

Bewitching the Vampire

Brides
of
Prophecy

BOOK 9

BROOKLYN ANN

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About the Author

Books by Brooklyn Ann

**BEWITCHING
THE
VAMPIRE**

*Brides
of
Prophecy*

Book 9

BROOKLYN ANN

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DEDICATION

To Karen Ann

6~11~1962 ~ 2~14~2009

Thank you for always supporting me

And

*To Layla, my crit partner, best friend, and one of my biggest
inspirations.*

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CHAPTER ONE

Jean Lafitte Wilderness Preserve, Louisiana

Raina Callahan linked hands with her fellow witches, and they raised their hands to the cloudy night sky. “We banish this storm and will it to dissipate before it reaches landfall.”

Her coven repeated her words in an overlapping chant. The fire continued to ripple at a sharp angle with the wind.

This was the most ambitious spell the New Orleans coven had attempted together. Raina wasn’t sure they were powerful enough to pull it off.

The four witches combined the elements. Raina represented water. She called forth her power to steer the moisture in the air away, back toward the sea. Alma used her affinity with Earth to cool the energy and to hold the spell like a living wall. Jack and Cinna combined their mastery over fire and air to dry out the air and send the current of cooled, dry air towards the approaching hurricane.

Raina closed her eyes as she felt the power coursing within her form and mingling with her coven sister and brothers.

Their bonfire roared, candles flickered, and their ring of crystals began to glow.

“Oh shit,” Cinna whispered, “Can you feel it?”

Raina and the others gasped before Cinna finished speaking.

The coming storm pressed against their power. Miles away and yet seeming so much nearer.

Were they crazy for doing this? Everyone who could afford to evacuate had left in the last two days, clogging up I10 and Highway 90. The rest were holed up in their homes, emergency shelters, or the Waffle House. And here they were in Jean Lafitte National Park, where solid ground was varied and a wrong step would make you gator food, trying to banish Hurricane Shelley before she reached the city.

Admiration for her friends' bravery swelled in Raina's heart.

If Raina and her coven failed, they could be carried away by floodwaters, struck by flying debris, or even killed.

But if they succeeded, they'd save their city from a hurricane that forecasters feared would be almost as bad as Katrina. Raina knew she'd be wracked with guilt forever if she didn't try to stop it.

Another gust of wind struck their circle like a physical slap. They swayed but kept their footing, ignoring the sting of sparks from the fire flying at their legs. "Keep your focus!" Raina cried through clenched teeth. "Let's do the Convergence Canticle."

She began the chant they'd written together to serve as a tool to increase their focus and magnify their power.

North, South, East, West

We come together at magic's behest

Earth, Water, Air, and Fire

Thus we seek our desire

Our powers combined as one,

Our will be done.

As the voices of Jack, Alma, and Cinna mingled with hers, Raina felt a fresh surge of power build within her, emit outwards, and mix with that of her fellow witches. That power raced across the swampland, over scattered lakes and marshes, and toward the Gulf of Mexico to slam into the storm.

Drying air that was naturally already humid, and doing so over so much water, felt like an exercise in futility. And yet, there was some ingredient in the coven's magic that was making a difference. Not the strength of their command of the respective four elements so much as their willpower.

Even though Raina felt the familiar dull ache in her temples that surfaced any time she overexerted her magic, she held firm, continuing to chant and focus her power on Hurricane Shelley.

Slowly but surely, they felt the brutal force of the storm abate. The wind still whipped their clothes, but most of it came from the direction of land rather than the sea. The distant howl they'd heard out from the direction of Live Oak had faded completely, and the rain stopped.

In tandem, the chanting slowed and quieted. When the four witches released their grips on each other's hands, they swayed and almost stumbled.

“We did it,” Raina breathed. “Holy Goddess, we did it.”



Valentin St. Scarasse, Lord Vampire of New Orleans, gaped at the witch coven in a mixture of awe and fear. The witch coven had broken up a hurricane. *A fucking hurricane!*

Doing his duty of keeping an eye on the coven, Valentin had been worried when, instead of evacuating the city like everyone else who was able, the damn witches drove to the Jean Lafitte preserve.

He'd been *this* close to mesmerizing the four witches and commanding them to accompany him to his private shelter, but two things had stopped him.

The first was his reluctance to bring the coven under the same roof as most of the vampires of New Orleans. Secondly, the witches radiated power and purpose with this seemingly mad venture into the wilderness mere hours before a hurricane was supposed to make landfall.

They had a plan, and Valentin couldn't suppress his curiosity to see what it was.

And so, that was why he found himself huddled beneath a cypress tree, soaking wet instead of sheltering comfortably. Memories of Hurricane Katrina flashed through his mind. Waking up in putrid, brown water, covered in bites from various swamp creatures, unable to leave his flooded prison

until sundown. And then the hellish nights after, finding out which of his people survived and which were dragged out into the sun by the merciless water.

Thankfully, his gamble with nature paid off. Because the New Orleans witch coven had made a gamble of their own.

When he'd first overheard Raina and her coven telling the members of Rage of Angels that their magic was getting stronger, Valentin was intrigued. He'd always had a taste for witch blood. Unfortunately, his dining plans were destroyed when Delgarias, the Thirteenth Elder, ordered Valentin to keep an eye on the witch coven and report on their activities.

What would Delgarias do when he learned that the witches had grown powerful enough to alter the weather?

The only beings Valentin had heard of being that strong were the high sorcerers of Aisthethai, the world that Xochitl Leonine, lead singer of Rage of Angels, ruled over. Xochitl was prophesied to lead an army of vampires in a war against her father, who was also the creator of vampires.

Valentin had refused to swear allegiance to Xochitl until he was granted entry to Aisthanesthai. He wanted to see, smell, feel, and *taste* that magical world.

But now it seemed that magic was coming to him. Maybe he should wait before telling Delgarias the coven had become so powerful. At least for a little bit longer. Unfortunately, Delgarias wasn't the only vampire Valentin had to worry about. Others would want to harness this magic for themselves. Valentin would have to increase his surveillance

and probably Mark the witches as his property to keep them safe. Or at least Mark the leader.

Once more, his eyes drank in the magnificent sight of Raina Callahan. Her rich brown hair tumbled down in decadent dark waves to frame lush, generous curves that never ceased to make him salivate. When his gaze roved over her plump backside, delightfully rounded belly, and marvelous breasts, Valentin wondered which he hungered for the most: her body, or her witch blood.

By the time the coven packed up their spell instruments and started the long walk back to the preserve's parking lot, Valentin's hair had dried from the coven manipulating the air, but alas, his clothes were still soaked. To think, he'd followed her out here in case she and her crazy coven needed to be rescued from the storm. Instead, they'd rescued the entire city of New Orleans and surrounding areas.

Pride, admiration, and ambition warred with a fresh sense of trepidation. Power like theirs would not stay hidden for long. Although his first concern was other vampires, the AIU, and, from what he'd heard regarding Queen Xochitl's coming war, Mephistopheles himself could try to take control of these witches and harness their power for his evil aims. And Valentin didn't know if he would be able to protect them from a government agency, let alone a would-be god.



“Whoa,” Raina gasped as she wobbled on rubbery legs. “That was intense.”

“Uh-huh,” Alma muttered and did trip as she headed to the tarp that covered their bags. She cursed as she wiped the mud from her jeans. “If I don’t get somewhere dry, I’m going to melt like the Wicked Witch of the West.”

Cinna nodded. “Do you think anywhere will be open so we can get some hot food?”

Jack laughed. “You know Waffle House never closes.”

Raina shook her head. “No way can I deal with a crowd after that. I can make us waffles at my place.”

After putting out the nearly dead fire, the coven gathered up their stuff. They picked their way carefully through the Louisiana wilderness, trying to hold their flashlights steady. With their physical exhaustion, it was tougher coming out than going in.

But their triumph and elation kept the witches on their feet.

“I can’t believe we did it,” Cinna said as they stepped over a cypress root.

“Right?” Raina shook her head in wonder. “I never guessed we’d come this far.”

Less than a year ago, the best they could do was summon a ghost. And that was with all four of them working together.

But all that changed nine months ago. Rage of Angels had been part of the Metalfeed Tour, which was sadly isolated to west coast states. Raina had been scrolling through the music

section of the Grimoire message board, a site for witches, and saw an odd post from Shonda Wu of the Sacramento coven.

Confirmed. Rage of Angels IS magic.

Every witch and even some non-practitioners made the same claim about the eccentric metal band. Though Raina couldn't deny that Rage of Angels' music invigorated her in a way that no other did, she'd always scoffed at the idea that their magic came from anywhere but the listener's own imagination.

And yet, the entire Sacramento coven claimed they had a huge increase in power after seeing Rage of Angels live. There was even a video attached of a rain spell working in the California desert. Sure, that could have been faked, but other videos followed. Levitation, fire, and even summoning the dead.

All throughout the west coast states, more witches reported an increase in their powers after seeing the band live. When Rage of Angels announced a full US tour, Raina and her coven made sure to get tickets for the Jackson show and VIP tickets for their New Orleans concert.

Jacking her credit card debt for heavy metal concerts had put a nervous knot in Raina's stomach until the band mounted the stage at the Mississippi Coliseum.

Raina had felt magic within her since she was ten years old. The sensation was a subtle, ASMR-like tingle accompanied by a thrum in her heart when she put that energy into willing something to happen.

What radiated from Rage of Angels was most definitely magic, and in a strength that Raina had never dreamed possible. The magic flowed between the band members and then through the audience. Raina gasped as the power entered her body in reverberating waves. Her coven jolted beside her, each witch crying out simultaneously, “Did you feel that?”

They also realized that the lead singer, Xochitl Leonine’s signature purple fireballs were real.

The rest of the set was an experience in magical ecstasy that bordered on sensory overload.

Although Raina and Cinna enjoyed Bleeding Vengeance almost as much as Rage of Angels, the coven left the venue early, unable to take any more sitting still with power coursing through their veins. They drove back to New Orleans in a rush and headed out to Jack’s place near Audubon, where they could practice their magic in secret. Like the Sacramento coven, they tried a rain spell first. The blue sky above was closed in by clouds, and a light drizzle fell upon their outstretched hands.

Raina and her friends had danced in the rain like dorks before ordering a celebratory pizza and discussing what magic they’d try next. It wasn’t long before each witch developed command over one of the four elements. Jack could create wind out of nowhere, Cinna could summon heat and set things on fire, Alma could make the ground shake, and Raina could form a little raincloud over her palm.

That was when they decided they needed to talk to Rage of Angels and find out if the band was increasing people’s magic

on purpose.

When they met the group during the meet and greet before the New Orleans show, Raina was shocked to discover that not only did the band members *not* consider themselves to be witches, but they were also surprised at the effects their music had on witches. They then invited the coven to meet them on their tour bus after the show, where they were sternly cautioned to be discreet about their magic because certain groups and possibly the government were actively looking for witches for nefarious purposes. Raina gave them the link to the message board the witches used, with a promise to keep in touch.

The whole encounter left her with more questions than answers. The band had denied being witches themselves, yet Raina could feel magic radiating from each musician and their entire crew. Xochitl's husband was even using a glamour spell to hide his real appearance. Even the band therapist, who'd shyly admitted that odd things had been happening with them as well, didn't identify as a witch.

The band kept to their word and not only joined the message board, but also emailed Raina personally to see how the coven was doing. Tentative plans were being made to meet up in person when the drummer, Aurora Lee, planned to come to New Orleans to scope out wedding venues. She was engaged to a lawyer who'd defended the band when their record label sued them for disappearing a year ago.

Rage of Angels had also been right about another thing. *Someone* was interested in the New Orleans coven. Only days

after that fateful tour bus meeting, Raina started getting frequent feelings that they were being followed. Even more unnerving was that sometimes she even felt like she was being watched at home. She and Alma secured the perimeter of their little house with protective spells.

A scrying spell served to partially identify the one who watched her. The water in her bowl revealed the figure of a man, though his features remained frustratingly obscured. Other divining spells failed to reveal the man's intentions toward them, aside from an alarming indication that his interests lie mostly with Raina alone. He wasn't an ex or anyone she'd ever met. And he was always alone. For months, every time Raina stepped out of her house, she felt him watching her. A couple times, she even caught fleeting glimpses of a man with long hair and emerald green eyes that seemed to glow.

Raina considered reaching out to Rage of Angels to tell them about her stalker, yet some inner voice urged her to keep this to herself. At least until she learned more. Maybe the band didn't trust her reports on the coven and had hired someone to spy on them. Raina *would* find out if that was the case. And in the meantime, her coven worked their magic as privately as possible.

As if summoned by the thought, the back of Raina's neck prickled with an all-too-familiar sense that *he* was watching her again. If her stalker had followed her and the coven out to Jean Lafitte in the path of a hurricane, he deserved to be swept away by the storm. Her gaze darted between the trees, but she didn't see him.

No. She was just imagining things this time. Her senses were raw from tonight's exertion. Like going days without sleep, she was seeing and hearing things that weren't there. The sight of the parking lot that was empty except for Raina's van reassured her. Yet part of her remained on edge.

When they crammed into Raina's Nissan Leaf, Cinna turned on the radio. It was still tuned to the local news station.

A woman's cheerful voice emitted from the speakers. "Hurricane Shelley has appeared to run out of steam shortly after making landfall in southern Louisiana. The storm has now been downgraded to a Category One tropical storm and is projected to deplete lower before she reaches New Orleans."

Alma cheered in the backseat, and the others joined in.

On the whole drive back, Raina constantly checked her rearview mirror for signs of being followed. The roads were mostly deserted, aside from a truck and later an SUV that turned off to other roads shortly afterward.

It's all in my head, Raina chided herself. After something goes right, I always convince myself that something is still wrong.

When they got to Raina's house in the Irish Channel, she felt that familiar prickle on the back of her neck. Stronger this time. He *was* here somehow.

She got out of the car and put a hand over her eyes, trying to see through the drizzling rain. As always, she didn't see anyone. But she could feel him.

Alma put her hand on Raina's shoulder. "Is your stalker back?"

"He might be. It's hard to tell." Raina's throat was scratchy as she answered. "I'm so drained right now."

Jack shook his head before grabbing his and Cinna's bags. "I highly doubt anyone is out in this weather. And soon, it's going to be chaos when those who evacuated come flocking back to the city. Speaking of, I think I'm gonna pass on waffles tonight."

Cinna shot him a stern look. "Still, we should do that threat-banishing spell we'd been discussing. I know we don't have the strength tonight, but maybe in a day or two."

Raina and Alma waved goodbye to Jack and Cinna as they crossed the lawn to Jack's car.

Alma snorted. "Cinna and Jack were the ones who wanted waffles in the first place."

"Yeah, but I get it," Raina said, grabbing her bag. "They probably want to get home before they're too exhausted to drive. We should have gone back to their place instead of ours."

"No way. I want to be in my own bed. But since it's now the two of us, I got leftover crawfish etouffee in the fridge."

"Mmmm," Raina murmured appreciatively.

As she followed Alma into the small house they rented, she forced herself not to look over her shoulder. Yes, her coven would do the spell to banish the stalker as soon as possible, but

in the meantime, she had more immediate plans and just enough power left to protect herself.

CHAPTER TWO

Valentin cursed under his breath. He'd guessed that the coven was becoming aware of his presence but hadn't fathomed that not only did they know that the majority of his interest lay with Raina but also that they planned to do a banishing spell on him. After seeing them banish a hurricane, he had no doubt that they were powerful enough to get rid of him. Valentin couldn't let that happen. Not when he was under orders from the Thirteenth Elder to watch them. Not when he was the goddamned Lord Vampire of New Orleans.

It was bad enough that he was standing outside a mortal's residence spying like an underling, with his clothes damp from the drizzle. But he couldn't delegate this task to a subordinate. Although he took care to only allow trustworthy vampires into his city, the thought of anyone watching Raina filled Valentin with a discomfort he couldn't articulate. It didn't matter that they wouldn't dare touch her. He didn't want them to watch her dance, hear her laughter, see her rapt expression when watching her favorite movies, *Suspiria*, *Phantasm*, and *The Crow*, like she hadn't seen them countless times. He didn't want them to know what Raina's favorite foods were, how she sometimes struggled to maintain the impression that she was always a strong and steady coven leader yet showed a tender vulnerability when she thought no one was looking. How she fully came alive when she danced to Rage of Angels and other metal music.

In the months of fulfilling his duties by watching over her—er, her coven—Valentin felt as if he'd come to Raina like a friend. *Or a lover*, a wicked voice whispered in the back of his mind. He did not want anyone else to know her so intimately.

And so, Valentin suffered. He endured cold, humid nights in the winter, hot, humid nights in the summer, and those odd cold, wet nights after a storm. He didn't think he'd felt dry in months.

He walked around to the side of Raina and Alma's little house where the kitchen was. Due to the hurricane, the air conditioning wasn't humming like usual. In a further stroke of luck, one of the witches opened a window, and with his preternatural hearing, their voices reached him.

"Now, about this stalker," Alma was saying. "I don't like the idea of waiting two days. If he was watching us today in this weather, that means he's very dedicated. And if he followed us out to the wilderness preserve and saw what we did..."

"I don't think he was out there. I mean, I was on edge and thought I saw something, but there's no way." Raina's voice held that fuzzy edge that always made Valentin want to tuck her in bed. She'd overexerted herself. Hell, she'd battled a hurricane and won! It was a wonder she was still standing.

The microwave beeped, and he heard Alma's light footsteps as Raina continued. "But I did sense him when we got home. He's probably casing the place."

"Do you think he's from one of those government agencies that the band warned us about?"

Valentin blinked. He knew what band Alma was referring to. He'd met them briefly the same night Raina's coven had. Rage of Angels had invited the coven to the band's tour bus after the concert. Valentin had tried to listen in, but a shield had made it impossible to hear, smell, or sense what happened in the luxury vehicle. Now he was learning what the band had discussed with the witches. The Abnormal Investigation Unit was an offshoot of the FBI that seemed to be primarily focused on identifying and surveilling vampires. Until they went rogue three years ago. Valentin had heard horror stories of vampires being abducted and tortured. Then the AIU's headquarters were suddenly destroyed a little over a year ago, and every person in the building was killed. Some whispered that Delgarias had been responsible. But if Rage of Angels and their vampire associates were warning Raina about government surveillance, that meant that not only was the AIU back in action, but the agency had also widened its scope to human magic practitioners.

Valentin and the New Orleans vampires had avoided the AIU's radar by hiding in plain sight.

Raina's drowsy voice pulled his attention back to the witches. "I don't think it's the government. Our phone's not tapped, for one, and no one's been in the house when we weren't home to bug the place or anything. We can sense that from the wards. But more than that, it feels like whoever they are, they're acting alone. I can feel it. Just like I knew it was a man before I caught a glimpse of him."

"And we still haven't determined his intention," Alma said while Valentin heard her scraping food from a dish onto plates.

“Have you thought about how weird that is? Intention is usually the first thing we can sense from people and items.”

“Yeah.” A yawn from Raina. “It makes me wonder if he’s one of us.” A pause. “Oh my god, this is delicious.”

“A rogue witch?”

“Yeah. But if he was watching us because he’s interested in joining our coven, I’d think he would have approached us by now. So, he could be from a rival coven.” Another pause came before she spoke again around a mouthful of food. “And if that’s the case, we need to strengthen our wards to the property line. We have the power.”

“Not tonight we don’t,” Alma said testily. “I haven’t felt this drained after a casting ever. Let’s go to bed and do it tomorrow.”

Yes, Valentin replied silently. Put it off until tomorrow. That way, I can give Raina my Mark tonight.

“No,” Raina said as if to him. “Not when I sensed him watching tonight. Not when I feel like he’s drawing closer and is gonna do...something. I can do it alone if need be, but I’d really appreciate if you can lend what energy you can.”

Alma sighed. “Fine. But we’d better have a sugar infusion first. I’m gonna open that box of Cosmic Brownies and brew a pot of tea.”

“*Merde!*” Valentin hissed quietly through his teeth.

The witches’ voices faded as they left the kitchen to get the implements for their spell. All he could do was hope their barrier would be weak enough for him to pass through. He

toyed with the idea of knocking on the door and mesmerizing whichever one answered but quickly discarded that plan. Tackling two powerful witches, weakened as they were, would probably lead to disaster and someone getting hurt. Probably him, since although he could overwhelm them with his vampiric speed and strength, the last thing he wanted to do was harm Alma or Raina.

So instead, he fled to a nearby bar to dry off. He waited there, warming his hands with a mug of coffee, listening to the clamor of drunken voices rejoicing the miraculous dispersal of the hurricane. Valentin filled his belly with the blood of a hapless customer before he returned to Raina's house.

His hopes were dashed the moment he tried to step past the curb. Last week, he'd been able to pass through their warded barrier. Now it held him back like a wall of steel.

Raina stepped out from behind the house to face him. Valentine caught her scent on the breeze, a delectable combination of the jasmine-scented soap she used...and magic.

