the curse, and then at the library, I found this strange book. And it had your picture in it.” She pointed her pen at me and shook her head in awe. “You look exactly the same. It’s amazing.”

“How peculiar,” I drawled.

“You know what else is peculiar? I went to check out the book, and the librarian said there was no such book in the records. She took it from me to check, put it down, and then couldn’t find it again. Like it just poofed out of existence.” Samantha leaned closer. “Do you think it was enchanted?”

I wasn’t sure what this book was, but I supposed it was possible the coven had recorded the events of the day. I shrugged. “I’m not much of a reader.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Really? With all the time in the world, I’d read every book ever written.”

I almost laughed. She was charming as well as beautiful, her enthusiasm entirely distracting. With effort, I tried to bring us back to the topic at hand.

“Samantha, you need to believe me. Your investigation has brought you into dangerous territory.”

She frowned. “How do I know I can trust you? You say you’re not one of them, but maybe you are. And how did you find me?”

“I learned about your investigation from an associate.”

“A vampire associate? And did that vampire tell you where I lived?”

“Yes. Does that bother you?”

“Of course it does,” she said curtly. “You’re the first vampire I’ve ever met, so as you could imagine, I’m not exactly comfortable having you in my home, and then you tell me that someone you know has been watching me and knows where I live.” Her voice trailed off and her face paled. “What if this is a trick?”

“I promise you, I mean you no harm.” I reached out to touch her hand to offer reassurance, but when my fingers made contact with her skin, I felt the room shift again. Not sure what that was about, I quickly brought my hand back to my knee. “Look, I understand that you’re leery of me and aren’t sure what to believe, but if I’d wanted to hurt you, I would’ve done so already.”

She stared at me, clearly struggling to process my words. Then, slowly, she seemed to absorb the truth, her eyes narrowing as she studied me more closely. “I can’t just stop my investigation in the middle of a story. Are you sure I’m in danger?”

“I wouldn’t be here otherwise. I came to New York to gain allies and stop a dangerous group. My nemesis, Radu Mirea, is here, and he’s heading up that faction.”

“Radu Mirea,” she repeated, as if trying to place the name. Then her eyebrows jumped. “Of Mirea Holdings? What does he care about me? It’s not likely the *Voice* is going to print some crazy article about vampires in New York.” She gave me an apologetic look. “Sorry, I know you’re not crazy. I mean, I know you’re real. I mean...” She heaved a breath and shook her head. “What difference does it make if a junior reporter is researching this curse and...you guys?”

“I know you’re an excellent reporter, and you’ve already broken a few cases. Your meticulous research will lend it credibility. Give yourself credit. Your article will reach the outside world. And Radu Mirea does not want his name broadcast all over New York and beyond. Even if the article were never printed, just your poking around in his business would be reason enough for him to...eliminate you.”

“But why is he doing this?” she asked. “What does he want with the curse?”

“The curse was broken by a great sacrifice, but its remnants still linger. Radu believes that he can harness its power to instigate that war with the human world you mentioned.”

Her eyes widened. “But why?”

“Power,” I said, the word heavy with disgust. “Radu craves power and will stop at nothing to achieve it. He wants to rule over both vampires and humans, and he sees the curse as a means to that end.”

She shook her head in clear disbelief. “This is all so much to take in. Vampires, curses, war. It’s like something out of a fantasy novel.”

I reached across the table, taking her hand in mine, for some reason driven to touch her. This time instead of the room twisting, I felt something I hadn’t in a long time—comfort. “I know it’s hard to believe, but it’s all real.”

Without hesitation, she asked, “What can I do?”

“Stop your investigation.” When she started to object, I held up a hand. “Your safety is paramount.”

She didn't look anywhere near convinced. "Cristian, this could be the case of the century. The detectives would never believe anything you're telling me. I might be the only person who can shed light on it and stop the killings. I need to be part of this."

I could see she wouldn't be dissuaded. "I need to gather my allies and make inroads. If you can just hold off for a short time, I promise I'll be back with more information. Maybe together, we can find a way to stop this."

"All right." She nodded slowly. "But if you don't come back, I'm going to be very disappointed. And I'm going to start digging around again." She narrowed her eyes in warning, and I couldn't help but smile a little at her stubbornness.

"I promise, Samantha. You'll see me again soon."

SAMANTHA

THE MOMENT CRISTIAN'S footsteps faded from the hallway outside my apartment, doubt rushed in. Even though it had been amazing to sit across from a man I was nearly convinced really was a vampire, I couldn't help questioning a lot of what he'd said. Vampires, ancient curses, danger—it was the stuff of movies, not my reality. And yet, something in his gaze, so deep and intense, nudged me toward belief. Was it possible all this was real? That Luther's family legend was *more* than just a legend?

As I climbed into bed, pulling the covers tightly around me, I couldn't help but wonder about what Cristian had told me. If there was even a shred of truth to his story, if I was actually in danger because of my investigation, then I couldn't stand on the sidelines. Radu Mirea... The name sounded even more sinister as it echoed in my mind. If he was as bad as Cristian said, then he needed to be stopped.

Staring at the ceiling, nowhere close to being sleepy, I kept picturing Cristian's face, those fathomless eyes, the lips I kept peeking at to see if he had fangs. I guess that was silly of me. But my mind quickly switched from thinking about his teeth to thinking about those clever lips pressed against mine. Whoa. I'd read about vampire allure. Was that all it was?

When I'd recognized him through my peephole, I hadn't believed he was really there, but my entire body had lit up like the Fourth of July. Hopefully he didn't detect my racing heart as I sat across from him, half my mind listening and the other half fantasizing about asking him to stay the night. I felt like I

could have listened to his deep, exotically accented voice forever. As if I'd waited forever to hear it...again. I dragged my hands down my face. I'd never heard him before. What was I thinking? There was no "again." *You're losing it, Samantha.* Good grief... I closed my eyes, praying sleep would give me a break from my whirling thoughts. But instead, it betrayed me.

I found myself in a vast, moonlit meadow, surrounded by a dense fog. In the center stood Cristian, garbed all in black, like something out of a Renaissance Festival, his hand outstretched toward a stunning blonde woman I knew was a witch, her white robes dancing with the night's breeze. There was an undeniable connection between them. Though their fingers were only inches apart, they seemed worlds away. The anguish in their eyes was palpable. As I watched, the ground beneath them cracked, pulling them farther apart, their desperate cries echoing in my ears.

Suddenly, a force pulled me closer, and as the mist cleared, I saw the witch's face clearly. A face that felt oddly familiar, as if we'd met before, as if I knew her. Her emerald eyes met mine, a silent plea shimmering within them.

"Oh, shit!" I jerked awake, drenched in sweat. Damn. I rubbed my eyes and looked out my bedroom window. The sky was brightening, but I didn't feel like I'd slept much at all. The dream felt more like a memory, vivid and real. I tried to shake it off. It had to be the stress and the crazy events of last night. Yet, as I dragged myself out of bed and got ready for the day, the image of the witch haunted me.

Walking in to work, I kept glancing around me at the usual hustle and bustle that usually cheered me up and made me feel part of a big beautiful machine. Today, my gaze flashed from one stranger's face to another. Were all these people human? Were some of them...other? I hadn't had a chance to ask Cristian about what it was like to be a vampire. He came in without me explicitly inviting him in, so that myth was a bust. I saw his reflection in the mirrored artwork hanging above my sofa, so there went that one. While I was reading up about the undead, I learned that in Romania, it was said redheads were

doomed to become vamps. As a ginger myself, I had to laugh at that one. But Cristian's hair was black as a raven's wing, to quote some cheesy romance novel I read a long time ago, and he sure seemed pretty *nosferatu* to me.

By the time I swiped my key card and entered the newspaper offices, I realized I'd gone from feeling like I had all the facts in place right back to square one, where I seemed to know nothing. At least nothing that could save my life. Hopefully the thing about sunlight was real and I wouldn't have to worry about being jumped in the middle of the day. Of course, I'd also read that some vampires kept human servants who could— “Oof!” I slammed right into Mark's chest, too lost in thought to notice him.

“You okay, Samantha?” Mark asked, reaching out to steady me. He took one look at my face and knitted his brows. “You look like you didn't sleep at all.”

I managed a weak smile. “Just one of those nights.”

“Yeah?” He grinned. “Hope he was worth it!”

“Who?” Oh, he thought I'd been on a date... Thankful for the out, I laughed. “Oh right! You bet he was.” I winked and went straight to my desk.

The hours at work dragged, but the memory of the dream remained as fresh as ever. Every time I blinked, I could see the meadow and the heart-wrenching scene of Cristian and the blonde witch. I pushed papers around, typed out a few emails, and sipped my lukewarm coffee, but the dream kept clawing its way back into my thoughts.

She was beautiful, that witch. I needed to find the book with the crest on it again, see if she was in there too. I had no doubt she was the witch of the curse, but I wanted to know more about her. I wondered if I could find Cristian again. We hadn't exchanged numbers or anything, which I was now seriously kicking myself for. What if I had questions? What if I needed him? What if I was attacked? Would he swoop down like Batman and rescue me?

Chin in hand, I worried my lower lip and stared at the mountain of notes. Just because I'd promised to stop poking around didn't mean I couldn't work with what I already had, right? The article deadline was looming, so I decided to at least rough it out. Maybe that would help organize my thoughts.

But by midday, I was getting nowhere with the draft. Frustrated, I blew out a sigh and tipped back in my creaky office chair, arms crossed. I'd been trying so hard to make the details of the story sound legit, and it just wasn't working. I was approaching it from a historical, fact-based perspective, not mentioning vampires, but connecting the murders to the histories of the properties, because I wasn't sure Marlowe, my boss, would accept it if I started going on about curses and fourteenth-century monsters. This was the respectable *New York Voice*, after all, not the *Weekly World News*. But heck... The story wanted to be told the way the story wanted to be told.

And it couldn't be told without the witch. I wish I'd asked Cristian about her, but he'd come and gone so quickly... He'd better make good on his promise to come back, or I swear I'd start sharpening stakes...

I minimized the story draft I was working on and began a new online search. "Sage Hawthorn, Wallachian witch," I typed, my fingers flying over the keyboard.

To my shock, pages of results flooded the screen, but most seemed to be based on old wives' tales. Like Guinevere or Helen of Troy, Sage had largely been reduced over time to a catalyst of change within the world of men. There wasn't much about her personal life, only that she'd nearly destroyed the witches of Wallachia through her forbidden love for the vampire lord. I clicked on "images" and hit paydirt at last, a short article on ancient Wallachian curses, and within it was a picture of an old painting.

The breath caught in my throat. Though stylized in the fashion portraits were at that time, her image bore an uncanny resemblance to the witch in my dream. Those same grass-

green eyes, the flowing wavy blonde hair, even the contours of her face were unmistakable. There she was—Sage Hawthorn.

I clicked on the image to enlarge it. Well, heck. The background depicted a familiar meadow, bathed in moonlight. My heart raced. How was it possible that I'd seen this place, this woman, in a dream before ever laying eyes on this portrait?

With my head spinning, I printed the article and the picture. I needed to speak to Cristian, to ask him about Sage. But even more than that, I needed answers to the inexplicable connection I felt to her. Now, if I just knew how to find him...

CRISTIAN

MOONLIGHT GLINTED off the skyscrapers as I made my way through the streets of the Empire City. The cold mist hanging in the night air swirled around me like a specter, a ghost of past mistakes and ever-present threats.

My phone buzzed—a call from Alexei. I immediately sensed the urgency in his voice. “Come to the Blue Dawn. Now.”

Upon arrival, I was greeted by the pulsating beat of music that permeated the walls, a siren call beckoning those seeking refuge from the night. But this time, it wasn’t the music or the allure of the night that called me—it was something darker, far more sinister.

Pushing through the crowd, I made my way to the back office, where a captivating sight met me. A young vampire, around seventeen by human years, sat perched on the edge of the desk, her alabaster skin shimmering under the dim light. Her ash-blonde hair cascaded down her back, contrasting starkly with her vivid blue eyes that bore into me with intense curiosity.

She was undoubtedly Alexei’s sister. “Julia,” I acknowledged, taking note of her evident intelligence and that hint of defiance in her gaze.

With a small smirk, Julia said, “You must be the great Cristian Lazar. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“And all good, I hope,” I replied, giving her a smirk right back.

Before she could retort, Alexei, appearing slightly frazzled, chimed in, “Julia, go back to the kitchen and make yourself useful. You know I don’t like you being in the club when that group is around.”

She rolled her eyes, but obliged. After she disappeared into the kitchen, Alexei’s demeanor shifted from older brother to confidant. “I became Julia’s guardian after our parents were murdered by a rogue coven last year,” he began. “I’ve had to keep her close, especially given the risks within our world.”

“And this is why you didn’t infiltrate Mirea’s ranks. You have her to think about.”

Alexei nodded, grimacing. “It’s not easy to stand on the sidelines, but she’s all I have left. I need to protect her.”

“I understand. There will be other things you can do that will still be helpful.”

“I overheard Radu talking,” Alexei began. “He’s planning an attack of some kind.”

My chest tightened. “Where is he now?”

“In one of the basement rooms,” Alexei replied. “We need to be careful. If he knows we’re on to him...”

I nodded grimly. “I understand. Lead the way.”

The music from the main floor grew fainter with every step Alexei and I took into the lower levels of the Blue Dawn. A new miasma of scents reached me, and I sorted through them with my meticulous sense of smell. Blood, both old and new. Other bodily fluids. Then, holding a breath deep in my lungs, I tasted fear, ecstasy, excitement... The cement walls, painted black and dimly lit by muted overhead lights, fairly echoed with gasps, moans, and screams. Closed doors to private rooms were spaced out along the long corridor, interspersed with alcoves where lovers might steal a kiss or a bite. I suspected this was where the vampires brought their human admirers to be fed upon and...other things.

Since I'd lost Sage, I'd never lain with a woman, but that was out of loyalty to Sage. But I knew many vampires had sexual appetites equivalent in strength to the blood hunger, and there was no end to the long line of humans eager for erotic adventures with such powerful creatures. Undoubtedly, many hoped to be turned. Probably many were. I sensed them all around me, vampires both old and new, their scent twining together with the sweat and perfume of humans. Our musk changed with age. Freshly turned vampires smelled bloodier, likely because their appetites were ravenous. With the passage of time and maturity, our scents became earthier, like fallen leaves or crisp new snow or ozone, never unpleasant, at least not to us. Just one more strange twist to this unnatural existence.

With the distant, muffled music of the nightclub thumping above us, we approached another softly lit corridor. The voices we sought came from behind a closed metal-studded door at the end. I pressed my ear against its cold, metallic surface, catching the restrained tension in the murmurs of those within. Words filtered through—*curse*, *attack*, and the ominous *soon*.

I stiffened as the door handle suddenly began to turn. In a heartbeat, Alexei and I ducked into a nearby shadowed alcove. The door creaked open, revealing a towering vampire with malevolent red eyes. He paused, nostrils flaring, and I held my breath. Thankfully, this time I'd remembered to bring the amulet Vasile had given me, masking my scent. But what of Alexei? I could only hope its magic was strong enough to cover him too. After an agonizing moment, the tall vampire walked away.

Alexei and I exchanged silent, relieved looks. Eavesdropping further was too risky. It was time to exit the underworld.

As we emerged from the underground corridors, the music hit us once more, but an unexpected sight brought a sharp sting of unease. There, poised at the bar with a drink in hand, was Julia once more. Her gaze, piercing and curious, met mine.

“Julia,” Alexei said once we’d reached her. “Office. Now. And do your homework.”

Julia pouted. “Please, can’t I stay here just a little longer?”

“Don’t you have homework?”

“What does it matter?” She swished her long hair over her shoulder. “I have eternity to learn geometry and read Shakespeare.”

Alexei tugged a lock of her hair. “An ignorant vampire is a ___”

“—danger to herself and others. I know.” She took a last sip of her drink before she set the glass down. “When *you know who* isn’t here, though, please may I hang out?”

“We’ll see,” Alexei growled, but there was no threat in his words. The siblings seemed to have an affectionate, if strained, relationship. With a final huff, Julia wandered off down the hallway that led to Alexei’s office.

“She’s a handful,” Alexei said as we walked toward a side exit. “Turned too young. I can only hope the years will mature her. Right now, she’s running me ragged.”

The nightclub’s intensity faded behind us as we exited into a narrow, shadowed alley beside the club. The night air, cooler and dense with city sounds, was a stark contrast to the heated, hypnotic environment we had just left. Overhead, a dim streetlight flickered, casting a glow that was eerie even to me.

“We really need someone on the inside,” I started, my voice low, “someone Radu wouldn’t suspect.” I paused, racking my brain. Then I recalled my encounter from the other night, and an idea emerged, “Janusz.”

Alexei’s eyebrows shot up. “Janusz? The big guy from Moldavia?”

I nodded. “He’s got a reputation for being ruthless and cunning. Exactly the kind of vampire Mirea’s interested in recruiting to his cause. But Janusz came to warn me off joining him, so I know he’s on our side, or at least not on

Mirea's." I thumbed my lip and nodded. "We just have to convince him to do this."

Alexei crossed his arms. "Radu's group is far from ordinary. They're a tight-knit, suspicious lot. You really think Janusz could infiltrate them? It would be dangerous work."

"Janusz is a dangerous vampire." I gave Alexei a grim smile. "I know because I've been on the receiving end of his aggression more than once. We've never been friends, but the fact he came to me last night shows he might be open to putting our differences aside and joining us. It's worth a shot."

CRISTIAN

TAKING A DEEP, albeit unnecessary breath for a vampire, I turned to Alexei. “Do you know where I can find Janusz?”

“There’s a place, downtown called the Labyrinth. Even by vampire standards, it’s...twisted. It’s not for everyone—too much for most, actually. But it’s Janusz’s kind of haunt.”

A sense of foreboding settled in my chest. I’d heard about the Labyrinth—a haven for the most powerful and secretive creatures from all around the globe. The Blue Dawn dealt in erotic play, but the Labyrinth trafficked in magic of all kinds and attracted spellcasters and supernaturals of every ilk. For someone like Janusz to frequent such a place spoke volumes about his nature.

I squared my shoulders. “Then that’s where I need to go.”

“Be careful, Cristian. Those who step into the Labyrinth are looking for something more, something...other. And Janusz? Well, let’s just say that his interests border on the extreme.”

“Thank you, Alexei,” I said. “I’ll tread cautiously.”

We shared a moment of understanding before parting ways. I took a taxi across town to the East Village where the club was located. Even though I knew the rumors, I wondered what I’d find once I set foot in the mysterious nightclub. Even among my fellow vampires, it was a name whispered with a mix of fear and exhilaration.

The taxi dropped me off in front of a nondescript building wedged between a closed-down bookstore and a derelict alleyway. Steps surrounded by a black iron railing led down to a door with faded and peeling red paint that opened into a black interior beneath a yellowed light. Though there was no sign announcing this very exclusive club, as I approached, a bouncer manning the door stepped out to stop me—a hulking vampire with scars running down one side of his face. He gave me a long, appraising look, seeing me for a fellow immortal, before nodding and stepping aside.

Once inside, I immediately understood the club's infamous reputation. The dim lighting, combined with flickering candles in gothic-looking sconces along the walls, gave the vast space an eerie, otherworldly ambiance. As in *Blue Dawn*, music thumped from towers of amplifiers, and bodies twisted and jerked on a small dance floor. But unlike the *Blue Dawn*, which had a party atmosphere, the *Labyrinth* felt gritty, old, and intense.

Silver cages hung from the ceiling with human dancers ensnared within, their movements hypnotic and seductive. Of the five I counted, three had fresh bite wounds on their throats, and the other two bore scars they exhibited with pride as they writhed. Three were young women, two were slender young men, and all were exotically beautiful. The closest, a stunning blonde with wide green eyes, dressed only in strings of crystal, drew my gaze, swayed down into a crouch and crooked her finger at me, beckoning. I smiled slightly and shook my head. She thrust out her lower lip, plush and red as fresh blood, and turned her attention to the next patron.

Her vague resemblance to Sage had made me notice her. I blinked her image out of my thoughts, but another face arose—Samantha Baker. I couldn't think of anyone who would be more out of place in the *Labyrinth*. Samantha was all sunshine and brightness, her inquisitiveness reminding me more of Sage than the dancer's green eyes ever could. For a breath, in my mind's eye, I saw Sam's smiling face superimposed over Sage's, and I almost stumbled. No. I was seeing what I wanted to see, not what was real.

I was drawn to Samantha, no doubt, on a visceral level. As we'd spoken last night, the attraction had surprised me. My eyes had lingered on her lips, traced the gentle slopes of her breasts and thighs, wondered what her warm hands would feel like on my cold skin. It had been disorienting. Hence the bouts of dizziness, of course. Gathering myself and refocusing on the sights and sounds around me now, I tried to put Samantha out of my mind.

Both vampires and other creatures lounged on plush sofas, their eyes as glazed with desire and thirst as those of the dancers. I'd rarely seen supernaturals other than vampires in my quiet corner of the world, but some of the human-looking beings were most definitely not human, and not vampire either.

I caught the eye of one who could have passed for a Viking with his long, fur-lined leather coat, his braided blond hair, and ice-blue eyes. But when he blinked, his eyes shifted to arctic white. Another blink, and they were back to blue. His smile was one of pure sensual invitation, and again, I shook my head. I had no idea what sort of creature he was, but I sensed my bafflement amused him. Once more, I felt distinctly out of my depth here. I probably should have gotten out of the castle more...

The air was thick with a heady mix of scents—blood, incense, liquor, and something darker, more primeval. The ozone smell of magic.

Walking through the club, I felt eyes on me, their gazes sharp and calculating. A few of the club-goers whispered among themselves, casting curious glances in my direction. I was fresh meat to them, I suppose, in more ways than one. But I had only one goal in mind—finding Janusz.

Finally, in the darkest corner of the club, I found him. Janusz, with his slicked-back raven hair and bright blue eyes, sat on a throne-like chair, surrounded by a group of eager sycophants, hanging on his every word and gesture. The power and allure that radiated off him was undeniable. He was definitely in his element here.

As I approached, he looked up, his initial surprise quickly masked by a smirk that slid across his ageless face like oil. “Well, if it isn’t Cristian Lazar,” he drawled, slouching dismissively down in his throne. “To what do I owe the honor of this unexpected visit?”

“I’d rather discuss that privately,” I responded, ignoring the penetrating and curious gazes of Janusz’s entourage. I scented a few young vampires among them, all freshly turned judging by the raw-meat aroma.

Janusz studied me for a moment, a bent finger pressed contemplatively above his lip as if weighing my intentions. He then stood, his fluid grace commanding the attention of the room, and gestured for me to follow him. “Very well,” he said. “Let’s see what has the great Cristian Lazar seeking me out.”

He led me down a winding corridor lined with heavy, crimson velvet drapes, the rich texture muffling the pulsating music from the club. We entered a private room, extravagantly adorned with gold fixtures and dark wood furniture. The room had an intimate ambiance, illuminated by soft candlelight and nothing more. No wonder we vampires loved our nightclubs. Everything was attuned to our need for darkness and mystery.

Once inside, Janusz motioned for me to sit in one of the luxurious leather chairs and shut the heavy door behind us. After pouring two flutes of blood from a decanter on a side table, he handed one to me, then took his place opposite me behind a desk, his blue gaze never leaving mine. “Now,” he began, leaning forward, all sharp interest now that we were away from his acolytes, “what could be so urgent that you’d come looking for me in a place like this? You’re risking news of your arrival getting back to Mirea, you know.”

The bouquet of the fresh warm blood stirred my appetite, but it was human blood. Probably from a willing donor, but still... I set the flute on a low table beside my chair. “Only you and one other know who I am, Janusz. I need information. And you’re the best source when it comes to the darker corners of our world.”

He noted my rejection of the drink and raised his glass to me before he swallowed some of the nectar. I swear I felt my veins contract. “Go on...” he murmured after slowly wiping the blood from his upper lip with his thumb.

I steepled my fingers. “You already know about Mirea and his plans to resurrect the curse. I’m here to stop him, not to join him. But when I initially came to New York, I had no idea it was Radu Mirea who was challenging the council. I only knew there was a rebel faction that wanted to start a war with humans.” I sat back and lifted a hand. “So far, nothing I’ve learned has contradicted that, but discovering it’s Mirea in charge derailed my plan to infiltrate his group. He’d never believe I’d changed my mind about him enough to join his cause. So now I need someone else on the inside, someone who’s willing to do whatever it takes to get the information about when and how they plan to use the curse.”

Janusz’s blood-tinged lips curled in a bemused grin. “And you thought of me?” He laughed. “I told you, we’re not friends, Lazar. We’ve been on opposite sides of many a dispute over the centuries. Even tried to kill each other on occasion, if I recall.” He rolled his eyes heavenward as if envisioning our battles.

“We were younger vampires then, full of passion and fighting for territory.”

“*I* was fighting for territory,” he corrected smoothly. “You already had that moldy old castle. Crow’s Nest, was it?”

“Ravenscroft,” I said, just as smoothly.

He cocked his head. “Not everyone was born a lord, my lord. Some of us had to scrap it out, find a place to call our own where we could be safe. Not that easy in a world full of peasants with pointy sticks and sharp blades.”

“Killing all those peasants was not the right thing to do to gain that land, and you know it. Your selfish appetite brought unwanted attention to our kind.”

He snorted softly. “*Our kind* shouldn’t care about attention, unwanted or otherwise.” He set down his flute and crossed his

arms on the ornate black walnut desk, his eyes catching the flames from the sconces. “We are the top of the food chain. Why should we fear what humans think of us? Why shouldn’t we take what we want from them?” He curled one hand into a huge fist, then flatted it on the desktop.

“Now you sound like Mirea,” I said softly, one eyebrow raised. “Are you sure you don’t want to join his faction?”

He pointed at me. “Don’t think I haven’t considered it. But...” He leaned back, stretching his arms out expansively and glancing left and right before linking his fingers behind his head. “I do enjoy my pleasures here. I have unparalleled freedom to do what I like, be what I like, with whomever I like. There are exotic beings here you could never even imagine, Lazar. Yet vampires are still top predator. In this city, we can roam undetected, and humans”—he curled his lip in a sneer, a bit of fang showing—“well, they fight for our attention. Not like those superstitious bumpkins in Wallachia.”

He said it the old way, *Vallakia*, but with a contempt I couldn’t mistake. “A lion is top predator of his domain, yet if he wipes out every gazelle and antelope, he soon starves.”