Although he stood in total darkness, her eyes seemed to meet his. "*You.*"

The hostility in her tone was amusing yet somewhat hurtful. He masked that hurt with a low laugh. "Hello, Raina."

His cheery greeting seemed to infuriate her more. "Who the hell are you, and why are you following me?"

Instead of replying, Valentin held her gaze and summoned his vampiric mesmerism. "Come to me."

She remained rooted to the spot. “Hell, no.”

He blinked in surprise. Was it the barrier that kept him from being able to bespell her with his gaze, or was it her power?

Before he could ponder that question further, Raina pulled some herbs from her pocket and tossed them on the ground before thrusting her palm in his direction. “Leave. Now.”

Her magic jolted through his skull like electricity, and he felt his body turn and his legs carry him away like he was a mere puppet on a string. It wasn’t until he was nearly a block away that he regained control of his body.

“Fuck!” he growled. When had been the last time his efforts to mesmerize a human failed? Hell, when had been the last time a witch had gotten the upper hand and been able to make him do anything?

Valentin remembered when exactly that had been, and suddenly, a slow smile spread across his face. He knew where to get help in solving this problem and regaining control over the situation.



Lavender accented with cream trim and columns, and a meticulously painted white wrought iron fence, the stately Queen Anne mansion on Prytania Street looked like the home of a princess. Very few in New Orleans knew that one of the

most powerful voodoo priestesses in the world dwelled beyond its pretty gates.

Valentin didn't dare place so much as a fingertip on the gate or even the exquisite bourbon roses peeking out between the wrought iron fence. Instead, he closed his eyes and projected a thought.

“Claudette, my love, may I be permitted to gaze upon your beauty and be granted your wisdom once more?”

For a few minutes, silence greeted him. Valentin smiled grimly and paced along the banquette. He knew she was home. Was she still angry with him over the fact that one of his people tried to bite one of her friends? He'd taken care of the matter as soon as it came to his attention.

Then the front gate opened on well-oiled hinges just as the front door beneath the covered porch opened to reveal the slight and stooped figure of a woman who'd captivated him for the past five and a half decades.

Only when she crooked her finger did he pass through the gate—and the neutralized magical barriers—and cross over the threshold into her domain.

Claudette Fontaine regarded him with a playful smile that transformed her back into the twenty-year-old woman who'd nearly stolen his heart fifty-seven years ago. “Mr. St. Scarasse. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?”

He sank to one knee and placed a hand over his heart and fell into the act of a lovesick swain that didn't used to be an

act. “I am starved for the sight of your beauty and the richness of your voice in my ears.”

Claudette snorted in derision, though the corners of her eyes crinkled with mirth and perhaps a wisp of flattery? “Careful, Valentin.”

He rose to his feet and abandoned all foppery. “Oh, I know how powerful your magic is. In fact, it’s probably stronger, given current events. If I overstep myself, I’m sure you’ll put a hex on me.”

Her lips curved in one of those smiles that always made him wary. “Not when I can simply tell Aurora Lee that you once drank her grandmother’s blood.”

“What?” Valentin’s stomach dropped, and he took an involuntary step back. “Your *granddaughter* is the drummer of Rage of Angels? One of the key figures in the Prophecy?”

Claudette smiled proudly. “Yes, and she and her handsome vampire fiancé will be visiting this autumn to choose a venue for their wedding.”

A tremor of alarm raced down Valentin’s spine. Could it be a coincidence that this mortal who’d first been the object of his infatuation and then grew to be one of his closest friends was so closely connected to the Prophecy?

He remembered his smug response to the Queen, refusing to pledge himself and his vampires to her army until he was granted entry to her world. Perhaps that hadn’t been the wisest of decisions. But he couldn’t do anything about that now. So it was best to forget about the horrific implications of

Claudette's connection to the Prophecy and focus on his immediate problem.

"I need your help," he admitted. "There's this witch..."

Claudette heaved a sigh. Pity filled her deep brown eyes. "Oh no, Val. Not again."

"It's not like that!" he said too quickly, holding up his hands in a defensive gesture that he regretted immediately. "Did your granddaughter tell you that magic is returning to Earth?"

"No, but everyone who's been paying attention knows that." Claudette made a gesture that seemed to unlock wards at her door and then beckoned him with a stern finger. "Come inside. Dry your clothes, and I'll brew some of that tea you like."

The tension in Valentin's spine relaxed at the invitation. She still liked him. And she would help him.

The inside of the house didn't look like a voodoo queen's abode either, with lacey doilies, family photos, and ceramic elephant figurines taking up every hard surface and cushions and knitted blankets on every soft surface. There was even a dish full of hard candies on the coffee table. Valentin liked the strawberry ones, though he could only suck on them for a brief time before he got a stomachache. That was one of the downsides of being a vampire. Aside from blood and water, all food and drink was hell on his digestive system. Except for Claudette's tea. Valentin smiled as she took a small tin down from one of her kitchen cupboards and scooped a bundle of dried herbs into a mesh ball that she placed in a mug of

steaming water. He didn't know about other witches or voodoo priestesses, but the nice thing about Claudette was that if she invited someone into her home, they were safe from all harm, and one could accept food and drink without fear.

Something about that particular tea not only allowed him to drink a whole cup without paying for it later but also gave him a warm calm that lasted at least an hour. And it tasted wonderful, but damned if he could identify the flavor. Something floral with a hint of citrus, and maybe some sort of berry?

Claudette brought two mugs into her parlor and set one in front of Valentin. A smile tugged his lips at the sight of the purple mug. Garish cartoon bats cavorted in front of a big yellow moon on one side, and the other said *Happy Halloween* in big orange letters. He pressed his palms to the hot ceramic, grateful for the warmth. Cold couldn't harm a vampire, especially a mere fifty-six degrees Fahrenheit, but that didn't mean it wasn't damn uncomfortable. A self-deprecating chuckle came to his lips as a thought came to him.

“Care to share the cause for your amusement?” Claudette asked.

“I was thinking of how the Lord Vampires of Spokane and Coeur d'Alene...and I suppose your soon-to-be grandson-in-law would be amused at my feeling chilly, given that they're up in the frigid north, and I'm in the semi-tropical South in late August.”

“You're soaked to the bone. That would make anyone chilly. Plus, it was eighty degrees yesterday, and now it's

dropped down to below sixty. Hell, *I'm* a little chilly.” Claudette reached forward and gave him a grandmotherly pat on his hand. “Besides, your Queen detests temperatures below seventy degrees, so I doubt she would tolerate mockery of anyone who dislikes the cold. Now tell me about this witch.”

“I was getting there. The Queen and the Thirteenth Elder—the de facto ruler of vampires—commanded me to keep watch over a witch coven here in New Orleans, given the situation with the magic returning,” he paused to sip his tea, suddenly nervous to proceed with his petition for aid. “By the way, how is that development treating you? You were already powerful.”

Claudette rubbed her hands together. The multitude of rings on her brown fingers glittered in the light. “It’s been quite invigorating. I feel twenty years younger.”

“You *look* younger,” Valentin said, noticing her appearance for the first time. Even though he’d gotten over his puerile infatuation with the powerful priestess nearly fifty years ago, he’d come to love her with the more steadfast and unadulterated love as a friend. And that’s how he always saw her first when he visited. Eventually, some of the veil would fall, and he’d observe more gray hairs and wrinkles, and his heart would pang, not at her fading youth—for she would always be beautiful to him—but at the reminder that she’d refused his offer of immortality, and thus he’d lose her one day. But looking at her now, he saw that her previously thinning white hair had thickened and many tight curls appeared to have darkened back to silver. Her eyes drooped less, the wattle at her throat had receded, and the warm brown

skin on her face had tightened. She looked like she did when she was in her late fifties. “What did you do?”

“Took advantage of some of that extra magic in the air and performed a few beauty rituals. I’d never bothered with them before since my power wasn’t excessive enough to be wasted on petty vanity.” Claudette took a deep drink of tea and hummed in appreciation. “I could go younger, but that would draw too much attention. Besides, I *like* being a grandma. So, I imagine your witch has also gained in power.”

“Too much.” Valentin took a sip of tea. “She and her coven broke up that hurricane.”

Claudette’s brown eyes widened. “I *thought* that was the work of magic. That is impressive. But why do you look unhappy about it? While it can be dangerous to tamper with the weather, this instance shouldn’t have any negative effects.”

“No, I’m damned proud of her for that,” he said sincerely, wishing he had time to tell her about the miracle he’d witnessed tonight as well as about Raina’s growth over the last six months. “It’s the fact that she had enough power left to expand her wards to her property line and to force me away when I tried to mesmerize her that is the problem.”

Rather than cooing in sympathy and offering a countercharm, Claudette’s dark eyes hardened. “You shouldn’t be skulking around her property in the first place.”

“It’s my job. How am I supposed to monitor her if I can’t come near her? And I need to Mark her before other vampires sniff out her power and try to claim her for themselves. But I can’t do that if I can’t get into her house. And even worse, her

coven plans to do a banishing spell in a few days, so then I won't be able to get near any of them." He set down his mug and took her hands. "Please, Claudette, help me."

"If you're asking me to use my magic to counteract hers, you can forget it. I cannot in good conscience support you stalking her and her coven." Before Valentin could protest, she held up a finger. "But I can offer some helpful advice."

"And what is that?" he asked sullenly.

"Talk to her. Explain everything."

"It is illegal for humans to know about vampires. The Lords of Spokane and Coeur d'Alene have immunity from the Elders, but I don't know if that extends to me."

Claudette snorted. "You've already broken that edict with me ages ago."

"I broke nothing. You knew what I was as soon as you laid eyes on me."

"And she might know what you are already. Besides, if I recall correctly, your kind has that law to keep safe from humans who would destroy you. A witch has the same reason to hide." Claudette closed her eyes, her brow furrowing as she seemed to recall some painful memory. When her eyes opened, the ghost of that pain fled her eyes, and she fixed him with the firm stare of a woman accustomed to giving commands. "Tell her who you are and why you've been following her. Her mind will probably be at ease knowing you're not a serial killer or one of the entities my granddaughter and her friends warned her about."

Valentin remembered Delgarias's smirk when he'd commanded Valentin to watch over the coven. At the time, he'd thought the Thirteenth Elder was amused at having a Lord Vampire do an underling's job, but now he wondered if Delgarias knew how this situation would end up. Between that, and Claudette's logic, Valentin found himself warming to the idea. Besides, he never liked skulking.

Slowly, he nodded and took another deep drink of tea. "Alright. But how am I supposed to talk to the witch if I can't get close enough?"

"Have her come to you," Claudette said patiently. "If the spells against you prevent you from dropping a note in her mailbox, I would be willing to deliver one for you."

CHAPTER THREE

Raina yawned as she organized invoices for online orders at *Bonheur Botanica*, the herbal shop she and Alma ran. She was in dire need of more caffeine. After last night's huge spell, she should have been so exhausted that she was able to fall asleep as soon as she went to bed, but her encounter with her stalker had kept her awake half the night.

He'd tried to use magic to compel her to come to him. That was creepy as fuck.

At least she had her answer as to who'd been following her. It was another magic user. A kind she'd never encountered before. *Or had she?*

Raina paused suddenly as she thought about the people who'd been with Rage of Angels on their tour bus. Some of them had magic that felt like her stalker's. Could it have been one of them? At least one of those people had worn a glamour spell, hiding his real appearance. Did the band not trust Raina to be truthful when she kept them updated about her coven's progress and sent a spy after her?

If only she'd been able to see more of the guy's face rather than a shadowy figure with eyes that seemed to glow a rich, emerald green for a second. And what sort of magic could make a guy's eyes glow anyway? Surely it hadn't been an illusion spell to impress her.

Maybe she shouldn't have banished him so soon. There were so many questions she wanted to ask him. Then again, he hadn't answered her when she'd asked him to tell her who he was and what he wanted. Instead, he'd tried to force her to leave her wards and get closer to him, which was a major red flag.

Nah, she'd been right to banish his ass. Besides, Raina knew in her gut that she'd see him again. Unless her coven could cast a spell that would keep him away permanently.

She only wondered if she'd also be able to banish his voice from her mind, that tantalizing old-world Creole accent, the sensuous undertone as he said, "Come to me."

Goddess help her, some part of her *wanted* to go to him. Her mind said that the compulsion came from whatever unethical magic the man had tried on her, but her heart kept nagging that the need came from somewhere inside her.

She fanned herself with a clipboard. Even though the storm had cooled down the city last night, New Orleans was back to its hot, muggy late summer weather. At least most of the plants Alma grew here would be happy.

The entrance bell jingled as a customer came in. Raina forced her thoughts of the mysterious stalker away, then held back a gasp as she got a better look at the woman. She looked like a normal middle-aged New Orleans local, a long bright yellow sundress flowing prettily with her regal steps, in gorgeous contrast to her rich brown skin. Colorful beads on her neck and wrists jangled musically.

But power radiated from the woman like heat from a boiler, palpable and thickening the air. Raina recognized the subtle charms the woman wore and even the flavor of her magic.

It wasn't unheard of for voodooiennes to come by for clippings, roots, or sometimes whole plants, though they usually stuck to shops owned by their own.

But this was a Voodoo Queen. The woman wasn't decked out with an elaborate headpiece, elaborate, multicolored robes, or dripping with large, jeweled charms like the movies portrayed. Yet there was no mistaking the purposeful arrangement of strings of orisha beads around her wrists and her neck, surrounding a pendant carved of bone with a *Vèvè* symbol, a large gold ring with another *Vèvè* etching, and the scent of the unique herbs and oils used by voodoo practitioners.

Raina inclined her head in a reverent bow, acknowledging the woman's rank and power. "How may I help you today, ma'am?"

"Would you be Raina Callahan?" The priestess's voice held a warm timbre that made Raina lose most of her nervousness and instead feel a strange urge to confide in her like she was a trusted aunt. It wasn't any magic, just part of the woman's inborn charisma.

"I am." Raina wondered what a practitioner of such status would want with her. "And you would be?"

"Claudette Fontaine." The priestess studied her with a wry smile. "I can see that you know what I am. Are you Wiccan?"

Raina shook her head. “I like to think of myself as an eclectic.”

Claudette nodded. “It seems to be working for you.”

She reached into her purse that doubtless held gris-gris, mojo bags, and other potent magical implements as well as normal contents like a wallet, phone, and keys. Raina blinked as she caught a glimpse of a few of those strawberry hard candies.

“Ah, here it is.” Claudette pulled out a black envelope with metallic red embossing. “A friend of mine has a message for you, and since I was already planning to come by this store for some five-finger grass, I volunteered to drop it by.”

Raina bit back a smile of her own. There was no way this woman needed five-finger grass from this shop. It was a staple in conjuring oils and other spells common in voodoo and hoodoo. That meant that Claudette came here solely to deliver the message.

“Who’s your friend?” Raina asked, refraining from taking the envelope from the priestess’s outstretched fingers.

“His name is Valentin.” Claudette smiled warmly as she said the name. “He’s been wanting to speak with you for some time, but he’s terribly shy. I suggested he write to you and ask to meet in a public place.”

The answer only increased Raina’s curiosity. “Is he one of your practitioners?”

“No.” The priestess chuckled as if the idea was ridiculous. “He’s just a man I’ve known for several years who’s been so

occupied with business and politics that his social skills have suffered greatly. I know he doesn't mean you any harm." She held out the invitation.

Raina *felt* like the woman was being honest. *Mostly*, anyway. "All right. Set the invitation on the counter. How much five finger grass would you like?"

Claudette laughed aloud. "I *like* you. A third ounce should do nicely. Oh, and would you also get me some luck oil? A bottle you made yourself, please?"

Raina fought back her nervousness and turned to the jars on the shelf behind her. The woman may be delivering a message for this Valentin, but she was also clearly interested in Raina. The request for the oil must be some sort of test to see how powerful Raina was.

As Raina weighed out the five-finger grass, it hit her. The return of magic to the world had to be affecting the voodooiennes as well. The local voodoo practitioners had to be curious about how much more powerful the local witches had gotten lately. Claudette was either indulging in her own curiosity to take Raina's measure, or she was a very powerful ambassador sent to do so. So maybe the friend's message was the excuse?

Raina bagged the herb and grabbed some luck oil she'd made during the last waxing moon. "I typically make the oils and teas and mojo bags. My coven sister grows the plants, so her magic is imbued in the oil too." She rang up the purchases and handed them to Claudette before lowering her voice. "Are you here because everyone's magic is getting stronger?"

“Perhaps,” Claudette said mildly, though her golden brown eyes sparkled with delight in her power. “But not everyone has seen improvement in their craft. The charlatans remain charlatans.”

“That’s sort of a relief.” Raina pulled a card with the website address of the witch’s message boards. “If you’re interested in how things have been progressing on a global scale, you can log in here.” She set the card down and wrote down her number. “It’s invite-only, so you can text me, and I’ll give you the password. I’d give it to you now, but it’s set up to change at random.”

The voodoo queen took the card. “Thank you. That could be interesting. Well, I’d best get going. If Valentin misbehaves in any way, you may call me, and I’ll straighten him out.”

A card with a phone number appeared next to the black envelope.

By the time Raina looked up, Claudette was already halfway towards the exit.

Claudette paused in the doorway and called over her shoulder, “Good job with the hurricane, by the way.”

Before Raina could recover from that bombshell, the voodoo priestess was out the door. The store bell’s tinkling was the only sign she’d been here. *How did she know?*

Her gaze strayed to the black envelope Claudette had left on the counter. Raina was tempted to grab it and open it to see who this Valentin was and what he wanted, but one couldn’t be too careful. She reached down to a set of drawers behind

the counter and pulled out some salt, black tourmaline crystals, and a small black candle. Then she turned back to the shelves of large jars of herbs on the wall and grabbed a small handful of juniper berries.

After making a circle of salt and juniper berries around the envelope, she carefully placed the tourmaline and the black candle on a silver tray on top of the envelope.

Raina lit the candle and focused her power as she whispered, “If there be harm in or on this missive, I call upon my power to banish it. Let all negative energy be drawn away with this circle and burned away in black flame. My will be done.”

She meditated upon her intention for a few minutes before returning to invoices. Waiting for the candle to burn down was torture, but since the envelope came from a powerful voodoo priestess, Raina wasn’t going to take any risks.

When the candle was down to a stub, Alma came in from the greenhouse with a basketful of freshly cut herbs.

She smiled at Raina, then frowned as her gaze shifted to the circle of salt and berries around the envelope with the stub of black candle and tourmaline on top. “What is that?”

“A message from some guy named Valentin. A voodoo queen dropped it off if you can believe it.” Raina told the rest of the story. “She felt benevolent, but she was scary-powerful, and she *knew* about what we did with the hurricane.”

Finally, the candle burned out. Raina lifted the tray, and she and Alma took turns placing their hands over the envelope

to see if they could sense anything malignant.

“I think it’s safe,” Alma said.

Raina picked up the envelope, popped off the old-timey wax seal, and slid out a folded piece of creamy, expensive paper. The message was written in spidery but fancy cursive, like the guy had gone to an old-fashioned private school.

She read the letter aloud.

“Raina,

I humbly apologize for frightening you last night. It was never my intention to make you uncomfortable. It is very important that I speak with you. To make you feel safe, we can meet in a public place. Therefore, I cordially invite you to the VIP level of Bloodletting at ten o’clock tomorrow evening. All drinks will be covered.

As further proof of my good intentions and to put you at ease, you may bring up to three guests. Their drinks will be covered as well.

If these terms are disagreeable, please reply with an alternative meeting location. The reply can be sent to Bloodletting’s mailing address or dropped off with a door bouncer.

I look forward to speaking with you.

Regards,

Valentin St. Scarasse.”

Alma looked at Raina with wide eyes. “He stalked you for several weeks, tried to use magic on you, and thinks that apology will work?”

Raina shrugged. “At least he’s offering to meet in a public place.”

“Yeah, but *Bloodletting*? Really?” Alma looked so appalled that they both laughed.

Bloodletting was a vampire-themed bar that was so dedicated to its theme that it bordered on cliché. Of course, Raina and her friends had been infatuated with the idea of a vampire bar back in their goth days. But by the time they’d turned twenty-one, the appeal had soured. Aside from a cover charge, no matter the occasion, patrons were expected to dress in their best gothic finery or risk being turned away at the door.

The decor inside was as expected: crimson-painted walls with black velvet furniture, cage dancers, goth, industrial, and metal music. The overpriced drinks were all blood red, with names like “AB Positive,” “O Negative,” and “White Transylvanian.” Everything but the bottled beers was dyed red with food coloring.

There was even a “Vampire Experience” package you could buy where you’d sign a waiver and be taken to a back room where a “vampire” would “drink your blood.” Raina

never did it, but she talked to some starry-eyed girls who were practically swooning with rapture as they showed off temporary tattoos of puncture wounds on their necks.

“It felt sooo real!” one had squealed.

“I’m addicted,” the other sighed. “I don’t care if it’s some hypnotism trick. It feels orgasmic.”

Raina and Cinna had laughed at the ridiculousness of the whole thing when the girls had stumbled off, but later, on the ride home, admitted that even though it was a relief that no one was actually drinking blood, it was still creepy that people were essentially paying to have their brains messed with.

With such an atmosphere, the place attracted young people, mostly tourists.

Alma’s voice pulled Raina from her thoughts. “Do you think this Valentin is one of those die-hard goths that like to LARP as a vampire? Maybe he was following you because he wants a ‘big tiddy goth girlfriend,’ as they say.”

Raina shook her head. “That would be a reasonable guess if not for him being close enough friends with a voodoo queen that he’d have her drop off a message for him. I don’t see someone like Claudette being friends with a weird LARPer.”

“What if he’s a grandson or nephew that she has a soft spot for?”

“I think she would have said he was a relative rather than a close friend.” Raina reached for her phone. “I guess I better call Cinna and Jack and see if they have plans tomorrow night.”

Alma cocked her head to the side, and fingered her Tree of Life amulet. “Are you seriously considering going?”

“Well, yeah. I’m curious as hell now.” Raina went to the computer, minimized the invoice program, and typed “Valentin St. Scarasse” into the browser.

Nothing came up except for his last name on some French Creole surnames sites. Which meant that whether Black, White, or mixed, he had deep roots here, possibly predating Raina’s Irish ancestors. Was he still close with his family, or did they cast him out like hers had? Raina forced the intrusive thought away and instead checked the social media sites for a hit.

After getting nowhere, she sighed and turned to Alma. “Either he’s super old, a ghost, or he keeps his shit very private.”

“That could be a red flag.”

Raina shrugged as she texted Cinna and Jack. “Or it could be really smart since more magic in the world means more attention. I’ve been considering having us go a little more low-key except for the message board.”

“What about our business?”

“I don’t think it will suffer much. We have enough regular customers who know where to find us. And our business-attracting spells are finally working.”

“Thank Goddess for that,” Alma said fervently. “Ok. I’ll go with you to Bloodletting tomorrow. And if this Valentin tries anything creepy, we can hex him to oblivion.”



The next night Raina found herself standing outside Bloodletting with her whole coven. Though Jack and Cinna had to get up early in the morning, they'd agreed to have her back for this meeting and then leave early if all was well.

Cinna let out a low whistle when they got in the long line across the front of the surprisingly wide building. "I can't believe this place is still so popular, given that vampires haven't been trendy for a while."

"Maybe they rebranded inside," Jack said.

Alma nodded. "Why are we waiting in line anyway? We have a special invite. They might let us through."

Raina had suspected the same, but she was nervous and took advantage of the line to have a moment to calm her nerves. She'd dressed carefully in an attempt to not only look powerful but also to look, well, pretty. To fit the club aesthetic, she went with all black. A corset around a diaphanous silky shirt, a shiny black skirt that swept around her knees, lacey patterned knit stockings, and some witchy button-up half-boots. For protection and power, she wore her favorite amulet, a silver Celtic *Triquetra* inset with tiger's eye that Jack made for her before the ceremony that established her as head of the coven. An amethyst pendant for intuition hung below it.

Despite her family's and Catholic school classmates' attempts to fat shame her, Raina was normally comfortable and confident with her curves, but something about this whole situation threw her off balance. Maybe it was the fact that she was meeting a stranger who knew more about her than she knew about him. Maybe it was his strange magic or his friendship with a powerful voodoo priestess.

Or maybe it was the seductive huskiness of his voice that continued to haunt her dreams.

“Come on!” Cinna tugged on her wrist.

They got some petulant looks from the line of twenty-somethings decked out in bondage pants, babydoll dresses, and club-kid boots, but the two guards at the door, resplendent in black silk button-up shirts that were tight enough to show off their muscles and leather pants, gave Raina's coven slight nods of recognition as if they were told to expect a party of four jumping the line.

Raina pulled the invitation from her beaded purse that was as loaded with herbs and protective stones and charms as it was with the usual necessities. “We have an invitation from Valentin St. Scarasse.”

The first guard, a devastatingly handsome Black man with long dreads, studied each of them in turn, taking in Alma, resplendent in a dark green gown and Celtic shield amulet, Cinna in an Earth-toned steampunk outfit, and Jack in a black utility kilt with a matching blazer and navy silk shirt beneath.

The second guard, an Adonis with long wavy blond hair, briefly glanced at them instead of reading the invitation. “Ah,

yes. Ms. Callahan. You're expected. If you and your guests will follow me, I'll get you settled in VIP, where you can get your drinks while I let Monsieur St. Scarasse know you've arrived."

Raina and Cinna exchanged amused grins as the people in line groaned in frustration at seeing other people get the VIP treatment while they had to wait.

Bloodletting's décor hadn't changed much since she and Cinna had ventured in all those years ago, except that it appeared to be even more opulent and over-the-top goth. The red and black rose wallpaper was replaced with red with a black velvet *fleur de lis* pattern. New wrought-iron chandeliers had been added, and the furniture was updated with thicker red velvet cushions and black lacquered wood.

The VIP section upstairs was even more luxurious, with satin and velvet chaises and throne-like chairs around gleaming cherry-wood tables. As Raina and her friends lined up at the bar to order their drinks that the guard told the bartender were on the house, her eyes wandered to a closed, guarded room with a sign above that read, "*The Vampire Experience.*"

Cinna followed her gaze. "They're still doing that gimmick, huh. Makes me almost tempted to try it."

The bartender cleared his throat and leaned forward, "Mr. St. Scarasse said that none of you are to do the Vampire Experience."

Jack's eyes narrowed. "Why not? I mean, none of us are keen on the idea of having a stranger bite our necks and

pretend to drink our blood, but what y'all are doing in there isn't harmful, is it?"

"Of course not," the bartender said with a light chuckle that sounded somewhat off. "It's just that the four of you are said to have some power that the usual human does not, and we want to ensure the safety of our staff. Now, what would you like to drink?"

"A hurricane," Raina said, not caring if it made her seem like a basic-bitch tourist.

After the bartender took her friends' orders, they went to a table in the quietest corner they could find amidst the thumping music from downstairs.

Alma spoke first. "So, your stalker has told the whole club about us."

Jack nodded with a frown. "And they think *we* could be a danger to them. That is very interesting."

"Now I know how Claudette heard about the hurricane," Raina said as quietly as possible with the thumping music downstairs. "He must have followed us out there the other night. I thought I was imagining things when we were in the woods."

Cinna kept her back to them as she watched the bartender make the drinks. "I don't know how safe I feel that some guy we don't know is telling everyone he knows about our secret business."

A shadow fell across the table before a rich, slightly accented voice spoke. "And that's why it's past time I got to

know you.”

Raina looked up and felt an electric jolt shoot through her chest at the sight of the man. He was tall and lean and had the most interesting shade of dark auburn hair that fell to his shoulders, slightly curling at the ends. His eyes were a deep, dark green, set in a face that was so beautiful it brought a lump to Raina’s throat. She reached for her amethyst necklace and summoned her intuition to see if he really was that gorgeous or if he wore a glamour spell.

No glamour. But she could feel his strange power radiating from his being. A magic that was mysterious and old.

The man bowed before her and held out his hand. “I am Valentin St. Scarasse. Welcome to my club.”

“Raina Callahan.” She shook his hand with her right, still holding her amethyst in her left to see what she could pick up from him. No hostility or danger emanated from him, but other than a tangible eagerness, she couldn’t sense anything else. “But you clearly already knew that.”

Valentin laughed, took the tray of drinks from a server in a Lolita-goth getup, and set the tray on the table. “Yes, and I again apologize for making you all feel uncomfortable. I fully intend to make amends.”

Alma ignored his proffered hand. “I don’t know if you’ll be able to make up for such creepy behavior. And did you say this is *your* club?”

He nodded. “Yes. Please, bear with the gaudy spectacle of the place. One has to have an angle for their business to

survive these days.”

Cinna also declined Valentin’s handshake. “What the hell is the owner of a vampire club doing following us around?”

Before he could answer, Raina received an intuitive flash of the potency and detail she usually only got when casting a strong divination spell. What she saw stole the breath from her body and made her scoot back closer to her coven sisters and brother. “Forget the club owner stuff. What is a *vampire* doing following this coven?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Valentin cursed under his breath. “I was going to tell you that tonight.” He met Raina’s wary eyes and attempted a teasing smile. “But you keep getting more powerful and jumping ahead.”

“Wait,” the witch in the brown distressed pants and ruffled white shirt said. “Vampires are *real*?”

“Witches are real,” he countered.

The male witch laughed shakily. “I see why you didn’t want us to do the Vampire Experience.”

Raina chuckled without mirth. “Vampires can be killed by fire, right?”

A tremor of wariness shivered between Valentin’s shoulder blades. He hid his nervousness with another cavalier smile. “That’s an odd change of subject.”

“Oh no, I think I’m *completely* on topic,” she said in a sweetly wicked voice. “Because if you don’t finally get around to answering my question, I will burn you, and maybe your whole club, to the ground.”

For a moment, all Valentin could do was stare at her in awe at the audacious threat. Part of him responded with genuine fear, for he could tell by the cold determination in her mahogany brown eyes that Raina meant every word of it. Another part of him was hot with arousal. Had a woman ever

been capable of delivering such a formidable threat to him? He didn't think so, though Claudette had come close.

He took a deep breath, thought of Claudette's wisdom, and followed her advice, even though it could land him in trouble with the Thirteenth Elder. "I was ordered to keep an eye on you and your coven. To observe the growth of your powers and to make sure you're safe."

"Ordered by whom?" Raina demanded.

With a sigh, he grabbed a chair from another table, set it down near Raina, and sat. "You've met them already."

"*Rage of Angels?*" Raina replied though she didn't look all that surprised. "So they're mixed up with vampires too?"

Valentin laughed. "If you only knew, *mon cher*."

Alma glared at him. "We'd know if you told us."

He shrugged. "Yes, well, my quandary is that there are laws I have to follow, and I've already broken one of the biggest ones by telling you what I am."

"You didn't tell us, though," Cinna countered. "Raina figured it out by herself."

He inclined his head. "Good point. Hopefully, I'll be able to use that loophole. Anyway, I'd heard that Xochitl Leonine and her entourage warned you that dangerous parties could find out that you four are real witches."

Raina looked down a moment, revealing the truth before she met his gaze. "They told us, but we've been discreet and only performed spells where no one could see." Her eyes

narrowed. “Or we would if you weren’t constantly spying on us.”

Valentin crossed his arms over his chest. “If *I* can spy, others could also spy. That’s why I must keep watch over you.”

She continued to glare at him. “And what will you do if you come across someone who seems to be doing what you’re doing? Kill them? Drink their blood?”

“The latter, most likely. The former would depend on the spy’s intentions and which faction they come from.”

“So there *is* more than one of these so-called dangerous parties,” Jack said. “You know, it would be easier for us to defend ourselves if we knew more about who we’re supposed to watch out for.”

“You’re right, of course.” Valentin weighed his options, trying to decide how much to tell them. “I’m sure you’re all smart enough to know that it would be bad if the government found out about magic users being real. You may even be clever enough to suspect that there would be an entire agency dedicated to the supernatural.”

Raina eyed him over the rim of her glass. “That’s what one of Rage of Angels’ crew members implied.”

“Good. We understand each other on that front.” Valentin pressed onward carefully. “Now let’s say, hypothetically, that the agency’s headquarters were destroyed by supernatural beings, and that when they managed to rebuild, their prime suspects are witches.”

He considered telling them that it had been vampires who'd destroyed the AIU's secret Arizona compound, then decided against it. That information would hardly endear the coven to him.

“Ohhhh,” Cinna said incredulously. “But how could you hope to protect us from the government? Especially when your kind is probably on their radar too.”

“That's more something where, ideally, we could watch out for each other.” Valentin remembered hearing the news about the AIU going rogue and abducting and torturing vampires in the Southwest and suppressed a shudder. “We have a few of our people monitoring this agency. Perhaps if any of you are clairvoyant or have powers of divination, you may also be able to find out if they come sniffing around my city.”

“You mean *our* city.” Alma gave him a stern look.

“Yes. Sorry for misspeaking.” Valentin cursed himself for the slip. He wasn't ready to trust them knowing that he was a Lord Vampire. It was enough that Raina had figured out that the owner of Bloodletting was a real vampire.

Raina leaned forward. “You have good points about this government agency. And we'd be willing to establish an alliance with you—*if* you'd come clean about everything else. Also, you said there was more than one potential threat to us.”

Valentin again weighed out how much he could reveal. “Yes. My biggest concern right now is other vampires. Though most vampires are governed by a Lord of a territory, there's been an uptick of rogues who invade cities and wreak havoc.

There's a way I can protect you from them without having to follow you around as much."

"How?"

"I'd Mark you four as mine. Local vampires would detect the Mark and stay away. Rogues would be deterred as well. Because if anything happened to any of you, I'd be able to sense it and track you through the Mark."

"Nope. Absolutely not." Raina crossed her arms over her chest. "That sounds like a gross violation of our personal autonomy. It's already bad enough that almost every app on our phones is trying to track us all the time."

"Then I'll have to keep following you," he said silkily.

Her lips curved in a smug smile. "Not if we perform the banishing we have planned."

"I'll have it countered."

"By who? Your Voodoo Queen?"

Valentin nodded, even though Claudette had already refused to do any such thing. "Or others." He softened his tone. "Come on, Mademoiselle Callahan. You won't be rid of me, no matter what, so we may as well be friends rather than enemies."

"I can't be friends with a stranger who's been doing shady shit."

"Get to know me, then." He turned and gestured to the bartender, "Jacques, please bring refills to our esteemed guests."

Raina stood. “That’s not necessary. I think we should leave.”

Before he could reply, Jack spoke. “Wait. Let’s not rush. While I agree that we shouldn’t become his property, I want to know more about vampires.”

“Yeah,” Cinna chimed in. “How do you pull off that Vampire Experience thing? The last time Raina and I were here, we saw that the bite marks were temporary tattoos.”

“We heal the real wounds with our blood.”

“Whoa.” Jack nudged Raina. “I bet vampire blood could be useful in our work.”

Valentin chuckled. “You’re far from the first to think of that. That’s partly why, in ancient times, my kind used to kill witches on sight.”

“What’s the other reason?” Alma asked, tone laden with suspicion.

“Because having them know of our existence was dangerous. They could set the witch hunters on us to detract from themselves.” Valentin paused before saying the last. “Or even harm us themselves.”

Raina regarded him once more with that dangerously sweet smile. “And what makes you think *we* won’t harm you?”

“That’s a very good point.” Valentin tried to keep his voice level and sincere even as he wanted to drown in her brown eyes. “That is why I am apologizing for not making my presence and motives known to you sooner and why I’m seeking an alliance with your coven.”

“It’s not a fair alliance if you make us belong to you.” Raina gave him a hard stare before her tone softened. “But I will put it to a vote as to whether or not we’ll get to know you well enough to consider some arrangement. Would you please give us some privacy for a few minutes? And I don’t mean step away a few feet. I’d bet my grimoire that you have preternatural hearing.”

Valentin inclined his head in a respectful bow and to hide a triumphant smile. The vote would go in his favor. He could read the curiosity in the eyes of all four witches. Even Raina, much as she tried to hide it under a tough veneer, was intrigued. “It’s time I go downstairs and look in on things anyway. I shall return in ten minutes.”

Although it would be easy to use his preternatural speed to duck behind a pillar and eavesdrop, Valentin kept his word and went downstairs to supervise the rest of the club.

Eniel, his head of security and Second in Command, met him by the lounge area. “I don’t think this is a good idea. Having witches know our business. It’s bad enough that you’re friends with a voodoo queen.”

“I consider it to be very beneficial. And we have the potential for even more benefits from an alliance with this coven. They saved the city the other night, Eniel.”

“Yes, you told us when you announced that you were inviting them here and breaking our laws, revealing our secrets.” Eniel gave him a skeptical look. “But you didn’t say how.”

Valentin smiled. “They’re the reason Hurricane Shelley didn’t make landfall.”

Eniel shook his head. “Bullshit.”

“I watched them do it. I felt their power as they dried the very air around them and cooled it before sending a cold dry front to weaken the storm and divert its course.”

“*Mon Dieu.*” Eniel’s widened as the truth of Valentin’s words finally sank in. “What does the Thirteenth Elder have to say about that?”

“I haven’t told him yet.”

Eniel gaped at him in horror. “Why not?”

“I want to make sure they are safe and protected first,” Valentin replied mildly, not wanting to think of what Lord Delgarias would do to him if anything happened to the coven on his watch. “And to do that, I need to Mark at least one of them. Preferably the leader.”

“You didn’t need to expose your secrets to do that,” Eniel said through gritted teeth. “Just wait until she’s alone, mesmerize her, give her your blood, and recite the words.”

Valentin sighed. “I *tried*. The wards on her property are too strong, and she’s too powerful to be mesmerized.”

“More proof that they’re dangerous.” His Second growled. “That’s why we killed them in the old days.”

“They’re benevolent witches,” Valentin insisted. “My months of supervising them have established that.”

“That’s not all that this venture of yours has established,” Eniel muttered under his breath.

Valentin arched a brow. “What do you mean?”

“You’re infatuated with her.” His Second didn’t need to specify which *her*. “This is the situation with Claudette Fontaine all over again. But this time, we have an interdimensional war on the horizon, so I can’t promise I’ll be here to pick up the pieces when this witch breaks your heart.”

“You’re being melodramatic. I may lust after Raina, but I’ve learned my lesson. Besides, I want to make use of her magic, not her love.” Valentin was suddenly weary of this probing conversation. “If everything is in order down here, I’ll return to my palaver.”

As he made his way back upstairs, Valentin gnashed his teeth over Eniel’s words. *Infatuated?* Could a man not appreciate a woman’s beauty without being accused of harboring romantic intentions? And furthermore, he hadn’t gone to pieces over Claudette. Sure, he’d had a melancholy period, but once that wore off, he was happy to remain simply friends with her.

Where Raina was concerned, he’d naturally try to seduce her...because why wouldn’t he? But his primary concern was keeping her and her coven safe and preferably under his control. This was *his* city, and he couldn’t have a group of young witches wreaking havoc all over the wards.

When he reached the VIP section, the witches ceased their huddled conversation and fixed their gazes on him. Raina had switched to drinking water, and Jack was nursing a fizzy soft

drink. Valentin felt a brief pang of envy. He loved the sweetness and the feel of the bubbles dancing on his tongue, but those blasted beverages hurt his stomach worse than almost any human libation.

“Well,” he began as he slid into the vacant seat at their table. “Have you come to a decision?”

Raina fixed him with an unreadable stare. “We’ve decided to get to know you, but on a trial basis. If you make us uncomfortable in any way, we’re out of here and will bar you from coming near us ever again.”

“That’s fair. What do you want to know about me?”

“How old are you?”

“One hundred and ninety-two,” Valentin answered a bit tiredly. “How old are each of you?”

He bit back a chuckle while each hesitated before answering. Raina was the eldest at thirty, Cinna was twenty-nine, and Jack and Alma were both twenty-seven.

“What made you choose Bloodletting for the name of your club anyway?” Raina asked suddenly.

“I named it after the Concrete Blonde album.” At their blank looks, he gave a mock-distressed sigh. “The youth today. They were a Southern rock band who not only made music that I adore but also made a song about a vampire in New Orleans. It’s also called ‘Bloodletting,’ and we play it every night at midnight. I’d really appreciate it if you stay and hear the song.” He grinned at Raina, oddly excited for her to

hear some of his favorite music after hearing hers over the months. “Watch how the regulars sing along and dance.”

A reluctant smile tugged at her lips before she arched one slim eyebrow. “Your club is cheesy, you know that?”

“All the better to hide my secret,” he told her. “And it brings in great money from the young goth crowd and even more from the tourists.”

“Tourists you feed on.”

“Indeed.” Valentin agreed cheerfully. “Now, don’t look so disapproving, *mon cher*. It’s only a little more than a pint. They don’t miss it. And,” he leaned over until his lips grazed her silken hair framing her adorable pink ear, “We make certain the experience is *very* pleasurable for the donor.”

Her body tremored deliciously before she regained control and fixed once more with a stern glare. “But Jacques told us that the Vampire Experience is off-limits to us.”

“It is.” Her nearness made his head swim with desire. He paused to regather his words. “Firstly, because I would never make you pay. And secondly, I won’t have any of my... employees feed on you.”

“Just you?” She gave him a knowing smirk.

He nodded. “Just me.”

Raina scooted back, leaving a pang of longing in his belly. “I’d rather you keep your fangs to yourself.”

“Ah, but if you only knew what you were missing,” he said in a low, seductive voice that never failed to draw women to his bed. “But I shall respect your boundaries.”

Her throaty laugh was full of derision yet still endearing. “That would be a first.”

“I said I was sorry.” He placed his hands over his heart and gave her a mock-wounded look before changing the subject. “What got you dabbling in witchcraft in the first place?”