Janusz laughed. “There are seven billion antelopes out there. Billion, with a ‘B.’ There’d have to be a lot more of us to even make a dent.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” I accused. “Making more of us? For what purpose? This is a cursed, hellish life.”

He shook his head, eyes widening. “Only because you don’t know how to live it, you fool. Leave your pile of rubble once in a while and you’ll see. You might still be a prince in the Carpathians, but here, you’d have to start from zero and learn all over again.” He picked up his flute and tipped it toward me. “It would be good for you. I can see you’ve already lost touch with the basics. Don’t you drink blood anymore?”

“Not human blood.” I was losing this negotiation. I’d come here with the arrogance of a lord, but Janusz was king of the Labyrinth.

“Why not?”

“I made a vow.”

“Ah. Let me guess, to that witch who is no more than moldering bones now.”

I stood so quickly, Janusz flinched back. A good reminder to him that in our conflicts, I’d always bested him. “You will not speak of her,” I said with lethal softness.

He smirked to cover his unbecoming reaction. “Love is not a good look on a vampire. Mortals are such fragile things. Besides, it’s your fault this curse is even in play, eh?”

I sat back down again, my tired old heart thumping with agitation. “It’s over fifteen hundred years old at this point. We may have stirred it, but we thought we’d ended it with our sacrifices.” I forced myself to calm and met his gaze. “Mirea was turned the night of Sage’s wedding by the same vampire who turned me, Seraphus. It’s possible they found a way to manipulate the curse. Contain it for future use.” I flicked my fingers dismissively. “I’m not sure, but somehow he’s trying to get control of it, and it won’t be good for us, for humans, or for whatever other creatures are coexisting with us if he’s able to do that.”

He contemplated me in silence for a moment, then quirked a brow. “You’re making me think I should join forces with Mirea after all. That way, when the dust has settled, with my enemies eliminated and humans beaten into submission, there’ll be more for me.” His smile was pure arrogance.

“Mirea won’t allow you to survive as a dominant rival.”

Janusz sighed. “Well, if I don’t join Mirea, what will you offer for my assistance in this matter?”

“Saving the world isn’t enough?”

“Not hardly,” he said with a laugh.

I hesitated, thinking about what I could possibly offer someone as powerful and unpredictable as Janusz. Finally, an idea surfaced, “Information. I have sources, ancient manuscripts and documents that few have ever seen.

Knowledge about our kind, our origins, and powers that not even you might be aware of. Aid me in this endeavor, and I'll grant you access to these texts."

"Ohh, dusty tomes. How exciting." Janusz widened his eyes mockingly, then relented. "But in all seriousness, you're playing a high card, Lazar. Those texts are invaluable. And you know they'll only make me more obnoxious."

I nodded. "I'm aware. But I'm willing to trust you because I know if you give me your word, you'll stick by it. Will you help me?"

Janusz drained his flute and studied me over the rim for a moment. Then he smacked his lips and set the empty glass aside. "Very well. I'll aid you in this endeavor of yours. But remember, once this is over, I'll expect my reward."

"I'll hold up my end of the bargain," I replied, relieved.

Janusz's grin revealed long, sharp fangs that gleamed in the candlelight like daggers. "I certainly hope so, Cristian. For both our sakes."

With the alliance sealed, I knew that I'd just made a deal with one of the most dangerous vampires in existence. But with Mirea on the move, sometimes the enemy of one's enemy is a friend. At least for now.

That task completed, I could at last return to the woman who wouldn't leave my thoughts. Somehow, Samantha Baker was integral to everything happening here. I felt it in my gut. Our paths crossing was no accident. Once more, I saw her face, Sage's face, blending, swirling together. Was it possible? Dare I hope? Or was she a wily deceiver, meant to distract me from my mission? I had to see her again, either way.

SAMANTHA

THE GENTLE KNOCK on my apartment door around ten p.m. caught me off guard, especially considering I wasn't expecting anyone. It'd been several days and nights since Cristian's visit, and I was going out of my mind with frustration. I wanted to go back and talk to Luther, but I'd promised to stay put, and I worried I might be risking his safety if I kept prying. I checked out the peephole, and my breath caught. Excitement surged through me, and also annoyance. Where the heck had he been all this time? Before I opened the door, I composed myself, tugging down the hem of my sweater, finger-combing my hair, and adopting a neutral expression.

I opened the door to six feet two of dark-eyed vampire yumminess. "Cristian?" I said with what I hoped was a cool tone.

"Samantha," he said, eyes scanning me top to bottom with unmistakable hunger that made my cool tone into the joke it was. Maybe he'd been thinking about me the way I'd been thinking about him all day. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"It's a little late," I replied, crossing my arms. "You could've called. It's been a while, after all."

"I know, and I'm sorry," Cristian said, running a hand through his tousled hair. "But the situation has grown more complicated."

Okay, that sounded serious. "What happened?"

He stepped inside, pulling me along with him before shutting the door. "Mirea is planning an attack."

“And you know this how?”

“That’s not important. The less you know, the better, for your own safety.”

I tugged my arm out of his grip. “Then why’d you come here? You told me you wanted me to help. How can I help if you keep me in the dark?”

My question seemed to stump him for a moment, and his bright gaze fixed on my lips, then slowly rose to my eyes. Goosies all over my skin! Damn, that was one electric connection.

“I needed to see you again,” he said, his voice dropping to a husky murmur. “To be sure you were safe.”

“I can take care of myself. I’m a tough kid,” I said, but my voice had also become breathy, and I swayed toward him helplessly, laying one hand on his chest—which was rock hard and cool beneath his shirt. He wore a dark blue button-down tonight, and beneath the thin fabric, no body heat rose to my palm. Wow. More and more, I was convinced he really was a vampire, but right now, my body didn’t care. It *wanted* him, in a way I’d never wanted anyone before. I licked my lips a little, and his gaze refocused there before he visibly drew himself back under control. Darn it.

Cristian looked past me to the window. He crossed the room to the windowsill where I kept many of my crystals. He picked up a large amethyst geode. The deep purple hue sparkled in his hand, the light reflecting off his pale skin. “Are you a witch?”

A nervous giggle escaped me. “Of course not.”

“You’re a healer,” he said, not a question but a statement.

I hesitated, caught off guard. “Not exactly. They’re more for... holistic purposes. You know, energy and balance?”

His gaze turned from the crystals to me, his eyes narrowing. As he moved closer to me, I felt the chill emanating from him. He was inches away, close enough for me to feel the stillness in him. No breath. No heartbeat. Just an

unnerving stillness. I shifted uncomfortably under his scrutiny, trying to appear braver, and less turned on, than I felt.

“What’s wrong?” I managed to ask.

He lingered, studying my face. “For a moment,” he murmured, “I thought I might have known you before. In another lifetime.”

Chills ran down my spine as his winter-pine scent filled my senses, so strangely, achingly familiar to me. I tried to swallow the lump forming in my throat. “What do you mean? Another lifetime?”

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you, Samantha. There’s something about you.”

Belying my nerves, I slanted him a grin. “It’s my razor-sharp wit and savoir faire. You think you’re the first undead guy to say that?”

He stepped closer and ran his fingers over my cheek, which I felt...everywhere. “Am I not?” he murmured.

I swallowed hard. “Well, being honest... Okay, yeah.” Oh, how I wanted to lean into that touch. And then I did, and he cradled my cheek in his palm, which seemed to quickly warm with the heat of my skin. He drew back his hand, and his palm was pale pink rather than the marble white of the rest of him.

He closed his fingers and looked at me again. “You’re sure you’re not a witch?”

“Nope. No cauldron, no cat. My broom’s in the shop.” I gave an unsteady chuckle.

At last, his stern expression relaxed. “You remind me of someone I knew long ago. She was brave and clever too.”

“Who?” When he hesitated, I blurted, “Sage Hawthorn.”

He went as rigid as if he’d been shocked, and for the first time since I’d met him, a jolt of fear lanced through me. A red flame burst into his eyes, his face hardened into a murderous mask, and he stalked me as I stumbled back away from him, one hand out as if that could ward him off.

“How do you know that name?” he growled, his voice battering me from every angle as he prowled after me until my spine hit the wall.

“I...I... Google!” I gasped.

As if Google was a magic word, he stopped, but he gripped one of my shoulders, close to my neck, and I felt his incredible steely strength, sensed he was barely holding it in check. “Show me.”

I ducked out from under his iron grip and dashed to my little makeshift desk, where I found the article and the picture of the portrait. He took it from me and stared at the image. All the inhuman ferocity melted away, the red glow faded from his pupils, leaving sorrow in those dark eyes. For a few long, silent moments, I said nothing, watching him gaze upon the face of his beloved.

“That’s her, right? The article said you and she were in love. And that’s what caused the curse.”

He slowly lowered the page. “We didn’t cause it,” he said, his words weighted with centuries of loss. “But our love awakened it. In order to break it, I had to give my vineyards to Radu Mirea, and Sage had to marry another man, the one chosen for her by her coven.” He indicated the page. “After that, we could never be together again. I commissioned this portrait because I couldn’t bear not to see her again. It does little justice to her true beauty and character.”

“But if both of you gave up on being together, then why’s the curse still floating around out there?”

His brows gathered. “Never in the history of vampires have the councils been so weak. All this”—he waved his hand toward the window—“technology, the lack of structure, the ability to move freely all over the world, has made our leaders obsolete. They are the lawgivers and enforcers over my world, you see. But they’re losing control, and men like Mirea sense this. New York is particularly chaotic. From here, if he can establish dominance, he can gather more vampires to him, and other supernaturals as well, I think. With enough of them supporting him, he could wage his war against humans.”

“To what end?”

“To be top predator. To relegate humans to being prey.” He huffed a quiet breath. “I am sorry to say, but based on what I’ve seen, many humans would go to his side too.”

I thought of the state of the world and crossed my arms. “Yeah. We are kind of in self-hate mode right now. Destroying the planet, killing each other like nothing matters. I mean, have you seen TikTok? We do suck.”

He shook his head. “No, Samantha. Humans are God’s most beautiful creation, more beloved than angels. You’ve just lost your way.”

“You believe in God?”

“God or gods. Goddesses or even Fate herself. I must believe that there’s a divine purpose for all...this.” He waved his hand over himself and included the portrait of Sage.

“But you’ll never see her again.”

“I made a vow to search for her, to wait for her, no matter how many lifetimes it took.” His deep gaze bore into mine, and goose bumps flushed over me again. “I apologize for my reaction when you spoke her name. It was unexpected. I would never harm you, not in this or any other lifetime.”

I felt as if we’d shared this moment before, opening our hearts to each other. My vision blurred as if someone else’s eyes looked out of mine.

Another Cristian stood before me, garbed in a heavy wool cape lined with silver wolf fur, a strong breeze blowing it around his booted legs, a coarse white linen shirt cinched around his waist with a dragon’s-head sword hanging from an iron-studded brown leather belt. My little apartment melted away, and it felt as if my soul itself was reaching for—

Oh no! *Hell* no. I caught myself and quickly turned away. “Hey! How about some coffee? Tea? I might have a beer somewhere. Do vampires drink beer?” I asked far too chirpily, my voice a betraying warble. I scampered to my tiny kitchenette, but when I turned around, he was back at the window, touching all my crystals.

“What do you do with these?”

Okay, no coffee, then. Wiping my damp palms on my jeans, I joined him, keeping a safe distance. Fortunately, now I only saw New York Cristian, in jeans and button-down, his unruly dark hair hanging over his brow. “Well, each one has a different purpose.” I pointed to the red carnelian. “This one’s for courage. And this one”—I showed him the beautiful golden citrine—“is for money.” I snorted a laugh. “Still waiting for that to kick in. And this one...” I held my favorite rose quartz. “Is supposed to be for love. But...” I shrugged. “Maybe I got a bad batch. Probably should ask for a refund, huh?” I attempted a grin.

He pinched the rose quartz from my fingers and held it up to the light. Then, with a speculative gleam in his eyes, he took my hand, put the crystal in my palm, and laid his hand over the top.

I gasped as, from the gaps between our hands, a soft pink glow emanated. “What...what is that?” I whispered.

He slid his hand from the top of mine to underneath it, so that we were still skin to skin, and there in the middle of my palm, the pretty crystal that had never been much more than a decoration to me radiated the most perfect dawn-colored light, as when the morning sun first touched every living thing and cast the darkness back to the other side of the world. When I glanced up at Cristian, the rosy light suffused his face, banishing the hollows beneath his sharp cheekbones and warming his eyes to chocolate brown, making him look... human again.

For some dumb reason, tears gathered in my eyes and my heart physically ached in my chest. He closed my hand around the quartz and drew me closer. And then, our hands still linked, he kissed me.

I slid my free arm around his waist and pressed up into the kiss, my whole body surging with longing and desire. He parted my lips with his tongue, cool but strong, sweeping into my mouth while his free hand gathered my hair and his fingers pressed into my scalp, anchoring me. He needn’t worry. I

wasn't going anywhere. Oh Lord, the man could kiss. Our lips slid over each other, tongues playing, while I pressed against him, wishing he could wrap me in that wolf-fur cloak and protect me from all the evil in the world.

And then he lifted his head, and I whimpered. Darned carnelian was letting me down now too. No courage in me. I feared losing him...*again*. Why was that feeling so strong? I'd think about it later. Right now, I just wanted to be held tight against his chest while he kissed the top of my head and stroked his strong hand down my hair.

"Sam..." he murmured, sounding gratifyingly as out of sorts as I was. Then I thought...had he started to say Sage and caught himself?

I looked up at him. "That's the first time you've called me that."

"I assumed it was your nickname. No?"

"Are you sure you didn't mean to say Sage?"

He remained silent, and I took a step back. "You think I'm her, don't you?"

"Don't you?" he shot back. Our hands had separated, and the pink carnelian had gone dark again. I set it back on the shelf, needing a moment to quiet my rioting body.

"I don't know. I've been having dreams since I met you... Of you and Sage, standing in a meadow in the moonlight. You both looked so sad." I wasn't a crier, but a fat sloppy tear coursed down my cheek now.

He caught it with a knuckle and gently slid my hair behind my ear. I turned to meet his tender gaze. "If you are my Sage reborn, then you are also still Samantha Baker, intrepid reporter and hunter of mysteries. You haven't lost who you are."

I bit my lip and considered his words. "Gotta admit, Cristian... I'm a little freaked out right now."

He touched my cheek, brushing away another stupid tear. "Don't be afraid."

“Easy for you to say. You’re immortal. Aren’t you?” I arched a brow.

“So far. I took a taxi earlier and thought the crazy driver was going to get us both killed. New York may prove to be my demise,” he said with a touch of humor that went a ways to lessen the intensity between us. He let a long strand of my hair slip through his fingers, growing serious again. “You have magic in you, Sam. Of that, I have no doubt.”

“I don’t know about that. Those crystals never did anything until you showed up.”

He touched the pink quartz. “Where did you get these?”

“There’s a crystal shop on the east side. Nice older lady runs it. She sells all sorts of things. Charms, herbs, candles, old grimoires.”

“Really? Did you buy one of those, by any chance?”

“A grimoire? No, why?”

“Because I’m wondering if we might find the original spell that started the curse. The informant who agreed to join Mirea’s ranks told me that’s what’s holding the faction back, the lack of that enchantment. Mirea’s been trying to find workarounds by performing human sacrifices and—”

“Wait! Human sacrifices? The murders.”

His lips flattened. “It’s quite likely. There is great power in blood magic.”

“Marlowe’s definitely not going to want to print that.”

“Marlowe?”

“My boss at the paper.” I chewed on my thumbnail. “It was bad enough when it was just vampires, but now blood magic and sacrifices? What the heck, Cristian? What can we do?”

“Let’s go grimoire shopping.”

I gave a disbelieving huff. “What are the odds that in all the witch shops in all the world, the right grimoire will be at the Paganarium?”

He grimaced. “Seriously? The Paganarium?”

I giggled. What the heck, I was not a giggler either. “I didn’t name it.”

He nodded. “Well, I have a feeling fate may be guiding us. Or...” He glanced out the window at a brilliant moon shining down over the city. “An old goddess I haven’t heard from in a long time.”

CRISTIAN

WE'D HAD to wait until the next evening to visit, as the Paganarium closed at nine, but after sunset the following day, I found myself at Sam's door again, my old heart beating as if it were alive again and I was racing into glorious battle.

When she opened the door, the silky flame of her hair up in a twist, her lovely feminine figure garbed in a forest-green sweater and dark jeans, I felt as if I were standing in sunshine again. I remembered my beloved's sun charm that she'd made me so I could feel the rays on my face for a few minutes. Sam's smile felt like that. Gods below, I was besotted.

"Why are you just standing there?" Sam said, brows knitted adorably over her blue eyes. She reached out and tugged me inside by the wrist. "Come in. I just have to put my shoes on and then we can head out. Do you want anything? I know you drink coffee." She paused, finger on her lip. "What about that? Do you really drink blood?"

"Just from animals," I admitted, worried she'd find even that repulsive, but instead, she nodded as if it made perfect sense.

"Got it." Then she stopped again. "Not dogs or cats, right?"

"Deer and boar mostly."

"Not a lot of those in New York City."

"It's all right. I can go a few more days."

“Great!” She sent me a brilliant smile, then went to grab her shoes.

Great? That went better than I thought. Somehow, she wasn't repulsed by who and what I was. As the tension left my shoulders, I realized that I'd been worried about that on some level. Sam was remarkably open-minded. And beautiful. And...

“Okay. I'm ready!” Stopping before me, she gazed up at me, shoes on, purse slung over her shoulder, and I couldn't help myself, I cupped her face in my hands and took her mouth.

As before, she swayed into me with the softest, most exquisitely erotic moan that had my cock lengthening. The hunger for her pounded through me, and judging by the way she plastered as much of herself against me as she could, she wanted me too. When I drew back, her pupils were huge, her breath coming fast. Her fingers clutched the edges of my jacket.

She sucked her lower lip between her teeth and gazed at me with shining eyes. “You're sure we need to go to that shop right now?”

“What time does it close?” I murmured, bending to brush her eager lips again.

“Nine,” she said breathlessly. Then she jerked back. “And it's seven thirty now. Darn it. It takes twenty minutes to get there, depending on traffic. We really do need to get going.”

“Probably for the best,” I muttered, though it was obvious neither of us liked the idea. Which made my feet float half an inch off the ground. Not literally, of course, but I hadn't felt this optimistic since...well, of course, since Sage.

As we hopped into an Uber, I glanced over at Sam. What if she wasn't Sage? Was I betraying my beloved's memory with this wild attraction? I stalwartly ignored the ping of guilt and uncertainty. I couldn't think about that now. We were on our mission.

During the drive, Sam cheerfully pointed out her favorite haunts. A coffee shop that served an unusual Colombia roast, a small restaurant where the owner's son serenaded the diners with amazing classical guitar, a shoe repair store that had saved her favorite pair of boots from the scrap heap.

I hung on her every word, seeing the living world through her eyes. I'd forgotten so much. Exiled in my gray stone prison of a castle, I'd forgotten the beautiful, bright, colorful world so far away.

The Paganarium turned out to be a good-sized shop loaded with all sorts of kitschy witchy stuff, as well as a few genuine articles. The owner, an older woman, as Sam had said, with a bird's nest of frizzy black-and-white curls piled haphazardly on top of her head, sailed out from behind the sales counter to greet us. In keeping with the theme of her store, she wore a long black dress embroidered with pentagrams and half-moons, and silver jewelry adorned her fingers, ears, and nose.

"How are you, Sam?" She gave Sam a friendly hug.

Sam hugged her back, then said, "I've been great." To me, she said, "I did a write-up of the shop for a local interest column."

"It really drummed up business for us," the patroness said. Then she held her hand out to me. "I'm Matilda."

I gently clasped her hand. "Lazar. Cristian Lazar."

As soon as our fingers met, she stiffened and went pale. Her grip tightened on mine and she gazed intently into my eyes, all friendliness and cheer evaporated. "You're...you're a..." she stammered. Then she let out an audible breath, released my hand, and looked at Sam. Sam gave her a blank stare, and Matilda composed herself, clearing her throat. "Why, you're *charming*." She smiled unsteadily, rubbing her hands together, then waved us farther into the shop. "Ah, well, um, what are you looking for tonight?"

I suppose it wasn't surprising she recognized what I was. With all the magical trinkets in here, it seemed like the kind of

place some vampires would love, just as they loved the gaudy, gothic atmosphere of the nightclubs.

“Remember when I was first here and you told me about the grimoires you sold?” Sam asked.

“Of course, my dear. I have them right over here.” She led us to a shelf full of books, from love spells to growing your own herbs, and a section of books with pentagram-adorned covers. A small handwritten tag beneath them read “Grimoires.” They were all in perfect brand-new condition.

Sam saw the problem too, and shook her head. “Not these. The old ones.”

“Ah.” Matilda slid me a side-eye. “What would you want with one of those?”

“We’re looking for a particular spell,” Sam said. “A curse.”

I could see by the way Matilda was wringing her hands that the idea of a vampire with a curse was not putting her at ease. “We’re researching witches,” I said, thinking fast. “For one of Sam’s articles. She’d like to...help put them on the map the way she helped you.”

“You mean a coven wants more members or something?” Matilda asked uneasily.

“That’s right,” Sam said, picking up my lead effortlessly. “Not only that, but they want to dispel the prejudice that’s directed their way. To be seen as serious practitioners of an ancient art, not some bunch of nuts cosplaying with fake spells.”

Matilda tipped her head. “But why a curse?”

“It’s part of New York history. While researching another story, I stumbled across it. Apparently, some of the Gilded Age mansions were said to be affected by it. I thought it would be a fun tie-in. But I wanted to get the wording just right.”

“You know those things can be dangerous in the wrong hands, right? In any hands, really.” She gave me another side-eye.

Sam gave her a confident smile. “Trust me, our intentions are honorable, and I won’t print it in the story. It’s just for my own edification. Remember how you showed me how to use the crystals? That worked out, right?”

That seemed to put Matilda more at ease. “All right. I’ll show you what I’ve got.”

She took us into a back room lined with shelves of old used books. In the center of the room was a table covered with a black cloth, and a white candle stood in a holder in the center. I wondered if she held séances here or some other such activity. She selected three worn and near-crumbling tomes from the shelf and laid them out in front of us. “What sort of curse...?” she inquired, one silvered eyebrow rising delicately.

“One involving vampires and witches,” I said, holding her widening gaze. Once again, she cleared her throat, but proceeded to open the pages to the most likely candidates. She left us alone with the books to man the front counter.

Sam sat at the table, flipping through the fragile pages. “I can barely make out what any of this says.”

I took a look. “This one is in Old High German. And this one is in Old English. And this third one is in Latin, although...not very good Latin.” I skimmed the columns, hoping to see something that would catch my eye, or better yet, hoping something magical would happen and the words would illuminate, confirming they were the correct spell. Sadly, nothing like that happened. I shook my head. “It’s not here.”

“So much for fate.” Sam glanced around at the other books, but of course, the spell could be anywhere and we could spend a lifetime searching.

“What next?” I asked, folding my hands in front of me on the table.

She thought a moment, biting her lower lip in that delectable way she had, then brightened. “Witches use grimoires. And there is a local coven. I’ve met a couple of

their members when I took a class on crystals here. I wonder if they'd let us look at their book, or books?"

"Do you know any of them you could call?"

"No, but I know where their covenstead is." She looked at her watch. "Maybe somebody's there now. I would imagine nighttime is busy for witches, right?"

I thought of Sage basking in the glow of her beloved moon goddess's light and nodded. "Let's give it a shot. Perhaps the goddess is guiding us there."

Sam gazed into my eyes, then reached out and covered my hand with hers. To my surprise and delight, she kissed me, a soft, warm press of her lips, then sat back and smiled. "We're going to find it, Cristian. I have a good feeling."

CRISTIAN

“WE’VE FOUND IT,” Samantha said, walking a little ahead of me up a quiet sidewalk lined with skinny trees growing along the edges. We’d Uber’d our way to the covenstead, which stood among now-closed cafés and quaint-looking shops.

The old brick building appeared well-tended, and a spacious herb garden stood at the back. I could see part of it as we approached and caught the scent of various herbs on the night breeze with my heightened senses. Lights were on inside, but when Sam knocked on the door, no one answered. She glanced up at me, then tried the door.

It swung open with no resistance. “That’s odd,” she said. Then she looked back at me and patted my chest. “If anything happens, you’ll protect me, right?”

“To the very end of time,” I murmured, and realized I meant it. My answer made her pause, but then she turned and headed inside, with me at her heels.

An air of reverence surrounded the place, and I could sense the echoes of ancient rites performed here. This was a home to serious witches. I suppose I’d been a bit skeptical of finding true magic wielders in the city, but the echo of their power swirled around us. Sam called out and peered into what looked like a dining room, then into a sitting room, but no one seemed to be home. “Where is everyone? I can’t believe they’d leave their front door unlocked, witches or not.”

I concentrated and stretched beneath the magic battering at my senses and realized why the power seemed to be swirling

and undulating. “Sam, something’s wrong here.” I caught her by the shoulder and drew her closer. “I’m picking up waves of violence.” I focused again, but didn’t sense blood, at least not fresh. But fear and anger, yes. A sense of outrage...and urgency. “Here,” I said, and followed a strong line of power down a darkened hallway. I pushed open a door that stood ajar and flipped on the light, though I didn’t need it to see that the room had been demolished.

Stepping in behind me, Sam gasped. Every table, every shelf looked like it had been violently searched. Scrolls, papers, and manuscripts littered the floor. My heart sank as realization hit me.

“It looks ransacked,” Sam said, picking up an aged book that had been torn in half, its pages scattered across the wide-plank floors.

Then I picked up a scent. Dried forest leaves... It was him. Mirea. My fists clenched. He must’ve been here. If the coven had the spell, it looked like Mirea might have beaten us to it.

“We might be too late,” I murmured, glancing at Sam, whose face had turned pale with concern. “If Mirea’s found the spell before us, things are about to become even more complicated. The only good news is that I don’t sense any blood. Whatever witches were here must have escaped.”

Sam knelt, examining the overturned furniture and scattered papers. “We can’t assume the worst just yet,” she said, her voice low. “There’s a chance they missed something.”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair, then nodded in agreement. She was right. Hope was all we had now. “Let’s start the search, then.”

For the next hour, we combed through the room, examining every crevice, every corner, and every item. It was while I was sifting through the remnants of a broken shelf that I heard Sam’s soft gasp.