Her lush lips twitched in a crooked smile. “The usual cliché. I was a lonely outcast looking to have power over myself and protection from those who bullied me. I thought we were supposed to be getting to know you. How did you become a vampire?”

“The usual cliché.” Valentin grinned at her. “I was a lonely outcast who befriended a lonely vampire.” Though his voice was glib, thinking of Marcel still caused him pain. His maker was insane, whether from the toll the years took on him or if he was already mentally ill in his mortal days, Valentin had no idea. “Let’s speak of lighter matters. I know we are all fans of Rage of Angels. What other music do you all enjoy?”

For several wonderful minutes, the coven cast off their hostility as they traded band names back and forth, diverting the flow here and there to discuss the merits of each. Valentin recognized some names, knew others very well, and made mental notes to check out the ones he hadn’t heard. He was happy to have some in common with each of them. He and Jack both liked Deity and Viciöus, Alma and Cinna agreed with Valentin on Dirtwire and Bleeding Vengeance, and he and Raina seemed to have the same enthusiasm for Iron Maiden and Judas Priest and spent some time discussing the merits of Rage of Angels’ cover of “Painkiller.”

Then the first notes of “Bloodletting: The Vampire Song,” played, and over half the people in the club cheered. Many people in the VIP section left their tables to gather on the small upper-level dance floor.

Valentin stood and extended his hand toward Raina. “May I have this dance?”

Her jaw dropped and she stared at him with large brown eyes. “Um...”

“I already assured you I won’t bite.”

“It’s not that.” Her cheeks flushed a delicate rose. “No one’s ever asked me to dance before.”

“Well, I’m honored to be your first then.” He took her hand and gave her a formal bow. “Shall we?”

Still looking charmingly flustered, Raina rose and allowed him to lead her toward the dance floor. At first, she was a little awkward, clearly trying to figure out what to do with both her hands and her feet, but then the natural grace she possessed when working magic with her coven took over.

Awkward or graceful, she felt absolutely divine in his arms. Valentin inhaled deeply, savoring her scent of herbs and slightly floral oils, the implements of her magic. But deeper magic flowed from within her, swirling around her in an intoxicating haze, more potent than Claudette’s had been in the days of his calf love. Was Eniel right after all? *Was* he in danger of falling in love with another magic-wielding woman?

Too soon, the song ended. When the applause for the DJ died down, Valentin looked down at Raina. “Do you still think

my club is cheesy?”

“Most definitely,” she said with a grin. “But it has its charm. And I really liked the theme song.”

When they got back to their table, Alma made a show of pointing at her watch. Valentin had somehow managed to completely forget that the other three witches were there.

Raina nodded. “We probably should get going. It’s a work night. So, how are we going to do this? Exchange numbers? Have a weekly meeting here to keep up this plan to get to know each other?”

“Both of those sound agreeable. But I’ll see you tomorrow night while I’m at my post.”

“What?” Her eyes narrowed. “Are you saying you’re going to continue to stalk us?”

“Unless you change your mind and let me Mark you, yes. I already told you your safety is *my* responsibility.” His tone was stern, but softened slightly as he added, “At least now you’ll know who is watching over you and why I’m there, so you no longer have reason to be afraid.”

“I was never afraid.”

He chuckled. “Your heart rate sometimes said otherwise.”

Raina’s shoulders trembled with barely suppressed anger as she visibly struggled to compose herself. “Ok, I’m going to reach out to Rage of Angels, tell them exactly what you’re doing, and have them tell you to stop.”

“Xochitl Leonine is not my queen yet. Not until she fulfills her end of a bargain we made.” Valentin winced after the words escaped him. Did Raina work some sort of spell that compelled him to say more than he should around her?

She frowned. “I thought you said Rage of Angels ordered you to spy on us.”

“No. I said you met the individuals that the orders came through.”

“Then who—”

“Pray you never meet him,” Valentin said quietly, suppressing a shudder as he remembered the first time he met the Thirteenth Elder, the first vampire ever created and, until recently—believed to be a myth. “Just be grateful that someone with unfathomable power wants you four to be safe.”

For an endless moment, the four witches stared at him, their wide eyes full of questions. Then Raina heaved a sigh and threw up her hands in exasperation. “Fine. Be cryptic for now. But we will get the whole story out of you eventually, St. Scarasse.”

She refused to look at him as she rose from the table with her coven sisters and brother behind her. They each went to the bar and left tips for Jacque on their way out.

As Valentin watched the hypnotic sway of Raina’s generous hips and deliciously plump ass, he couldn’t resist calling out, “Until tomorrow, *mon cher*.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Raina ground the alkanet root, bringing her pestle down in rhythm with the music from the Bluetooth speaker behind her. The song that she and Valentin had danced to stuck with her so much that she couldn't resist downloading Concrete Blonde's entire Bloodletting album as soon as she and Alma got to the shop this morning.

Well, not exactly morning. After leaving the vampire club, the coven had spent way too much time at Waffle House discussing what had transpired, the revelation that vampires were real, and the insane fact that a famous heavy metal band like Rage of Angels was apparently very closely involved with them.

Raina would have suspected the band of being vampires themselves if not for the fact that Rage of Angels did their share of interviews and concerts while the sun was still out. Given that Valentin only followed her at night and had someone else deliver his invitation during the day made Raina pretty sure that vampires couldn't be exposed to sunlight.

So that made three—no four—things she knew about vampires. They hid from the daylight, didn't age, they could hypnotize people who didn't have the power to resist their power, and they didn't kill people when they fed since they only took around a pint at a time, then healed the puncture wounds with their blood. Wait, that was five things. Six, if

Valentin was telling the truth about their bite being pleasurable. Unless that counted as part of the hypnotism? Maybe she'd ask him tonight when he showed up for his regularly scheduled stalking session.

Alma came in from the greenhouse with a basket full of mugwort for divination spells. Technically, it wasn't legal in Louisiana due to some internet rumors back in the early 2000s that the herb could get you high—it didn't do enough to make it worthwhile—but law enforcement had bigger concerns, so the witches sold it behind the counter. She gave Raina a wry smile.

“You're *still* listening to that album the vampire named his club after?” Alma teased. “I could hear you singing along from the greenhouse. You already know the words to most of the songs.”

“It's a good album,” Raina said defensively. “And the customers seemed to like it too.”

“It sounds pretty cool,” Alma admitted, but then a suspicious glint shone in her eyes. “But are you sure Valentin didn't work some vampire magic on you when he danced with you? Because you seem a little obsessed.”

“I get obsessed every time I find a new band I like. You remember how I was with Rage of Angels.” But even though that band brought her magic and power beyond her wildest dreams, she'd never danced with a vampire to one of their songs.

And that dance did do *something* to her. Raina almost wished it had been magic. Because then she could find a way

to counteract it. No spell could vanquish the way she'd felt in Valentin's arms. He'd held her like she was delicate and fragile. He'd looked at her like she was precious and beautiful. And he was so unfairly gorgeous, with those dark green eyes, chiseled features, and long, wavy dark auburn hair.

His husky voice, with its French Creole accent, had made her spine tingle pleurably. Raina could try to blame it on vampire magic, but she could feel it when he was using his powers and when he wasn't. The fact that Valentin hadn't been using his powers that night was frightening in its own right.

The only thing she could do was never reveal to him the effect he had on her, so he wouldn't exploit her weakness and hurt her.

"The last time he tried to bespell me, I felt it and shut that shit right down," she assured her coven sister.

"Did any of the members of Rage of Angels get back to you on the email you sent last night?"

Raina closed her eyes. "I've been afraid to check. I was a little drunk when I sent that."

Her cheeks heated as she remembered the gist of what she'd sent. Something along the lines of: *"Why the fuck didn't you tell us that vampires are a thing? And who the hell do you think you are that you can have a third party go through you to give the okay for one to stalk my coven without giving us a head's up? Valentin St. Scarasse is an arrogant prick, and he says that unless I allow him to use his vampire magic to mark me as his property, he's going to continue to follow me everywhere? Please, tell him to back the fuck off and explain what's going on."*

Even worse, it was probably full of typos.

Instead of checking her email, Raina continued to make excuses more to herself than to Alma for the less-than-professional message her tipsy ass had composed. “It’s been a while since I’ve had two hurricanes in a row. Hell, it’s been a while since I’ve gone out drinking.”

“Yeah.” Alma let out a self-deprecating laugh. “The hangover tea I brewed for us is already wearing off. How are you feeling?”

“I had some of that tincture that Beau Thompson sent us.”

Alma’s eyes widened. “The weed tincture?”

Raina nodded and opened her personal laptop. “Yeah. Apparently, the bass player from Bleeding Vengeance makes it. He grows medical marijuana on the side and gave Rage of Angels some when they toured together.”

Alma grinned in recognition of the band name. “Oh yeah. I think I remember reading about that on the Metalness website. Can I have some?”

“Yeah, but only have a drop.” Raina reached under the counter and grabbed her purse. “This stuff is strong. I had a dropperful once, and I was laid out on the couch for hours.”

“Or maybe you’re just a lightweight,” Alma smirked.

Raina shrugged and handed her the tincture. “It’s your risk. We’re open for four more hours. You don’t want to be too high to take care of the plants.”

Alma giggled. “Honestly, I like being with plants when I’m high. But since I don’t handle customers well in that state, I’ll behave.”

Raina headed back to her laptop and logged into the encrypted email that Aurora Lee from Rage of Angels advised her to set up. A response was in her inbox. She took a deep breath and clicked on the reply.

“Hi Raina, Xochitl here.

I’m sorry we didn’t tell you about vampires or about Valentin. We weren’t sure you were ready. Valentin was supposed to keep it chill and not freak you out. As for him wanting to Mark you, I don’t blame you for being pissed about that. At least he’s asking for your permission. A Lord Vampire Marked all four of us and didn’t tell us until five years after the fact. Still, I wouldn’t let Valentin do that unless you get to know him enough to trust him. I mean, he looked like he wanted to eat you back when we first met backstage at our NOLA gig.”

“He did?” Raina said aloud.

“What?” Alma asked.

“Valentin was backstage when we met Rage of Angels.” Raina turned around to block her screen, not wanting to mention aloud what else Xochitl had said about him. *He looked like he wanted to eat you. Did Xochitl mean that Valentin wanted to kill her, or fuck her? Or both?*

Alma's blue eyes widened. "So, did they have that scary third party Valentin mentioned order him to spy on us that day? And what prompted that decision?"

"I haven't read that far yet." Raina returned to the email.

"Anyway, I'll have my uncle talk to him about that and tell him to back off a bit. In the meantime, we should be coming down in a month or two so Aurora can pick out her wedding venue. We'd all love to meet up with you and your coven. Feel free to reach out if you notice anyone else following you."

"That's *it*?" Raina huffed, exasperated. She turned to Alma. "She says she'll have her uncle talk to Valentin."

"Xochitl Leonine has an uncle?" Alma's forehead creased with confusion. "Correct me if I'm wrong since you're the biggest Rage of Angels expert, but isn't Xochitl the one who has zero living family?"

Raina nodded. "I mean, with them being so rich and famous, it wouldn't surprise me if a relative came out of the woodwork, and he might even be real, with DNA kits being so popular, but I would think that would have been news if she'd found an uncle."

"Maybe her uncle is the one who got them involved with vampires in the first place," Alma suggested. Then she sucked in a breath. "Shit, maybe he *is* one."

"He very well could be since Valentin seemed scared of him." Raina agreed. "One thing I'm sure of, is that he

probably has something to do with that time the band disappeared for six months last year. Also, Xochitl says that a Lord Vampire Marked the whole band without telling them, and they didn't find out for five years."

"Whoa." Alma shook her head with a disapproving frown. "That's not cool. At least Valentin asked us."

"Yeah, that was Xochitl's point too. I think she meant to reassure us that he's not dangerous. Maybe her uncle is a Lord Vampire. She seemed to imply that he's the one who ordered Valentin to follow us." Raina realized there was more information in the short email than she'd originally assumed. "And she and the band intend on coming down here in a month or two to help Aurora Lee choose a wedding venue."

"I forgot she was engaged. She's marrying the lawyer who was first representing them when they got sued by their record label, right?"

"Right. That's why he's their ex-lawyer. He turned the case over to someone else when he and Aurora got involved." Raina remembered seeing a picture of the happy couple on the *Metalness* website. "He's *hot* too."

"And Valentin?" Alma teased.

"*Very*," Raina admitted with a sigh, remembering those gorgeous dark green eyes, shiny auburn hair, and cheekbones that could cut glass. "But he's also a *very* bad idea."

"Should we still do that banishing spell on him?"

"It's tempting, but aside from that meaning breaking our agreement that we'd get to know him, we may as well wait

and see if Xochitl's mysterious uncle gets him to back off." Raina paused as a wicked idea came to her. "And if he doesn't, I can inflict some light hexes on him."

"Do you think Xochitl and her band are trustworthy?" Alma's voice went low and tentative. "I know Rage of Angels is your favorite band and that their music is what gave us and all the other covens the power we have now, but between them having us followed by vampires and all the stuff they haven't been telling us, it's starting to look like they may not have the purest of intentions."

"I've honestly worried about that since the day we met them, and they were so insistent on keeping tabs on the development of our powers," Raina admitted. "So, I've cast several divination spells to try and find out if they have any ulterior motives."

"And?"

"They most *definitely* do. However," she continued, holding Alma's anxious gaze. "They genuinely like us, and their concern for our safety *is* sincere. My theory about their caginess is that they don't know how well they can trust us. I know I sometimes come off as a mindless fangirl when it comes to Rage of Angels, but I promise I've remained objective when it comes to our interactions with the band. And if they don't come clean with us soon, we may just have to see if we can cast a truth-telling spell on them."

Before they could discuss the subject further, the bell above the door jingled, and a woman walked in. She was pale, frizzy-haired, and looked like a middle-aged accountant with

her thick glasses and pin-striped skirt-suit, but once she reached the counter, Raina sensed magic around her. It wasn't as intimidating as Claudette Fontaine's, but it also felt like the woman may be shielding.

“How may I help you?” Raina asked politely, concealing her curiosity.

The woman looked around to make sure no one else was in the store. “I think it's about time I introduce myself. My name is Emma Hoffen, and I'm from the Nightwatch Society. We're a private organization dedicated to observing and providing a safe haven for those with paranormal abilities. Most of them, anyway.” She slid a business card onto the counter, making an effort not to touch Raina. “We generally stick with passive observation, but in certain cases, we also seek out those who could make good candidates to become members.”

Alma's eyes narrowed, and her voice rang with outrage. “Wait, *you've* been stalking us too?”

Emma's cheeks reddened. “It was my job. But I've done my best to respect your privacy and not pry any further than necessary.”

“And what did you deem to be necessary?” Raina asked in a low voice that didn't conceal her fury.

“You know that something happened to increase supernatural phenomena all over the country. The world, really. Though it seems to be happening overseas at a slower rate.” Emma's words spilled out fast and frantic. “But what I mean is that you are a practicing witch. Your powers were negligible up until sometime last year. And in our

organization, everyone with a glimmer of clairvoyant, telekinetic, and other supernatural abilities has also seen an increase in their power. We feel it would be beneficial to do more outreach, compare notes, and offer refuge if you require it.”

Raina drummed her nails impatiently on the counter. “You didn’t answer my question. What *exactly* have you been doing in your surveillance?”

“Mostly just monitoring yours and Mr. O’Brien’s stores and the perimeters of your properties to check the frequency and potency of power when you practice your craft,” Emma said as if that wasn’t still a violation of their privacy. “We never trespass on your property. Unlike another individual we’ve noticed watching your coven as well.”

“We’re aware of that one,” Raina said flatly, not elaborating.

“Then surely you see that you may be in need of protection,” Emma insisted. “Ms. Callahan, I swear that the Nightwatch Society only has the best intentions and wants to ensure your safety.”

“A whole lotta people claiming they care about our safety,” Alma muttered.

“Yep,” Raina grumbled in agreement. “Join the club. Leave your card. We’ll get in touch when or if we feel it is beneficial to do so. Now, unless you’re going to buy anything, we’d appreciate it if you left our store.”

Emma blinked at them and shifted her feet, clearly not expecting her overture to be rejected. “But Ms. Callahan, I don’t think you understand the danger you could be in. The man who is watching you is...”

“Is what?” Raina prodded, curious to know what this society knew about Valentin, but nowhere near ready to reveal what she and her coven knew.

“He could be dangerous.” The woman was insistent, but still evasive.

“We can handle him.”

“Begging your pardon, but I’m not certain you can.” Emma fidgeted with her bracelet made of shiny hematite beads.

“Why not?” Raina dared her to elaborate.

“I’m sorry, I’m not permitted to divulge that information to non-members.” Emma looked down sullenly before once more giving Raina and Alma a pleading look. “But if you join us...”

“I already said I’d discuss that with my coven. Good day, Ms. Hoffen.”

At first, it looked like Emma would either argue or spit out the obvious fact that her society also observed vampires but then her shoulders slumped, and she left the store without another word.

“Wow,” Alma stared out the windows at the retreating figure. “Do you think we should send Xochitl another email about whatever that was?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think I’ll bother her with that right away.” Raina thought carefully. “While this paranormal investigation society clearly knows about vampires but was cagey about letting that info out, they don’t seem to know what prompted the increase in magic while we do.”

Alma nodded. “I did get the vibe that they have no clue what caused it. And she seemed more sincere than Valentin *or* Rage of Angels. Both the vampires and the band are hiding a lot of information, and I’m getting sick of it.”

“Me too.” Raina paced behind the counter. “I plan on having a serious talk with Xochitl and Aurora when they come. I don’t care how much I love their music and the magic they’ve awoken in us. They can’t keep using us as pawns in a game they won’t explain. Also,” she went back to her laptop and logged into the witches’ message board. “I’m gonna do a little bit of investigating on this Nightwatch Society. See if any of our connections have been approached, and also call a certain Voodoo Queen tomorrow.”

Claudette Fontaine hadn’t texted Raina yet for the password to the message board. She may not be interested in networking with other magic users, but Raina intended on giving her a call and asking if Emma or someone else approached her.

The door chime tinkled as another person entered the shop. This one was a regular customer, not a witch that Raina could determine so far, but one of those woo chicks who made essential oils and soaps and said “*Namaste*” to everyone.

The rest of the afternoon was pretty busy, and Alma and Raina weren't able to close until after seven.

By the time they locked up the store, their stomachs were growling. After a quick text to Jack and Cinna, they met at the Waffle House for dinner. While Raina devoured her covered and smothered hashbrowns, Alma told their coven sister and brother about Xochitl Leonine's strange email and the visit from the Nightwatch Society woman.

Jack and Cinna were as excited as Alma and Raina at the prospect of helping Aurora Lee make wedding plans and equally intrigued at the mention of Xochitl's mysterious uncle. But they were more interested than Raina and Alma in the Nightwatch Society woman's offer to meet and visibly tantalized at the prospect of joining a secret society. It took all of Raina's leadership skills to convince them to be cautious and learn more about The Nightwatch Society before agreeing to meet with them.

The sun had set by the time they left the restaurant. Raina groaned to see Valentin leaning against her car. "Did you even have time to feed?"

The vampire smirked and put his hand over his heart. "I'm touched that you care."

"I just want to make sure that you aren't planning on biting one of us."

"And now you wound me." Valentin gave her an unfairly sexy pout. "Ms. Callahan, I told you that your safety is of utmost importance to me. Now, may I have a ride, or will you make me walk?"

“Can’t you fly?”

His laughter held the texture of roughened velvet. “That is a rare ability with my kind.”

Raina wanted to ask more about what he could do but held her face in an impassive mask. “I guess you’ll have to take an Uber, then.”

With that, she and Alma got in her little Nissan Leaf and drove home. But when they pulled into the narrow driveway, Valentin was waiting on the curb, just outside the protective wards.

Raina glared at him as she got out of the car, noting that he remained outside the barrier. “I thought you couldn’t fly.”

“I can’t.”

“Did you turn into a bat then?” Alma asked him. “Or teleport?”

“I have my ways.” Valentin stood and dusted off his jeans. “You may as well invite me in.”

“Hell no,” Raina said as she shut her car door. “I’ve seen enough movies.”

The vampire laughed. “I don’t need an invitation to go inside your house. I’ve been in there before. You both have interesting taste in art. I especially like the movie posters. I’d just appreciate it if you to let down your ward.”

“No.”

His pout twisted things beneath her ribs. “I am tired of being outside.”

“Then go home.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

Raina threw up her hands in exasperation, and she and Alma went into the house. They tried to ignore the fact that a vampire was lurking outside and watch a movie, but ended up turning it off and going to bed early. Despite her exhaustion, Raina tossed and turned for an hour, countless questions burning in her mind. She gave up on sleep, put on her robe, and went outside. Valentin was still sitting on the curb, reading a book.

He looked up with a smirk. “I’m glad you’re here to alleviate my boredom.”

“Who is Xochitl’s uncle?” Raina demanded, marching up to him.

Valentin’s eyes widened, and he visibly shuddered. “Probably one of the most terrifying beings in existence. I don’t know how much I’m allowed to tell you about him.” He sighed. “I honestly am sorry. I hate all these unknowns and uncertainties.”

“Me too.” She thought of her own concerns with the Nightwatch Society visitor and Xochitl’s email that gave her more questions than answers. Remembering the email, she found herself blurting, “Xochitl said you were watching me during the backstage meet and greet back in February. She said you looked like you wanted to eat me. What did she mean by that?”

The vampire’s lips curved in a wicked smile. “Exactly that.”

“But what—”

Suddenly, he stood behind her. Too late, she realized she'd stepped past the protective barrier. Valentin's fingertips swept her hair to the side, and his lips grazed her neck as he whispered, “If you're asking if I want to sink my teeth into your pretty neck and taste your powerful blood, the answer is yes.”

Before she could respond, he appeared in front of her, his green eyes glowing like dark emeralds. “Or, if you're asking if I want to part your luscious thighs and plunge my tongue into your plump pussy until you scream my name in pleasure, the answer is also yes.”

Raina shivered uncontrollably as the mental picture he painted sent frissons of arousal jolting between her legs.

“Of course, I will not do either unless you ask me to,” he finished while his eyes continued to blaze emerald flame.

Finally, her faculties recovered enough for her to pull away and step back into the safety of her barrier. “Just because I'm fat doesn't mean I have low enough self-esteem to fall for your attempts to flatter me.”

Valentin's eyes hardened. “Just because society often lauds thinner women as paragons of beauty doesn't mean I have to change my own personal tastes. Nor does it make you any less beautiful. Furthermore, I've never felt the need to feign attraction to someone. My flirtations are sincere. It's one thing if my advances aren't welcome, but quite another if you think I'm a liar.”

For a moment, Raina was dumbstruck at his impassioned rebuttal. Although her heart warmed at the fact that a sexy creature like him honestly found her attractive, her mind dreaded the disadvantage that truth would cause. Doing her best to sound nonchalant, she spread her hands in mock surrender. “Fine. I believe you. But for now, I think we should keep things professional.”

“I was only answering your question,” Valentin said with a wicked grin. At her glare, he sighed. “Very well. What else would you like to know?”

“How are Xochitl and Rage of Angels mixed up with vampires and magic in the first place? Is it her uncle?”

“Strange as it sounds, from what I’ve heard so far, no. Aside from that, we’re back to the infuriating dilemma of my not knowing how much I’m allowed to tell you.” At her angry glare, his tone softened further. “How about we make a deal? I understand that Aurora Lee will be visiting in six to eight weeks to start planning her wedding. Xochitl is supposed to accompany her. When they come, I—no, *we* will demand they allow me to explain what is going on. There’s something else they promised to show me in exchange for something they want. I will ask that they show you as well.”

Raina pondered his words and used a breath of intuitive magic to gauge their truth. “Sounds good. Then we’ll both be less in the dark. But what do you want in return?”

“A little patience and understanding,” Valentin said softly. “Also, I do worry about you during the day. Would you please

tell me if anyone approaches you or any member of your coven regarding your magic?”

She closed her eyes and decided to tread carefully. “Do you mean like those government goons we talked about last night? Or are there civilian outfits too?”

He frowned as she watched him weigh out his words. “Paranormal investigators have been around since the dawn of history. Most are charlatans or fools playing a game they don’t believe in. But there are some serious organizations with money and power. Some may even be benign, but as a paranormal entity myself, I wouldn’t trust them. Who knows what they want?”

“Maybe safety in numbers?” That seemed to be the main reason Emma had for wanting her coven to join. Raina didn’t mention that they’d explicitly said they offered safety from vampires.

“Perhaps.” Valentin nodded curtly before he added, “But maybe you’re too optimistic and trusting.”

The accusation stung, but she refused to let him see that. “Says the vampire who’s been stalking me for months and wants me to trust him.”

“That’s fair.” He dipped his head in a formal acknowledgment. “But I wouldn’t be here right now if you hadn’t brashly told Rage of Angels that you were a witch with growing powers in *this* vampire’s hearing range.”

Raina’s jaw dropped. “*That’s* why they chose you to watch us?”

“Honestly, after catching me looking like I wanted to eat you, their original plan was to assign someone else to watch you to keep you safe from me.” His burnished hair hung in his face, giving him an unbearably sexy look when he raised his face to smirk at her before he shook his head ruefully. “But then Xochitl’s uncle had the brilliant notion that the one who could keep you safest from me *is* me.”

She blinked at him in confusion. “That makes no sense.”

“It does when you take into account that I’m afraid of him.” His casual admittance of fear was frightening in its own way. “Any other vampire hired to watch you wouldn’t keep me away from you. But knowing what that creature could do to me if I displease him has me determined to follow his orders.”

Raina’s curiosity about Xochitl’s uncle increased even as she grew nervous about the prospect of meeting him. Or *had* she met him? There had been so many powerful and beautiful beings on Rage of Angels’ tour bus that fateful day when her coven met them. And now, after learning just how much Valentin feared the guy, she couldn’t help but feel guilty that because she complained to Xochitl, this scary being would be coming to see Valentin soon.

Hopefully, he’d just call or email.

Valentin rose from the curb. “As much as I enjoy spending time with you, it is getting late and you should rest. We can talk more tomorrow evening.”

A thousand more questions raced through her mind even as exhaustion weighed her down. “All right. Good night,

Valentin.”

He gave her another one of those old-world half-bows.
“Good night, Raina.”

She turned and headed back across her narrow lawn, then paused at the door and turned back to face him. “I won’t replenish this outer ward. Then in a night or two, you should be able to sit on the bench in the backyard.”

Raina closed the door behind her before he could respond. Was it wise to be striking up a friendship with a vampire who’d been stalking her and shamelessly admitted that he wanted to drink her blood and fuck her?

CHAPTER SIX

When Valentin rose from his concealed lair the next evening, he found he still couldn't stop smiling. Claudette had been right to have him stop the deception and tell Raina the truth. Well, as much truth as he was able at the moment. At that thought, he checked his laptop meant solely for vampire matters, to see if anything had come from the Thirteenth Elder. If Delgarias did indeed follow his niece's request and commanded Valentin to "back off," Valentin would need to re-strategize. Of course, he may also be able to get some answers on how much he could tell Raina.

But aside from last week's email from Xochitl announcing that she and some cohorts would be entering his territory in the fall for Aurora Lee's wedding preparations and that she'd fulfill her end of the bargain at that time, there was nothing in his inbox.

Hearing nothing was somewhat a relief and gave him more time to get to know Raina on a more personal level before the witch and her coven were plunged into complicated vampire politics, an interdimensional war, and an otherworldly prophecy. Valentin hoped to at least get a first date with Raina before subjecting her to those messes.

Stomach roiling with hunger, he dressed and found his meal outside a jazz bar on the way to his club. His second, Eniel awaited him in the office along with Calixto, his chief

enforcer, and Angelique, his third in command. Both vampires wore foreboding scowls.

Angelique spoke first. “My lord, there have been more sightings of rogues infiltrating the city.”

“This is New Orleans. It’s become somewhat of a mecca for vampires since the late twentieth century. Did any of you run them off?”

Most Lord Vampires captured and executed rogue vampires because they were usually exiled from their former lords for good reason, but Valentin didn’t care to do so unless he absolutely had to. Not when so many came here naively hoping for a haven. So, he had them chased off unless a rare one had a valid appeal and sincere intention to pledge fealty to him.

“They fled at the sight of my posse,” Calixto answered, still frowning. “But these weren’t ordinary rogues. I think they were members of the Order of Eternal Night.”

“*Merde!*” Valentin rapped his fist on the table. “The cult usually keeps to rural areas and neutral grounds. If they’re sniffing around our city, that could mean they’re expanding. Hire more troops and increase patrols. If you find one, capture them alive.”

He made a mental note to send messages to the Lords of Baton Rouge and Lafayette as well. After hearing the rest of the nightly report, Valentin headed downstairs to check on the club. Halfway down the stairs, he froze as his knees turned to liquid and his head swam with dizziness.

“What the hell?” He hadn’t felt dizzy for at least a century, and that had been after going for three nights without feeding.

His stomach lurched with a spinning sensation, then his vision went black. Valentin felt this horrific rushing around his body like he was falling. Then his senses stabilized, and he was able to open his eyes.

Raina sat before him, a ring of candles atop a chalk and salt circle separating them. Valentin looked around and saw that he was in her living room. The flatscreen TV, couch, and framed horror movie posters were incongruous with the occult trappings around him.

She spoke first, her eyes wide. “Holy shit, it worked!”

He stared at her, incredulous. “Did you just use your magic to summon me?”

“I did!” she declared proudly. “I couldn’t very well try this spell on someone else. They’d be scared shitless. And you were on your way here anyway, so I saved you a trip.”

“I thought you didn’t want me in your home.”

“Not in uncontrolled circumstances, I don’t. But this way, you’re confined to my circle.” Some devilish glint in her eyes indicated that she had other motives.

He wondered if this was revenge for his refusal to stop following her, or for his less than proper attempt to seduce her last night. Valentin tried to step out of her circle, but it was just as solid and impassable as the barrier she and Alma had made around their property.

“Most impressive.” He did his best to conceal the fact that she’d upended him and blown his mind. “Now that you have me, what are you going to do with me?”

A brief flash of uncertainty in her eyes revealed that she hadn’t thought that far. Then she recovered her confident poise. “Release you, of course.”

With a word, an eloquent gesture, and a blast of power, Valentin’s vision blackened again, and he felt that uncomfortable sensation of falling again before he found himself back on the stairs in his club.

“*Mon Dieu!*” he whispered, placing a hand on the wall until the rest of the dizziness abated. He didn’t know whether he should be infuriated or proud of her.

Both. Definitely both.

Along with the hurricane disruption, this new ability of Raina’s was also something he should probably report to Delgarias immediately. But the moment he considered the implications of what Raina had done, Valentin knew he couldn’t tell anyone, much less the Thirteenth Elder. If any of the Elders learned that a witch had the power to summon and trap a vampire, they’d have Raina imprisoned or killed.

Since the Thirteenth Elder had commanded Valentin to keep the witches safe, not telling him about this was actually following Delgarias’s orders to the letter.

Valentin continued down the stairs and looked in on the club, addressing the latest questions and concerns as quickly as possible before he rushed to Raina’s house. She waited for

him on her small covered porch, pacing nervously. When she saw him, she froze, eyeing him warily. Seeing her clearly fearing his retaliation soothed his wounded ego somewhat.

He gave her a sarcastic slow clap, then bowed before her. “Impressive trick, witch.”

Raina smiled sweetly. “That’s payback for violating my will and privacy, vampire.”

“I thought we’d agreed on a truce last night. That you’d grant me understanding and patience and get to know each other while we wait for Xochitl and her people to sort things out.” Worry churned his gut. Had she changed her mind?

“Yes. But I wanted you to know what I can do if you try playing games with me.”

There was a bit of logic missing from her claim, especially when he remembered her own shock that her spell worked, but Valentin let it go. “So, are you going to keep me on your curb tonight again?”

“No. I promised you the bench in the backyard. But Alma and I are supposed to be meeting Jack and Cinna at their house to do a ritual.” At his frown, she added quickly, “It’s not the banishing spell we’d planned on doing on you before you came clean with us. We’re recharging our crystals and other implements along with ourselves. And since I know you plan on following us anyway, you can ride in my car if you want.”

Valentin tried to hide a smile but mostly failed. He was getting further with her. But when Alma came out, giving him a distrustful scowl, he learned that he’d need to further prove

himself to the rest of Raina's coven. That fact was further demonstrated when he was banished to Jack's driveway. Forbidden from entering the house or the large fenced backyard where the witches practiced their most powerful spells, spells that Valentin had sensed and deduced the intent with his hearing but that he'd never witnessed. There wasn't even the tiniest gap in Jack's fence, a fact Valentin often cursed even though he knew it made them safer from the wrong eyes. Once again, he wished he'd been blessed with the power of flight.

When the witches finished, they invited him to accompany them out to dinner. To Valentin's amusement, they went to an Italian restaurant notorious for the amount of garlic in their food. He couldn't resist taking a big bite of garlic bread just to see the shocked looks on the witches' faces. He'd have a stomachache from hell later, but it was worth it.

"I love garlic," Valentin explained after swallowing the decadent buttery morsel. "Most of us do. We just have trouble digesting anything but water and blood."

"That is very interesting," Cinna said, the wary edge was gone from her voice.

Jack nodded, but from the firm set of his jaw, Valentin knew that the previous good rapport he'd had with the guy when they'd met at Bloodletting had faded. And he completely understood why. Valentin hadn't exactly been subtle about his extra interest in Raina. He even admired Jack for being protective of those who were close to him.

Jack's lips quirked in a sly smile before he asked, "What about stakes and crosses?"

"Why do you go straight to wanting to know how to kill me?" Valentin asked in a mock wounded tone before grinning. "Crosses don't do anything. Stakes? It depends, and I'll leave it at that."

"Do they need to be silver?" Alma asked.

"No. I'm not a werewolf. I'm not even certain whether those exist." Valentin took a deep drink from his glass of water in hopes it would thin out the bit of garlic bread he'd eaten. "But enough about me, at least while we're out in public. Tell me about your work. I understand you and Raina own a sort of apothecary, and Jack and Cinna own a store for other witching needs."

Throughout the meal, the witches regaled them with the details of their businesses, and Valentin commiserated with them and compared his experience with running a club. But after they left the restaurant, the conversation returned to his vampirism when Raina asked him to demonstrate how he feeds.

If anyone but Raina had asked, Valentin might have refused. But he was hungry. So he led them behind the restaurant and waited until he spotted a human walking alone. The first person, a middle-aged man who moved with a slight shuffle, he had to pass on.

"This poor man has Parkinson's. We don't feed on the weak or the ill," he explained to the witches. "We don't want to kill our food supply."

A few minutes later, a drunk man stumbled by, and Valentin captured his gaze and had his teeth in the man's wrist in mere seconds. He willed the unwitting blood donor to feel absolute bliss. As he drank, he looked up and locked eyes with Raina. His preternatural vision made him able to see her cheeks pinken in the darkness.

After healing the drunk's wound, he released his mind and handed him a twenty-dollar bill. "You dropped this."

After the man thanked Valentin in a slurred voice, he glared at Raina and her coven. "What're you freaks lookin' at?"

Valentin waved him off and stumbled a little as the alcohol from the blood hit him.

"Holy shit," Cinna said, "Are you drunk now?"

"A little. I may have saved that man's life, sobering him a little."

They went back to Jack's house and were dropped off by Raina's car. The ride home was mostly silent. When they got to Raina's house, Valentin was relegated to the bench in the backyard. But he didn't mind. He'd already gotten further with Raina than he'd expected in such a short time.

The next evening was even better because she and Alma grilled food out in the yard, and he suspected it was because they didn't want him to be lonely. Then Raina remained with him on the bench until midnight. She brushed off his attempts to flirt and didn't mention anything about how watching him

feed had affected her, but he knew she was intrigued by him. And that was good enough for now.

The evening after that, he paid a visit to Claudette.

“Your witch called me yesterday,” she told him after granting him entry past her wards and into her home.

“You gave her your number?”

“Yes. I told her she could call me if you misbehaved in any way.” The Voodoo Queen’s eyes danced with mischief.

“Did she say I did?”

“*Did you?*”

He thought of his pressing at Raina’s barriers, cajoling her into drawing them back, and his frequent urging her to let him Mark her. “A little.”

“Well, she must have decided to handle you herself for now.”

Valentin shook his head, plopped down on her couch, and reached for a strawberry candy. “That minx. She didn’t mention this conversation to me.”

“I’m sure there’s a lot she’s not telling you,” Claudette countered with a wry smile. “And I’m not sure you deserve to know it.”

“Why not?” Valentin tried to sound bland.

“Because you’re in a stalemate when it comes to how much you’re allowed to tell her on your end, it’s only fair that she holds off until she knows everything. Have you told her about Aisthanesthai yet?”

Valentin sucked in a breath at the mention of the other world that he was supposed to pledge to fight for. “*You* know about Aisthanesthai?”

“Of course. My granddaughter took me to see it.” Claudette spoke with casual cheer as if they were discussing the Carribean or the Swiss Alps. “Lovely place. If my roots weren’t so deep here, I’d consider relocating. The two moons are absolutely breathtaking. And they hold so much more power than ours.”

He opened his mouth to tell her about his ultimatum with Xochitl Leonine regarding him not pledging his fealty to her until he saw Aisthanesthai but held his tongue. Claudette was probably close to her, given that her granddaughter had been friends with Xochitl since their adolescence. Instead, he returned the subject to Raina. “Are you going to tell me anything about Raina’s visit?”

“Only that she’s a very sweet, very powerful woman, and worthy of your love. If you proceed slowly and respectfully with your courtship, you may be worthy of hers.”

The mention of love made Valentin’s gut churn uncomfortably. He didn’t know if he was ready to face that probability. Being infatuated with Claudette and having her not return his feelings had stung badly enough. And even though he’d only been observing since Raina last February and then only now was starting to get to know her, he had the unnerving feeling that what he already felt for her was only going to grow stronger until the ache became unbearable.

He stood and bowed. “As always, it has been a pleasure to be honored with your company. I have other business to attend to, so I must depart.”

Claudette laughed and called after him, “You can’t run away from your heart forever.”



Summer burned away to Autumn, and Valentin slowly worked his way into the coven’s good graces. There were a few setbacks, such as the time Raina cast a spell that rendered him mute for an entire night after he’d pressed her too hard on trying once more to convince her to let him Mark her. And then there was the time he’d accidentally startled her outside the bookstore and she’d made a rain cloud form above his head and follow him everywhere for an hour. He apologized profusely and took care to alert her of his presence from then on.

Though Valentin hadn’t managed to persuade Raina to share either her blood or her bed, he eventually formed a tentatively friendly rapport with the coven. He’d even convinced them to help him plan his annual Halloween Ball at Bloodletting.

The four had gleefully made use of his bank card and ordered decorations, a live band they promised would be perfect, prizes for a costume contest, and themed appetizers and drink ideas. He was even able to trust them with the keys

to the club so one of them could be there during the day as each of the decorations was delivered and pick up the Halloween-themed confections the day before and bring them to the club. Every three days, they'd come to the club before it opened and put up more and more decorations, saving some of the more spectacular ones for the big night.

As a result of the growing trust, the wards Raina and Alma made had gradually receded back around their little shotgun house. Raina had even given him permission to sit on the covered porch while he kept his watch. Which was a world better than getting rained on. In return, he didn't dog her heels as closely and gave her some time off from being surveilled, so long as she promised to call or text him if she heard or sensed even the slightest possibility of a threat.

Speaking of threats, reports of rogue vampires belonging to the Order of Eternal Night invading the city were increasing. Valentin gave the order to capture them instead of his usual policy of chasing them off.

And he still had to worry about the dangers his witches faced during daylight hours. He knew the Nightwatch Society had been sniffing around them, despite Raina evading telling him. The secret organization was usually nothing more than a nuisance, but all it would take was a few leadership changes, and they'd become dangerous and cozying up with vampire hunters.

But Valentin pretended he wasn't aware of their recruitment efforts for now because, firstly, he didn't want to goad Raina into rebelling against him and joining the

Nightwatch Society out of spite. Secondly, from feeding on one of the members, he'd discovered that Jack and Cinna were on the verge of accepting an invitation to tour one of the Society's safehouses. However, he'd also determined that when it came to vampires, the Society's mission was still to passively observe them. In fact, they were considering recruiting his kind.

And perhaps he feigned ignorance about the Society because he didn't want to dampen the fun he was having with Raina. The Halloween Ball was only a week away, and he was determined to take their uncertain relationship to the next level.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Halloween

Raina gasped as the stretch limo pulled up in front of her house. “Damn, I knew he was sending us a car, but I didn’t think he’d be that extra.”

“You didn’t?” Alma gave her a wry smile. “He’s rich and infatuated with you. This is Classic Wooing 101.”

“Stop teasing her,” Cinna scolded. “Besides, we earned the VIP treatment after helping him plan this big party.”

“But did he *really* need our help?” Jack interjected. “He’s been throwing Halloween parties since before we were born.”

“He wanted feedback from today’s goths, though.” Raina tried to hide her defensive tone. “And it’s not exactly safe for him to get close to just any goth for that.”

“We’re starting to age out of his club’s main demographic, though.”

“Who cares?” Cinna nudged him. “I want to check out the inside of the limo!”

A liveried driver opened the door for them and they were treated to red velvet cushioned chairs, matching velvet cushions, and red LED lights running down the roof, the floorboards, and the mini-fridge that held luxury drinks.

Raina started with ginger ale, knowing she was already getting too old to pre-game with one of the tempting wines in a bucket of ice.