“Cristian! Over here!” she whispered urgently. I moved to where she was standing, in front of an old wooden desk. She

ran her fingers along the intricate carvings, pressing and prodding at the detailed patterns.

Suddenly, with a soft click, a concealed drawer slid open. Inside lay a single, beautifully illuminated manuscript. When Sam laid it on the desk, the pages fell open, adorned with ancient symbols and characters unfamiliar to my eyes, but I recognized its energy. This was it.

“The spell...” I breathed in wonder, and a fair bit of trepidation as well. I knew how dangerous this was.

“Do you know this language?” Samantha asked. “Is it more High German or Latin?”

“No. And that’s unusual. I’ve learned many languages, and this one... I’ve never seen it before.” I put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s possible it’s coded. If we could find the High Priestess, she might be able to give us some insight.”

“If they come back.” She stood and leaned into my side, her arms crossed as she stared at the open book. “Is there anyone else who could help us?”

I thought of my contacts, the few vampires I’d touched base with since I’d arrived. “Let’s take it with us to the Blue Dawn. It’s a nightclub,” I said in response to her furrowed brow.

“A nightclub? Really?”

“A vampire nightclub.”

Her grin spread. “Seriously? I’m in!”

I shook my head. “You really are unlike any other human I’ve ever met. You’re supposed to be afraid of us, you know.”

“Fear’s not in my genes.” She closed the book and picked it up. “Besides, you’re not so bad.”

“Not all vampires are like me. In fact, I think I might be the odd vamp out in our world. But don’t worry, you’ll be under my protection. And the vampires we’ll meet are friends. Between us, we have thousands of years of life. One of them might know what language this is.”

“Do you think it’s okay if we take this? I feel like I’m stealing.”

“We’ll return it as it is. Hopefully, we’ll find out what happened here and the witches will be able to give us some insight. There’s a reason they hid it in the secret drawer. I’m sure they’d rather have it in your hands than in Mirea’s.”

With a nod, she tucked it safely into her purse. “With this, we finally have a fighting chance.”

Sam’s eyes were round as saucers as we entered the Blue Dawn, but if she’d been hoping to see a crowd of otherworldly creatures, she was disappointed. The doors of the nightclub didn’t open to the public until much later in the evening, so right now, the place was empty aside from a couple of acolytes vacuuming and cleaning and stocking the bar. The lights were turned up, and no music boomed out of the towers of speakers, so it really lost its spooky atmosphere. I could sense her disappointment, but this was the safest time for my small group of allies to meet, before Mirea and his rebels showed up to mingle in the crowd.

“Cristian,” Alexei greeted, getting up from the bar to come over to us.

I introduced Sam. Alexei lingeringly kissed the back of her hand, nearly making me roll my eyes. You could take the vampire out of the Old World, but you couldn’t take the Old World out of the vampire. “Delighted,” he murmured, and she chuckled.

“Nice to meet you too,” she said, but before she could say anything else, Janusz emerged from a back room like a scowling black thunderhead. I felt Sam draw closer to me as his laser-blue eyes pinned her.

“Who’s this?” he muttered, stopping in front of us.

“Janusz, this is Samantha Baker, reporter for the *New York Voice*. She was conducting an investigation that connected

Mirea with the recent murders. For her safety, she's with us now."

He curled a corner of his lip, his fang glinting. Ill-mannered brute. "Is that right? Are you another vampire wannabe, Ms. Baker?"

She glanced up at me uncertainly.

"No," I intervened. "But she does possess some magic, and perhaps...a connection to the past." When Janusz huffed, I moved on. "We've found a book that contains what we think is the wording of the original curse. But we can't interpret it. It's in a ritualistic language I've never seen before." I deferred to Sam, and she pulled the book from her purse.

"We found it at a witches' covenstead not far from here," she said.

"And they just let you take it?" Janusz said dubiously.

I shook my head. "They were gone, and the library where we located this was ransacked. Mirea had been there. I scented him."

"He's one step ahead of us, then," Alexei said, "if this is really the book he was after. May I?"

Sam handed him the tome, and he cradled it in one palm as he flipped through it. "Dark stuff, here. Even though I can't interpret any of this, it's got a very sinister energy about it." He showed it to Janusz in a silent question of whether he could read it, and the big vampire shook his head. Alexei handed it back to Sam. "You don't feel its power?"

"Not when I hold it, but when I was looking for it, I felt drawn to it. The desk it was in had a secret compartment, and when I touched it, it just popped open."

"As if you were meant to have it." Janusz scratched his cheek and studied her intently. Anyone, living or undead, would squirm under that penetrating gaze, but Sam merely hugged the spell book to her chest and met his eyes calmly. My brave girl.

“Interesting,” Janusz murmured. “Which covenstead was this?”

I gave him the address, and he arched a brow in surprise. “I know the High Priestess there. A formidable woman. I have no doubt they gave Mirea a fight. All gone, you say?”

“Yes,” I said, “but I scented no blood, so we’re hoping no one was injured and that they just fled.”

“The hidden drawer wouldn’t have opened for Mirea, I’d bet,” Alexei said. “I have a small library downstairs of grimoires and other spell books I’ve collected over the years. We can compare the text and perhaps find a Rosetta stone of sorts that will allow us to interpret this.” He glanced at Janusz. “Would you be able to contact the High Priestess?”

“I could try. We were never close. Our paths have crossed more than once, but it’s not as if I have her cell number.”

“Sam, do you think Matilda might help us?”

She nodded. “I could call her shop. Oh”—she checked the time on her phone—“the shop is closed, but she’s on Insta all the time. I can DM her. If we’re lucky, she’ll be on.”

I had no idea what Insta or DM meant, but I trusted her. “Why don’t you do that while we look through Alexei’s library? We’ll bring back what we find. Maybe we’ll get lucky and one of the books will connect with you.”

I could see in her slightly dazed expression that this was becoming a bit overwhelming. I took the book from her where she clutched it against her chest and slid my other hand reassuringly down her arm. “You’re doing amazing, Sam. Without you, this book would never have been found.”

She took a deep breath and curled her lips into a small smile. “If you say so.”

Our gazes held, and that wonderful warm energy that surged between us flowed through me, and likely through her as well. I began to bend to kiss her again until Alexei cleared his throat. Sam jerked back, her cheeks turning rosy. Janusz scoffed a laugh. Asshole.

“If you want some privacy, Sam, or if you’d like to use my laptop, my office is back in the direction where Janusz came from,” Alexei interjected politely, indicating the back of the cavernous empty club. “My sister’s in there doing her homework. Her name is Julia. You’ll like her, and she’ll be thrilled to have someone other than her nagging brother to talk to.”

Sam bit her lip. “Is she a, uhh...”

“Yes,” Alexei said simply. “But at heart, she’s the seventeen-year-old girl she was when she was turned, so brace yourself. She’s a teenager through and through.”

With a smile, Sam said, “No problem. It wasn’t that long ago I was that age too.”

“So young and fresh,” Janusz drawled with a lascivious edge, and then flashed his fangs when I growled and took a menacing step forward.

Sam put her hand on my chest and held out her other hand toward Janusz. “Now, boys. You have your job, and I have mine. We’ll meet back up here?”

Thankful one of us wasn’t driven by a vampire’s need to possess and protect, I relented.

Ever the gracious host, Alexei said, “If you’re hungry or thirsty or want something stronger, please help yourself to whatever you want. Since we have human patrons, our kitchen is well stocked, and the bar has any kind of liquor or wine you could imagine. Julia will show you around.”

“Thanks!” She turned to me once more, her face already so familiar and dear to me. I took her gently by the elbow and walked her to the office door. I hated to leave her, but she was right; we each had our tasks, and time was of the essence.

“Would you like me to make the introductions?”

“It’s okay. I’m sure Julia and I will hit it off.”

I slid my hand down her arm and gripped her hand. “You’re doing so well, Sam. After this, we’ll find time to talk. I’m sure you must have so many questions.”

She cocked a grin. “And I intend to fill in some gaps if I can buddy up with Julia. Girl talk must be universal, whether you’re a human or a vampire.”

I raised a brow. “Maybe it’s Julia I should be worried for.”

“Aww, don’t worry about me. Somehow...” She glanced around, catching her lip between her teeth, “this doesn’t feel quite as weird as it probably should.” She met my gaze, her own inquisitive. “Do you really think I have some magical powers or something?”

“It’s very likely. You seemed to be led to the book. Grimoires that don’t want to be found never are. It called to you for a reason.”

“Freaky,” she murmured with a shake of her head, then gave my hand a squeeze. “Better go off with your boy band over there. Looks like they’re getting impatient.”

I nodded. “I’ll return as soon as I can.”

“Good luck. I hope you find something.”

“Fate is on our side,” I murmured, then followed the other men to the door that led down to the catacombs beneath the club.

SAMANTHA

I WATCHED Cristian and company disappear through another door before I entered Alexei's spacious office. At first glance, it looked like any other office of a busy club manager. Several large monitors showing the interior and exterior of the club sat side by side on a huge, functional horseshoe-shaped desk. There was also a laptop that was turned on and ready to be used if I needed it. Piles of paper and scribbled notes covered the surface, and framed autographed pictures of people who must have been famous somewhere hung on the walls. And in a corner at a smaller desk sat a beautiful teenage-looking girl who gazed at me with giant blue eyes full of curiosity.

"Hello," she said. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Samantha. Sam." I went to her with my hand outstretched, and when her slim fingers clasped mine, I felt that vampiric chill I was beginning to grow accustomed to.

"Julia. Are you looking for my brother?"

"No, he's with Cristian and Janusz, err, downstairs?"

"Uh-oh. What are they getting into this time?"

"Why, what's down there?"

She paused as if considering how much to tell me, then said, "It's just creepy down there is all." Then she sat up from where she'd been bent over what looked like geometry homework and took me in fully. "You're with Cristian?"

What she meant by "with," I wasn't sure, but I tipped my head to the side and said, "Sort of?" I crinkled my nose and

lifted my hands, and she broke out in a stunning smile. Wow, she must have been beautiful when she was a human, but the vampire magic had given her an ethereal quality. If it wasn't for the mischief in her eyes, she could have been mistaken for an angel. Her long pale gold hair fell in waves past her waist, and she tossed it over one shoulder.

"He's pretty hot," she said. And my smile snapped closed.

"So's your brother," I shot back. We locked eyes, and then both burst out laughing.

"You can have him," she said, then waved to a chair. "Sit, make yourself homely. What kind of trouble have they dragged you into? You're, umm..." Her eyes did the up-down thing again, and I could guess what she was thinking: *How'd a nice human like you end up with these undead jamokes?*

"I am human," I said, pressing my hand to my chest. "And I know you're not. So it's okay. You can speak freely around me. Actually, I'm finding all this really incredible. Have you been a vampire for long?" The reporter in me was itching for my notepad. "I mean, if you don't mind me asking. It's fine if it's too personal."

She brightened. "Heck no. I'm happy to tell you. Nobody else talks to me around here. 'Julia, go in my office. Julia, go cut lemons. Julia, do your homework,'" she said in a low gruff voice, imitating her brother. "That's what I always hear."

"That doesn't seem fair. Especially when you're surrounded by a freakin' nightclub, am I right?"

"Totally! I can't even have a drink at the bar. And technically, I'm old enough!" She put down the pencil she was holding. "Speaking of, can I get you anything? There's a minifridge in here that's got soda and beer in it, and Alexei keeps a bag of pretzels in his desk. He thinks I don't know, but he always forgets to brush off the crumbs. He thinks it's embarrassing he can't give up the one mortal food he used to love."

I started to wave away her offer, then thought better of it and accepted a water and the half-finished bag of Utz pretzel

rings. We settled back down in our seats, and Julia cradled her chin on the backs of her linked fingers, elbows on her little school desk. “How long have you known Cristian?”

“Not long. A couple of weeks,” I said around a mouthful of pretzels. I chased them down with a swig of water. “He found me to warn me that I should stop my investigation into the murders around here.” I wasn’t sure how much she knew, but she nodded.

“Oh yeah, those. It’s got to be that Radu Mirea. He’s bad news and most of the reason Alexei keeps stuffing me back here. He doesn’t want what happened to our parents to happen to me.” Sadness passed over her angelic face like a cloud crossing the sun.

“Why, what happened?” I asked.

“They were murdered. About fifteen years ago by a rogue group of vampires. Alexei and I were human then, living in California. Our parents had come here from Russia. Dad had gotten caught up in some kind of underworld dealings. Not his fault. It’s a long story, but suffice to say, these vampires were after some money, and he was the accountant for his company. He refused to give them the codes to the accounts, and they killed him and Mom.” She slid the pencil through her fingers, eyes downcast. “Then they found Alexei. He tried to fight them off, but they left him nearly drained. If it wasn’t for another vampire who was hunting those guys, he would have died, but instead, he was turned.”

“And you?”

“I was only ten when all that happened. Alexei brought me here when he took over the club. I grew up around all these freaks.” She laughed, but it was tinged with sadness. “I saw how powerful they were, how glamorous. And then finally, I convinced one of them to turn me.”

I crunched another pretzel, entranced. “How’d Alexei take that?”

Her full lips curled up on one side. “He went batshit, of course! But heck, I was seventeen. I bet you did crazy things

when you were a teenager, right?”

Nothing quite that crazy, but sure. “How was it? Being turned, I mean.”

She made a thoughtful moue. “Not as bad as you might think. But now...” She huffed a sigh and gazed up at nothing in particular. “I wish I’d waited a few more years. Maybe when I was in my twenties. Because even though that was a while ago, I’m stuck now in this body, and because I grew up here, everyone still treats me like a little kid. I mean, Alexei still wants me to go through high school. What does it matter at this point?” She flapped her hands over her textbook, then bit the end of the pencil with her perfect white teeth and leaned back in the chair. “So what’s your story, sister? Spill!”

I was going to shrug and say I had no story, but then I suddenly felt like maybe this was the one person who would understand what I was feeling. “I think...I think I might be a witch.”

“Ooh! Sexy!”

“Are they? Sexy?” I laughed.

“Well, some are. They come here sometimes. Vampires seem to like them, but you know, we’re not allowed to intermingle. There’s some of kind taboo on vamp-witch relations. But they sure do like the werewolves. And there are male witches too.” Her eyes narrowed. “You can feel them coming toward you. Their power just sort of *whooshes* out before them.” She made a sweeping motion with her hands. “Here, supes don’t feel like they have to suppress who they are, not like in the mortal world. So what makes you think you’re a witch?”

“I—”

The door swung open abruptly, and three massive men in dark clothing burst into the room. Julia sprang to her feet, hissing. The bag of pretzels went flying as I was jerked to my feet, my chair clattering over. The room seemed to blur as the men roughly grabbed us and held us tight, two on Julia, one on me. My captor locked my arms behind my back until my

shoulders felt like they were going to be dislocated. I whined from the pain. Julia fought like a wildcat, but stopped instantly when a fourth man entered the room.

All the air in the office seemed to be sucked out as his cold gaze swept over us, touching on Julia, but lingering on me with a curiosity that made my stomach cramp in terror.

He was tall, about the same height as Cristian, also dark haired, with a thick mustache that would grace his lip for eternity since I had no doubt he was a vampire too. He wore business casual, a dark shirt open at the throat and dark slacks, polished shoes on his feet, a long wool coat around his shoulders. He looked like a modern businessman, but those hard eyes were ancient, and a small gold dragon, wings outstretch, hung from a chain around his neck. Power pulsed from him in icy waves. He reached out to touch my face. I tried to turn away, but my captor wrenched my arms back harder until I stopped struggling.

“Shhh...” the cold-eyed man whispered. “Little mortal. Look at me.” He touched arctic fingers to my jaw until I met his gaze.

His hazel eyes narrowed beneath his heavy brows. “Where is Cristian Lazar?” he demanded softly.

Julia glared defiantly back at him. “Let us go! You’re making the worst mistake—the last mistake you’ll ever make!”

“Oh, no, *înger mic*,” he said grimly. “I’m correcting a mistake. A terrible injustice.” He stepped back and signaled to his men. “We’ll question them at the warehouse. Take them now, quickly.”

As I was dragged past him, I saw him glancing around the office, leafing through papers as if he had all the time in the world. I felt sick, like I was going to puke. I took deep breaths to calm myself even as my captor wrestled me toward the door. I tried to scream, but as soon as I pulled enough air into my lungs, he twisted my arms, and the pain knocked the breath right out of me. I saw the two vampires who’d been doing the

maintenance work laid out on the floor, hopefully just knocked out and not dead. *Dead-dead*.

Before I knew it, Julia and I were outside and shoved into a van. One guard bulled his way in with us, his heavy booted feet thumping on the van's metal floor. He turned me back and forth with his enormous strength and stripped me of my phone and my smartwatch. They searched Julia too, but she must have left her phone at the office. Then the door was slammed and locked, and the vehicle lurched into motion. Our guards were driving and riding shotgun. One had stayed behind with the leader. I struggled to find purchase on the bare floor. I glanced around, but the van was empty. Nothing to use as a weapon. As if I could fight off a vampire. I rubbed my aching shoulders.

“Are you all right?” I asked Julia.

She shoved her fingers through her long hair and growled. “Damn it! I can't believe that just happened. Alexei is going to go on a rampage. Alexei...”

All her bravado left her, and her face became that of a child who'd lost her parents to these sorts of savages and now feared for the life of her only brother. I reached out and grasped her hand, then shuffled over to her side so I could put an arm around her shoulders. “It'll be all right. Cristian will find us.” I bit my lip, then asked, “That was Radu Mirea, wasn't it?”

She nodded, brusquely wiping red-tinged tears from her face. “I hate him. I hate him so much.”

“Alexei's not alone now, Julia. He's got Cristian and Janusz with him.”

Her small hands balled into fists on her updrawn knees. “I never trusted that Janusz. I bet he tipped Radu off. He's a double agent, spying for Cristian. He's part of Radu's group too. Did you know that?”

I shook my head, my stomach chilling. They had seemed barely cordial. Had Janusz set us up? Was Cristian in danger now, down in the catacombs with the massive vampire? Had

Janusz alerted Radu that we'd found the book of spells, and now they'd taken us for ransom in exchange?

I took a breath and tried to calm my racing thoughts. I could spin tales in my head, but I really didn't know what was happening. This world was not my world. I was just a squishy mortal pawn in it. "They must want us for a reason or they would have killed us already. We just have to stay calm until somebody comes for us."

In my mind, I called out for Cristian. Were vampires psychic? Probably not. I pictured Sage's ethereal face, her wise green eyes, and begged her for help. Maybe, if our souls really were connected, somehow, her spirit could help. There was nothing else I could do.

I didn't know how long we drove. I tried a trick I'd read in a book, counting the number of turns, trying to keep track of the lefts and rights, but I soon lost track. It wasn't long, though. The van slowed over what sounded like loose gravel, then stopped and shut off. I felt a chill creep up my spine as the doors were pulled open, and the same two stone-faced guards hauled us out and duck-walked us into a warehouse. I barely had the chance to glance around at our surroundings, shrouded by darkness, but it certainly looked abandoned. The van was the only vehicle I could see. When I glanced up at the roof, other vampire guards spaced out along the edge peered down at me, maybe as many as seven or eight. Oh no, this was bad...

Julia didn't resist her guard's prodding. Her head was down, her long beautiful hair hiding her tear-wet face. Fear for her brother's life made her compliant. I couldn't imagine the trauma she was reliving.

They pushed us into an empty room with two chairs bolted to the floor and sat us down in them, then tied our hands in the back, mine with zip-ties, Julia's with a chain, something even a vampire would have trouble breaking free of.

And then they left, and we waited.

The room was cold, and I shivered. My mouth was dry from fear, and the pretzels were trying to claw their way back up my throat. I squeezed my eyes shut and mentally called out again to Cristian, but Sage's face floated into my mind's eye, gently smiling. She wore the same pure white robe I'd seen in my dream, the breeze lifting her golden hair, and a bright beam of moonlight made a halo around her head. She reached out to me, her lips moving, though she made no sound, and I found myself breathing more easily.

Well, whether it was my desperate imagination or not, it helped.

Then the door room creaked, and my eyes snapped open.

Radu Mirea strolled inside.

Behind him came a short muscular brown-haired vampire with a scarred chin...and Janusz.

Lunging against my binds, I poured all my hatred into my glare, but Janusz's impassive eyes passed right over me and settled on Julia. I switched to Mirea, wishing I could stare hard enough to make him burst into flame. "What do you want with us?" I snapped.

One of his heavy brows—seriously, he could give Colin Farrell a run for his money—lifted lazily. "Silence, human." Then he went to one knee in front of Julia and brushed the hair back from her face almost tenderly. "*În sfârșit ești al meu, îngerul meu.*"

Julia picked up her head, and her usual spirit seemed to blaze back into her eyes. "I don't speak Romanian, dumbass," she spat.

"I will teach you," he said with a patience that chilled me. Just how long was he planning on keeping us here? "I said at last you are mine, my angel."

"I'm not your angel." She shook her magnificent mane of hair back like an avenging goddess and kicked out at him. He jumped up and out of the way just in time. I almost laughed. Stupid guards hadn't thought about tying our legs.

“I’ve always admired your spirit. I look forward to mastering it.” He narrowed his eyes on her, then looked at me while he toyed with a round red stone that hung around his neck. A light flowed beneath the surface like a malevolent worm. “And you. Lazar’s plaything. I hope you don’t think you meant anything to him. He’s obsessed with his dead lover, that useless hedge witch who died over six hundred years ago. You would never have replaced her in his stupidly chivalrous heart.”

I didn’t care for the way he referred to me in past tense, but that aside, I continued doing my best to kill him with my eyes. “He’s going to come for us. And then you’ll be sorry!” Damn, a master’s degree in journalism, and that cheesy line was the best I could do?

Lazar put his hands on his narrow hips and shook his head. “In all my long life, I’ve never understood this pointless thing you humans call hope.” He came to stand in front of me, studying me like a bug. “Understanding your foe and planning accordingly is the way. Because he is chivalrous, he’ll feel obliged to try to rescue you. Guilt still rides him six hundred years later. Imagine how he’ll feel if another woman suffers because of his failure?” He reached out and slid my hair through his fingers, lifting it and letting it drop like it was some yarn he was thinking about making a sweater out of. “I like redheads. You don’t disappoint in the fiery-temper department. I’ll enjoy breaking you.”

He said it the way one might say they’d enjoy a cocktail after work. I’d almost rather he was a sneering, laughing cliché bad guy, but instead he was acting as if his long-range business plan was unfolding precisely as he’d intended. Which it probably was.

“We watched you go into the covenstead and come out with the book we couldn’t find. How’d you manage that? Lazar wouldn’t have found it. He’s about as sensitive as a brick.”

We’d been watched? By who? I swung my gaze to Janusz again, but he stood like a silent sentinel, hands clasped behind his back.

Mirea noticed the direction of my gaze and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “If you’re a witch, then all the better for me. A witch and a vampire were the ones to put the curse in motion. You do know about that, yes?”

“I’m not a witch. I’m just a reporter.”

“Yes, we saw you in the library with your stacks of books, your piles of notes. You were getting close to the truth. And now you’ll deliver the final element into my hands. The spell itself.” He puckered his lips and sighed for dramatic effect, I’m sure, since he had no other reason to breathe. “It’s almost a shame you have no power, but don’t worry. I can still use your blood for the ritual.” He patted my head. “At least you’ll be useful before you die. And on the off-chance Lazar has developed some affection for you, then that’s just a bonus.”

He gave me a fangy smile, then turned to Janusz. “Be ready. Baranov and Lazar will be arriving within moments to rescue their women, I have no doubt. Make sure we’re ready for them.”

Janusz nodded curtly and left the room, my eyes boring into his traitorous back. The weightlifter vampire stepped forward at Mirea’s wave. “Mihai, you may begin.”

Without a word, Mihai knelt and slung forward a satchel he’d been carrying over his shoulder. He unrolled it, revealing a vast array of very silver, very sharp-looking implements of torture—knives, clamps, screws, hammers, nails, scissors, scalpels, and some my mind just wouldn’t wrap around.

Mirea’s gaze was on me, and he shook his head. “Don’t fret, mortal. These aren’t for you, but for my angel here. You see, a mortal would quickly perish under Mihai’s hand. He could keep you alive for hours, maybe days, your skin flayed, your every nerve exposed, while you begged for death. But my angel...” Once more, he reached out toward Julia, but she snapped at his fingers, and he snatched back his hand.

“She’ll just keep healing, and he’ll just keep cutting, over and over. Deeper and deeper. Vampires feel pain just as mortals do. We heal quickly, but Mihai is trained in the art of torture, and”—he held up an admonishing finger—“an art it is.

He can make the pain linger, endure...even in an immortal. In theory, he could make it last forever. He worked side by side with Torquemada himself, the Grand Inquisitor.” He smiled affectionately down at Mihai, who was arranging his implements under Julia’s terrified gaze. “I spared no expense to bring him to my cause.”

Desperate, I twisted in my chair, wishing I could reach Julia. “Why? Why are you doing this?”

That caterpillar on his face crawled up his forehead again. “Is this the part where I tell you all my evil plans?” He tipped his head. “All you need to know is that I want that book. And I want to make a point. That I am the one vampire willing to go to any length to ensure our rightful place in the world.” He pointed a finger upward. “At the top.”

“You’re a megalomaniac.”

He shrugged. “That works.” Then he turned back to Mihai, who had selected some sort of curved butcher knife with a serrated edge. Julia was cringing back away from him as he brought it closer to her. “I want a beautiful display that will bring her brother to his knees. But not the face, Mihai,” Mirea murmured. “Not at first, anyhow.”

He reached forward and ripped open Julia’s blouse. She tried to kick and bite him again, but he stayed out of range. Mihai brought the knife down and sliced, a flow of blood coating Julia’s chest as she yelped.

“Alexei!” she cried out through her tears.

Dammit, enough was enough. I struggled against the zip-ties, tugged against the bolted chair, but my breath came short and I thought I was passing out. The edges of my vision got foggy. And then...words began to form on my lips, and calm settled over my racing heart like silvery moonlight over a grove. I breathed deep, imagining myself in that grove, in the goddess’s graceful light. The words drifted like mist from my lips. I don’t know what I said. I didn’t understand the words. But I felt them growing like a breeze, then a wind, then a vortex spinning around me.

They surged from the bottoms of my feet, through my core, out the tips of my fingers, lifting my hair with its force. It swept through the room, sending Mihai's instruments flying to impale themselves into the walls and ceiling, and the two vampires were blown back across the room, until they skidded to a stop, lying unconscious and still.

And then it stopped. Heaving in breaths, I blinked my eyes a few times and turned to see that Julia was free. Her blouse hung open, stained with her blood, but a thin white line had already formed on her healed breast. The spell had broken the chains holding her hands, apparently, as she now knelt by my chair and broke the zip-ties still binding me.

"Sam...what...how did you...?" she stammered, her wide eyes darting between the paralyzed vampires and me. Her hair looked like she'd gone through a wind tunnel. My hands free, I patted my own wild snarls.

"I...I don't know," I whispered. I was as baffled as Julia. I had no knowledge of spells or witchcraft. "I just...said the words."

Julia helped me to my feet. "Whatever you did, it was genius."

Just as she untied me, the vampires began to move. The spell was already wearing off. I tried to remember what I'd said to freeze them, but I couldn't. "We have to warn Cristian and Alexei," I said.

"And get the hell out of here ourselves," Julia added.

We made a mad dash toward the door.

We shoved open the heavy door and stopped, unsure of which pitch-black corridor to follow. "This way. I think," Julia said. Trusting her eyesight was better than mine, I started forward.

Only to have a huge hand land with a steely grip on my shoulder.

CRISTIAN

“JULIA,” Alexei moaned, rushing to his sister as soon as she exited the warehouse. They crashed into each other, embracing, just as I reached Sam and swept her into my arms. She clutched at me desperately, but I addressed Janusz, standing behind the women, looking as panicked as I’d ever seen him. There was no time for tearful reunions.

“What’s the situation?” I asked him.

“You need to get them out of here. Mirea’s coming. He’s waiting for you with at least a dozen guards—”

“Lazar!” A door farther down the outer wall of the warehouse smashed open, and a ferocious shout froze us all. It was a limping Mirea, flanked by a small army of imposing vampires with flaming eyes, ready for battle.

I turned to Alexei. “Take them back to the club.”

“But—”

“Now!”

With Julia by his side, he grabbed Sam around the waist and hauled her away from me at the same moment the guards gave chase, moving at speeds so fast, even to my eyes they were blurs. But I was older. Faster. Stronger.

As battle rage filled me, I became the ancient warrior again, the right hand of the Voivode of Wallachia, Prince Dracula. Ruthless. Relentless. Unstoppable.

My nails grew into curving claws sharp as Damascus steel. My fangs extended into two-inch daggers, two of my lower teeth as well, so that when I sank them into the first vampire's throat, I nearly decapitated him. I leapt and slashed with my nails through the spine of the next guard, then gave chase to the rest, for they'd already lost their courage. I was a whirlwind of death, ripping out spines, tearing heads from shoulders.

I vaguely saw Janusz fighting another swarm of guards who'd poured out of the warehouse. The crimson light of war took over his eyes as a small army of vampires swarmed over him, driving him to the ground. Then he threw them off and continued fighting.

I searched for Mirea. Screamed his name. I raced through the warehouse at blinding speed, searched for his scent, leapt from the rafters, climbed to the warehouse roof... But he was gone. The coward!

My vision hyperfocused, I was able to see Alexei's silver BMW already on the highway some miles off, and I hung my head as relief shivered my shoulders.

I sensed Janusz joining me on the roof. Crouched, balanced with one fist on the corrugated tin, I spoke without looking at him. "You'd better have a good explanation, Janusz." Uttered through my heavy fangs, my words were low and slurred, more growled than spoken.

He'd been down in Alexei's catacombs with us when he'd gotten a phone call. Without indicating anything was amiss, he'd gone upstairs to the club. Even called us to let us know the women were fine. Alexei and I had become absorbed in our work, until my cell rang, and it was Janusz, telling us to hurry to the address of an abandoned warehouse. That Sam and Julia had been taken.

Our horror when we bolted upstairs and realized the truth was matched only by our urgency to reach the warehouse. It had obviously been intended as a trap, one I'd been happy to spring, as I lusted for the blood of my rivals. Only the fact that Janusz had helped Julia and Sam escape stopped me from

taking his head as well. But he still had a lot of explaining to do.

Janusz sat next to me now, scrubbing his hands over his hair, his eyes still red. “Samantha and Julia were still in the office at Blue Dawn when I left. I swear it. I didn’t know why I’d been summoned to the warehouse. It wasn’t even Mirea who called me, but one of his lackeys. A quick routine job, I was told. I expected to be back within minutes, perhaps with more information for you. I’m supposed to be part of their crew, remember? And then... Mirea showed up and had me go with him into the room where Sam and Julia were being held.” He folded his arms over his knees, hands flexing into fists. “If Mirea hadn’t sent me out to stand watch, I wouldn’t have been able to warn you.”

I whirled on him, shoving him down onto his back on the roof, the heat of rage crackling through my body. “You could have stopped him! Killed him right then! You fool. You coward!”

He gripped my wrists to hold me off. “There were too many guards. I couldn’t take them all on at once. I did what I could.”

“And if Mirea hadn’t sent you out? Would you have stood there doing nothing while they sliced them apart, bit by bit?” Dripping bloody saliva into his face, I snarled, a growl emanating from the very depths of my chest. “This is why you always lose, Janusz. You still have an overblown sense of self-preservation.”

“Cristian.” He gagged as my claws dug into his throat. “Samantha bespelled them. Mirea. She spoke...” The flame was dying to ash in his eyes as I dug deeper. And then his words registered, and I hesitated. Then released him and slowly sat back.

“Explain,” I said.

Eyes cinched closed in pain, he pressed his hands over the gaping wounds for a moment until the blood stopped flowing and they began to heal. When they were mostly filled in with new flesh, he grated out, “Julia had only a minute to fill me in,

but the reason they were free was because Sam conjured a spell. It knocked Radu and Mihai, his torturer, unconscious.”

“How do you know this?”

“Julia told me he...he was just starting to work on her when Sam spoke and all hell broke loose. I’d managed to find a place to call you from and was heading back when I saw them in the corridor, searching for the way out. I did what I could.”

Now that the battle lust was fading, a wave of exhaustion swept through me. I hung my head. I could feel my fangs retracting, the adrenaline draining from my muscles. “You got them out of the warehouse.”

“Yes. I would have fought for them, Cristian. Mirea saw the way Samantha recognized me and probably sent me out because he knew I wouldn’t let him continue if I remained in the room. So instead, I called you, then went back to force my way in if necessary. That’s when I saw them escaping.”

I nodded, rubbing my forehead and pushing my hair back with spread fingers. “I apologize, Janusz. I let my emotions overwhelm me. It won’t happen again.”

He sat up, his eyes back to their normal, penetrating blue. “You have feelings for her.” It wasn’t a question. “What if she is a witch? Your affection for each other could be what kickstarts the curse back to life. It’s dangerous.”

“She’s innocent in all this. I did sense magic in her, but...” My head ached with the thought that Sam could be in even more danger. “We can’t jump to the conclusion that she’s a witch.”

“Where’s Mirea?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. But he’ll be back.”

“Now he knows I betrayed him, we’ve lost our inside edge.”

“Then that part of our plan is finished. But you did your job, Janusz. You got us as much information as we could hope for. And Sam found the grimoire. That gives us an advantage.”

I stood and held out a hand to him to help him up. “Let’s go check on the women.”

In Alexei’s office, Julia’s excited energy stood out like a beacon. Her eyes were wide with admiration and disbelief as she looked at Samantha. “You won’t believe what Sam did, Cristian! She just...said something, and poof, they froze!”

Struggling to wrap my head around what Julia told Janusz, I stared at Sam. She looked pale and shaken, and all I wanted to do was take her somewhere safe and ensure for myself that she was all right.

I didn’t remember much about human physiology, but I made sure she had a strong coffee with plenty of sugar that might help with the shock. “A spell? Sam, do you remember what happened?”

Samantha took a deep breath, her eyes flitting between all of us. “I... I honestly have no clue. The words just came to me in that moment. I was terrified, and then suddenly, I felt calm. All this energy flowed into me, and I just knew what to say. There was a huge wind, and...then Radu and that other guy were laid out, and we managed to get out of there.” She bit her lip and turned to Janusz. “I’m sorry I doubted you. When I saw you with Mirea, I thought you’d betrayed us.”

Janusz, who had been silently observing the exchange, nodded. “I understand. Please, put it out of your mind.” Then he turned to Cristian. “Maybe she has latent magical abilities. It’s not unheard of for someone to manifest powers under extreme stress or danger.”

Alexei added, “I’ve heard of such instances before. But if that’s true, Sam, this changes everything. Radu will not only want the spell now. He’ll want you too.”

Sam took a shaky breath, her fingers clutching the edge of the desk. “I didn’t ask for this, any of this. I just wanted to find the truth about the curse. I didn’t think I’d be...be whatever this is.”

I took a step closer to her, trying to offer some comfort. “We’ll figure it out.” My eyes met Alexei’s and Janusz’s. “We need to ensure her safety, now more than ever.”

Julia, sensing the gravity of the situation, approached Sam and gently squeezed her arm. “That was some spell, though. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Janusz cleared his throat, breaking the short-lived moment of camaraderie. “We don’t have much time. None of Mirea’s lieutenants were in that warehouse, only neophytes and lackeys. The faction won’t be foolish enough to keep having meetings here. They’ll go deeper underground.”

“They were following us, Cristian,” Sam said, her blue eyes meeting mine. “Radu said he knew when I was researching in the library, and even when we found the book at the covenstead.” She gasped. “The book! Is it safe? What if he was drawing you away to get to it?”

Alexei held up a hand. “We’ve still got it, don’t worry. Though it does look as if someone tried to crack the safe I put it in before we left.” He gave Cristian a significant look.

Janusz said, “After tonight, Mirea is down a dozen men. He’ll know I’ve been passing information on to you. He still doesn’t have the spell book. And it’s possible Sam’s unexpected display of ability has made him think twice about attacking again. If nothing else, I’d expect him to go quiet for a while.”

“We should do the same,” I said, holding Sam’s gaze. “Let’s meet again tomorrow. Tonight, we rest and heal.”

SAMANTHA

CRISTIAN BORROWED a car from Alexei and took me to a random hotel, a nice one, with a big bed and a huge shower that normally would thrill me, but right now, I was so wiped out, I didn't care. I was just glad to be somewhere quiet and away from the chaos of the city. I borrowed some of Julia's clothes, and we stopped for toiletries on the way. Cristian's eyes were ever searching for tails or spies. I couldn't believe that we'd missed them before. Vampires probably had all kinds of ways to mask their presence, though. I didn't blame Cristian. We'd both been so caught up in finding that grimoire that we'd lost focus. I was just relieved to be away from that madman—madvampire—and back with Cristian.

We settled into a penthouse suite overlooking Central Park. I went to the window to gaze out. The moon was just starting to peek over the horizon, as if coming out of hiding. I wished she really was a goddess who could help us. The same goddess Sage had worshipped...

"Everything has changed, hasn't it?" I murmured, closing my eyes briefly.

Cristian took a moment before answering. "It has. With Janusz's cover blown and Radu not using the Blue Dawn for meetings anymore, he's going to become even more unpredictable. It's going to be hard to keep tabs on his movements now. But I'll keep you safe, Sam, I swear."

I wrapped my arms tightly around myself and turned to look at him, his black hair ruffled as if he'd run his fingers

through it many times, his deep eyes full of repentance.

“What’s happening to me?” I whispered. “Who am I?” Despite trying to ball up my emotions and shove them down deep, I felt tears welling up to dampen my lashes.

He crossed the room to me, and I fell into his strong, familiar embrace. He stroked his hand over my hair, holding me tight against him.

“You’re Sam,” he murmured. “Brave, beautiful Sam.”

I wrenched back and pressed a fist to my chest. “But am I also *her*? Sage?” My voice broke on a ragged whisper. “It was her face I saw when I was begging for help in my mind. She came to me...and then...I think she *became* me. Or I became her. Is that even possible?”

He lifted his shoulders and let them drop. “Have you recalled any other images of her? Do you remember anything about her life?”

I sat heavily on the end of the bed. “The dreams... Are they memories? Or are they Sage reaching out to me from heaven or wherever witches go?” I knuckled the tears from my cheeks and gave a shaky laugh. “This is so beyond my paygrade.”

He handed me a tissue from a box on the small desk, sat beside me, and took my hand in his. “I want to say something clever, something comforting that will put an end to this nightmare for you, but I’m no poet. All I can do is assure you that I won’t abandon you, and I’ll do everything necessary to figure out what’s happening.” He lifted his arm, and I fitted myself into his side, needing his comfort and strength. He hugged me tight against him, and I felt my muscles relax. This was the only place where I felt truly safe.

“I thought I’d lost you,” he murmured, his cheek against my hair.

“I kept thinking out to you.” I made a pushing movement with my hand. “Like, with my mind. Can vampires do that?”

“Telepathy? The very oldest can. The elders in Romania... I witnessed them doing it once. I’m only six hundred years

old, though.”

“Only.” I gazed up at his beautiful, worried, ageless face. “Something weird is happening when I don’t find that shocking. I’m starting to accept all this...craziness.”

“And now you’re a part of it.”

I sat up and blew my nose. “What if I don’t want to be? What if I just want to be Samantha Baker, reporter? With my shitty little apartment and student loan debt and stupid defective crystal collection?”

“Mirea knows you now. I don’t think you can go back to that life.” When my face crumpled, he put his hand on my thigh. “But Sam, there’s so much more to be discovered. If you do have latent powers, you can develop them. There’s great joy in magic when it’s used the right way. You’ll be more in tune with life than you ever were before. You can help people, maybe even heal them.”

“Like Sage?” I said, wiping my nose with the balled-up tissue. “Am I a witch?”

He seemed to stiffen, then he said, “There are other kinds of magic users...so not necessarily.”

I dropped my hand in my lap. “You’ve been waiting a long time for her to show up again, haven’t you.”

He slowly shook his head. “It doesn’t matter anymore. I loved Sage. I’ll always love her. But...now there’s you.” He tucked a ribbon of hair behind my ear and ran the backs of my fingers down my damp cheek. “And you’re enough, magic or no.”

“Even when my nose is all swollen from crying and my eyes are all bloodshot and I have no idea what I’m doing?”

He smiled a little. “Even then. Especially then.”

Needing more, I curved my hand around the back of his neck and brought our lips together. His were cool against mine, but warmed with my breath. We kissed unhurriedly, though my need grew, my breasts aching, my core growing wet even with him barely touching me.

He gently bit my lips, toyed with my tongue, kissed me as if he knew me, had known me... I couldn't let my mind go there. I clutched his hair in both hands and ate at his mouth, not wanting gentleness anymore. I needed to feel him everywhere. I needed something to make me forget the terrors of this night.

Nothing about him frightened me. I didn't care that he was a vampire, or six hundred years old, or...undead. He was the missing part of me, as cliché as that sounded. Now I knew what all those romances had been talking about.

When at last he moved me back onto the mattress, I moaned, wishing we were already naked. I slid my hand under his shirt to feel his alabaster skin, cool and smooth as river stones, marked by raised scars that must have followed him into his unnatural existence. Who had he been before? Had he been a warrior? A king? There was so much yet to learn about him. But for now...

He reared up to unbutton his shirt and toss it aside so I could see all of him, muscles chiseled as if by Michelangelo's hand. Then he helped me to sit up and undressed me with the greatest care, his lips skimming every newly revealed inch of skin, sucking and nipping to raise goose bumps and gasps, until he reached my bra and tugged it down. When his lips closed over a nipple, I pressed his head against my breast. Whatever was happening to my body was unlike anything I'd felt before. I was molten, flowing, hungry. I almost wanted him to...bite me.

Smacking that thought away, I thumbed off my panties and went to kiss him again, but he put a hand on my chest and encouraged me to lie down.

"You are a goddess," he murmured, his ravenous gaze sliding down me from my hair to my curling toes. I had good hair, not gonna lie, so I spread it over the pillows and curled the ends around my fingers, arching my back to draw his focus to my aching breasts, my legs twined together coquettishly. I felt powerful and infinitely desirable as his eyes devoured me. When I'd had enough waiting, I licked my lips and rolled to my side to unbutton his pants.

His cock was simply magnificent, thick and long and hard as the stone it could have been carved from. I looked up into his eyes, chocolate-brown and vulnerably human-looking in the room's soft light, as I slid my lips over the tip, then down the shaft, working my tongue under the head.

His mouth opened and he let out a startled gasp, then groaned and gathered my hair in both hands. When he threw back his head and gave himself over to me, a thrill of feminine victory shot through me. Mine. Yes, he was mine.

Just when I thought he might come, he pushed me down to my back again, spread my thighs, and came into me in one, hard, satisfying push. His cock, hot now from my mouth, reached deep inside me, and he ground himself against my clit and lower lips, sending wave after wave of mind-bending pleasure through me. After that, there was no thought, only us driving each other crazy, racing to the brink, joining and throwing each other over the cliff with soft shouts and clutching hands. Until at last, long minutes later, I lay with my head on his chest.

And I heard his heart beat. Once... Pause... Twice... I imagined this once-a-minute beat was probably fast for him. But somehow, that tiny stirring of life comforted me. I wrapped my arms around his narrow waist and twined my legs through his, content.

His fingers played idly with my hair. "That was worth waiting six hundred years for..." he murmured.

I picked my head up to look at him. "Wait, are you saying you haven't had sex in...six *hundred* years?"

He nodded slowly, a little smile on his lips.

"You don't regret it. Do you?" I wasn't sure how I felt about being the one to break his streak.

"No. Oh, no. I probably shouldn't have said anything, but...I wanted you to know how much you mean to me." He caressed my cheek, his hair fetchingly ruffled, his eyes brown now instead of vampire black, his skin actually a little

bit pink. My heart twisted in my chest and those bothersome tears popped up again.

“You mean a lot to me too.” I sucked my lower lip, then said, “Not to jinx us, but it really does feel as if I’ve known you for a lot longer than two weeks.”

This time, he grew serious, but he kissed me softly, oh, those beautiful kisses, and tucked me in closer against his side. He tugged the comforter over me. “Sleep now, my darling.”

I was so tired, body and soul. “Will you stay?”

“Until morning. Then I’ll have to rest. I spoke to Alexei earlier, and we have human allies who will watch over you until the sun sets again.”

I played with his chest hair. “This is complicated, with you being a vampire.”

“It is, but our enemy is one too, so he’s at the same disadvantage.”

He turned off the soft bedside lamp so that the only light was the moon filtering in through the window, covering us as if in benediction.

What was she up to, the wily goddess? The moon had two sides, bright and dark, and if she was real, I’d read that she could be fickle. I could only hope she was lighting a path for us that would lead to happiness and not to disaster. For Radu Mirea also stood beneath her light, planning his next steps.

SAMANTHA

I MET my human bodyguard the next day, a very large Chinese-American guy named Bai Liu. He seemed to be younger than I was, maybe early twenties, but with the muscles of someone who'd been working out for years. He was, he explained, trying to get in the very best shape he could before he was turned. He was working on his eternal physique.

If he hadn't said it so cheerfully and with a big white grin, I probably would have freaked out and thrown myself out of the car we were driving in, but as it was, I liked the guy.

"So you're intentionally going to become a vampire?" I asked from the passenger seat.

"Yup. I was a freshman in college studying accounting and working as a deliveryman for a liquor supplier on the side. One day, my boss says, 'Take dis order to dis nightclub, but get outta dere as fast as you can. Strange shit goes on dere, and you don't wanna be part of it.'" He said this in a thick Bronx accent that made me smile. "Well, then my curiosity was piqued. So I made a note of the address and came back when the club was open. At first, I couldn't get past the bouncer. So I grabbed a case of Grey Goose, went around back, and acted like I'd missed part of the delivery and I was there to give them some missing bottles. Since they recognized me, they let me in through the kitchen, and I just kept walking."

He shook his head. "I didn't know what I was seeing at first. Seemed like a regular nightclub, you know? Loud music, crazy dancing. Then I noticed how spooky-looking a lot of the

people were. And I saw a lady drinking blood out of a glass.” He gave me a side-eye as he turned down a side street. “Can’t mistake blood. The more I hung around, the stranger the sights and sounds became. I snuck down into the catacombs. You know about those?”

“Yes. Haven’t been down there yet myself.”

He chuckled. “Oh, well, that’s where the action is. I saw humans giving themselves to vampires, and vampires doing things to them that...well, if you haven’t seen it for yourself, I’m not gonna spoil it for you. Couldn’t believe my eyes, but I knew *that* was where I was meant to be. Sure beat a long boring career of accounting that would make my parents happy but me miserable.

“Anyhow, the bouncer caught up to me and started hauling me out, but I begged for a job. The bartender recognized me, and we got to talking, and before I knew it, I was part of the lifestyle.” He pulled down his shirt collar, showing me bruises and an array of healing puncture marks.

I grimaced. “Doesn’t that hurt?”

“Heck no. It’s like the best drug you could ever take.” He lifted a hand and waved it. “Not that I’ve ever done drugs. Gotta keep the blood pure.”

“Oh,” I said weakly, my mouth going dry. “Right. So when are you going to be a vampire yourself?”

“I’m an acolyte now. That’s a human who’s earning the right to be turned. Probably next year or the year after, I’ll be ready. I don’t want to turn too young, like Julia.” His brows lowered over his brown eyes. “She’s really great, but stuck in that teenaged body, no thanks.”

“She mentioned that to me too. I guess you’re smart to wait...” I glanced out the window. “Here it is! Are you coming in?”

“I’ll come in with you, then keep a watch outside.” He parked in one of the street spaces outside the Paganarium. Before he got out to open my door, he lifted the left side of his jacket to show me a collection of weapons, including shuriken

and knives. “These are all bespelled against vampires. So don’t worry, I got your back.”

I smiled. “Thanks. I appreciate you doing this.”

“It’s all part of my duties, but I’m happy to do it anyhow. Alexei’s a great guy, and he was real worried about you.”

He hopped out, then held my door as I exited. The afternoon seemed blinding after all my nighttime activity. “Won’t you miss it?” I asked, pointing up at the brilliant blue sky.

He shrugged. “I’m getting my time in now. Small price to pay for eternal life, right?”

“I guess.”

He walked ahead of me into the Paganarium. After my night with Cristian, I couldn’t just sit around doing crossword puzzles. I’d had to call in sick to work—bad flu, you know. Since I’d never missed a day before this, Marlowe was sympathetic and told me to take my time. Before dawn, Cristian had gone back to the Blue Dawn to keep researching with Alexei, so I decided to seek out some answers on my own. Can’t keep a good reporter down and all that, right?

There were a few other women in the store murmuring over the tarot decks and athames. Matilda saw me walk in and had a smile for me and a raised eyebrow for Bai. He gave her his brilliant grin, took a turn around the store while I waited, then nodded and went back outside.

Matilda hurried over. “My dear, are you all right? You look...different. Well, I should say, you look the same, but you *feel* different.” She waved her hands in a circle in front of me, and my stomach clenched.

“Oh no, really? Something has changed. I need to talk to you about it.” I looked around at the other customers, just in case they were spies for Radu, but I was just being paranoid. Still... “Do you have a minute to talk? In private?”

“Of course.” She waved to a slender young man with long purple braids stocking a shelf. “Felix, could you please keep an eye on the front?”

“Sure thing,” he said, then went to the register. I followed Matilda to the same room that housed the grimoires. After she flipped on the light, she shut the door and waved me to sit.

“What’s been happening? I’ve been so worried about you since you came in the other day with that...umm...”

“Vampire?” I said.

“Ah, so you do know.”

“Yes. And you know too?”

“Of course. As soon as I touched him, although I had my suspicions as soon as I saw his face.” Her lips pressed into a sly smile. “He is a handsome one, I must say. I’ve always had a soft spot for vampires. The good ones, anyhow. This area has always been a hotspot for them.”

I huffed a laugh. “Well, I never knew they existed until recently. And now I seem to be all tangled up in them. But there’s a problem.” I closed my eyes and waved my hand. “A bigger problem than vampires. I...I had a weird moment where I spoke a spell, like, out of nowhere.”

“Really? How fascinating. What kind of spell?”

I wasn’t sure how much I could tell her without endangering her, so I just said, “A spell of protection. A friend of mine got into some trouble, and it incapacitated a bad man. And his friend. But I don’t know why I knew what to say or where it came from.” I touched my chest. “You’ve known me for a few years. Have you ever thought I had anything magical about me?”

Matilda pulled thoughtfully at her lower lip. “No. But now, there’s a glow about you.”

“A glow?” It was all I could do not to swat at my arms to brush it off. “What does that mean?”

“Your aura, my dear. Almost...” She tucked a pair of square glasses onto her nose, squinted, and stared at me for a full silent ten seconds. “I’ve only seen such a thing in powerful practitioners before.”

I dreaded the answer, but I had to ask. “Practitioners of what?”

“Witchcraft, of course.”

“But I’m not a witch. I’ve never done anything witchy in my life!”

She crossed her arms on the table and peered into my eyes. “Did you find that curse you were looking for?”

“Yes, but we couldn’t read it.” I gasped, my memory jogged. “The West Street covenstead! Have you heard from any of the witches there?”

“The High Priestess herself came in this morning. Said the library had been broken into. Only a few novices were in residence at the time, but they were able to escape without being harmed.”

“That’s where we found the grimoire with the spell. I need to explain to her why I took her book.”

“I doubt she even knows it’s missing. She didn’t seem alarmed when I saw her.” Matilda patted my hand. “Besides, I’m sure she’ll understand. Celeste was traveling to Salem to meet her sister, who has her own coven there. She’ll be back later today. You can tell her yourself when she returns.”

I blew out a breath and told her what Cristian and I had found, and that it had been a rogue faction of vampires that had invaded the covenstead. Without knowing what else to do, I found myself pouring out the entire story, sans the sex, of course. By the time I was finished, her jolly mood had evaporated and she was filling two shot glasses with vodka she fetched from a cabinet hidden beneath the bookshelves. “I think we both need this.”

Her hand shook a little as she sipped, her unfocused gaze staring thoughtfully past my shoulder.

“Here’s the problem,” I said, not touching my drink. “That curse we were looking for? It forbids vampires and witches from falling in love.”

“And you love Cristian Lazar,” she said.

Did I? I hadn't thought about it. But my chest filled with warmth when I recalled his expressive eyes and the strength of his arms around him. I bit my lip and looked at her. "If I do, that's terrible, because what if I really am a witch?"