There was also a flat-screen TV on the wall beneath the window to the driver's compartment, but they didn't turn it on. Instead, they spent the drive alternating between luxuriating in their surroundings and grinning at each other in triumph.

The limo took them around back to a private entrance. Valentin waited for them, taking Raina's hand like an old-world gentleman helping a lady down from a carriage. She had to admit that the action charmed her.

When they were all gathered on the VIP floor, still not open to anyone else until Eniel and Lucas, the head bouncers, ordered the doors open for the night, Valentin walked around Raina and her friends, admiring their costumes.

Raina had chosen hers with extra special care. She wore a black velvet late nineteenth-century ballgown, complete with hoops and a corset that made it tough to breathe but pushed her breasts up magnificently. A black lace cameo choker, jet earrings, and black lace gloves completed her outfit.

Alma was dressed as Winnifred from *Hocus Pocus*, Jack was Art the Clown from the *Terrifier* movies, and Cinna was the nun from the *Conjuring* movies. Raina felt a momentary pang of regret for not joining her friends with their movie characters theme, but she'd seen the plus-sized black velvet ballgown at one of her favorite shops and had to have it. Which meant she had to wear it *somewhere*.

And...she'd wanted to look pretty tonight.

Valentin took Raina's hand and brushed a light kiss over her knuckles, making her knees weaken. "You look exquisite, *mon cher*."

"So do you." Her cheeks heated as she failed to hide the tremor in her voice.

As if knowing what she'd wear tonight, Valentin looked like he'd walked off the set of the 90s version of *Interview With the Vampire*. His russet hair fell in soft waves across the shoulders of a black velvet tailcoat. Beneath was a red silk waistcoat embroidered with black and gold. The elaborate snow-white cravat around his neck made her worry about it getting bloodstains from his next meal. Black velvet knee breeches, which should have looked ridiculous on anyone else but were sexy on him, and shiny leather low-heeled shoes completed his look.

Valentin gave her a wicked smile as if he could tell she was checking him out, then belatedly turned to her friends. "Your costumes are also fantastic. I cannot thank you all enough for helping me plan this thing. Would you like a drink before we open the doors and the music gets too loud for conversing?"

"As if you can't hear what everyone around you says no matter how loud the music is," Alma told him. "But yes, I'd like a sangria."

They headed for the bar and ordered their drinks. Jacques, the bartender who was usually working on nights when Raina and her coven hung out at Bloodletting, greeted them with a broad grin. His fangs gleamed in the light from the overhead lamps.

“I really like the decorations you four helped Valentin choose for tonight. And the little ice trays that make skull and bat-shaped cubes were a nice touch. But who came up with the special drink menu?”

“I did,” Jack said. “I bartended while I was at college.”

Jacques’s eyes widened, and he leaned forward. “You’ve been coming here every week for over two months and are only now telling me this?”

The two began exchanging bartending stories while Cinna rolled her eyes and wandered off with Alma to admire the decorations before they’d be obscured by the incoming crowd.

Now Raina was relatively alone with Valentin. Eyeing his eighteenth-century costume and remembering his age, a question that had been haunting her mind for the past few weeks could no longer be denied.

“Which side were you on in the Civil War?” she blurted.

Valentin gave her a long stare that took her dread up another notch before he answered. “Any vampire living today who supported the confederacy would never admit it.” He gave her a wry smile. “Furthermore, vampires as a society have been taught as well as obligated by law to stay out of human affairs. Not to mention the fact that warzones are dangerous places to be. The Lord Vampire of Atlanta back in 1864 was burnt to a crisp when Sherman torched the city.”

“What about slavery? Did you own slaves back then?” Again, she held her breath in fear of the answer.

“Of course not,” Valentin said vehemently. “None of our kind did. Despite Anne Rice’s portrayal of a vampire being an antebellum plantation owner in *Interview With the Vampire*, it would have been sheer idiocy to be in that position for several reasons. It is against our laws for humans to know about our kind. Having humans in a subservient position that both forces them to stay near us and foments natural hostility is *asking* to be found out and destroyed. One may seek a human’s loyalty and discretion with good pay and keep them at a distance when their help is not needed, and that’s as far as our business dealings with humans go. Furthermore, at least where I’m concerned, slavery is an evil practice.”

Before Raina could fully bask in relief that Valentin wasn’t a former Confederate slaveholder, Eniel approached the bar. The bouncer’s only acknowledgment of the holiday was a bowtie shaped like a bat. Otherwise, he was in his usual uniform of skin-tight black muscle shirt, black jeans, and black work boots.

“My—ah, Mr. Scarasse? It is time to open the club.”

Valentin nodded. “Go ahead, Eniel. And tell the DJ he can start as soon as the live band finishes their sound check. Once the crowd flows to a trickle, you can switch with Jameson and have your lunch.”

“Yes, m—*sir*.”

Eniel glared at the witches before his professional mask returned, and he went back downstairs. Raina was ninety percent certain that the bouncer was also a vampire. Having a vampire dislike her so much made her nervous. At least

Valentin seemed to have authority over him. The guy had kept stumbling over how to address him in front of the witches.

Valentin finished his glass of water and stood. “And now I must get to work. Enjoy yourselves.”

Moments later, the building was flooded with music and eager, chattering voices as people poured into the club. Raina looked over the wrought iron railing of the VIP floor to the main level, admiring everyone’s costumes. Halloween was her favorite. Aside from her love of all things spooky, the combination of her wanting to be someone else sometimes and her enjoyment of dressing up made this the perfect holiday.

The dance floor filled and stayed that way as the DJ played songs by Bauhaus, Rage of Angels, Vicious, and Deity.

When “*Darkening of the Light*” by Concrete Blonde came on, Valentin appeared at her shoulder. At some point, he’d lost the ribbon holding his hair back, and those flame-colored locks framed his face beautifully. “May I have this dance?”

Raina fought back the swoony feeling that came over her every time he turned on the old-world charm and nodded. However, she was unable to fight the hot and cold shivers at the feel of his arm around her, his hand at the small of her back and his other hand holding hers, guiding her in a waltz that was perfect with the ballad.

Although she made it a habit to avoid eye contact with him, this time she found herself trapped in his gaze in a way that was primal rather than supernatural. The raw desire and appreciation in his moss-colored eyes made her belly flutter and things low in her body ache.

“Raina?” Valentin’s voice held a huskiness that deepened the ache between her thighs.

“Yes?”

He bent lower until his hair fell in a curtain between their faces. “I’d very much like to kiss you.”

His words made her breath halt, and her heart slammed against her ribcage.

If she let him kiss her, she’d sacrifice the upper hand.

If she let him kiss her, he’d gain power over her in ways she’d be unable to fight.

If she let him kiss her, her heart would never recover from the inevitable pain he’d bring when he tired of her.

“Yes,” Raina whispered, despite every instinct screaming that this was a bad idea.

But the moment his arms tightened around her, pulling her against his warm, firm body, and his lips gently pressed against hers, all the warning inner voices fell silent.

Warmth cascaded around her like sinking into a hot tub. Raina reached up and tangled her fingers in his silken hair that she’d wanted to touch for months. Valentin growled low and pressed himself tighter to her, kissing her with a fervent passion that melted her into a helpless puddle in his embrace. She could feel his erection against her belly, and the place between her thighs throbbed with the need to feel him there.

Too soon, he broke the kiss and relaxed his grip on her.

Raina's head swam with dizziness, and her liquid knees gave out. She would have collapsed if Valentin didn't steady her with a firm grip.

His smug smile made her face burn with humiliation.

Her senses recovered, and she pulled away. "If you're going to get so cocky about it, that's the last kiss you'll have from me."

"We'll see about that." He gave her another deeply formal bow and melted into the crowd, leaving her feeling bereft and conflicted.

The music faded, and the live band came on the stage. Raina went back to the bar to get a refill and find one of her friends to watch her and make sure Valentin didn't try to seduce her again tonight. She knew that having more alcohol wouldn't help her resistance, but damn it, that vampire drove her to drink.

The band ended up being really good. They played covers of older bands like Type-O Negative, Nine Inch Nails, and The Cure, and newer ones like Bleeding Vengeance, Niteblade, and Ghost. Valentin got two more dances out of her, but she held her ground and didn't let him have another kiss.

As the party wound down, Raina and her friends asked the bartender, Jacques, to tell the limo driver they were ready to go and for the car to drop them off at the Waffle House on Canal Street. When they got into the limo, Valentin was already inside, reclining against the plush cushions.

He grinned at Raina over the rim of a wineglass full of ice water. “You four weren’t planning on leaving without saying goodbye, were you?”

“Figured you were too busy,” Raina mumbled and sat across from him, leaving Jack to sit beside him instead.

The limo got a ton of stares through the window of the shabby but beloved all-night diner. Raina suddenly felt a little self-conscious as she clambered out of the luxury car, the flexible hoops in her underskirt flaring back out. The stares turned appreciative when Valentin hooked her elbow with his and escorted her into the establishment.

“Nice costumes!” a woman dressed as Flo from Progressive Insurance shouted.

As Alma, Cinna, and Jack trailed behind them, more compliments were delivered by devils, evil clowns, and even a perfect-looking Freddy Krueger. The crowd of diners and staff was so festive that the few people not wearing costumes stuck out worse than Raina had in high school. One man in particular gave Raina a strange, intense look that wasn’t quite interest but also wasn’t one of disgust at a fat girl daring to dress up. His gaze shifted to Valentin, and his eyes widened in what looked like fear before he lifted his menu to conceal his face.

The guy’s effort to hide failed. As soon as they found an empty booth, Valentin’s hand grasped Raina’s arm tightly as his eyes narrowed on the guy.

“Who is that?” she whispered.

“A rogue vampire.” Valentin frowned. “Let me sit on the outside. I need to be able to catch him if he tries to leave.”

“What’s a rogue vampire?” she whispered.

“One who either has not sworn fealty to the Lord of the City or was banished by their former Lord and thus doesn’t have a legitimate home,” Valentin said so low they strained to hear. “As he can hear us, it’s best to drop this conversation for now.”

Sure enough, Raina spotted the vampire peeking at them over the rim of his menu. His eyebrows were scrunched together in what looked like confusion. Was he perplexed at seeing a vampire openly talking about their kind with humans, or was there something else about Valentin he hadn’t expected?

The witches’ phones all chimed at the same time. Raina checked hers to see that Valentin sent them a group text. She hadn’t even seen him pull out his phone, much less compose the text.

Pretend to forget the rogue is here.

That was easier said than done, but Raina did realize she was starving. Once they gave their orders, they occupied themselves trying to converse about everything but the elephant in the room. Thank Goddess Cinna turned into a chatterbox every time she drank. She soon had them discussing which movie they should go see next.

Thankfully, the food arrived quickly, and Raina hummed with appreciation as she dug into her hash browns, cheese

grits, and biscuits & gravy. Yeah, it was all carbs, but it would absorb some of the alcohol she'd drank and ease tomorrow's hangover. More importantly, she did almost forget the presence of the rogue vampire.

When the coven was close to finishing their food and the server dropped off the check, their phones chimed again at the same time.

Another group text from Valentin.

I want you to leave one at a time. Alma goes first. Tell the driver there is a rogue in here. Cinna goes next, then Jack, then Raina. I will go last.

Valentin pulled out his wallet, giving no indication of awareness that they'd gotten his message. After he laid down a stack of bills that more than covered the bill and the usual tip, he nodded at Alma.

Instead of getting up right away, Alma pulled her travel bottle of money oil from her purse, dabbed some on her finger, then wiped it on one of the bills. Raina added a bit of skullcap to the money, an herb that attracted money gifts. Jack added a pinch of basil to deter negativity from customers, and Cinna finished the ritual with a sprinkle of clove for luck.

At Valentin's questioning look, Raina texted him:

We do this to protect servers from assholes, give them luck, and increase their tips.

The coven reached under the table, joined hands, and silently willed the ritual to complete. Then Alma got up and headed out the door. Raina's fists clenched at her sides as she

watched her best friend pass the rogue vampire, cross the length of the restaurant, and head out to the limo. Cinna kissed Jack and then headed out too. Jack got up to follow her even quicker, visibly struggling not to turn his gaze toward the other vampire.

When her coven sisters and brother were safe in the car, Raina relaxed slightly and put her hand over Valentin's, silently wishing for him to not get hurt and for whatever he had planned to go smoothly.

Then she got up, straightened her hoop skirt, and made her way past the rows of raucous tables full of people who'd also spent the evening partying.

Her hand was on the door when it happened. Strong arms looped around her waist, arms that did not belong to Valentin.

"You're coming with me, water mage," a fanatical voice intoned.

"The hell I am!" Raina retorted and drew her power to throw him off her like she'd forced Valentin away the first night they'd met.

But before she could blast the rogue away, he was torn from her so suddenly that some of the seams of her gown ripped. Raina turned to see Valentin and the limo driver surrounding the other vampire. Suddenly there was a fourth vampire, then a fifth. They'd moved too fast for her to see.

The customers and some staff held out their phones, anticipating another viral Waffle House fight video.

"Oh, *fuck*," Cinna said behind her.

Jack and Alma came running in after. “What should we do?” Jack asked.

“We help in any way we can,” Raina said firmly. “Cinna, be careful with your fire magic, though. This place is full of grease.”

Alma was ahead of them all. She extended her hands and chanted her special call to the Earth before throwing a blast at a vampire who’d been on the verge of stabbing the limo driver in the heart.

The floor bulged upward, and the offending vampire tripped and fell. Most of the crowd exclaimed and snapped pictures, but a few got up from their tables to flee.

Jack called upon air to blow another vampire into the wall. “I hope Valentin and our driver can use their vampy mind powers to erase these people’s memories.”

Another rogue vampire tried to attack Valentin from behind, but Cinna ran forward and placed her palm on his back, making him leap five feet in the air, screaming in agony. The fabric of his t-shirt had a smoking hole burnt in it, and the skin beneath was red and blistered.

The first rogue charged toward Raina again, but this time, she was ready. She blasted him with a spout of water that sent him flying backward and slammed him into the wall.

Unfortunately, that left her, and probably the others, mostly tapped out in their magic. But then the customers and staff rallied forth. Soon, the rogue vampires were being pelted with food, plates, and even chairs.

Valentin seized the dripping vampire and lifted him like a puppy by the scruff of his neck. He then hauled the rogue over the counter and shoved the vampire's face against one of the huge industrial waffle irons.

"Who sent you?" Valentin demanded over the rogue's shrieks of pain.

"Our unholy creator!" the rogue squealed. "And he'll see you severely punished for harming one of his chosen!"

Valentin rolled his eyes and uttered what had to be curses in French. "Another zealot from the Order of Eternal Night. When will you freaks get it through your thick skulls that you're not welcome in my city?"

He brought down the waffle iron again, making the vampire shriek again. The smell of burnt hair and flesh reached Raina's nostrils, and she gagged.

"Why did you try to take my woman?"

"She's not yours. There's no Mark on her—" he screamed as Valentin brought the top of the iron down again. When the lid was lifted, a bright red grid pattern was burnt into the rogue's face. "She's a water mage. We need her."

Water mage? Raina wondered at the term before glaring at the vampire. "I can do a helluva lot more than water magic, fuckhead." Even though her powers were depleted after that water spout, she stepped forward. "Try me."

The rogue struggled free of Valentin's grip and lunged for Raina. She raised a shield, and he bounced off it. Valentin seized the vampire's head and tore it off his shoulders. Blood

burbled out the creature's neck like fake lava in a kid's volcano project.

For a moment, all Raina could do was stand there and stare, frozen, as screams echoed all around her. Valentin had told her that vampires have superhuman strength, but she had no idea they were *that* strong.

Valentin dropped the rogue vampire's head, and somehow, she heard the wet thud on the tile beneath the screaming. Then Valentin's voice pulled her from her shock. "*Don't!*"

She turned to see who he was yelling at just in time to see the limo driver stake one of the other vampires with a chair. One chair leg went through the vampire's throat. The other impaled his chest.

"Fuck," Valentin muttered. "I'd wanted to capture at least one of them and find out why they keep invading my—our city."

"What about the third rogue?" Raina said, "Jack should be —" She broke off as she saw Jack leaning against the door, his face so pale the veins in his cheeks were visible.

Jack met her gaze and gave her a rueful look. "I'm sorry, I couldn't hold that one. When Valentin ripped off that one's head, he rushed me, and I couldn't fight him and hold the door at the same time. He slipped out."

Valentin sighed. "It's all right. I'd rather you be unharmed. Did anyone else get out?"

"No."

“Ok. You should sit down, Jack. Raina, Cinna, and Alma, could you guard the door?” Valentin turned to the vampire driver. “Cortland, call Angelique and Benoit. We have a lot of cleanup to do.”

A woman rose from a table and approached Valentin. “Mr. St. Scarasse? I’m Genevieve Moreau. We’ve never been formally introduced, but I would very much like to help.”

Valentin gave her a hard look that made Raina shiver. “*Merde*. You’re from the Nightwatch Society, aren’t you.”

Genevieve nodded. “I’ve sent you several emails. We’ve had problems with these intruders as well. An alliance could benefit us both.”

Valentin pinched the bridge of his nose. “Begging your pardon, Ms. Moreau, but we’re currently surrounded by humans who’ve witnessed and recorded things they shouldn’t, two corpses, blood all over the floor, and a public establishment in shambles. Unless you can erase some memories, or get a mop and wipe up this blood, I don’t want to deal with you right now.”

The Nightwatch society woman sighed and then turned to a man at the next table. “You want to delete all pictures and videos that you recorded tonight.”

“Ok,” the man said agreeably.

“The fuck?” the woman sitting by him said, “I ain’t deleting shit.”

Valentin appeared in front of her and not only captured her gaze but also bent a wide swathe of customers to his will.

“You will delete all photos, videos, and social media posts about what happened in this Waffle House tonight. You will remember this as nothing but the usual drunken brawl.”

As that section of customers obeyed, Genevieve moved on to another person while Cortland, the driver, took care of another group. Valentin finished up the rest, then he and Cortland held everyone in thrall while two more New Orleans vampires arrived, got rid of the bodies and the bloody evidence, then went in the back to deal with the security camera footage.

By the time the vampires moved on to straightening up tables and chairs and sweeping up broken glass, the customers were helping and bemoaning that they forgot to get a video of the latest Waffle House fight.

The staff looked visibly relieved as they straightened their equipment. Their server was extra pleased with her large tip. Then Valentin gave every employee a hundred.

“Damn,” Jack said on their way back to the car. “Do you always carry a stack of Benjamins on you?”

“Yes,” Valentin answered mildly. “One never knows when some cash will come in handy.”

On the ride home, Raina tried to absorb what happened tonight. The unfathomable strength Valentin had used to tear off that rogue vampire’s head, the terrifying power he and his subordinates used to manipulate the memories, actions, and minds of all the witnesses, the Mafia-like efficiency with disposing of bodies, cleaning up evidence, and paying people off.

All that made her finally understand what it meant to be involved with vampires. Only two things kept her from casting a banishing spell on Valentin.

First, that rogue vampire had been after her specifically. If not for Valentin, she'd have been carried off to what was likely a terrible fate.

Secondly, every time she looked at him, memories of his kiss haunted her mind, body, and soul.

CHAPTER EIGHT

On the ride back to the witches' homes, Valentin cursed himself. He'd wanted to take one of these intruding rogue vampires captive and interrogate them to find out why these cultists wanted to invade his city and why they wanted to take a witch as a captive. Why they wanted a water mage, as the first rogue had called Raina.

But the moment that bastard had touched Raina, Valentin had lost control over his temper. All he could think about was tearing the wretch to pieces. That foolishness had cost him more than a prisoner and a source of information. Raina's horrified look at him after he'd torn that vampire's head off burned into Valentin's memory. As would be the wary glances she cast him in the car and the distance she tried to put between them. She'd now seen an almost complete display of his power. In fact, every member of the coven aside from Jack was treating him differently since the incident.

Hopefully, Jack's apparent understanding that this was proof of Valentin's capability to protect them rather than a sign that he'd harm them.

Another downside to the Waffle House battle was that Raina probably now suspected that he was the Lord Vampire of New Orleans rather than a powerful business owner. After all, not only was the witch beautiful and powerful, but she also wasn't stupid. It hadn't escaped him that she'd noticed his

subordinates' occasional slips and how they addressed him. She'd most definitely caught his own slips, like referring to New Orleans as his city. And now the whole coven and the blasted Nightwatch Society woman had seen him acting in full capacity as Lord Vampire when doing damage control and disposing of bodies.

When the car reached Jack's and Cinna's house, Valentin turned to them, "I can have guards posted outside your home until dawn if you'd like."

Jack shook his head. "We have everything we need to defend ourselves here. All I need to do is reinforce the barrier wards. Besides, the sun will be up in a couple hours."

Before they got out of the limo, Valentin got a handshake from Jack and a reluctant smile from Cinna. Raina and Alma remained silent for the rest of the ride home.