"Well," she said, setting her glass aside, "that seems unlikely as only a very few are born with the gift. The bloodlines were diluted and most died out long ago. Even those who are descended from born witches may go their entire lifetime without knowing, sad to say. Now, it takes years of training and discipline to acquire such abilities. So despite your new glow, I think you're all right."

"Even if I...might be the reincarnation of a born witch?" I scrunched my shoulders to my ears and grinned awkwardly.

She sat back, blowing a curl off her forehead with an exasperated upward puff. "Oh my. Well, now you're outside my realm of knowledge. You really should talk to Celeste about such matters."

"I'm afraid to go back to the covenstead. We were watched last time. I don't want to put her or the other witches in danger."

"It seems you're all in danger now anyhow. What does the curse say, exactly?"

"We don't know. Nobody can interpret it. Not even the vampires have seen the language before. I was hoping you might know. Do you have something I can write with?"

She produced a pencil and a pad from one of the shelves, and from memory, I sketched out the first line of the curse. "Does this look familiar?"

"Goddess..." she breathed out, her face going nearly as white as Cristian's. "Oh Samantha. This is the blackest of magics." She quickly crumpled the paper and lit it with a match from a box near her white candle, murmuring a few words that made the smoke disappear.

"What did it say?" I asked.

She waved her hands. "I cannot repeat the words. Only know that it's calling upon the very darkest powers. Love,

Samantha, is the greatest force in the universe. Stronger than the bond between atoms. And you know what happened when they split the atom. Now imagine splitting a force as powerful as love. For you see, when people love each other, that force continues on and never truly dies, creating beautiful links between all who share in its light. This spell would destroy that, shredding the fabric of the world itself, and perverting everything good and bright in the world.”

Despite being in a small room lit by a single light, a shadow somehow fell across us, and I shivered. “Radu thinks he can harness it and redirect it to subjugate humans, and then vampires can take over.”

Matilda’s expression grew grim. “This really is a job for Celeste. If you think it’s not safe to go to her covenstead, then I’ll contact her and arrange for her to meet with you here as soon as she returns.” She leaned forward, peering over the tops of her glasses at me. “And bring your vampire with you. If Radu Mirea is successful, then all our people are threatened.” She closed her hand over mine.

A crash and a shout came from the shop. A woman screamed. We both jumped out of our chairs.

CRISTIAN

MY EYES FLEW open into pitch darkness. Which was normal for me, but then a feeling of panic seized me, and I sat bolt upright in my temporary chamber in one of Blue Dawn's private rooms.

“Samantha!” I gasped.

I felt her heartbeat thrumming through me as if it were my own. She was in danger, terrible danger. I brought up her number on my cell with shaking hands, the light from the phone casting shadows on the chamber's walls. When she didn't pick up, I tried Bai, the human guarding her. When the call went to voice mail, my gut clenched. I called the room at her hotel. Again, silence.

Still dressed from the night before in my jeans, button-down, and boots, I burst out of the room into the scone-lit corridor and banged on the door across the hall, behind which Alexei lay. Vampiric slumber was difficult to wake from, and I hadn't checked my phone for the time. When he didn't answer, I tried the door, but of course it was locked. Which was good; likely he was asleep and just not able to be woken. But it was also bad because it meant I was on my own to deal with this ferocious panic searing through me.

I dashed down the corridor and up the stairs into the club. As I'd feared, it was daytime still. Brightness seeped in harmlessly through closed blinds. The club was empty, only the fledglings vacuuming and polishing. One turned in shock to see me. “What's the matter, sir?”

“Is anyone else awake?”

“No, sir. It’s not quite sunset. Only six thirty.”

So perhaps an hour until it was safe enough to venture out. I went to Alexei’s office and checked with his trusted human office manager, Barbara, who handled club matters during the day and managed deliveries to the kitchen and bar. A pleasant middle-aged woman, she startled when I banged open the door. “No calls, nothing,” she said when I asked her if there’d been any alerts or alarms.

Frustration had me growling and clenching my fists. The waves of fear kept battering me, but I had no idea where Samantha was. Then I thought of what she’d said... Reaching out with my mind, I tried to find her. I closed my eyes and struggled to empty my mind of anything but her face, her blue eyes, her plush lips saying...saying... *Paganarium*.

“Barbara,” I said, turning to face the wide-eyed manager. “I need a car.”

“But it’s still daylight.” As quickly as she said that, she shook her head. “Wait. We have a windowless van. I’ll get one of the guys to drive you. To where?”

“When Alexei awakens, tell him I’m going to a place called the Paganarium.”

“Seriously?” She wrinkled her nose.

“I know. But it’s on the east side.” I gave her the address, then paced while she rounded up a human to take me.

Alexei’s crew was well-trained, and within minutes, I was on my way to Samantha. I tried again to feel her with my mind. *I’m coming, my beloved...* I felt a spark of connection and marveled that such a thing was possible. Our bond was getting stronger. Goddess help whoever was threatening her now...

The van stopped in front of the Paganarium, and I leapt out into the sunlight, heedless of the sharp stinging needles of sunbeams that gouged my skin until I slipped into the shop. I almost lashed out as a form hurtled into my chest, catching myself just in time. “Sam!”

She'd wrapped herself around me. "Cristian! Thank God..."

I looked over her head to see a scene of chaos. Bai, his shirt shredded, his chest bloody, stood over a snarling half-man, half-wolf creature, his booted foot between the beast's shoulder blades, pinning him to the floor.

Matilda was comforting three sobbing, terrified customers, and books, bells, and candles lay scattered from their overturned tables around the shop. Broken glass from one of the display windows sparkled in a spray of shards across the floor. It must have been quite a fight.

I put Sam behind me and approached Bai and the werewolf, which was not a true were, but a runt, a half-breed. "What happened here?" I asked Bai.

"I wasn't fast enough to stop them both, sir. They came in through that window"—he pointed to the shattered one—"and started wrecking everything in sight. One got away, but I caught this one." He leaned his weight onto his foot, and the runt, a hideous thing, snapped its partially elongated jaws.

I nudged Bai aside and hauled the bleeding, broken creature to his feet. Bai had done a number on him. I saw with satisfaction that the runt's arms were broken and two shuriken were still lodged in his chest. I gave the were a good shake. "Who sent you?"

"No one," it growled, the words like stones hitting together, coming through its malformed jaws. "We felt..." He pointed with his eyes at Sam. "*Her.*"

Sam shook her head wildly. "I was just talking to Matilda."

"The spell," Matilda gasped, a hand on her chest. "Just writing out the one line might have been enough to stir the curse. It would draw the worst of the worst."

The runt panted and whined in pain, but one side of his lips curved up in a snarl. "Our time is coming, witch. We've been promised. No more living in the shadows for us." He aimed his narrowed yellow eyes at Matilda and her cowering customers. "No more living under the rules of *food*. Because

that's all you are. Foo—" He never finished because I snapped his neck and let his corpse flop to the floor.

The customers cried out, and I quickly went to them. The three recoiled as one, but I caught their eyes in one of the few things about vampire lore that was true: a hypnotic gaze. "You had a lovely time shopping at the Paganarium today. Everything went well, and you'll be back soon. Perhaps in a few days. Other than that, your time here went by in a pleasant blur."

They nodded synchronously, and Matilda hurried them out the door.

A few curious people peered in through the broken glass, but Matilda's shopworker was already outside tidying up and gave them some excuse about a bird flying into the window and causing a scene inside, and Bai had quickly dragged the corpse behind the sales desk.

I startled when Sam clutched my hand, then I threw my arms around her, then held her at arm's length, looking her up and down to assure myself she was unharmed.

"I felt you," she whispered, clutching at my elbows. "I knew you were coming. Oh, Cristian."

We held tight to each other, even though the sun leaking through the broken window was starting to sizzle my skin. Fortunately, the buildings surrounding us blocked most of it. I surreptitiously eased us into a safer part of the shop.

Matilda joined us, her curls a disheveled mass tumbling about her round face. "Cristian, whatever this spell is you're messing with, it's incredibly powerful and already partially activated. I've never seen anything like that." She started wringing her hands again.

"I wrote out the first line to see if Matilda could read it, but that's all." Sam shook her head. "We didn't even read it aloud!"

"It's you, my dear," Matilda said solemnly. "The combination of the curse and you...and you." Her eyes turned from Sam to me. "Your love is giving it life."

“No!” Sam cried, but I held her tighter to my side.

“All of New York’s most sinister creatures will be feeling its power and rising to its call. You must find a way to stop it.”

“That’s what we’ve been trying to do!” Sam exclaimed.

Matilda held up her hands in a calming gesture. “Tonight, you must meet with Celeste. If anyone can tell you what to do, it’s her. That grimoire has been in the possession of the covenstead for who knows how long, so I’m sure she’s aware of its danger.”

“We shouldn’t meet here,” I said. “The place will be marked by every supernatural miscreant now.”

“The Blue Dawn?” Sam suggested, but I shook my head.

Then I said, “What about those buildings you were researching?”

“The murder houses? The ones that used to be owned by Mirea?”

“Yes. That’s the last place he’d think we’d go. Also, they’re probably shielded from outside magical interference, since he wouldn’t want to be discovered during his sacrifices.”

“Well...” Sam bit her lip. “I know the night watchman at one of them. I’m sure he’d let us in.”

After looking it up in her Google maps history, she gave Matilda the address, and I turned to the patroness. “Tonight, at midnight.”

“Naturally,” she drawled, one brow arched.

Sam reached out to Matilda and hugged her. “I’m so sorry to have dragged you into this mess.”

Matilda gave her a motherly pat before she straightened. “My dear, this mess would have unfolded with or without me.” She reached out to me and, to my shock, took my hand, and held it together with Sam’s. “Never underestimate the power of love. I believe in both of you.”

Sam gazed up at me with hope and faith in her eyes, and I couldn’t help myself, I bent my head and kissed her briefly,

relief flowing through me at the touch of her willing, warm lips. Matilda grinned. “All those of us who serve the light will be at your service, friends.”

“Thank you, Matilda,” I said, then turned. “And thank you, Bai. I’ll be sure to mention your courage to Alexei.”

Bai tugged on the cuffs of his ripped shirt. “You’re welcome, sir, but we still have a problem. That werewolf who got away? He knows what Samantha looks like. They’re all going to be coming for you now.”

SAMANTHA

BY THE TIME Cristian and I got to the Blue Dawn, night had fallen. I rode in the back of the windowless van with him, his arm tight around my shoulders, my emotions riding from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows. I felt like I hadn't stopped shaking since being kidnapped by Radu.

I hated that I'd put Matilda in danger. Seeing those two werewolves sweeping their arms across the display tables, snarling at the customers, snapping at Bai, I'd felt the world drop out from beneath my feet. Somehow, I knew this was my fault.

At the nightclub, we sat in a quiet corner booth while one of the acolytes brought me a hamburger and a drink, which I barely touched. Everyone kept a respectful distance.

"Can we really do this, Cristian?" I asked him, picking at my french fries.

He nodded confidently. "We must. No one else can."

I shook my head. "What were those things? Were they really werewolves?"

"A form of them. We call them runts. True werewolves come from royal bloodlines. The runts are mixed blood, never able to fully transform into their wolf bodies. Of course, that's why they'd be seeking more power, the kind Mirea could promise them."

I shuddered. "So there's more out there than just vampires, huh? I was just starting to wrap my head around vampires and

witches, and now this.”

Sitting beside me, he put a comforting hand on my arm. “Try not to worry. We’re together now, and I’m not letting you out of my sight again.”

“But should we be? Together, I mean.” I gazed up into his eyes and tried my best to ignore the blanket of solace that immediately wrapped around me. “Wouldn’t it be better if we separated?”

He touched my cheek and slid my hair behind my ear. “Would that diminish our feelings for each other? Would living on opposite sides of the world make us care less for each other?”

He was right. No matter where I was, I would always want to be with him. “This is crazy,” I whispered. “We’ve only known each other for a couple of weeks!”

“Our souls have known each other for much longer. I feel it here.” He tapped his chest.

“Me too,” I had to admit, then frowned. “Fated romances never seem to work out in the books I read.”

He smiled, his confidence battering against my inner sense of dread. “What we feel for each other makes us a target, but it’s also a source of great strength too. Our ending is yet to be written. Speaking of... Before everything got crazy, Alexei and I did find some interesting things in the books downstairs. I’d like to show them to you.”

“Is it safe? Just writing that one line from memory attracted the...runts.”

With a nod, he stood and held his hand out to me. “We’ll leave the grimoire alone for now, but there are other things you should see. Alexei and I came across a book of foretelling.”

“Uhh, like a prophecy?”

“Something like that, but as with our love, the ending is still to be determined.”

That was the first time either of us had said the L-word. How did I feel about it? As I slipped my fingers into his and rose from my chair, I decided...I liked it. A lot. I couldn't be sure if that was what I felt yet because I had nothing to compare it to. I'd never had a crazy crush when I was a teenager, and had been so focused on my career, the guys I dated were a blur in my mind, all of them nice, none of them special. Not in the way Cristian was becoming to me.

Hand in hand, we went down into what Julia had called the catacombs, and I could see why. Nearly pitch black, the corridor was softly lit by wall sconces. Doors marked rooms every twelve feet or so, and in between some of them were alcoves. All very mysterious. "Vampires must love it down here," I said quietly.

"We do. No chance of a stray sunbeam finding us. Eternal night." He took us down another corridor that seemed even older and more crumbly than the first. The slow drip of water echoed from somewhere ahead of us. At the intersection, I had seen two other tunnels stretching out to who knew where. We walked past the point where the electric wall sconces ended, and the darkness, unlike anything I'd ever known, crushed down around us. I moved closer to Cristian, gripping his arm with my free hand. He seemed to know where he was going. I could imagine getting lost down here and starving to death. I shuddered.

"Are you all right?" he asked, squeezing my hand.

"Just thinking about how dangerous it would be to get lost down here."

"Indeed. Stay close to me." He then stopped, and I heard a slight noise as if he was lifting something from the wall. He spoke a word, and a genuine old-timey torch lit with a real flame in his grip.

"You can do spells?" I squeaked, looking at his face gilded by the flame.

"Not really. Vampires have some innate abilities, but I've picked up a few things from ancient texts I've got back home."

I didn't even know where home was to him. I felt as lost as if my heart was a maze and I was feeling my way through blind. As if he could read my churning thoughts, he squeezed my hand again.

"These tunnels have been here for centuries," he said as we continued. Only the flame of the torch lit our way, glimmering off damp bricks. "They were originally used by merchants to smuggle goods in and out of Manhattan. Over the years, they were expanded and eventually connected to various points around the city, including to another nightclub called the Labyrinth."

We reached another door, this one made of ancient-looking dark wood and reinforced with heavy black iron. Diagonally across the wood and scraping the metal were long gouge marks that seemed fresh. Seeing the direction of my gaze, Cristian said, "While we were at the warehouse, someone tried to break in here, undoubtedly after the grimoire. Fortunately, the ward is strong. Only Alexei and I can breach it."

There was no doorknob, but Cristian laid his hand in the center of the door and whispered a few words that skated across the back of my neck like a winter breeze, and the massive door swung open a few inches. He pushed in the rest of the way and quickly lit three more torches set along the walls.

The chamber was a pretty good size. Old trunks that could have come off a pirate ship sat against the wall, and a row of bookshelves contained not only curious-looking books, but also scrolls, and pots and jars full of things I could only hazard a guess at. Eye of newt? Tail of toad? From the exotic, musty, spicy scent that hung in the air, it could be anything.

My arms crossed over my chest against the cold, I slowly walked around the room. I stopped when I recognized the grimoire we'd borrowed from the covenstead on a shelf, and I'm telling you, the thing pulsed at me, a light I could only see in my mind's eye, rhythmically beating like it had its own heartbeat. If a book could snarl, this one was definitely showing fang to me. Creepy! No way was I touching that thing again.

“Here,” Cristian said. He drew out a chair for me at a scarred square table and opened a big illuminated book in front of me. He pointed at some text written in a flowery hand. “It seems to be a counterspell to the curse. It tells of a great battle with a usurper vampire who unites the darkest beings to his cause.”

“Well, that does sound like Radu,” I murmured.

“It’s a guide, a roadmap to defeating him.” He nodded when I glanced up at him in shock.

“That’s wonderful! Then...what’s the problem?”

A hand on his hip, he raked his fingers through his thick hair. “Alexei and I were trying to understand its wisdom. It speaks of a bond that transcends time and space. And also of a spell, and a sacrifice.” He crossed his arms.

“Sacrifice? Like what you and Sage had to do?” My heart fell as I understood why he wasn’t as thrilled as I thought he’d be to have a map to Radu’s defeat. “You had to separate.”

He nodded slowly and sat down on the edge of the table. “It could be something completely different this time. Or something even worse. Nevertheless,” he said, tipping his head to me, “it’s a warning to us of the danger ahead. And there’s no doubt that you’re a part of it.”

I ran my fingers over the text, realizing I could sort of read it. “Is this Old English?”

“Yes. Our theory is that some of the witches from Sage’s coven emigrated to England over the years and brought their legends and lore with them. It would make sense since they were the ones directly affected by the curse.”

“What part of England?”

“Judging by the genealogy written down in the endpapers, mostly Lancashire.”

A jolt of recognition made me jump, as if someone from beyond the grave had tapped my shoulder. And maybe they had. Heck, anything was possible at this point. “My mom has been working on our family tree for years. I remember her

saying that my great-great-grandparents came from there. Is that significant?" I asked, even as I was opening the book to scan the ancient family tree meticulously recorded in the endpapers of the book. I recognized some of the surnames from our own family history.

"I want to call my mom and ask her about all this, but would that be safe?"

"Probably best to keep your parents out of it until Mirea is dealt with."

"Tell me more about the prophecy. What else does it say?"

"There's going to be a great battle between the light and the darkness, a struggle that will shape the destinies of both the vampire and human worlds. We must strike before Radu completes his dark design. The battle will be fierce, and the odds may seem against us. But we have each other, and we have this." He waved his hand between us.

"Yes, but... Like, you mean a physical battle?"

"Exactly. You saw the weapons that Bai carried? We have more of those, swords and knives spelled against supernaturals. The older of us are weapons ourselves once battle lust overtakes us. Radu will have rogue vampires and unnatural creatures like the runts on his side."

"Are there more of you? Because Radu seemed to have no problem coming up with a whole bunch of vampires, while so far, I've only seen you, Janusz, and Alexei. And Julia. She's pretty badass when she's backed into a corner, but still."

"You're forgetting yourself."

"Me? I'm a lover, not a fighter. I flunked out of junior judo when I was in first grade."

He slid to the floor beside my chair and sank to one knee, grasping my hands and gazing into my face with such conviction that I held my breath. He reached out to brush a strand of hair from my face, his touch gentle. "This is our destiny, our fight. We were brought together for this purpose, and we will face it together. There is power in you that's

untapped. I can teach you some basic spells, and it might unlock your latent power.”

He glanced to the book. “The prophecy is clear that you’ll be instrumental in defeating Radu and his dark army.”

SAMANTHA

WE HAD a few hours before midnight, when we were scheduled to meet up with Celeste the High Priestess, so we took the Lancashire witches' book with us to another torch-lit room so that we'd be safely away from the grimoire, and Cristian prepared to show me a few basic spells. Warm-ups, he called them.

"In the tomes I have at home, training of adepts is covered in fair detail," he said, rolling up his sleeves.

I've always been a sucker for good forearms, and Cristian had them in spades, thick and well-muscled. "Who were you before you turned?" I asked.

"A warrior. I fought the armies of Sultan Mehmed the Second with my lord, Prince Vlad Dracula, Voivode of Wallachia," he said with obvious pride.

"*The* Dracula? Was he a vampire too?"

"Of course not." A scowl flattened his lips. "I'm not sure where that ridiculous legend came from. But he was a great man."

"Didn't he, uhh, impale a lot of folks?"

"Mm," he hummed speculatively. "Back then, it was the way we did things."

"Ookay, then," I said. Even though I hated Radu, I wasn't sure I could stomach impaling. "I have to tell you, I'm nervous about this battle you say is coming."

“No one expects you to swing a sword, my heart. Alexei and I are hoping that your innate magic will rise and counter whatever black magic Mirea throws at us. That will weaken him considerably.”

“All righty. Well...where do we start?”

He turned and plucked an unlit torch from the wall. “Let’s see if you can light this. It’s the most basic of magic, necessary for survival.”

I cocked a grin. “Anybody got a light?”

“Very funny. Now see, here...” Holding the torch in his left hand, he pointed out a short line of text in the spell book. “Can you read this?”

I squinted at the flowing text. “*Gleam sunnan, ic þe gelæde*. Sorry, that’s probably not anywhere close to how it’s supposed to...”

He tipped the torch forward to shine on the pages. *Shine?* I clasped my hands to my chest. “Oh my gosh! Did it work?”

“Told you you could do it!”

I crossed my arms and narrowed my eyes at him. “Are you sure you didn’t help just a little?”

“Not at all. Even many humans could use that spell, but for you, it was so easy, right?”

Well, heck. I was getting a little excited, I admit. I took the torch from him and wagged it back and forth in the air, enjoying the light from the flame. *My flame!* “How do I put it out now?”

He waved to the book, where in the adjoining column was another short line. I read: “*Gleam sunnan, ic þec forbēode.*”

The flame went out as if someone had doused it in ice water. No sputtering or anything, just out. I lit it back up with the original spell and saw Cristian’s grin in its light.

“Your pronunciation is actually excellent,” he said. “Ready for the next one?”

“Yes! This is better than Hogwarts!”

“Hogwhat?”

“It’s from a novel about a boy discovering he’s a wizard. It was my favorite growing up. He could fly and everything.”

“Well then, you might like this next spell.” He flipped the page and pointed to another line, then took his cell phone out of his pocket and put it on the table. “Direct your energy to that, please.”

“*Purh mildne bræð, swā swā feger ūp āstige,*” I uttered, focused on his iPhone. Then gasped when it floated up to hover between us. “This is fun! Can I do that to us? Make us fly?”

Laughing, he shook his head. “I won’t say it’s impossible. Up in old Quebec, there was a legend of a flying canoe full of lumberjacks, but they’d made a deal with the devil, or so the story goes.”

I plucked the phone from the air and put it back on the table. “Is there a devil?”

He shrugged. “I’ve never seen him, if he does exist, and no God either. But the world is full of restless spirits, some benign, some vengeful, some kind and some murderous. The old gods still have sway, even though they’ve been mostly forgotten.” He seemed sad for a moment, and I reached out to him.

“The world is a lot different than it was in the fourteen hundreds.”

He nodded. “I realize now that I should have participated in the modern world more. I spent most of my time at my castle, Ravenscroft, in a remote part of the Carpathians. Sometimes, decades would go by without a visitor. It was just me and my manservant, Vasile.” His smile returned briefly. “You’ll meet him at some point. You’ll like him. He’s ‘a great guy,’ as they say nowadays.”

To have lived with Cristian so long, Vasile must be a vampire too. Thinking of how overwhelming this new supernatural world was that I’d been plopped into, I

sympathized with Cristian's plight. "A castle sounds amazing."

"Some people have called it a pile of rubble, but I like it." He tucked the torch into the wall sconce and drew me closer. "There's so much I want to show you, my heart."

I felt like a happy puppy when he called me that. And when his hands threaded into my hair and held me still for his kisses, I melted against him like hot candle wax. I was just about to suggest we take the book off the table and find some other use for the furniture when he drew back, his hands combing through my locks.

"We must focus." But then he growled low in his throat, the sexiest sound I ever heard, and attacked my mouth again, dragging his lips down the column of my neck so that every sensitive bit of me perked up and cheered. "Samantha, what you do to me..." he rumbled.

I clutched at his shoulders. "I want you too. Don't ever doubt it."

"We can't have doubt between us. We are one in this."

I realized he was back to talking about the fight ahead and tried to compose myself. "Right. What's next?"

Setting me aside with what looked gratifyingly like considerable effort, he returned his focus to the book. "There are battle spells in here. Ones that will freeze soldiers in place and render weapons useless. We should practice those now."

I felt my eyes go round. "How will we know if they're working? We don't have anyone to practice on."

He winked and smiled. "My darling, that's what acolytes are for."

CRISTIAN

SEVERAL HOURS and a small pile of acolytes later, I set Sam up in one of the private chambers to take a nap or at least rest before we met with the High Priestess, Celeste.

Alexei had had a few dealings with her, as the paths of witches and vampires in New York City sometimes crossed, and he assured me she was wise and thoughtful and would probably be happy to help Sam.

Still, I worried about my beloved. While she practiced the spells, her face was lit as if by a fire from within, as if her true self was breaking free of the chains of mundanity that had constrained her. But at the same time, there were moments when I could see that she remembered why we were doing this, that a dangerous battle lay ahead, and she'd grow pensive.

She didn't know her own strength, at least not yet. I hoped that wouldn't be a detriment, for to defeat Mirea, she would need to be at her best. I would do everything necessary to support her, even as I prepared myself and others for the coming conflict.

While she rested, I met with Alexei and Janusz. Janusz had been making quiet inquiries throughout the Blue Dawn and the Labyrinth, recruiting vampires to our cause. Many had sensed that trouble was in the air, the older ones especially. Our army began to grow. We'd have plenty of fangs and sword hands in our ranks by the time we met Mirea in battle.

Sitting on Blue Dawn's roof now, getting some fresh evening air, I felt the breeze moving my hair and kissing my

cheeks. The moon was lifting herself over the cusp of the horizon, beaming between buildings, as if trying to find her way to me. She would be full soon, and since the spell book indicated the battle would be fought beneath the goddess's light, I knew that was when we would meet with Mirea's forces.

But where? I scanned the cluttered landscape. Buildings everywhere. Central Park could host a vampire war, but we'd definitely be noticed. I decided to let fate figure that one out for us.

Janusz silently joined me where I sat. Rooftop meetings seemed to be our thing. "What news from the Labyrinth?" I asked.

"The news is good." He sat beside me and followed my gaze to the rising moon. "There's little love for Mirea among the vampires and witches who want peace. They realize how good they've got it here in this city. A war with humans would be never-ending." He narrowed his gaze as if envisioning New York in rubble and ashes. "How did Samantha handle the news of the prophecy?"

"Well," I said with a proud nod. "She's amazing, Janusz. The spells rolled off her tongue."

"Because she's a witch?" he said quietly.

I paused before answering. "It's seeming more likely. In the genealogy in the back of the spell book, she recognized some familial names as being in her family tree as well."

"Then it's possible she's a born witch."

"One who grew up without a coven, never knowing her powers."

"Celeste will know. She's powerful and wise."

"Are the guards situated around the mansion where we're meeting?"

He nodded. "Well before dusk, I had people in place. So far, it's been quiet. Just the one night watchman Samantha mentioned. He keeps looking out the windows, so he

obviously knows we're coming." One side of his lips lifted. "I wish he wasn't being quite so obvious, but I'm sure this is exciting for a human."

"If only they knew what might be about to befall them." I chewed absently on my thumbnail, a bad habit that even dying and being reborn hadn't broken me of. "Do you think this is the beginning of the resurrection of magic in the world, Janusz? I've never seen such forces converging since before I was turned."

He huffed softly. "I don't know if there's room for magic anymore. Every corner is occupied by machines. Every human has their face glued to a phone or computer. They've lost touch with the gods of the natural world. They barely even talk to each other anymore. They've forgotten who they were, what their purpose was."

"To serve our kind?" I asked with a sly smile.

He smirked and shook his head. "To serve each other. Now it's every man or woman for themselves, it seems."

I patted his back. "Our group is strong. I'll proudly stand beside you and Alexei and every vampire or witch who comes to our side. Too much is at stake for us to be selfish."

A couple of hours later, we made our way to the Bronx. Sam had been quiet. I plied her with food and drink, as mortals needed sustenance in times of stress, but she ate little, and I worried for her, even though she assured me she was fine.

To cheer her up, Julia invited her to pick out an outfit from Julia's extensive wardrobe. "I want to look my best when I meet the head witch," Sam had told me. And when she rejoined me in Blue Dawn's lounge, she did look incredible, wearing a long dark green dress with a silver belt that accentuated her tiny waist and flaring hips, the bodice cut modestly, the color complementing her flaming hair, which she wore down but for two silver filigree clips that caught back the sides.

“You look lovely,” I whispered as she came to me and put her hands in mine. I kissed her lips.

“Cristian?” she murmured, glancing around because we were surrounded by our friends and a few acolytes who would be drivers and lookouts.

“Let them see us, Sam. Our love should inspire them. This is one thing we’re fighting for, the right to love whom we want, without fear of a curse coming down on our heads.”

“Well, in that case...” She pressed up on her tiptoes to catch my lips, and her slender arms slid around my waist. Her warmth soaked into me like a balm. The world faded away, until it was only her and me in a serene pool of moonlight.

Someone coughed, and I dragged my head up. It was Alexei. “All right, lovebirds. Time to go.”

Her cheeks pink, Sam shuffled her feet and bit her lip, but I pressed my palm against her lower back for reassurance, and we headed out.

We piled into SUVs—Alexei had amassed an assortment of vehicles to service his eclectic clientele—and within a short time, we were pulling through a gate in a rusted chain-link fence and parking in front of a tired old mansion that must have been a showstopper a couple hundred years earlier.

Janusz, riding shotgun while Bai drove, had been on his phone the entire time, checking in with the guards posted all around the house, in the woods, on the roof. He gave us the all clear. He looked back at me now, his cerulean eyes bright with anticipation. “You can go right in. Celeste is already there. The night watchman, Luther, has been safely escorted home.” He slid a smile to Samantha. “He’s a funny guy. He really wanted to stay.”

“I’ll catch up with him later and fill him in,” she said with a chuckle. “If it wasn’t for him, maybe I wouldn’t even be here right now.”

A fist of cold foreboding closed around my heart at her words. Surely the goddess’s influence was at work, bringing us together. But was it so that we could finally love each other in

peace, or was the devious goddess getting her revenge on a world that had turned its back on her?

I took Samantha's small warm hand in mine and led her to the imposing front door of the abandoned mansion, knowing I had to have faith that love would show us the way.

SAMANTHA

MY HEART WAS GOING a mile a minute as we entered the old mansion, through the front door this time, not like when I'd slipped in through a broken window the night I'd met Luther. Everything about the place felt different. I didn't know if it was me and the changes I was undergoing or what, but magical energy seemed to hum over my skin. I knew without being told which room the High Priestess was in, even though the door to it was closed. Before we went in, I stopped and tugged at my dress and touched my hair. "How do I look?" I asked Cristian.

He gazed down at me with dark chocolate eyes brimming with such unabashed adoration that it made me blush. "So very beautiful," he murmured. "Everything will be all right, Sam. I'll be right here."

Celeste had requested to meet with me privately, so I wet my dry lips and opened the door. The room must have been a den or study at one time. A big fireplace with a beautiful green-tiled surround held a small cheery fire that touched upon the silver hair of a tall woman standing before it, her hands clasped over her middle.

Her deep-set gray eyes caught my gaze and held it. I felt a flush of energy prickle over my skin, not unpleasantly, and to my surprise, my own fledgling power answered her, gently questing. She smiled warmly, and I felt a measure of tension leave my shoulders. I sensed I'd passed the first test.

"I'm Sam. Samantha Baker," I said.

“I know,” she said with a quick grin and a tip of her head. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

I puckered my brows. “Like...just tonight, or...”

She gracefully approached me, then said, “For many years. Your coming was foretold.”

I bit my lip. “Oh no. I’m not the Chosen One or something, am I?” That just seemed too cheesy.

She laughed lightly. “One of many, but an important one. You’re the catalyst for the changes the goddess will bring about across the world.”

“Good changes, right?”

“We can never know the mind of the gods, but we can trust them to always do what’s best for life. And love is very necessary for life to flourish.”

I wrung my hands—must have picked that up from Matilda—and got right to the point. “High Priestess... Am I a witch? Can you tell?”

Her fingers lightly touched my arm. “You may call me Celeste, and yes, my sister. You are indeed a born witch. And there’s someone I want you to meet.”

She stepped aside, and I saw another woman I hadn’t noticed before, standing in the shadows where the firelight couldn’t reach. She was a pleasant, grandmotherly looking sort with apple cheeks and kind blue eyes like mine... *Like mine*. I gaped as she came forward to peer into my face. “You have the Albu eyes,” she murmured, then touched my hair. “And your great-grandmother Gertrude’s hair.” She stood straight, clasping a book to her chest, and beamed at me. “I am Enise,” she said. “I’m your cousin, though from another branch of our family tree. Still, I see the resemblance to our ancestors. And your power has the Albu signature.”

“Albu?” I stammered, exchanging a glance with Celeste. I recalled that name from my mom’s Genealogy.com research, though it was several generations removed.

Enise nodded, gesturing for us to sit on two sofas by the fire. “I felt the energies shifting and knew someone special was coming. And of course, your great-grandmother always said you would find me someday. There was a special spark within you.”

“My great-grandmother?”

“Yes, she was a witch, like me. Like you,” Enise said matter-of-factly. “I assume you’ve started to experience... changes?”

I nodded, wondering how much they knew about the bigger picture, about Radu Mirea and what he was planning.

Uncannily in tune with my energies, Celeste nodded solemnly. “The night you and Cristian Lazar took the grimoire, I sensed your presence.”

“I apologize for just taking it. We’ll return it.”

She pressed her lips together. “You were meant to have it. And when the battle is over, it would be better to destroy it so that it might never fall into the wrong hands. Especially those of Radu Mirea.”

“Why did the witches write down the curse?” I asked her, relieved she did seem to know about Mirea and that I didn’t have to be the one to break it to her that a giant war was coming to her doorstep.

“Because only by knowing what it says can we counter it, just as how understanding the structure of a disease enables doctors to create a cure. As a healer witch, you are uniquely qualified to fight it because of your heritage.”

“My heritage?” I felt like a dumb parrot, but trust me, this was a lot to take in.

Enise opened her book, and there was an image of the portrait of Sage Hawthorn. “I know who that is,” I told Celeste.

“She’s your great-great-many times removed grandmother, Sam. The children she had with her husband, Cezar, moved away from their village, and they and their descendants had

families all over Wallachia, which later became Romania. In the 1870s, many people fled that country and came here, to the US, and also to England. That's where your ancestors settled."

"My mom told me our people were from Lancashire."

"Exactly," Enise said with a bright smile. "The descendants of the legendary witch Sage Hawthorn."

"But my mom's not a witch, and she never mentioned any of our close relatives having powers."

Enise sighed and glanced at Celeste. "Unfortunately, magic has gone into hiding. In those of the bloodline, it's latent, but unless there's a catalyst to rouse it, magic can remain dormant throughout a person's entire life."

"These days," Celeste said, "even if someone's powers did begin to emerge, they would probably think there was something wrong with them, or ignore it or worse."

My mouth went dry as I tried to form the question I dreaded most. "Am I...Sage reincarnated?"

Celeste's delicate brows drew down over her keen gray eyes. "Do you remember things from her life, Sam?"

"I've had dreams where I saw parts of her life. Especially times when she was with Cristian."

"Ah, her vampire lover," Enise murmured. "And he's with you now?"

I nodded.

"Do you love him, Samantha?" Celeste asked quietly, no judgment in her tone.

"I do." Just admitting that out loud felt freeing. I took a deep breath and said again, "I do, with all my heart."

Celeste touched my hand. "Then that's all that matters. Don't worry whether you're Sage reborn or not. You are your own person, free to choose whom to love. If Sage is guiding you from the spirit world, accept her help. She would only ever want the best for both of you."

I told them about the incident in the warehouse. “I don’t know how I knew the words to the spell, but it knocked Radu unconscious, and Julia and I were able to escape, with the help of another vampire.”

Celeste and Enise exchanged a glance. Enise said, “That’s a powerful spell if it had that effect on someone as strong as Radu. Perhaps that was Sage helping you.”

When I bit my lip, Celeste assured me, “It’s good to be open to such influences. You did nothing wrong.”

“Cristian started teaching me some simple spells today. He said I’m going to be important in the battle against Radu. You know about that, right?”

“Of course. That too was foretold. The spell book showed you the way to his defeat?” Celeste asked.

“How did you know about that?”

Her lips pursed in a sly little smile, and mischief lit her eyes, making her look much younger than her fifty or so years. “We witches have our ways of making sure the right book ends up in the right place at the right time.”

I huffed a laugh. “I’m starting to think being a witch might be kind of fun.”

“Oh, it is!” Enise said cheerfully. “There’s a whole wonderful new world about to open up for you.”

“But also danger,” Celeste countered, her face growing serious once more. “There is still a very good chance this curse could overwhelm us. You’re untrained and so young. We’ll all help you, but I have to be honest, it could go either way.”

“What if Radu wins?” I whispered.

“Then everything we know and love will be twisted to serve his dark desires,” Enise said, then bit her lower lip just as I always did. Was that genetic? She touched the pages opened to Sage’s portrait. “This,” she began, “is the Albu Grimoire. It has been passed down through our lineage for centuries. Everything you need to know about our magic, our

history, and the spells our ancestors have crafted is contained within these pages.”

I hesitated, my fingers brushing over the book, drawn to it. “Are you sure I should have this?”

Enise chuckled. “You are an Albu, dear. It is your right, and perhaps, your destiny. But remember, with great power comes great responsibility. The magic within this book is not to be taken lightly.”

“Study it, Samantha,” Celeste instructed. “Come to us if you have any questions. This book is attuned to your blood and spirit, though, and I believe you’ll have an affinity for it. You’re no longer alone in this, sister.”

“That’s right, coz,” Enise said kindly, patting my hand.

I nodded, clutching the book closed against my chest. “Thank you, Celeste, Enise. For everything.”

As we prepared to leave, Celeste pulled Cristian aside. I watched from the doorway, curious. They spoke in hushed tones, and while I couldn’t hear what was said, the serious expression on both their faces told me it was significant.

On the drive back to the Blue Dawn, the silence between us was palpable. Finally, unable to stand the quiet any longer, I turned to Cristian. “What did Celeste say to you?”

He hesitated a moment before he finally answered me. “She warned me that Radu was hoping our love would strengthen the curse rather than defeat it. He’s counting on it, in fact. He will bend it to his will if he can.”

I mulled this over, the grimoire heavy in my lap. “What are we supposed to do about that? I can’t stop...loving you.”

His dark eyes lit at my words, and he smiled as he reached to take my hand. “Nor I you, my heart. The fate of the world rests on our faith in each other.”

“Oh. Is that all?” I bunched my brows and laughed unsteadily. “Sounds like just another Friday night date to me!”

He brushed my lips. “The day will come when we don’t have the threat of Mirea hanging over us. I will do whatever it

takes to free us of this curse.”

“Me too.” I looked down at the Albu Grimoire in my lap. “I can’t wait to start learning some new spells.”

Cristian slid his hand over my hair. “The goddess has chosen her warrior witch wisely.”

That evening, I began my deep dive into the Albu Grimoire, eager to unlock the secrets within and discover the true extent of my power.

CRISTIAN

DESPITE THE LATE HOUR, nearly two a.m., Sam was eager to start in on the grimoire. We'd agreed it would be best for her to stay with me at the Blue Dawn. While the chambers below were more suited to vampire than human comfort, she'd be safe there, at least. And in my arms all night. I liked the sound of that very much.

But she was so excited to study her new book that instead of being wrapped up in each other's embrace, we ended up in the secret chamber again, bent over the grimoire by torchlight.

"Look at this, Cristian." She ran her finger down a line of text. "Herbs for healing, spells for lifting fevers and even mending bones. It's wonderful!"

"What about the battle spells?"

"I'm sure they're in here too." She sucked on her lower lip, making my cock ache from the memory of those beautiful lips wrapped around it. "Here! This reminds me of what I said at the warehouse." She started reading the spell aloud, and right away, a vortex surged and swirled around our ankles, ruffling the pages of the books on the shelves. "Oops!" She put her hand over the grimoire, looking up at me with huge eyes. The wind sputtered to a stop. "Guess I better not do that here."

"Not unless you want to knock me unconscious."

"Never." She slanted a grin, face alight. "This all feels so right. I've always felt like kind of an outsider, like I never really belonged. But now...I have sister witches, and an actual

cousin. And this book.” She leaned in to peck my lips. “And you.”

Wishing we could kiss more, and do more, I flattened one side of my mouth. “And a war approaching. Focus, Sam. The battle spells? Offense? Defense?”

“Oh, okay. Let’s see...”

She was flipping through the pages when a vibration from my phone disrupted the silence. Pulling it out, I saw Alexei’s name flash across the screen.

Office, now. Emergency.

“What is it?” she asked.

“It’s Alexei,” I replied, pocketing the phone. “He wants us in his office. Immediately.”

Sam closed the grimoire. “Let’s go.”

At this hour, the club was in full swing, writhing dancers and mingling patrons a noisy sea to shove through. The pounding music made my head throb. Sam’s hand in mine, we weaved our way to Alexei’s office, fortunately an oasis of quiet. But as soon as we pushed through the door, his somber expression told me all I needed to know.

“They made their move,” he said, beckoning us closer. “Shortly after you met with the High Priestess, a group of Radu’s followers kidnapped two young witches from the covenstead.”

“Celeste?” Sam gasped.

“She’s all right. She tried to fight them off.” He shook his head. “She was injured, but her sisters are with her. There are good healers among them.”

Sam’s face lost all color, and she pressed her hand to her stomach. “This is my fault.”

“No, Sam.” I put a hand on her shoulder and said to Alexei, “Where did they take them? What do we know?”

Janusz and Julia came in as I was speaking, looking distressed. “They’re at the Labyrinth,” Janusz said. “I was

there when it happened. They've got them down in the lower chambers. It's chaos over there. Fights are breaking out among the factions already, the vampires who promised to help us versus the ones loyal to Mirea. And unfortunately, there are more of those than I thought."

Julia went to Sam, and the two held each other's hands for support.

"By now," Janusz said, his eyes stormy, his fists clenched, "they've taken over the Labyrinth."

I shoved my fingers through my hair. "Mirea's trying to bait us, drag us into his domain where he has the upper hand."

Alexei's expression was grave. "We can surprise him by using the secret passage under the club that leads to the Labyrinth."

I looked over at Sam, at her tired but brave eyes. There was no fear there, and my chest filled with admiration. But I had to plan wisely. She would be a formidable weapon, but her inexperience made her vulnerable. "Sam, you and Julia stay here. Don't leave the office. Radu could have spies here, watching. He'll be waiting to see if you're alone for another kidnapping or worse. If anything suspicious happens, though, text me."

Sam scowled as she stood up and crossed the room to poke me in the chest with her finger. "You can't be serious. You might need me and my magic!"

"I need you here." I grasped her arms. "You're not ready for this. Mirea knows that. If you rush into a fight with him, he could kill you."

"Those are my sisters he's holding hostage," she insisted. "They wouldn't abandon me!"

"We're not going to abandon them either. We'll find them and rescue them. But you need to be ready for the war, not for this one battle. I'm sure Mirea is hoping you'll fly to their aid, and he can win the conflict before we even have a chance to gather our forces. Remember, without you, all is lost."

Her jaw clenched, and her eyes burned into mine. I held her gaze. “Trust me, my heart,” I whispered.

After a tense moment, she took a deep breath and bowed her head. “Okay, but you better come back safe.” When she looked at me again, unshed tears deepened the blue of her eyes, and she clutched my arms. “I can’t live without you. Not after all this.”

I pulled her against me for a quick, strong hug, then relinquished her back to Julia, who took her hand and drew her once more to her side. Julia and I exchanged a glance. I knew she would watch over Sam. Julia was flighty and bratty, but she had a good heart and could be a fierce fighter when necessary.

I could only hope that necessity wouldn’t arise.

The entrance to the secret tunnels beneath the Blue Dawn was expertly concealed. Alexei took the lead as we began the descent into the darkness. Behind him, Janusz and I formed a tight line, relying on the faint glow of handheld torches to light our path. Without them, the tunnels would be too dark even for vampire eyes.

The moisture in the air settled on my skin like a clammy film. The entire pathway had a crypt-like feel to it, punctuated only by the soft echo of our footsteps.

“How much farther?” I asked, my unease growing by the minute.

“Not much,” Alexei replied. A few minutes later, he raised his hand to signal a halt. We started moving again, upward this time. The familiar throbbing of club music started to pulse through the ceiling above us, growing louder as we ascended. Finally, ahead was a door, unassuming in appearance. Alexei listened intently for a few moments, then slowly turned the handle, pushing it open. The door revealed a small storage closet stacked with crates and cardboard boxes, long undisturbed, as they were thick with dust. The music was

clearer now, but other sounds reached us too—the screams and shouts of a huge brawl.

Janusz, using his vast knowledge of the Labyrinth's layout, whispered, "This storage room is pretty far from the main hall. Nobody's used it in a long time. But it's just a short jog down the corridor to the lounge area. If we're quiet, we can exit this closet and be right in the heart of Radu's territory without him realizing."

I nodded. "Let's go."

Gingerly pushing boxes aside, we carefully emerged from the closet, ready to face whatever lay ahead.

It opened into a chamber similar to the one I and Sam were staying in at the Blue Dawn, but on the walls of this one hung chains and manacles. A tall leather cross-like structure stood in a corner, and the whole room smelled of sweat, blood, and sex. I cast a quick glance at Janusz, who rounded his eyes in his best look of innocence that certainly didn't fool me.

We moved to the door that would have opened into a corridor at Blue Dawn. And it did here as well. The Labyrinth's corridors were even blacker and spookier. Janusz took the lead, and we followed him into a lower tunnel, cobwebs brushing our faces, the skittering of rats echoing around us.

Even with our stealthy approach, Mirea would be waiting for us. It was the only reason he'd taken the witches to lure us to him. However, several of his guards were apparently expecting us to come from another direction. I closed my fist around the charm Vasile had given me so that it would mask our approach.

With a few quick slashes and twists, we overcame those guards, and then we swiftly moved down the corridor to take out the remaining minions. We left their bodies on the floor while we moved stealthily toward the one room in sight with light coming from cracks around the door.

I felt him in there. My ancient enemy. My rival.

For Samantha, I thought, then rushed the door.

SAMANTHA

“WE CAN’T JUST SIT HERE,” Julia finally burst out, her blue eyes fierce. “We need to find them.”

The men had been gone for almost half an hour, while out in the club, the music roared and the patrons of the Blue Dawn partied on as if the world wasn’t about to end. Bai was on duty and had already checked in on us a couple of times. I’d been trying to practice some of the minor spells I’d learned, moving objects around and lighting bits of paper on fire, but I couldn’t focus and ended up burning my fingers. Julia’s outburst shocked me out of my concentration.

I looked up, startled. “You heard Cristian. We’re supposed to stay here.”

Julia crossed her arms defiantly, her silky hair falling over her shoulder. “Do you always do what you’re told? Besides, I know this club better than anyone, including its secrets.”

Before I could respond, Julia was on her feet and opening the office door. She exited the office without a backward glance. If I didn’t follow her, she’d run into danger all by herself. Besides, I had to admit, it was really eating at me that I was sitting in the office doing nothing while Cristian and his friends were going up against Radu and his ilk. I knew some spells. I could do something!

Closing the office door behind me, I glimpsed around for Bai, but he was probably patrolling the club. He wasn’t the only acolyte on duty, though. There were several, to whom I’d been introduced only briefly. When one I recognized as Peter

spotted me, I wave and mouthed, *Potty break*. He nodded and went back to scanning the club's ingresses and egresses.

The music and strobes lights disoriented me as I hurried to catch up with Julia, but I couldn't find her. The door that Cristian had taken me through to get to the catacombs was way in the back of the club, so I walked right by the ladies' room and then started jogging toward it, hoping to see a blonde mane among the crowd of club-goers. I startled when a hand grabbed me and yanked me back behind a huge potted plant.

"Took you long enough," Julia said. "Running is only going to attract attention, especially since you're human. Predators are drawn to movement." She handed me a hoodie. "I stole this out of the coat room. Put it on and pull up the hood. Walk behind me with your head down, as if I'm taking you downstairs for a feeding."

"F-feeding?" I thought about what Bai had told me happened downstairs, or rather what he'd chosen not to tell me.

"Just be submissive," she said, then grinned. "Trust me. I'll get us out of here and no one will even miss us."

I nodded, then put on the hoodie and tucked my long hair out of the way. With my head slightly bowed, I followed her like an obedient lamb to the slaughter as she smartly stepped away, hair swinging around her waist. We soon were away from the bar and the dance floor, in an area where there weren't many patrons, just a few who wanted a quieter place to talk and a couple of humans using the restrooms that vampires had no use for.

Instead of the door Cristian had used, she took me to another one by a service elevator. We went down a series of metal steps into a stairwell that was cool and dark. Beneath the last set of stairs, she stopped and pressed against what looked like a cement wall, but slowly, it swung on a hinge, revealing a gloomy tunnel.

"Does Cristian know about this?" I whispered, following her in.

“Alexei doesn’t, so that means Cristian doesn’t either. But when you’re a bored kid growing up in a big ol’ club, you tend to poke around and get into all sorts of stuff.” She pushed the pivoting door closed again, encasing us in darkness. I gasped involuntarily at the sudden total blackout.

“Oh, sorry, I forgot you can’t see in the dark,” she whispered. I heard her moving around, and then suddenly, her face was spookily illuminated in front of me, a flashlight under her chin. “Boo! Did I scare you?” she said with a laugh.

I swatted the flashlight away. “Doesn’t work. You’re too beautiful to be scary.”

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong, my dear mortal,” she said over her shoulder as she sashayed away down the tunnel. “Beauty often hides a wealth of danger. Mwuahahaha!” She did her best evil-bad-guy laugh, and despite my tension, I had to chuckle too.

I pushed the hood off my head and hurried to keep up with her. These tunnels looked in even worse shape than the ones Cristian had showed me. “Where does this go?”

“They used to push coal trolleys through here to bring it to the big mansions and hotels. Nobody wanted to see grubby old coal carts coming up to their luxury accommodations back in the day.” She waved with the flashlight. “Not too far from here, they hook up with the catacombs that run under the Labyrinth. It’s a shortcut, actually. I’ve snuck over there plenty. If Alexei knew I was going to that place, he’d ground me for eternity.”

“Why? What’s so bad about the Labyrinth?”

“It’s where powerful magic wielders come from all over the world to deal in spells and potions. In addition to kinky sex, of course. But you could get that at Blue Dawn. Alexei banned magic trade from the BD a long time ago. He didn’t like the unsavory element it attracted.” She shone the flashlight under her chin again and intoned in a deep voice, “There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” She waggled her eyebrows and

pointed the flashlight forward again. I guessed she must have passed her Shakespeare class.

I was glad for the jacket since it was as chilly as a cave in the tunnels. I tried hard not to think about the ancient architecture caving in on us and controlled my breathing so I didn't become claustrophobic. We walked in silence for a long time, but down here, time seemed to have no meaning.

"Wait," I interrupted, panic starting to creep in. "Are you sure this is a good idea? What if we get lost?"

"Trust me, Sam. I know where I'm going. We'll be fine. And besides, we can't leave our guys in a bind."

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. "All right."

The flashlight bobbed ahead of me, the rhythm almost hypnotic. I felt my mind starting to drift, and then...anger touched my mind. And fear. I pressed my hand to my forehead, stopping. "Cristian."

Julia hurried back to me. "What is it?"

"I can feel him in my mind. Something bad is happening. We need to hurry."

She grabbed my hand and turned, pulling me along with her at a brisk pace. "It's not far now," she said after a minute. "There!"

The booming of music thumped through the old walls like a monster's heartbeat, and we headed up a utility ladder that brought us up an unused elevator shaft. After climbing a short ladder, Julia worked her fingers in between two elevator doors and pried them apart. "Come on up and go through."

I did, shocked that we were still in a tunnel, but these must be the tunnels that Cristian and Alexei had taken. They'd intersected via the elevator shaft.

Julia quickly followed. "Now which way? Can you track him with your mind?"

"I...I think so." I closed my eyes and felt him as if a thread was tugging me. "This way."

We headed into darkness again, through crumbling tunnels, and soon, the echoing of voices reverberated against the stones. I barely stifled a gasp when we saw bodies on the floor, but when I saw they weren't anyone we knew, I gingerly stepped over them toward a shaft of dim light reaching out into the corridor.

"...just hand them over. This doesn't need to escalate further." Cristian's voice reached me.

A chilling voice responded, unmistakably Radu's. "I'll trade you, two for one. Your witch for these two. Or better yet, the grimoire, and I'll let them all go free."

My heart nearly stopped beating. Radu had kidnapped the witches to get the spell...the spell that Cristian and I had.

A small female voice croaked, "You'll never have that grimoire. The goddess won't allow it."

"Your goddess is dead," Radu muttered. "It's only us here now, and I intend to elevate myself to godhood in her place."