He thought his offer of protection would be refused by this pair as well, but Alma surprised him.

"Since Raina was the one those guys were after, would you mind coming inside and hanging out with us until sunrise?"

Raina shook her head and opened her mouth to protest, but Alma squeezed her hand and gave her coven leader a stern look.

After a long pause, Raina's shoulders slumped, and she sighed in defeat. "Yes, you're welcome inside, just for tonight."

They all got out of the car, and Valentin relieved Cortland for the night. As Raina and Alma opened the wards to allow

him through, he couldn't help but be giddy at being invited inside for the first time. Though there was a slight pang of disappointment that the invitation had come from Alma and not Raina.

But progress was progress.

Still, it hurt when the moment he crossed the threshold Raina reached over to a shelf near the door and grabbed a sachet of herbs. "If you misbehave in any way, I will banish you forever. I'm gonna get out of my costume and wash the blood off. If you harm Alma while I'm gone, you don't want to know what I'll do to you."

After she left the room, he followed Alma into the kitchen. "*Mon Dieu!* Why is she suddenly treating me like I'm a danger? I thought we'd long reached the point where you all know and trust that I'm here to protect you all and would never do anything to harm her."

Alma shrugged as she filled the tea kettle with water. "I'm sure seeing you rip someone's head off with your bare hands is part of it. Not to mention erasing people's memories on a mass scale."

"Yes, I know that was...how do you say...a lot, but still, I thought she'd understand that I only did that to protect our kind and all innocent humans."

"And she'll get that soon. She's just..." Alma paused as she rummaged through a cupboard containing a collection of various looseleaf teas, not unlike Claudette's tea stash. "Wait, has anything happened between you two that's changed the dynamic of your...ah, relationship?"

“Yes.” Valentin closed his eyes and let the memory of their kiss wash over him. Damn those cultist vampires for ruining what would have been a perfect night!

When he opened his eyes, he saw Alma smirking at him. “Ok, I won’t ask what that was, but I will tell you that when there’s a dynamic shift in Raina’s relationship with a person, she is extra defensive for a while. Just ride it out and try not to do anything else that will make her skittish unless you want her to hex you again.”

Like admit that he wasn’t a regular vampire, but a Lord Vampire? Or reveal that he knew the Nightwatch Society was trying to recruit her coven? Or tell her about the existence of other worlds and that he and a large faction of vampirekind were about to go to war against their very creator?

Instead of mentioning any of that, Valentin nodded. “I’ll be aware of that.”

“Aware of what?” Raina stood in the kitchen doorway, looking adorable in her *Evil Dead* shirt, matching pajama pants, and black cat slippers.

Alma’s cheeks turned red, and she turned around quickly to fill two mesh infusers.

Valentin recovered faster. “That you two might not be the most hospitable given that you’re usually in bed at this hour.”

“Damn right,” Raina said with a yawn. “At least tomorrow isn’t a work day. We’re always closed on All Hallows Day to rest up for certain rituals. Alma, I can take over with the tea so you can get out of your costume.”

When Alma left the kitchen, Valentin's stomach gave another light tremor at being alone with Raina. Would this witch hold him enthralled forever?

"Can you drink tea?" she asked him as she pulled mugs from a cupboard.

"For the most part. A friend of mine even has a special blend I can fully drink. But even if the kind you're making won't agree with me, I appreciate the warmth on my hands."

"What's in the special blend your friend makes?"

"She won't tell me." Valentin couldn't help but pout over that fact.

Raina arched one of her perfect eyebrows. "*She*, huh? Sounds like she wants you to keep coming to her for that tea."

"Probably, but our relationship is platonic, I assure you." He paused, then grinned. "Are you jealous?"

Her cheeks pinkened, and she abruptly turned to watch the tea kettle. "No. I was just teasing you." She turned back to him. "Is it that voodoo priestess?"

"Claudette? Yes. And before you ask, her tea isn't magicked. She also has these strawberry candies that I love."

Unbelievably Raina gaped at him in shock, then started giggling. When she recovered herself, she said, "You like old lady candy."

"Those are for old ladies?"

"Not exactly. They usually keep them in big bowls or in their purses to give to their grandkids."

“She *is* a grandmother.” Valentin chuckled and shook his head. “Tease me all you like. I think they’re tasty.”

“Oh, they are.” The kettle whistled, so Raina took it off the stove burner. “What kind of tea do you prefer? Alma and I are going with our sleep blend. Most sleepy teas have mint, which we both hate, so we custom-make our own. It has chamomile, white peony, lavender, and pear.”

“I’d be pleased to try it. The kind Claudette made me was a blend of floral, citrus, and some fruit that I think might be a type of berry.”

“Speaking of Claudette,” she said as she loaded a third tea infuser for Valentin. “I’ve been trying to find her. She hasn’t answered my calls aside from once, shortly after when we’d first met. I hope I haven’t done anything to upset her.”

“I doubt you’ve done anything wrong. Claudette is impossible to reach most of the time.” Valentin fought back his nervousness at the prospect of those two talking with each other and instead regarded her with a teasing smile. “Why are you trying to get in touch with her? To talk about me?”

“Don’t be so full of yourself.” Raina poured boiling water into three mugs—one had depicted the infamous red curtains and chevron-patterned floor from *Twin Peaks*, another had the pattern of the lament configuration from *Hellraiser*, and the third showed a still of the bizarre scene in *The Shining* with the ghost of a man in a bear or dog costume kneeling in front of another man on a bed. She put the tea infusers in each to steep and handed Valentin the odd *Shining* mug with a light

smirk as if this mug was an inside joke. “I wanted to know if she knew anything about some other...covens in the area.”

Another half-truth. Valentin hid a disappointed frown at her still not being honest with him. And he could guess who Raina wanted to ask Claudette about. That blasted Nightwatch Society. If Raina would just open up, he'd tell her that Claudette and likely every other voodooienne in the city didn't trust the wealthy organization of psychics, telekinetics, academics, and spies. He frowned again. That woman, Genevieve, had powers of hypnosis on the level of a vampire. Had their powers *also* increased along with those of the magic-users? *That* was a worrisome thought. Their surveillance capabilities would dramatically rise, as well as their recruiting abilities. Hell, if the Nightwatch Society had a member who was even more powerful than that Genevieve, they could persuade a youngling vampire into entering their safehouse and telling them everything they knew.

Alma emerged, fresh-faced and cozy in *Ghostbusters* pajamas and a fluffy blue robe. She smiled at Valentin's hands cupping his hot mug. “I didn't know you could drink tea.”

“Only a little.” He took a sip of tea and hummed in appreciation. “This is very good. Since you two seem to like movies so much, perhaps that's how we may pass the remainder of the night?”

Raina and Alma exchanged intent looks that made Valentin wish he could read minds before they both agreed and took their mugs into the living room.

While Alma rattled off the options of what was available to watch, Valentin studied Raina. Normally she was bursting with questions for him. But aside from asking about his tea preferences and where to find Claudette, she hadn't asked him anything else. That was especially suspicious, given all she'd seen him do and heard him say this night.

And not a word about the Nightwatch Society woman? When he knew damn well that they were courting her coven? If he wasn't holding his own secrets, he'd demand to know why she was hiding things from him.

They eventually settled on watching *Twilight*, a choice that was most certainly intended to torture him. Their intent backfired, as Valentin considered that film franchise among his favorite unintentional comedies.

Soon, the three of them were laughing themselves senseless at Valentin's remarks on what messy, wasteful eaters the vampires were, the ridiculousness of them going to high school, the terrible execution of trying to convey that Bella smelled irresistible to Edward when the acting indicated that she smelled awful. The awkwardness of his skin being cold, the all-around idiocy of the vampire behaving like a boyfriend made out of red flags, and of course, the *sparkling*.

He would have loved to watch the sequel, but unfortunately, dawn was approaching. "Could we do this again sometime soon? I've forgotten how pleasant it is to abandon one's obligations and worries for a couple hours and simply laugh at something inane."

“Maybe.” Raina yawned as she rose from the couch. “I’ll walk you out.”

Once outside, they both lingered on the small porch. Her brown eyes flitted up to meet his, then darted away.

Valentin did his best to look open and harmless. “Whatever you want to ask me, go ahead.”

“Before I caught you spying on us, did you ever sneak into my room to watch me sleep like Edward did to Bella?”

“Good God, no!” Valentin couldn’t help his appalled tone. “That would be the height of rudeness. I generally avoided watching any of you once you were in your homes.”

Her face remained implacable. “But you said you’ve been in my house before.”

He ran a hand through his hair and suppressed a cringe as he felt a stickiness that was either dried blood or maple syrup from the Waffle House. “Yes, once, and that was shortly after I was assigned to watch over you. I needed to make sure none of you were potential vampire hunters, for one thing. For another, Delgarias was especially interested in what sort of magic you four practice, what types of implements you use, and what books you read on the subject.”

“Ok, that makes sense, but I’m still very uncomfortable with your invading our privacy like that.” Raina’s relieved expression shifted back to wariness. “You didn’t go through my underwear drawer or anything, did you?”

“Of course not!” He couldn’t hide his outrage at the very suggestion of something so sleazy. “That is *not* a place where

you would put any of those items. Therefore it is nowhere I needed to pry. I left your computers alone as well. If Delgarias was interested in your browsing history, he'd have assigned someone else to that.”

Raina tilted her head and regarded him with interest. “Vampires have hackers on their payroll?”

“Not all of us. But he likely would.” Damn it, she always managed to coax him into revealing more about vampire secrets than he was allowed to reveal.

Raina’s expression turned speculative. “Speaking of Delgarias, have you heard from him since Xochitl was supposed to tell him to tell you to back off?”

“I haven’t.” At her skeptical look, he held up his hands in mock surrender. “I swear. And even without those orders, I *have* backed off. I don’t remain with you every night anymore, and I give you the occasional night off. In fact, I won’t be around tomorrow night as there will likely be a meeting amongst my people regarding those rogue vampires.” He didn’t mention that he would be the one commanding that meeting.

“Oh, okay.” Her tone was so mild that he couldn’t tell whether she was disappointed at his forthcoming absence or not. “Good night, then. I mean, good morning.”

Valentin bent down to kiss her, but Raina stepped back and shook her head slightly. “I think we should slow down a little.”

An invisible hand with sharp claws clenched his heart. Valentin swallowed past a lump in his throat and nodded. “As

you wish, *ma belle*. But, may I ask what prompted this change of heart?"

Raina hugged her arms and looked down at her feet. "Because I didn't fully realize what you're capable of."

He nodded, having expected as much. "Everything I did was to protect you."

Her beautiful brown eyes flitted to meet his then darted away. "I know, but still," she paused and took a deep breath before whispering, "You frightened me."

"Your power frightens me sometimes," he countered gently, then placed a finger on her lush lower lip before she could reply. "But I will respect your decision. That said, I will continue my efforts to woo you and change your mind."

The reluctant curve of her lips in a tremulous smile lifted his spirits. "Challenge accepted. Just don't carry things too far, or I'll put another hex on you."

"Duly noted." He gave her a low bow, then used his preternatural speed to flee the coming dawn and return to his lair.

After his shower, he pulled a bag of blood from his fridge and drank down the cold sustenance with a grimace. Nothing compared to drinking straight from the vein, but cold blood was the worst. Even animal blood was better.

Though his hunger was abated and he was exhausted, Valentin was too keyed up from the mixed triumphs and disasters of the night. He headed over to his desk and opened his laptop.

To Valentin's irritation, the Nightwatch Society woman continued to pester him with another email. This time, she cited her help in hypnotizing the humans after the Waffle House skirmish as a reason why he should consider an alliance. Then she attempted another dangle of a carrot.

"We know of your close association with a certain local witch coven. As you've seen demonstrations of their magic, I'm sure you wonder why their magic has grown. Our members with preternatural abilities have also seen an increase in power. Surely you wonder what has prompted this. Together, we have a better chance of finding the answer."

Valentin chuckled. "That's where you're wrong, woman."

But he did wonder what the Nightwatch Society would do with the strange truth that it was a heavy metal band that was responsible for returning magic to Earth. He also wondered if Genevieve was at that Waffle House to watch him or the witches?

He needed to work up the courage to confront Raina about her avoidance of telling him that the Nightwatch Society was courting her coven. If he did that, she would most definitely confront him about all the things he wasn't telling her. That would put further strain on their already hindered relationship.

Which was why Valentin's stomach plummeted when he received an email from the Lord Vampire of Spokane stating that he, his Seeress Bride Jayden, Aurora Lee, and the vampire attorney, Anthony Salazar would be arriving on November Eighth to look in on the witch coven, find a venue for Aurora

and Anthony's forthcoming nuptials, and fulfill their end of the deal with Valentin.

There was a note from Xochitl Leonine apologizing for not being able to come this time because they needed to investigate a concern with another witch coven in New York. Yet again, no mention of Delgarias and the fact that she'd asked him to order Valentin to back off on his surveillance of Raina's coven. At least that was a small relief. He didn't think anything could keep him away from Raina. Not even a command from the Thirteenth Elder.

Valentin checked his calendar. They'd be here next week.

"Merde," he muttered.

While Raina would be pleased that Valentin would, at last, be able to fulfill his promise to demand answers to her many questions about how vampires connected to Rage of Angels and the growing magic in the world, he was beginning to fear that those answers might drive her further away from him.

CHAPTER NINE

One week later

Raina's jaw dropped when she answered her front door. Aurora Lee stood on the porch beside the gorgeous, willowy redhead woman who'd told Raina she was the band's therapist during the brief meeting the coven had with the band on their tour bus last winter. Jayden was her name, according to the email Aurora had sent her a couple days ago.

"Oh wow, hi!" Raina stammered as her cheeks burned with humiliation at her awkwardness with one of the best drummers in the world. "When I got your email, I didn't think you'd come straight here."

Aurora took a step back and gave her an apologetic look. "We got in late last night. I hope you don't mind us coming here. Razvan and Tony are sleeping for the day, so we thought we'd come to see you. We can leave and meet up later if you'd like."

Raina's face burned hotter. "Oh, no, I'm glad you came! I was just surprised. Please, come in."

As the women followed her inside, the redhead remarked, "Nice wards."

"Right?" Aurora said. "Very strong. Zareth would be proud."

Raina paused at the mention of Xochitl Leonine's husband, the man who'd reeked of magic and worn a glamour spell that was too powerful for her to see through. "What does he really look like?"

"It's not up to me to say, but I have a feeling you'll find out soon." Aurora looked around the living room, admiring the movie posters and large bookcases filled with DVDs and Blu Rays. "I see you like our kind of movies. We're going to get along very well."

The compliment warmed Raina to her toes. "Do y'all want anything to drink? I have tea, hot or cold, milk, water, White Claw, and wine. No soda, but I can get some."

Both opted for tea, choosing green oolong with honey. Once settled at the table with steaming mugs, Aurora gave Raina a level look. "So, have your coven's powers grown more from the last time we met?"

Raina nodded. "But I'm sure you knew that, since Xochitl's uncle put a vampire on our tail without letting us know."

Aurora had the decency to look ashamed. "I'm sorry about that. It wasn't my idea. I mean, I agreed with having someone keep y'all safe from the Lord Vampire of New Orleans and other vampires in the area, given that they can sense magic and would doubtless want a piece of it, but I didn't agree with keeping your coven in the dark about it."

Jayden nodded. "It was imperative to make sure no vampire decided to grab one of you and make you their pet. I speak from experience."

Aurora arched one eyebrow at the band therapist. “Yeah, but that worked out really well for you. Unless you and Razvan are getting divorced and not telling us?”

Jayden’s cheeks turned crimson. “No. He’s an ass, don’t get me wrong, but I love him.”

Raina blinked. The band therapist had powers too? And had become a vampire’s pet and ended up marrying him? Then she remembered Aurora saying both men were sleeping for the day. That meant that Aurora’s fiancé, the band’s former lawyer, was a vampire too!

Before she could say anything, Aurora gave Raina a level look. “Speaking of vampires who are asses and your need for protection, how are things working out with Valentin?”

Now it was Raina’s turn to blush. “Okay, I guess. He was pretty intrusive at first, but he’s backed off a little. And we always get free drinks at his club, so it’s not all bad.”

Aurora’s eyes widened. “He owns a club?”

“Yeah. A vampire-themed club. It’s called Bloodletting.”

Both Aurora and Jayden burst into laughter. “That’s both hilarious and perfect. Great way to hide in the open, I guess,” Aurora said.

“He didn’t tell you?” Raina couldn’t hide her surprise. “I figured that’s where your men are sleeping.”

Jayden shook her head. “Vampires keep their resting places secret. And Razvan and Tony are probably staying at designated guest quarters. But I wouldn’t be surprised if the address where we’re supposed to meet is the club.”

After she gave the address, Raina nodded. “That would be it. Um, there’s something else I need to tell you. On Halloween night, we were attacked by rogue vampires at Waffle House.”

Both guests gasped. Then Aurora’s eyes narrowed. “Hold up. Your coven was attacked last week, and you didn’t let us know immediately? I mean, we were playing a gig that night, but we would have seen the message soon after. Also, vampires attacked you *in public*?”

“Yeah, Valentin thought it was weird too, but he figured since they were rogues, they didn’t think they had to adhere to any laws. He and his people and...someone else...cleared the witnesses’ memories and got them to delete all pictures and footage.”

“What about live streams?”

“Fuck, I didn’t think of that.”

Aurora waved her hand dismissively. “Never mind that for now. We can check later. But why didn’t you tell us right away?”

Raina’s cheeks flushed guiltily. “That night was *a lot*. And we figured it could wait until you came down here. Especially since Valentin said something that makes me suspect those guys weren’t the usual rogue vampires.”

“What did he say?”

“I heard him call them zealots and mention something called ‘The Order of Eternal Night.’”

“Fuuuuck,” Jayden said.

“Motherfucker,” Aurora growled.

“Who are they?”

Aurora gave her a tired smile. “I think we should wait until your whole coven is together, along with Valentin. I’m surprised he didn’t take one prisoner.”

“He was planning to, since apparently, these guys have been infiltrating New Orleans for a while now, but since their leader was after me specifically, um,” Raina took in a breath before confessing. “He kinda lost his temper and tore the vampire’s head off. The other two got away.”

Aurora’s jaw dropped. “Holy shit. For a vampire of his status to lose his shit like that and kill someone so publicly, he must either be insane or so in love with you that he might as well be.”

“He was just taking his orders seriously.” Raina couldn’t hide a defensive note in her voice.

“Riiiiight,” Jayden said with a light laugh. “Has he kissed you yet?”

“He did earlier that night,” Raina admitted, cheeks flaming again. “But after the Waffle House incident, I told him I want to slow things down.”

“Why?”

“Because it sank in what he’s capable of. Decapitating someone with his bare hands, erasing memories, hypnotizing people to obey his will...” Raina spread her arms in a hopeless gesture. “I’m not sure it’s wise to get involved with someone who can do all that.”

“Okay, I get that.” Aurora’s confident, knowing tone seeped in like warmth in winter. “Tony can do all those things *and* he has a scary past. But what about you? I heard you managed to take out a hurricane.”

“Not alone!” Raina protested. “I had my coven sisters and brother with me.”

Jayden gave her a firm look. “The point still stands. Also, did it occur to you that when you have a vampire’s love, his power is yours? Razvan can do all that Valentin can and more because he’s over a thousand years old. But I know he’d never use that power against me or anyone I remotely even like much less love.”

“I don’t want or *need* to use anyone else’s power,” Raina countered, then sighed. “However, those are very good points. But you gotta keep in mind that I only found out that vampires existed a little over three months ago. It’s still overwhelming.”

“I understand completely,” Aurora said, placing a warm brown hand over Raina’s. “I found out about *a lot* of things I didn’t know existed really fast and am still surprised I didn’t lose my mind over it.”

Raina’s curiosity piqued. “Like what?”

“Oh, you’ll see soon enough. Why don’t you call the rest of your coven? Maybe we can meet up for dinner before we head over to our vampires.”

Our vampires. From Aurora’s smile, Raina knew she was including Valentin, declaring him Raina’s. And maybe she should give in to temptation, surrender to his fervent attempts

at courtship, and agree to...date him, be his girlfriend, or whatever vampires called it. She closed her eyes and imagined being in his arms again, feeling the silky heat of his kiss.

“Are you okay?” Jayden’s voice pulled her from her enticing fantasy.

Raina’s face heated again. “Yeah. I was just wondering where you two are staying. If the hotel or Airbnb sucks, I could help you find somewhere better.”

“Thanks for the offer,” Aurora said. “We’re staying with my grandma.”

“Oh, that’s right!” Raina’s embarrassment rose. “I remember reading an interview where you said you had family here.”

Raina got in touch with Alma and the others. They decided to meet up at Jacques Imo’s, a restaurant not as many tourists knew about, as it was away from the French Quarter.

But Aurora knew of it. As soon as they gathered outside by the little old pickup in front of the restaurant, which was covered in multi-hued blotches of paint, she hummed appreciatively. “Oh, baby Jesus, Xochitl is gonna be even more upset that she couldn’t come. She is obsessed with the potato-breaded fish here.”