We crept closer, trying to peer through a crack in the storage room's door, which stood slightly ajar. The dim overhead light spilled out into the tunnel, and we did our best to stay in the shadows.

Two young witches were bound to chairs as Julia and I had been, their faces bruised, their clothes torn. One was bleeding from her lip, and Radu held a black athame to the throat of the other. The trembling girl looked barely fourteen, a ginger like me, with freckles across her nose and tear-filled brown eyes. Behind them stood three of Radu's vampire enforcers, hulking monsters with bloodshot eyes and scarred faces, as still as statues, but clearly focused on Cristian. I wondered if Alexei and Janusz were with him. They'd said nothing so far.

"Lazar, you can avoid this whole messy situation," Mirea said, gripping the redheaded girl's hair in one huge hand, pulling her head back to expose her throat. "You don't have enough people on your side, and your witch lover is weak. The prophecy is not set in stone. We can avoid this entire war, save so many vampires before any blood is even spilled. I've

brought you here the only way I know how to offer you a deal. Give me the book, and all this ends tonight.”

“Well, of course, Mirea, how reasonable of you,” Cristian drawled. “I’ll hand it right over. I’m sure you just want to catch up on your reading.”

“Then give me Samantha Baker.” Mirea’s lip curled beneath his heavy mustache. “You’re spelling your own doom, you know. I feel the strength of your love for her.” Beneath the folds of his shirt, his fingers stroked the carnelian stone hanging around his neck. I recognized it from the warehouse. The light within chased his fingers as if trying to find an escape route. “Do you recognize this, Lazar?” He drew the stone into the light so that Cristian could see it.

I couldn’t see Cristian’s face, but I felt his shock and anger through our bond. “Where—”

“You should be more careful where you leave your artifacts lying around. It was barely a night’s work to break into your moldering castle and snatch it.”

“This is going to backfire on you, Mirea. You can’t control the curse, any more than Sage and I could.”

Mirea twisted the girl’s long hair around his fist. “You were a besotted fool. I’ve had six hundred years to study the lore.” He narrowed his eyes. “And here you are, besotted again. Good. After hundreds of years of waiting, the curse is awakened at last, thanks to you and that reporter. The deeper your love for her grows, the stronger the curse becomes.” He tucked the thing he called an artifact back into his shift. “Imagine a world without love, Lazar. Humans stripped of any reason not to destroy each other. We”—he thumped his chest with his free hand—“will be their warlords and generals. It will be like the legends of Jerusalem, when the Crusaders waded through streets knee-deep in blood. A world custom-made for the likes of us.”

I felt Cristian’s revulsion like a cold ball in the pit of my stomach.

Mirea's eyes shifted back and forth, and I figured he was looking at Alexei and Janusz too, who hopefully were there by Cristian's side. "Join me," he growled. "Vampires should not fight vampires. Unite with me against the tech-obsessed, irredeemable, godless human world. If you like, Lazar, you can even have your witch. No harm will befall her. Your love will keep the curse alive." He wrenched back the girl's hair until she squeezed her eyes shut and whimpered. "It is time for the ninth Crusade. Be my officer, serve me as you served Vlad Dracula."

"Never," Cristian said with conviction.

"I knew you would say that," Mirea sneered, then, still looking in the direction of Cristian, he started to draw the athame across the girl's throat.

"No!" I yanked open the door and burst into the small room.

Mirea swung his gaze to me, his shocked expression the only satisfaction I got before his three enforcers surged forward. Alexei and Janusz, who stood either side of Cristian, met them with blinding vampire speed. Cristian went for Radu with a roar. Julia ran to the girls to untie them.

I invoked one of the protective spells I'd practiced from the Albu Grimoire. The magic leapt eagerly to do my bidding, and a shimmering shield appeared around them, buffering them from the fighting vampires as they lunged and swung fists and claws at each other. The vampires' faces grew hideous as huge fangs distended their jaws and their eyes blazed like crimson bonfires. As soon as Julia had one girl free, one of the big enforcers fell beneath Janusz's assault, smashing the chair she'd been bound to a second earlier in an explosion of splinters.

I racked my brain, trying to remember the vortex spell from the warehouse, but Julia grabbed me as she ran by, pushing the girls ahead of her. "Let's go!" she shouted.

Cristian and Radu were somehow fighting on the ceiling, a snarling blur of bloody claws, their clothing shredded and bared chests gouged, locked in mortal combat. I started to tug

away from Julia, but then one of the enforcer's decapitated heads slammed into my hip, and I screamed and ran out.

"Cristian will be fine," Julia said. "Now the girls are out of the way, they can fight like they wanted."

An explosion and blinding light came from the room, throwing us all back as if a giant hand had slapped us. *Cristian!* My heart nearly stopped. The door was kicked off its hinges to slam against the wall, and Radu Mirea, his flesh smoking, his hair burnt in patches, bloody from head to toe, staggered out. One cruel hazel eye pinned me where I stood in front of the girls with my arms stretched out as if that would protect them from him. He curled his lip, then turned and raced in a blur down the corridor.

"Cristian!" I ran into the room and nearly smashed into him. While just as bloody and torn as Mirea, he didn't seem burned. But oh, was he angry. In his battle form, he was terrifying, his ferocious scimitar-like fangs hanging over his lower lip, equally sharp but shorter teeth jutting up from his extended lower jaw, reminding me of a saber-toothed tiger. His eyes were so red, there was no brown or white left in them, just roiling molten lava. He stalked toward me, backing me up all the way against the corridor wall. My heart was about to pound out of my chest. Didn't he know who I was?

"C-Cristian?" I stammered, turning my face away and closing my eyes.

"What were you thinking, Samantha?" His words were guttural and rough, an avalanche in my ears. "You could've been killed!"

I flinched, then slowly turned my head and looked up to meet his lethal gaze. "I couldn't just sit there and do nothing. We didn't know if you were in trouble." Oh wow, that was weak. I hitched a breath. "I thought I could help." I should just shut up now.

Julia chimed in. "Give her a break, Cristian. She loves you. Of course she's going to run to your defense."

“I didn’t *need* defending,” he ground out, but I sensed he was getting a grip on himself. He stepped away from me, his fangs disappearing, his wounds already mostly healed. He turned his back to me, scrubbing his hands over his head and through his hair, until at last he stood with his hands on his hips, staring at the ground.

I slowly walked around him and put a hand on his arm. “Y-you’re all right?”

“Of course I am,” he said. He ran his tongue over his now-blunt, if bloodied, teeth, still not meeting my gaze.

“And...you’re not mad at me?”

“*Of course I am!*” he barked, lifting his head so I could see the flames simmering in his eyes. I dropped my hand as if his arm was a hot coal.

He wearily rubbed his thumb and forefinger over his eyelids and turned to the young witches. “Are you well, girls?”

Alexei was tending to one of them, fashioning a sling out of his shirt. Her arm was either broken or dislocated. My loathing for Mirea grew exponentially.

The witch whose neck Mirea had been about to cut held a torn piece of her skirt over the wound. “We will be. Thank you, kind vampire.”

“I’m Cristian Lazar.”

She glanced at Alexei. “Alexei Baranov. And my sister, Julia. Though don’t expect to see much more of her. She’s grounded for eternity.”

Julia raised an eyebrow at me. “Told you so.”

The girls quietly introduced themselves as Fern and Willow. I wished I’d studied the healing spells in detail. I hated that I couldn’t help them yet.

Before I could ask where Janusz was, he swaggered from the room, somehow bloodier than all of them, his leather jacket hanging from his shoulders in ribbons, but his wounds were sealing swiftly. He held up what looked like a small stick of dynamite. “I told you these would come in handy.”

Cristian gave him a grim smile. “You were right. But if I hadn’t had Vasile’s charm to shield us from the blast, we all would be burnt offerings right now, like Mirea.”

“He got away,” I said, then pointed down the corridor. “He went that way.”

“Back to his lair. That was his last attempt to stop us,” Cristian said.

“Then war is coming,” Janusz said, storing his dynamite in his one remaining functional coat pocket.

“I’m ready for it,” Alexei said, supporting Willow, the girl with the injured arm. “At this point, we need a purging in this city.”

Cristian nodded. Other than his torn clothing, ruffled hair, and blood-soaked appearance, he was back to the vampire I loved. I moved to his side, but he stopped me with a hard-eyed glare. “You and I need to talk,” he said with quiet threat.

“Go easy on her, Cristian,” Janusz said, tugging what was left of his jacket around him. “If it wasn’t for her, the girls wouldn’t be free now. We weren’t getting anywhere with Mirea.” To me, he said, “Good job, witch. That was a sufficient spell.”

I’d settle for sufficient. I felt myself smiling, then canned it when Cristian growled at me. And at Janusz. Was that a hint of jealousy? He reached out and took my hand, but gently, and my heart calmed.

To Alexei, he said, “Let’s get everyone to safety.”

“I’ll have the staff come down here with a sun lamp and sweep up this mess.” Janusz said, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder at the headless corpses of Radu’s henchmen.

“Do you own the Labyrinth?” I asked him.

“Oh no. I’m just a happy client. I’ve never seen the owner, actually.” He puckered his lips in thought. “Think it’s a djinn living in Dubai, or least that’s the rumor. But the staff know me very well.”

With that decision made, the group, with our newly rescued allies, made our way back to the Blue Dawn through the secret tunnels. The ones Alexei used, of course. Julia smiled at me behind Cristian's back. We'd keep our little secret to ourselves.

SAMANTHA

AFTER A BRIEF WAR council in which Alexei, Janusz, and Cristian sent out acolytes to contact their allies in the outside world and they discussed weaponry and tactics, Cristian and I went down to the creepy windowless room where we'd been staying.

Cristian sat me on the low, rock-hard platform that served as a vampire bed and started slowly pacing back and forth, his hands linked behind his back, his expression closed.

Oh boy, I was in a world of trouble. I wasn't going to pin it on Julia, though. I was glad we'd disobeyed.

“Cris—”

A quick hot glance dried up my words. He went back to pacing, but I had to try again. I took a deep breath and said, “I'm *not* sorry.”

He stopped and looked at me, then approached me where I sat on the bed. Eyes intense, he dropped a fist on either side of my hips and leaned over me, his voice gruff as he said, “You could have been killed, or worse. Someone like Mirea wouldn't hesitate to turn you against your will. Did you think about that?”

I hadn't. Involuntarily, my hand went to my throat as I shook my head.

“He could impose upon you a living death, where he could keep you blood hungry until you lost your sanity and became his slave for eternity.” Closing his eyes, he rested his forehead

against mine. “I waited so long for love again, Sam. If he did that, I would have to destroy you, and myself as well. Our souls would wander through the eons searching fruitlessly for each other.”

I bit my lip, blinking through tears as I heard the anguish in his voice. He lifted his head, and I cupped his cheek. “What he said, about a world without love. Is it possible?”

He pressed my hand against the side of his face and nodded. “That is what we’re fighting for. Not only what you and I feel for each other, but for every human heart that loves, for every mortal soul that clings to another.”

I drew back to cross my arms over my chest, feeling cold. “But humans have become so greedy and self-absorbed... I don’t have much faith left in us.”

He dropped to his knees and gathered my hands in his, his brown eyes full of light and hope. “Then believe in us, my heart. I do. Together, we will defeat this evil, destroy Radu, and break this fucking curse once and for all.”

It was the first time I’d ever heard him swear. I guess he reserved it for the gravest of situations, which this certainly was. “What was that stone he had, the thing hanging around his neck? I saw it at the warehouse too.”

He hung his head and took in a breath. “It’s the charm created by the vampire elders when I asked for their help to break the curse so that Sage and I could be together. They tricked me, as in the end, as you know, we had to part. It was made from my blood and the blood of the leader. The curse must be trapped within it. That’s why Mirea was searching for the spell, to unleash it.”

“And the murders?”

“Innocent blood to give it power.” He stared at our linked hands, his jaw set. “He is evil personified, and a wily enemy.”

I threaded my fingers through his hair, gazing upon his face, so familiar and wonderful that if the world stopped there and never moved again, I would be content just to stay as we are. “I won’t lose hope,” I whispered.

He nodded. “Good.” Then he stood, all business again. “We have a few days until the full moon. It’s not much time, but I’m bringing Enise and, if she’s recovered enough, Celeste here to train you in the ways of the Albu Grimoire. You need to be prepared, as the prophecy is clear that you’ll be the key to our victory.”

“What about the other thing, though?” I hated to even bring it up, but... “The sacrifice?”

His jaw flexed. “We’ll deal with that afterward. First, we have to defeat Mirea and send him and his followers to hell.”

CRISTIAN

NEW YORK CITY'S vibrant energy became a contrasting backdrop to the sinister storm gathering within its heart. Mirea's lieutenants had infiltrated the city, taking up positions in various nightclubs, hiding in basement dwellings, dark alleys, and infesting the thick woods of Central Park. The vampire council had gone so silent, I wondered if they'd fled to Romania. The lack of support I'd received from those cowards rankled, but we were set on our path whether they were with us or not. New York had become a lawless territory where anything could happen.

We had little time, and our few remaining days became a whirlwind of preparation. Samantha's tenacity and courage came through as she trained tirelessly with Enise and Celeste, whose healers had helped her recover from several serious stab wounds inflicted upon her by Mirea's athame. Other members of the coven stopped by the Blue Dawn to meet Sam and contribute their knowledge and wisdom, and, surrounded by her new tribe of sisters, Sam shone like a beacon of love and unity. She spoke to me about bringing her mother to New York once all this was over to see if her latent power could be awakened too. Her hope for the future gave me strength.

I called a meeting of the leaders of our allies, gathering them in a large chamber beneath the Blue Dawn. The room was filled with tension. Nerves were on edge. Radu's spies were everywhere, and trust had become a scarce commodity. Standing tall, with a wreath of fragrant rosemary upon her silver hair, Celeste stood to my left, to demonstrate a rare

allegiance between my kind and hers. At my right was my beloved, looking resplendent in a black tunic over leggings and boots, a braided leather belt around her waist. Her sisters had braided her hair with silver and gold charms and wound the braids around her head in an intricate design, save for some soft strands that fell around her cheeks. She looked magnificent and fierce, a witch brimming with her newfound power. When she smiled at me, my chest filled with confidence and calm.

“Friends,” I began, my voice steady as I passed my gaze over every face. I tried not to lose heart, for there were not nearly as many here as I’d hoped. It seemed Mirea’s promise of a blood-soaked world appealed to many. “The time has come to face our enemy. If Mirea is successful, the world as we know it will end in bloodshed and perpetual warfare. We were all once human or are still human, though magical ones. Love and kindness, life and light, are worth fighting for. Even creatures such as we cannot stand by and allow that beauty to be snuffed out on the altar of one vampire’s ambition.”

A murmur of agreement rippled through the room. The gathering was a diverse mix of vampires, witches, and other supernatural beings, each with a stake in the outcome. It was perhaps the first time in history that we’d all united against a common foe.

I continued, my voice rising. “Under the light of the full moon, our forces will meet his. The battle will be fierce, and the odds may seem against us. But we have each other, and we have righteousness on our side.”

“The goddess will guide us,” Arthur, a male witch with a black eyepatch and a thick scar across the left side of his face said, and many heads nodded in assent.

“She rules us as well,” Gabriel, a muscular, swarthy werewolf, said. “We’ve felt her power growing stronger, beckoning us. You have our pledge, Lord Lazar. We will not fail you.”

“And where, exactly, is this battle to take place?” One dry, skeptical voice rose. It was Heimdall, the Viking-looking

fellow from the Labyrinth, who sprawled in his folding chair with his thick legs spread. I still wasn't exactly sure what kind of supernatural he was, but he'd come at Janusz's behest. He lifted a palm and an eyebrow. "My men would like to know where and whom to attack."

I nodded. "Mirea has plants within the NYPD. Alexei does as well. His contact has told us the patrol routes have been quietly directed away from Central Park tonight, no doubt on Mirea's orders." Modern vampire that I was, I had a PowerPoint ready and used a remote to flash it onto one of the room's blank walls. "Here," I said, pointing. "Strawberry Fields. It's one of the quietest parts of the park, but our spies have reported that Mirea's forces have been seen gathering there and around the lake. We believe that's where they're going to strike."

"Strike what?" Heimdall said, sliding his tattooed hand down his braided beard. "We have to wait for the full moon to be at her peak. Who's going to be in the park at that hour?" He wagged his finger. "Feels like a distraction to me."

The eye-patched witch, Arthur, shook his head. "It would be an advantageous battlefield. To wage war anywhere else in the city would involve too many humans."

"How are we going to approach?" another vampire asked, clearly eager to get underway.

"Are we waiting for an invitation?" someone else demanded.

"I'll have my wolves start heading that way," Gabriel said, taking out his cell phone.

But I barely heard them, because Heimdall's words struck a chord of dread in me. I stared at the map of Central Park, then let my gaze wander beyond it. My memory soared back to my days riding by Vlad Dracula's side. I recalled his battle strategies and deceptions, and a chill fell over my already cold heart. I turned to the group so quickly that their chatter instantly stopped.

“Heimdall is right. It’s too perfect a battlefield. Mirea wants confusion, chaos.” I looked at Lachlan. “Split your pack. Have some of them go to the park, but keep most of them near the heart of the city.”

“Times Square?” He arched a heavy brow.

“Exactly. All of you, do the same. We want Mirea to think we’re going to the park. Falling right into his hands.”

“If you’re wrong?” Lachlan asked, his gaze shifting from me to a smug-looking Heimdall and back.

I paused before replying. If I was wrong, then part of our forces would be overwhelmed at Strawberry Fields, and we’d be at an enormous disadvantage. Even though it wasn’t that far from Times Square to the park, not all of us had vampiric speed, and that part of the city was always congested. Our progress would be hindered. A lot could happen in the time it would take for all of us to get there and join the fight.

Of all the creatures here, I knew Heimdall the least. He could be leading me astray for all I knew. Yet his words felt right, and if Mirea wanted chaos, Times Square would be the logical choice. Thinking our forces would be in the park, he’d create a scene in midtown, knowing I’d rush back with Samantha and a few fast vampires to protect the humans. We’d be met with his larger forces and quickly overwhelmed. It would be a smart way to divide our numbers. It’s what Dracula would have done.

“Where will Samantha be?” Arthur asked, glancing at her. “The prophecy has named her as the key to our victory.”

“With me,” I said decisively. “In midtown.” Which would effectively leave the troops advancing on Strawberry Fields unprotected.

“I won’t let any of you down,” Samantha said, coming to my side, her voice only slightly unsteady.

Murmurs of dissent and concern rose, but Heimdall slapped his hands on his thighs and got to his booted feet. “Welp,” he said. “Time to go.”

I glanced at Celeste, who had thinned her lips, but now gave me a slight nod. “Trust your instincts, Lord Lazar.”

With that, I took Samantha’s hand and braced myself for war.

CRISTIAN

THE ALLY LEADERS split their forces as instructed, though I could tell few were confident in my plan. Manhattan was huge and busy, and we weren't positive where Mirea would strike. We thought originally he might begin at the Blue Dawn or the Labyrinth, but all seemed quiet there. We spread our forces throughout midtown, keeping our eyes and senses open for evidence of his minions.

Sam and I stayed in the shadowed alleys, several city blocks from the bustle of Times Square. I looked down at her face, partially hidden by a black hoodie. "Are you all right?" I asked quietly.

Her eyes caught the dim light from a streetlamp and she smiled bravely. "I'm ready. Celeste helped me with the counterspell. If it wasn't for her, I'd be like a fish out of water right now, but"—she shook her head—"somehow, even though I've only been a witch for a few weeks, it feels so right."

"You've always been a witch. You just didn't know it." I brushed her lips, so proud of her.

She huddled closer to me. There was a cool night breeze that danced around us, and the moon was inching up the horizon. "Will they strike as soon as she's above us?" Her eyes reflected the silvery glow.

I gave a short nod. "The two-faced goddess gives power to good and evil on nights such as this."

"She's not just good?"

“Sage told me she can be fickle. Don’t worry, for us to have gotten this far, I’m sure she’s on our side.”

Sam worried her lower lip. “I’ve never worshipped a goddess before.” She closed her eyes and tipped back her head so a moonbeam bathed her face, silvering her hair so that it looked almost blonde...and for a moment, I saw Sage again, felt her spirit with us, blessing us, supporting us. “I feel her, Cristian,” Sam murmured.

Dead as I was, goose flesh pebbled my skin. “I as well, my heart.”

A buzz from my phone made us both jump. I’d been holding it and quickly took the call. It was Janusz, who was leading a small contingent to Strawberry Fields. I heard swords ringing and shouts. “We’re engaged!” he barked. “There’s a sizable crew here, more than we expected. Lazar, you better be right.”

I glanced at the moon again. Almost at zenith. Sam clutched my arm. “Should we go to them?” Her eyes were huge with worry.

“We have to hold steady. I know Mirea is here...”

There was a thump and a grunt, the ringing of steel on steel, and Janusz growled, “Don’t wait too long. We’re taking casualties!”

Even before he clicked off, the phone buzzed with another incoming call. It was Gabriel, who had stayed in midtown with the bulk of his pack, but reporting that his small group was being shredded by Mirea’s vampires at Strawberry Fields. “Is Mirea there?” I nearly yelled into the phone. “Has anyone spotted Mirea?”

Gods below, I’d made a horrible mistake. Our friends were being slaughtered. Werewolves could hold their own against most creatures, but vampires were faster in every way—we moved faster, healed faster, and hell, we were already dead. The werewolves and witches would be destroyed. The phone went dead before Gabriel could respond.

I looked down into Sam's worried face. "Mirea's not here. I don't know that he's there either, but we need to go."

I began to call Heimdall, waiting with his crew along the edges of Times Square itself, when we heard screaming, dozens of people screaming and running for their lives. The phone lit up. Arthur shouted into my ear, "He's on Broadway! They're tearing apart an audience full of people. They're pouring out into the street, and I see him, Cristian! Mirea is here!"

I sent the group text for all forces to converge on Broadway, and then I swept Sam into my arms and used my vampiric speed to blur us through the curious pedestrians who were responding to the rising screams and sirens coming from Broadway.

We skidded to stop as a stampede of theatergoers surged past us, Sam tucked safely behind me.

"There!" she shouted, pointing to a rooftop over brightly lit neon signs.

Mirea crouched there, the cursed artifact throbbing at his throat, his face a mask of cool composure as his forces swept through the street, slashing, howling, panicking the crowds.

Then our forces arrived, the vampires first, then the werewolves, swooping and leaping between the running humans. Mirea's forces used them as shields, taunting us. The carnage was terrible. Above us, the moon had reached her peak and was a haunting burnt orange color, as if tainted by blood and dark magic. The two-faced goddess...

Beside me, Sam was doing her best to protect humans by casting shielding spells, swirling a whirlwind that swept handfuls of Mirea's soldiers off their feet and slammed them against walls. Other witches arrived, many pulling wounded humans out of harm's way and casting healing spells. I heard police sirens, but the cars were flipped by Mirea's henchmen, who'd clearly been placed to prevent the cops from interfering in our war.

“We have to get you closer to Mirea,” I said to Sam. “There!” I pointed to a rooftop across the street, where she’d have an uninterrupted line of sight to him. We didn’t want anyone else getting caught up in her spell.

Mirea was on his feet, his lips moving. The stone was creating a spinning cocoon of crimson light around him. The blood spilled on the pavement, both human and supernatural alike, rose and spun and was absorbed into the maelstrom. Humans all around us were moaning and sobbing, clutching their chests as if their very hearts were being torn from them. Sam too pressed her hand over her breast.

“I feel it, oh no, Cristian!” Tears spilled down her cheeks.

I clasped her arms. “Don’t lose faith, Sam. Look at me!”

“Our love...” she gasped. “It’s killing everyone. The curse is too strong!” She shook her head wildly.

“Reach inside yourself, my heart. You are Samantha Baker, born witch of the Albu lineage, sister of the New York coven, descended from the great Romanian coven, and the woman I have loved and will love for all eternity.”

With a cry, she threw her arms around me as a freezing, blood-tinged wind battered at us. “I love you, Cristian.” She pressed up to kiss me, then drew back slowly, her face suffused with wonder. “I feel her, Cristian. Sage is here, with us.”

Her eyes as she gazed up at me flashed from blue to green and back again, and I caught her face in my hands. “Let’s put an end to Radu Mirea.”

She nodded once, and without waiting further, I grasped her and ran with her, scaling the side of the building until we reached the rooftop.

Below us, the swords of witches and werewolves clanged, vampires snarled and tore out throats, humans screamed, and opposite us, Mirea was barely visible within the pillar of fire his black magic had wrought. Farther out in the city, a great wailing rose as human souls were torn, bonds broken, hearts

silenced. Love was dying. Clouds obscured the crimson moon.
It was now or never.

SAMANTHA

I BEGAN TO CHANT, the words flowing from my lips, forming a circle of power around us. At first, nothing seemed to be happening. My magic, as if responding to my fear rather than my need, didn't rise. I felt it simmering, just out of reach, but it wouldn't obey. Radu's evil power stroked through the night like tenebrous fingers, seeking like a hungry parasite to suck up anything good and true. Cristian's forces below were falling, driven back by Radu's army. I saw runts among them, and other hideous creatures I couldn't name.

Closing my eyes, I reached for my inner calm and spoke the words again and again, rhythmically chanting in a singsong voice, trying to block out the screams. Then Cristian joined in. At first unsteadily as he tried to mimic my words, then stronger as he quickly learned them. Our voices melded together, our love and magic intertwining, growing stronger, more potent.

I opened my eyes to see Radu's red flames starting to spark and diminish. The horrible parasite that had spread from the rooftop withdrew like a coiling snake, and Cristian's army let out a rousing cheer as reinforcements arrived from Central Park.

But the real battle was between us and Radu Mirea now.

My spell took shape, the energy built, the power grew, mine and Cristian's, weaving into a hammer that would smash Mirea back to hell. We were tapping in to something ancient, something primal, something beyond our understanding.

The world seemed to slow down. The fighting faded into the background, the noise dimming, the chaos receding. In the center of it all, I felt a profound sense of peace unlike anything I'd ever known. We sang the spell, and it wove around us like a silver web, catching the goddess's pure light. Cristian and I stood together, hand in hand, face to face, chanting our song as one. The light expanded, then retracted, then exploded outward in a dazzling burst of silver and white.

A shockwave rippled through the air, thundering over Radu like a tsunami, over his followers, over us.

Across from us on the rooftop, Radu screamed, writhed, as pure white flames engulfed him. The boiling red stone at his throat began to sear his flesh. Smoke rose from a blackening hole in his chest as it melted its way through his skin, his ribs, toward his accursed undead heart. He gripped the chain that held it in both hands, fighting for his life now against his own evil spell.

Radu's followers staggered, clutching their heads in pain, their bodies convulsing as the dark magic that had bound them was ripped away. Cristian's forces, limned in the goddess's glory, swiftly dispatched them, and those who weren't killed outright fled into the shadows.

Cristian turned to me. "We have to finish this, Sam," he said.

I nodded, ready to send that bastard to the devil. "I know," I whispered. "Let's do it."

But as Cristian swept me up into his arms and prepared to leap to the opposite roof, Radu roared and tore the glowing pendant out of his chest. He broke the chain and threw it to the sidewalk below. His gaze hit us like a freight train as he staggered to the edge of the roof. He shouted over a cacophony of approaching police sirens and ambulances, "This is one battle, Lazar! The war is not over! The curse will never let you rest. Never let *me* rest!" He flattened his hand over the gaping, smoking, gruesome hole in his chest. I could see the white ends of his ribs between his spread fingers.

“I will follow you until the end of time, Lazar,” he growled, ropes of saliva falling from his lips like a rabid dog. “And you—” He stretched out his fingers at me as if he could reach across the rooftops and break my neck. “You’re mine!”

The sharp bark of a cop speaking through a bullhorn a block away jarred him from his rant, and with one more hate-filled glance, he turned and leapt up the side of the building like a scurrying spider and disappeared over the top.

Cristian set me down and coiled to leap after him, but I clutched his arm. “The stone!” I cried. It lay on the sidewalk below, still pulsating like a heartbeat. “It has to be destroyed.”

Cristian glanced from it to the rooftop, then back to me, indecision burning in his eyes. Then he gave a quick nod, swept me up again, and we landed lightly on the pavement a moment later.

We rushed where we’d seen the stone. The chain was there, but the stone itself was gone. Only a charred mark on the sidewalk indicated it had been there at all.

“Shit!” I turned in a circle. The humans had abandoned the area, and those who were able had run to the police. The witches had taken the wounded to the ambulances. The streets were mounded with the decapitated and dismembered bodies of Radu’s soldiers, limbs and heads everywhere. I had no idea how this was going to be explained. But where was the stone?

Janusz jogged up to us, bloody and singed, but whole. He and Cristian did the manly guy hug, slapping shoulders, then Janusz said, “Right after Mirea was spotted here, his forces in the park retreated. We chased them down, then came here as quickly as we could. Glad we didn’t miss out on the action.”

“You did well, my friend. Everyone did.” Cristian’s brow furrowed. “What are our losses?”

“Six or seven werewolves, a few vampires lost their heads, and a dozen or so witches. They all fought bravely.” He slid me a sympathetic glance, then put his shoulders back. “Mirea’s forces were decimated. He had creatures in his army we’d only heard about in legends, but once Sam started speaking the

counterspell, many of them fled, and we were able to mop up the rest.”

“I helped!” Julia front-flipped down from a balcony, her flying blonde hair in warrior braids, a long shining sword in her hand. “That was fun. Can we do it again sometime?”

“No!” we all said in unison.

Julia mock-pouted. “You’re almost as bad as Alexei, you fun bummers. Speaking of...” She glanced around. “My brother’s okay, right?”

“He is,” Janusz confirmed. “He’s setting up triage at the Blue Dawn for any soldiers who don’t have our healing abilities. Bunch of witches there are helping out.” He tossed his hand toward the carnage. “Now, we better get out of here before we have to explain this mess.”

“I can help with that,” a cool voice said. Celeste gracefully approached, flanked by her senior witches. Together, they invoked a spell that made the corpses disappear, leaving only a few wisps of smoke where they’d been.

“Neat trick,” said a blood-spattered Heimdall as he joined us, slinging his enormous silver-headed axe onto his shoulder. Then he nodded to Cristian. “All’s well here, my lord?”

Cristian looked to Celeste, who studied both of us with a solemn, knowing gaze. “As well as it can be,” he murmured, then turned to me and took my hand. “Let’s go home.”

A couple of hours later, Cristian and I met with Celeste upstairs at the Blue Dawn. We were both exhausted, or at least I was. I wasn’t sure if vampires got exhausted. I was wiped out enough for both of us, in any case. I’d changed and showered, and my hair fell loose around my shoulders again as I found my vampire standing at the bar.

The wounded had moved on to heal in their homes, and though Alexei had officially closed the place for the night, many soldiers of many varieties milled about, sharing

comradely drinks and telling increasingly embellished tales of the fighting.

It reminded me that I could have a hell of a great story for the *Voice*. But somehow, I didn't think I'd be going back to my old job. It made me sad on the one hand. I'd worked so hard to get to where I was, and I'd finally been realizing my girlhood dreams of being a reporter in the big city. But on the other hand, this world of magic, mystery, and love...well, no nine-to-five grind could compare. I was where I was meant to be.

"There you are," Cristian murmured, pulling me into his arms. I hugged him hard, loving his coolness against my heat. My heart filled with peace.

I drew back and looked up into his chocolate-brown eyes. "I guess we have to hear what Celeste has to say," I said quietly. The High Priestess had given us time to refresh and regroup, but I saw her waiting silently in the corner booth.

Cristian nodded, lips pressed together.

"I wish we'd killed him," I said, a surge of anger boiling through me. "Then this would be over. It's my fault. I shouldn't have stopped you."

He shook his head. "Mirea was only an instrument of the curse. It existed before him, and apparently, it's continuing without him. Let's go talk to Celeste."

When we reached her and sat in across from her, she gazed at us with serene but sad eyes. "You both did so well. I'm so proud of you."

Stupid tears pricked at my eyes, and I tried to dab them away without her seeing.

"As you both know, you stopped the curse. But you didn't destroy it."

"How is that possible?" I asked, my voice coming out a lot sharper than I liked. But seriously, what the heck? "The stone disappeared. Doesn't that mean the curse is gone too?"

She covered my hand with hers. "Don't you remember? The last part of the prophecy."

I did remember, but I'd been hoping everyone else would forget, including the prophecy itself.

"The sacrifice," Cristian said heavily.

Celeste nodded, her gray eyes sad. "Something else is required of you to truly put an end to the curse. Only then will the world be safe. For the sake of all life and love itself, you must follow through."

"That didn't go so well last time," Cristian reminded her.

"I understand. Unfortunately, you'll have to return to speak to the vampire elders. And you, Samantha, will go with him, back to the home of your ancestors. You'll find the answers there."

I had a really bad feeling we weren't going to like those answers, but there didn't seem to be a way around it.

I looked up at Cristian. "At least we'll be together."

He stroked his big, strong hand down my hair. "Forever, my heart."

CRISTIAN

A FEW DAYS LATER, as the private jet began to descend into Henri Coandă International, Sam watched avidly out the window, even though, of course, it was nighttime and she could only see the lights of the city spread out beneath us. I looked forward to showing her my home. My excitement was dimmed by our reason for being here. I glanced past her to the moon, now in her waning phase, and sent a quick prayer her way to watch over us. But who knew what the goddess had in store.

Vasile was waiting for us at baggage claim, and his craggy face lit up like a lantern when he spied us. I introduced Sam, and I thought he was going to start crying, he was so pleased to meet her. He gave her a hug—completely unlike Vasile. I couldn't remember him ever hugging anyone, at least not since he'd been turned. And then, to my shock, he hugged me too, then regained control over himself, cleared his throat, and said, "Welcome back, my lord."

Grinning from ear to ear, Sam looked up at me, and my chest filled with happiness. Yes. Something I hadn't felt in so long. I had the two people who meant the most to me right here with me now, and I would take this moment and hold it close like a charm.

Vasile regaled Sam with stories of life in old Wallachia while we drove. Ever thoughtful and well-prepared, he'd brought a picnic basket of snacks and drinks for her, and she enjoyed that while she laughed over his funny tales of rustic village life. He'd spent much more time with the villagers than

I ever had, and I wondered why he'd never told me about the boy who fell in the frog pond chasing a lamb, or how a young bride washed dyed clothes with white so that her husband had to wear pink shirts for the entire harvest season.

A natural storyteller and lover of tales, Sam absorbed it all, asking pertinent questions and laughing at the right times. I began to picture the three of us settling into a contented domestic life around a huge hearth. At least for the extent of Samantha's mortal life. No, I wouldn't let my mind go there now. We had many years to worry about that. Unless the council wanted to separate us again. I closed my eyes and dragged my hand down my face, the remnants of my happiness fleeing like mist before the sun.

"You okay?" Sam asked, her hand on my thigh.

"Mm. Just thinking."

"Everything's going to be all right. It has to be," she said, then leaned up and kissed me.

I saw Vasile's big smile in the rearview mirror and shook my head. He'd always had a romantic streak.

Eventually, the Land Cruiser bumped and swayed up the pitted dirt road, and then at last, Castle Ravenscroft, lit by torches all along its perimeter and in sconces along its front gates, came into view.

"So that's where you live?" Sam whispered, staring at the castle with wide eyes.

"Yes," I replied, holding her hand. "For six hundred years, at least."

She nodded, her grip on my hand tightening as the enormity of our journey set in. Vasile parked, then hopped out to get our bags as we made our way to the entrance. The heavy wooden doors opened as if they were expecting us. Hm, perhaps my own magic, most of which I'd learned from those books I would gather and share with Janusz as promised, had increased a bit during my time in America.

I took Sam on the nickel tour, showing her the portraits of my mother and father. "You would have liked my mother. She

was sweet and kind, like you.”

She harrumphed. “If you knew what I wanted to do to Radu, you might not think that about me.”

“I like your bloodthirstiness too, don’t worry.” We stopped in front of the near-life-size portrait of my father. He stood garbed in the traditional ornate clothing of a Wallachian noble, his brown eyes disapproving, a formidable-looking hawk on his raised forearm. “He never even owned a hawk. I’m not sure why that’s there, but...that’s my dad. He was a good man. Don’t let his judgmental expression fool you.”

A few more feet down the hallway hung a portrait that was slightly embarrassing.

“Is that you?” Sam rushed forward, leaning in to study the portrait of a chubby-cheeked boy on a stout roan pony. “It *is* you! How adorable!”

“That was me at about age seven on my first pony. His name was Şoarece, which means mouse, but he threw me more times than I could count. However, because of him, I became a competent rider.”

Vasile approached. “I have dinner served in the feasting hall, err, I mean dining room, my lady,” he said. I arched a brow, and he quickly added, “And my lord.” As we followed him to dinner, Sam’s arm linked through mine, he said, “I’ve managed to acquire quite a lot of good game and vegetables, and even some pastries from the surrounding villages. Enough to keep you fed for days! And I’m a good cook, in case my lord hasn’t told you. You shan’t starve under my care, my lady.”

Sam glanced at me, and I said, “Vasile, I’m not sure how long we’ll be staying.”

At the door to the dining room, he stopped, his face falling. “Why not? Where else would you go?”

I paused, then said, “We’ve come to meet with the elders in their Carpathian stronghold. In America, we were able to defeat the curse, but it seems only temporarily. We were told a sacrifice is required.”

Vasile stiffened. He'd been with me through it all the first time around. He knew what was at stake. His face darkening, he said, "Not again." Then he grew thoughtful. "The elders... They're a fickle lot. The sacrifice they demand this time around might not be of a material nature. And you weren't promised to anyone at birth, were you?" he asked of Sam.

She made a face and shook her head.

"Then let's not borrow trouble," Vasile said with a wise nod. "Tonight, we'll feast, or you will anyhow, Sam, share stories, and celebrate your homecoming." Turning slightly aside, he murmured, "And, uh, for you, my lord, I've got a couple of lively boar out back."

"Wonderful, Vasile. Thank you."

He left us alone in the great feasting hall. Though the massive table stretched nearly the length and could host up to a hundred people, Sam and I sat side by side near the cheery fireplace.

"I like it here," she said quietly. "It feels like home."

I chuckled and slid a strand of hair behind her ear. "I'm so glad to hear you say that, but home is anywhere you are."

"Do you really think the elders are going to separate us? After everything we've been through?"

I stared into the bright flames, wishing I could see the truth there. "Only they can tell us that, my love."

SAMANTHA

CRISTIAN and I made love in his bed before a blazing fire. This time, we came together not with urgency, but with tenderness, slowly bringing each other to completion, kissing unhurriedly, drinking each other in. My heart felt whole and satisfied, even if true happiness lay just out of reach. Until we met with those elders, I couldn't feel completely settled.

Lying in his arms, covered with a genuine wolf-fur blanket and listening to the very slow beat of his heart, I drifted off. Or did I? Everything seemed so real. I was standing in a clearing with a dense forest of beech trees and spruce surrounding me. The sky was painted in hues of orange and purple, and the setting sun cast shadows across the leaf- and fern-covered path upon which I stood. I heard a brook tinkling nearby, and birds singing. In front of me stood a woman with long blonde hair, her eyes a striking shade of green.

“Samantha,” she whispered, her voice soft and melodic. As her gaze held mine, sorrow and recognition flashed in her eyes.

“Sage?” I asked.

She nodded, stepping closer. “You're here,” she murmured. “After all this time.”

I tried to meet her halfway, but an invisible barrier seemed to hold me back. I stretched out my arm toward her. “Why am I seeing you? What does this mean?”

Sage reached out so that our fingertips almost touched. “We're connected, Samantha. Our souls are intertwined. My

past is now your present.”

“You’ve been with me all this time. Haven’t you?”

She smiled so gently, so gracefully, that my heart broke for what she and Cristian had gone through. “Yes. When the goddess allowed, I tried to help you.”

“I’m sorry for what happened to you, and to Cristian.”

“We suffered terribly. But I see how happy you are together. That brings me joy. He’s such a good man. Please take care of him for me.”

“I will. But...you know why we’re here, don’t you?”

Her beautiful face grew sad. “The curse, your love, the sacrifice... It’s all linked. You’re here to right the wrongs of the past, to mend the wounds that time couldn’t heal.”

“Will the elders force us apart too?” I whispered, fear gripping me.

Sage folded her hands together. “The future is uncertain, but remember, love is the most powerful magic there is. It transcends time, space, even curses. You must hold on to it, believe in it, no matter what.”

The world around me began to dissolve, the edges blurring as the dream began to fade. “Wait!” I called out, reaching for Sage. “Don’t go! I have so many questions.”

“I will come to you again when the moment is right.” Her whisper faded as I fought to stay in the dream. But it was slipping away, and I found myself jolted awake, drenched in sweat, the remnants of the vision still vivid in my mind.

I sat up, trying to catch my breath. I had to tell Cristian what I’d seen. But the sun had risen, its light slipping around the edges of the heavy shutters we’d drawn closed the night before, and he’d left to go to a lightless chamber in the lower levels of the castle. That meant Vasile was out of commission for now too.

All alone with my fretful thoughts, I bit my lip and wrung my hands, wondering what our future held, or if we’d even

have one at all. I had to trust in love, Sage had said. And I would. Nothing, not even those elders, will tear us apart now.

That night, around dusk, Cristian appeared again. I rushed into his arms, and he held me tight. “I’m so sorry I had to leave you alone all day to rattle around in this castle,” he murmured into my hair.

“It was a little spooky, not gonna lie. Maybe I could get a dog or two if we’re going to stay here?”

“Whatever you like, my heart. Did you do any exploring? How was your day?”

“The day was fine, but Cristian, I have to tell you about my dream. It was Sage. She came to me.”

He didn’t seem surprised, only focused as I continued. “She’s been helping us. But she said she didn’t know what the elders wanted.” I felt my cheeks warm a little before I said, “She told me seeing us together makes her happy.”

His lips curved up. “She always had a generous, unselfish heart.”

“And she was really beautiful.”

“Like you,” he said, brushing my lips with his. Hm, I hoped Sage wasn’t watching us *all* the time...

“Would you like to see her village?” he asked. “Where your ancestors lived?”

“Yes!”

He grinned at my enthusiasm and had Vasile, who had apparently also just awakened, fetch me a heavy cloak with a sheep’s wool lining. It had to be an antique and smelled a little musty, but it was warm and heavy on my shoulders. I liked it. I liked everything about this place. “When I was walking around today,” I told him as we headed toward the massive front door, “so much of it felt familiar. As if I’d been here before.”

“You carry your ancestors’ memories in your genes.”

“Is that possible?”

“Why not? You carry their magic. It would make sense, no?”

I stopped at the door. “What about the sun? It’s not completely dark out there yet. Won’t you get burned?”

“Not with this.” He held up a beautiful charm on a chain.

My breath caught in my throat. A sun crafted delicately in silver, each ray shimmering brilliantly... Before he could speak, the words tumbled out of my mouth. “I gave you that sun charm.” Then I gasped and pressed my fingers over my lips. “What is happening?”

Cristian pocketed the charm, then gently cradled my face in his palms. “You’re remembering.”

I shook my head, feeling dizzy. Then everything stilled, and I let out a long, calming breath. Filled with a sense of determination, I tugged the cloak around me. “I need to see it. The village.”

He nodded in understanding, and we headed out into the dusk light. The sky was streaked with orange and purple, so like my dream that my heart skipped a beat. But I followed close to his side. Despite the sun’s rays touching him, he remained unharmed.

“How long is that thing good for?” I asked.

“In full daylight, only a few minutes, but I should be fine for the walk to the village, and then by the time we go back, it’ll be dark and we’ll grab a torch. I should warn you, it’s fallen into decay over the years. I only really kept Sage’s hut in good condition.”

But as we approached the village, my vision blurred and shifted until my eyes didn’t see the roofless huts and dried grass blowing by in the breeze. I saw white-washed buildings, laundry hanging, women in voluminous skirts with beautifully decorated vests and colorful scarves keeping their long hair out of their faces as they sang and chatted with one another.

Barefoot children ran along the riverbank, chased chickens, and caught butterflies. A broad-chested older man with white hair stopped to converse with an apple-cheeked woman holding a freshly baked pear tart. He radiated confidence and power, and part of me recognized him.

“Grandfather...?” I murmured, walking forward a few steps. Then I turned my head and saw my...home.

The path seemed familiar, as if I’d traversed it many times before. Instead of dusk, it was a brilliant day, the sun shining overhead in a perfect cloudless sky. I pushed open the door to a tidy little hovel, my senses flooded with the beloved scents of herbs and forest, the tang of mushrooms and moss. My instruments were laid out on a rough-hewn table. My mortar and pestle, my jars and baskets. There was the feverfew I’d been grinding for Crina’s grandson. I touched everything, barely noticing the tears pouring down my cheeks to drop on the backs of my hands.

I turned to see Cristian, my lord, my love, wearing his wolf-fur cloak, his silver sword hanging from a thick leather belt. His dark hair fell untidily over his pale forehead, pale because he’d become a vampire to protect his lands from Radu Mirea. I blinked, and he was still Cristian, the man I, Samantha, loved. I felt Sage’s spirit within me, yearning for connection. I took a deep breath and allowed her to see through my eyes.

I spun back to another day. Cristian and I stood beneath the protective boughs of a great willow tree. I placed something in the center of his outstretched hand.

“A gift,” I said, intertwining my fingers with his. “I want you to have this. A charm, to let you walk in sunlight, just for a little while. Be careful, my love. Once you feel the sun starting to burn, come back under the trees, and you’ll be safe.”

He slipped the chain around his neck and stepped out from under the willow, and although he was a vampire, as the sunlight fell on him, he came to no harm.

“Nothing is impossible when it comes to us,” I said, my voice sounding strangely familiar yet different. My Cristian came to me now and caressed my cheek.

All the memories of Sage came flooding back. The love we shared, the promises we made, the tears, the joy, and the heartbreak. It was all so vivid, so real. I was Sage. Or rather, Sage was a part of me, a past life I had forgotten, until now.

The memory began to fade, and I was back in the present, staring at Cristian, my tears flowing freely. He gently cupped my face, wiping them away with his thumbs. “Sage,” he whispered. “It’s you, isn’t it?”

I nodded, trembling, but filled with joy. “Yes. I remember now. Everything.”

He pulled me into his embrace, holding me close. “I never stopped loving you. Not for a moment. And now you’re back.”

I clung to him, letting the memories wash over me. “I’m here, Cristian. We’re together again.” Like the sun softly easing from the sky, I felt Sage’s spirit draw back, graciously allowing me time to adjust and accept. In my mind, I saw her again, beautiful and brave, her face lit with love. We were two, yet we were one, I was her, yet I was still me, Samantha, and I loved Cristian Lazar with the force of two lifetimes.

CRISTIAN

SAM and I spent much of the night wandering through the old village. With Sage's memories rising in her mind, she pointed out the now-dilapidated homes of some of the people she'd once loved. While she lived, Sage had been a busy part of their lives, even after she'd married Cezar. While her heart had always belonged to me, he'd been good to her, she told me. And she'd loved her children more than life itself. As we walked hand in hand along the overgrown moonlit path, she told me about them and how proud she'd been of them.

I couldn't help feeling a pang in my heart that they hadn't been our children, but I'd foolishly rushed to become a vampire, thinking I'd then be able to protect the village from Mirea. What a thorn in my side that man had been, and still was. He was still out there, somewhere. And so was the carnelian stone that I'd helped create in my original quest to end the curse.

"What's wrong, Cristian? You're remembering too, aren't you?" Sam wrapped her hand around my arm, and we walked unhurriedly, pressed against each other.

"I am. It's hard not to regret being turned. I really understood nothing about the supernatural world before I entered it." I looked down at her sweet face and smiled sadly. "I was young and full of myself. After surviving years of bloody warfare, I thought I was invincible. Witches and vampires seemed quaint to me." I shook my head. "Now I know how powerful the magical world can be."

“I totally get it,” she said. “I’m still trying to wrap my head around everything that’s happened. I feel Sage’s...my...magic inside me. She’s strong, but also very kind. I think even in the modern world, I could use my abilities to help a lot of people.”

“We can’t stay hidden away here, then. If we get a handful of visitors to Ravenscroft every ten years, that would be a lot.”

“We have to return to America at some point.” She stopped, and we faced each other. “Do you have any idea what happened to that stone?”

“My deepest fear is that with all the blood it absorbed during the battle, it became powerful enough to seek out a new master.”

“Who?” she asked, her brows drawn.

“It could be anyone. Another vampire, a werewolf. Someone like Heimdall, whatever he is. Or someone with latent power like you were, who doesn’t yet understand the strength of their ability.”

She pursed her lips and gazed beyond me, deep in thought before she met my eyes again. “The elders will see that we’re stronger together. That you and I were reunited again after centuries apart to fight this thing. Won’t they?”

“We can only hope, my heart. As Vasile said, they’re fickle and impossible to predict. But they are also long-sighted and dwell in spiritual realms you and I could only imagine.”

She held my hands tighter. “If they say we have to separate... I won’t do it. I won’t! Not again.” Her chin was set, her eyes burning with determination.

But I shook my head slowly. “You will, my love. If it means fighting for life and love, we both will. We wouldn’t be happy if the world was in ashes around us.” That was the reality of what we faced. I bent to kiss her and wrap my arms around her tight, wishing we could just hide here at Ravenscroft and let the world do whatever it wanted without us. Her tense muscles relaxed as I stroked my hand over her flame-red hair to her slender waist.

“Sam...” I gently drew back from her, holding her soft small hands in mine. An impulse had seized me, but every cell in my body knew it was right and true. I felt suddenly young again, and full of hope. When I sank to one knee before her, she gasped.

“Cristian...?”

“My heart, my joy, my reason for existence... Fate has allowed us this second chance, and I’m not the fool I once was. Be my wife, Samantha. Marry me.”

Her eyes grew round with shock, then she knelt too and threw her arms around me. “Yes! It’s what I always wanted. The night I had to marry Cezar, my heart shattered into a million pieces. But you’ve made it whole again, Cristian.”

“I thank whatever power brought us together once more...”

Beneath the blessing of moonlight, kneeling humbly, face to face, we quietly said our personal vows. Goddess willing, when we returned to New York, Celeste could perform an official ceremony, surrounded by our newfound friends. But for now, even if the future should be dark and difficult, we would have this moment and each other.

We would face the elders and their retribution as one.

WHAT'S NEXT

In a world where the past's hidden mysteries can shape the future, a love ignited by destiny must unravel an ancient secret.

Cristian Lazar, a 15th-century vampire, embarks on a perilous journey that spirals through the corridors of history itself. Driven by an enigmatic prophecy, he's on a quest for an elusive artifact with the staggering potential to alter the destiny of humankind. Yet Radu, his age-old adversary, is a dark shadow dogging his steps, obsessed with claiming the artifact for his own sinister ends. With the clock ticking and a malevolent darkness threatening to envelop the world, Cristian's courage, resolve, and love are put to an unprecedented test.

Newly discovered as a born witch, Samantha Baker is no longer just an ally but a key player in Cristian's quest. With her newfound ability to cast powerful spells, she's an invaluable asset, but her connection to Cristian goes beyond the magical—it's a deep-rooted love that defies time. As they unravel the intricate web of clues surrounding the artifact, Samantha grapples with her own uncertainties and fears, wondering if she is truly prepared to bear the burdens of a past laden with secrets and peril.

Cristian and Samantha's odyssey catapults them across continents, through the tapestry of time, and plunges them into the unfathomable depths of existence. But with formidable enemies lurking around every corner and a secret with the power to shatter their newfound love, can they unearth the

ultimate truth before it's lost in the annals of history, becoming an Immortal Secret forever?

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Sage Hawthorn lives under the watchful eyes of her coven leaders, who have promised her to another man. But when she meets Cristian, she yearns to defy tradition. He's interested in her world, and intrigued by her. Love for the noble takes root in her heart.

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MORE FROM EDEN HART

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MEET THE AUTHOR

Eden Hart is the author of the Empire City Vampires series, a spellbinding collection of paranormal romance novels that delve into a world of vampires, witches, and mystical beings.

Her writing journey began with a fascination for the unexplained, a passion for love stories, and an affinity for the dark and mysterious. Drawing on her extensive research and vivid imagination, she crafts characters that are as complex as they are compelling, and settings that are both fantastical and grounded in myth.

Eden's novels are more than just escapism; they are an invitation to a realm where love transcends time, where heroes and heroines must face ancient curses, forbidden spells, and the very essence of what it means to be immortal.

When she's not writing her next tale of magic and desire, Eden can be found enjoying a cup of tea in her garden. Her books are a passport to a world where the supernatural is real, and love is the most powerful force of all.

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