“So am I,” Raina said with a grin. “This is our favorite place to treat ourselves.”

“I like the paneed rabbit best,” Cinna said, then her expression sobered. “So what is going on with the New York coven that Xochitl and Sylvis are checking on?”

Alma added, “Did y’all have a vampire following them too?”

“Nope,” Aurora answered with a frown. “But someone *is* following them. Aside from the vampire we appointed and those rogues at the Waffle House, have you sensed anyone else around?”

Raina and her coven exchanged looks. They’d decided to keep quiet about the Nightwatch Society until they got more answers from Rage of Angels about their connection with vampires.

“I see you don’t want to tell me,” Aurora said with a thin smile. “Why?”

Raina answered honestly. “Because you didn’t tell us about Valentin. And a bunch of other things.”

“Fair enough.” Aurora shrugged. She didn’t seem angry. “As long as you’re certain you four can defend yourselves from whoever it is.”

The rest of the meal passed amiably, with Aurora telling them about their plans for their next album, her requirements for a wedding venue—no plantation houses and no religious properties—and about what foods were best in Coeur d’Alene. Although the place couldn’t boast even a quarter of what New Orleans had to offer, Raina was intrigued by huckleberries, morel mushrooms, rainbow trout, and venison. The latter two she could technically get here, but not freshly caught or hunted like Aurora was describing.

Between enjoying the decadent food and fun conversation, Raina reached out her senses to see if she could discern any duplicity or maliciousness in either Aurora or the mostly quiet Jayden. The latter passed her occasional glances that seemed to indicate she knew what she was doing. From what Raina could feel, the two women—and hopefully the whole band and their vampire men—had only good intentions.

After supper, the sun had set, so they headed off to Bloodletting to meet up with the vampires. Raina and her coven led Aurora and Jayden to the back entrance, where Eniel waited to let them in. At least this time he didn't scowl at Raina. Instead, he was deferential to the point of being a kiss-ass with Aurora and Jayden.

Valentin was even more so when they met him at their table on the VIP floor. He bowed low and said, "I greet you, Brides of the Prophecy, and friends of the Queen."

Raina blinked at the capital letters in the address and the strange phrasing. "What Prophecy?"

Aurora laughed and shook her head. "Girl, you are in for a long story."

"So I've been told about a lot of things." She turned her gaze to Valentin. "But he promised me that he'd demand permission to explain to me—and my coven—what exactly is going on."

One of the two vampires sitting at the table spoke in an odd accent that sounded like he was from New York, but also not. "And he did so. As Razvan Nicolae," he inclined his head toward a vampire Raina recalled meeting on *Rage of Angels*'

tour bus, “has been given immunity from the Elders, he can tell you almost anything you wish to know.”

Raina’s pulse accelerated with excitement and nervousness to finally have answers. She turned back to the New Yorkesque vampire, who she at last recognized from Rage of Angels’ first press conference after they’d returned from their six-month-long disappearance last year. Anthony Salazar had been their lawyer back then, then recused himself when he and Aurora started dating. She couldn’t help shaking her head in wonder. Xochitl’s uncle was a vampire, Razvan, their band manager was a vampire, the band’s lawyer was a vampire, and they’d assigned a vampire to spy on Raina’s coven.

“My first question is why Rage of Angels is so entangled with vampires.”

Razvan’s accent sounded like he’d come from Transylvania. “Because Xochitl Leonine is the daughter of the creator of vampires and is our queen. Her uncle by marriage is the Keeper of the Prophecy, which says that she is to lead an army of vampires and other allies in a war against her father.”

Raina’s jaw dropped. Her coven sisters and brother’s expressions mirrored hers.

“Holy shit,” Cinna breathed. “And here I thought Rage of Angels were just extremely good, but extremely weird musicians.”

“They *are*.” Razvan laughed. “I helped mentor them in their youth and would want to manage them even if they were normal humans.”

Raina was dying to ask more about how that happened but willed herself to focus on more immediate concerns. “Ok, and what is up with these rogue vampires who are zealots of some cult? One of them called me a water mage when he tried to abduct me.”

“They belong to the Order of Eternal Night, a cult that worships Mephistopheles, Xochitl’s father,” Aurora explained after licking a bit of salt from her margarita glass.

Jack leaned forward. “Wait. Satan is the creator of vampires?”

Razvan shook his head. “No. Satan was named after *him*, for Mephistopheles’s name remained in old Germanic stories, and the original author of the *Faust* stories mistook the old legends to mean they referred to Satan and ran with it.”

Alma frowned. “You say Earth as if y’all aren’t from there.”

“We *are* from Earth,” Razvan said. “But Mephistopheles and the first vampires were not. They were banished here when we weren’t compliant enough and refused to carry out the evil deeds he’d commanded. As he’d stripped Earth of most of its magic thousands of years ago, sending his vampires to a barren place was intended to be the ultimate punishment.”

Raina absorbed the magnitude of the vampire’s words, finally starting to understand. “And now his daughter is bringing magic back to Earth.”

“Precisely.” Razvan took a minuscule sip from his shot of bourbon. “Though, from what I understand, that was a

completely unforeseen and unintentional effect of Rage of Angels growing in power.”

Aurora nodded. “Yup. Xoch’ isn’t the only band member with magic. The rest of us just came into it a little later than she did. But no one bothered to tell us that our music emanates magic until your coven informed us. Then Zareth and Silas were like, ‘Oh yeah, you four have been radiating magic every time you play together from day one.’”

Silas...Raina scanned her memory of her knowledge of her favorite band. His name had cropped up in articles right after Rage of Angels had disappeared the December before last. The band had used his basement for practice back in their high school days.

Then, something clicked. “Did Xochitl’s uncle order Silas to watch over you guys like he ordered Valentin to watch over my coven?”

Aurora laughed. “Precisely. Though keeping an eye on you four was more Silas’s wife’s idea as well as Xochitl’s. Were you told about the AIU?”

Raina nodded. “Those were the people Akasha was most worried about.” She didn’t mention Xochitl’s claim that Valentin looked like he wanted to eat her. “What did the AIU do to her?”

“That’s her story to tell,” Razvan said solemnly.

Cinna rose from the table and started pacing. “Okay, to sum up, you guys are watching us to document how powerful we’re getting and also keep us safe from a secret government

organization, vampires who would want to eat us, and a vampire cult who wants to exploit our magic.”

The vampires nodded as Anthony answered. “That’s correct.”

“Anything else?” Alma asked.

Raina watched carefully as the vampires looked at each other, seeming to silently communicate.

Jack met her eyes and gave the vampires a suspicious look. “What about civilian paranormal investigation societies?”

Razvan pulled a pipe from his front pocket and fidgeted with it. “That’s somewhat of a gray area. They’ve been a nuisance to our kind for a few hundred years, as it’s generally forbidden for humans to know of vampires and mostly forbidden for us to kill humans. Whereas, you four are humans. And most of those societies include members with supernatural abilities of one kind or another.” He took out a bag of tobacco and loaded the pipe. “So, I’d advise extreme caution.”

Valentin turned to Raina and gave her a stern look. “And I’d advise you four quit beating around the bush and tell me if any of said societies have approached you.”

“In time.” Raina took a small amount of pleasure in her being the one keeping things from him for a change. “Now that we have most answers about what is going on with Rage of Angels and vampires and sort of how we fit in, I have a question for you, St. Scarasse.”

Her vampire guardian bowed his head. “But of course.”

“You mentioned that there’s something they promised you. And that you’d ask if I could see it too. What was it?”

Valentin glanced at Aurora and Razvan as if asking permission. At their nod, he leaned forward and spoke quietly. “You know how they said that Xochitl Leonine is supposed to lead an army of vampires in a war against her father?”

“Yes.” Though that aspect of this whole thing made Raina wonder if she was dreaming.

“I haven’t pledged myself or my people to her cause. Not until I see what I’m going to be fighting for.”

“That sounds fair enough.” Raina absorbed the implication of his words. “Wait. This fight isn’t over Earth?”

“Not as of yet,” Aurora said. “But with magic returning, that may not remain the case.”

Cinna leaned over the table and whispered loudly. “Is this other world the one that vampires are from?”

Razvan answered. “Yes, and no. The people Mephistopheles took and transformed were from Aisthanesthai, the place we’ll be showing to you four and to Valentin.”

“But Mephistopheles turned those captives into vampires in Qua’ al-fán, the world he created from taking parts of other worlds, along with their magic,” Aurora finished.

“He took from Earth, didn’t he?” Alma said, toying with the stem of her wineglass. “That’s why you all keep saying that magic is returning here. Like it used to have more.”

“Precisely.”

Raina’s imagination soared at the prospect of visiting other worlds. “When can we go see Ais-than... Fuck, what’s it called again?”

“Ais-than-es-thai,” Aurora said slowly. “We can show you tomorrow, if you want. But before you get too eager, think carefully about whether or not you want to see it. Because once we take you through the portal, you can’t exactly unsee it.”

“Is it that bad?”

“No! It’s beautiful. But that’s part of the danger. Knowing there’s a place other than Earth that sucks a lot less than Earth can kinda fuck with your head.”

Raina considered that concept and how she would feel once the excitement and curiosity at seeing another world wore off and practicalities seeped in. “That makes sense. Is there any danger if we were to remain there?”

“No. In fact, before the return of magic, it was dangerous for the people from there to remain on Earth for too long. That’s what killed Xochitl’s mom. Aisthanesthai’s people really love a lot of Earth culture, especially music, books, and movies,” Aurora explained patiently. “But for us, the knowledge and ability to pass between worlds, Prophecy or no Prophecy, makes us have to juggle our lives in two worlds and keep that knowledge, a part of our lives a secret from people close to us. So, if you have any living family...”

“Mine disowned me,” Raina assured her. “And Jack’s an orphan. But Alma has a huge family, and Cinna has people too.”

Jayden rubbed her temples and interjected in a pleading tone, “Is it okay if we have a rest from all these serious subjects? I’m doing my best to shield myself from all your emotions and thoughts, but it’s starting to wear on me.”

“Oh Goddess, I’m sorry,” Raina told her guiltily. “I forgot that you’re a clairvoyant.” She thought of something light to say, then grinned. “We made Valentin watch *Twilight* with us.”

The table rang with laughter, and Jayden sighed with relief. Razvan leaned over to kiss the top of his wife’s head.

Seeing the protective gesture between the ancient, powerful vampire and the human clairvoyant made Raina’s chest tighten. The love in their eyes made her wonder if maybe there could be a chance for her and Valentin.

Immediately she scolded herself. How could she think about romance when there were bigger concerns like a vampire cult trying to abduct her, a war between vampires and their creator, and the existence of other worlds?

CHAPTER TEN

Valentin watched Raina closely. The wistful look in her brown eyes as she watched the Lord Vampire of Spokane being affectionate with his human Bride filled him with a mix of hope and an unfamiliar ache.

Razvan's voice pulled him from his reverie. "*Twilight?* You poor fool. My brother tormented us with those films when he was on a quest to watch every vampire movie ever made."

"I find them comical," Valentin teasingly defended himself. "Perhaps you and Anthony will join us in watching the other installments?"

Razvan gave a mock shudder. "I don't know if I can bear a second watch."

Anthony held up his hands. "Don't bring me into this." He stood and held out a hand to his Bride-to-be. "Would you like to dance?"

The group at the table dispersed. Aurora and Tony went downstairs with Jack and Cinna to the crowded dance floor. Razvan and Alma led Jayden to a smaller, quieter table in the corner. Valentin watched Raina give Alma an approving nod and bet that the quietest member of the coven would have some remedy or ability to strengthen the clairvoyant's shields.

Once he was alone with Raina, Valentin held out a hand. "Care to join the others downstairs? Or we could dance up here."

At first, Raina hesitated, then a secretive, mischievous grin spread across her beautiful face. “Downstairs. Aurora has a specific song request for the DJ, and I don’t want to miss it.”

Although Valentin was reluctant to immerse himself in the heat and chaotic noise of the crown downstairs, he would dance with Raina under any terms. Furthermore, her expression when mentioning the song request made him curious and nervous.

“I did tell all of my staff not to deny my visitors anything, but your tone makes me wonder if they’re going to make me regret that.”

“It won’t be that bad,” she assured him as they headed down the steps. “Jack and Cinna kinda put them up to it since it’s one of their favorites.”

A favorite that they’d been too afraid to ask for until they were shielded by a celebrity drummer and powerful diplomatic guests. “It’s not that old rap song about big butts, is it?”

“No.”

“Country?”

“*Hell* no!”

“Weird Al?”

“Nope.”

“Pity.” Valentin gave her a mock tragic pout. “I *like* Weird Al.”

Her look of astonishment was adorable. “You do?”

He chuckled and steadied her before she stumbled on the stairs. “There is much you don’t know about me.”

“There is much you don’t *tell* me,” Raina countered with a sharp look.

He dipped his head in acquiescence to her point. “You’ve now learned most of it, though.” He frowned as the music made him repeat himself louder. “If you let me Mark you, you’d always be able to hear me.”

“Nice try!” Raina shouted over the noise.

Despite the nuisance of the crowd, Valentin reveled in having Raina back in his arms when they reached the dance floor. She moved so smoothly and naturally. For four blissful songs, the crowd disappeared, leaving only the music and their joined bodies remaining. If only the rest of their relationship could be as perfect as their dancing. If only they could be like this forever.

As the last song faded, the DJ spoke on his microphone. “This next song isn’t usual Bloodletting fare, but it was specially requested by Rage of Angels drummer Aurora Lee, so it’s gotta be good! I give you ‘Laser Shooting Dinosaur’ by Angus McSix!”

Valentin’s hum of confusion matched half the crowd. “Did he just say *‘Laser Shooting Dinosaur?’*”

Raina’s giddy laughter simultaneously worried and delighted him. “Yes! It’s so much fun, but let’s go upstairs. I want to see how everyone reacts to this one.”

The song started out sounding like dance music from the nineteen-nineties. So different from the usual goth or metal melodies that normally filled the club. As he headed back up the stairs with Raina, Valentin braced himself to see a mass of patrons leaving. Guitars and power-metal style vocals followed, with the strangest lyrics.

But once they reached the VIP floor and looked over the balcony, he saw that no one had left. The older crowd had backed off from the dance floor to watch in cheerful bemusement as the younger people danced with gusto. Aurora, Jack, and Cinna danced and sang along, and to Valentin's surprise, some other patrons did too.

He stole a glance at Raina and bit back a smile to see that she was mouthing the words as well. Something about the titular dinosaur being created by samurai and powered by lightning strikes and boom-boom-boom being the sound of goblins dying.

“This is one of the strangest songs I've heard, at least since Frank Zappa was with us.” Valentin shook his head in bemused wonder. “I do remember Jack mentioning this Angus McSix.”

Raina chuckled. “The band is a lot of fun. They have a whole continuing storyline with lore that could have come from kids' cartoons. But they're all excellent musicians too.”

“My patrons seem to enjoy it.” He made a mental note to check out the album. “Are there any more surprises in store?”

“Not that I know of.”

But there was in, in a way. Despite her being younger than Raina by about five years, Aurora Lee knew about Concrete Blonde. When midnight struck, and the DJ played “Bloodletting,” the heavy metal drummer’s gleeful shout could be heard above the rest before she pulled her vampire fiancé into her arms for a dance.

Raina turned away from the balcony railing and melted into Valentin’s arms with the first opening bass line. After dancing with him to this song at least twice a week for the past four months, she gave herself over to the dance like it was second nature. Inhaling her decadent scent of herbs and magic, Valentin wished she’d come into his arms so naturally in all other situations.

When the song concluded, Aurora rushed upstairs and gushed to Valentin, “Holy shit, I haven’t heard that song since I was a kid spending summer weeks with my grandma.”

“Oh.” Valentin froze as it came together. Claudette was Aurora’s grandmother. And Claudette liked Concrete Blonde because Valentin introduced her to the band back in the nineties. What *would* Aurora do when she found out about his relationship with Claudette?

Oblivious to his worry, Aurora continued, “I’m trying to convince Xochitl and the others to cover ‘The Sky is a Poisonous Garden.’”

“That would be incredible!” Valentin burst out. Excitement chased away his unease. Xochitl Leonine may not have Johnette Napolitano’s sultry whisky voice, but she had her

own gorgeous range and sound. And Rage of Angels had yet to make a bad cover song.

Razvan broke in. "Sorry to interrupt, but Jayden is tired."

Aurora nodded. "Of course. We'll take her back to Grandma Fontaine's. What time should we meet back here to head to the portal?"

"An hour after sunset should be fine," Valentin answered.

To his disappointment, Raina and her coven decided to depart too. He was tempted to go with them, but that would be bad form since he had guests.

At least Raina allowed him a light kiss on her cheek and even hugged him on her way out. After the vampire Brides and the witch coven departed, Valentin turned to see Razvan and Anthony regarding him with amused smiles.

"I see you're guarding one witch more than the others," Razvan observed.

"I don't see where either of you are in a position to judge," Valentin said curtly, then changed the subject. "Shall we feed?"

Anthony was wary of the Vampire Experience. Earlier, the vampire attorney asked Valentin countless questions about the waivers the customers signed and whether or not the local authorities knew this was going on. Even after assuring him that everything was above board Anthony refused to participate.

"I can't in good conscience allow a human to pay to be my meal."

“I can,” Razvan said. He found the whole concept delicious.

Anthony went outside to find an unsuspecting tourist while Razvan and Valentin entered the room where a line of mortals waited to pay to fulfill their fantasies of being bitten by a real vampire.

As Valentin drank his fill, he again fantasized about sinking his fangs into Raina’s throat while she eagerly pulled him closer.

The next evening Valentin found himself pacing the upper floors of his club as Razvan and Anthony watched with impertinent amusement. He’d already been awake hours before dusk, excited and nervous to set foot in Aisthanesthai. Aurora’s words of caution to Raina’s coven rang through his mind. Would it fuck with *his* mind to know another world was right there past a portal in his backyard? A world full of magical beings whose magical blood could be his for the drinking. He hadn’t been told much about how vampires were able to feed there. Yet another bit of information held back until he swore fealty to Xochitl Leonine and gave the New Orleans vampires the choice to join her army.

At last, Valentin heard the rear door downstairs open and sensed the different flavors of magic of Raina’s coven members and Aurora. He couldn’t feel the clairvoyant, Jayden’s presence, but that was to be expected since the seeress shielded so hard. And once the humans reached the

bottom of the stairs, Valentin could sense the Marks on both Jayden and Aurora.

Once again, a pang of frustration and sadness that Raina wouldn't permit him to Mark her gnawed at his heart.

Valentin forced back the melancholy and made sure to have a genial smile once the human women and man reached the VIP floor.

Aurora spoke first. "We rented a van that will fit all nine of us."

"We can't cross over through here?" Valentin had assumed they'd do their magic to teleport them like Delgarias was able to appear anywhere at will.

The drummer shook her head. "Nope. That only works from Aisthanesthai's side. We got a half-hour drive ahead of us, so if you don't mind, we'll have a drink first."

"But of course."

When Raina took her seat beside him with a hurricane in hand, he raised a brow at her choice of beverage. He'd only seen her order the strong drink the night she'd entered his club for that first palaver.

"Nervous, *mon cher*?"

Raina nodded. "Aren't you? Not only are you going to go into another world, you're going to pledge to go to war for the lead singer of a metal band against your creator."

Valentin's stomach gave another twist, and he rubbed his temples. "Did you have to put it that way?"

Jayden spoke then, her voice warm and soothing. “It will be okay.”

The conversations shifted to benign topics such as the wedding venues Aurora and the other women would look at tomorrow, the relative safety of Razvan’s and Anthony’s guest accommodations for the day, and restaurants to visit that would make Queen Xochitl jealous.

At last, the humans finished their drinks.

“Are we ready?” Aurora asked, in a queenly tone so like her grandmother’s.

They piled into the rented van, and it wasn’t long before Valentin recognized where they were headed. “

Jean Lafitte?” He turned to Raina in surprise. “But this is where you and your coven broke up that hurricane.”

“That makes a ton of sense,” Aurora said. “I wonder if you four drew on magic from the portal to accomplish such huge magic.” Suddenly, her expression shifted to one of concern. “Wait, are any of you witches sleeping with each other or another magic practitioner?”

Cinna and Jack raised their hands. “We’re together. Why?”

“Because your sex lives could get dangerous without proper training on handling the bursts of magic.” Aurora shook her head and chuckled. “Beau and Artavian made a damn tornado near our Atlanta gig last winter.”

“Holy fuck,” Jack gasped. “Really?”

“Yeah, but don’t worry. You’re probably a long way from generating power that way, and we can get you storage crystals for if it does happen.”

Valentin gaped at Aurora’s casual talk of magic users creating national disasters with the sheer power of their lovemaking. He was beginning to feel more and more like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole, and he hadn’t even set foot into the real-life equivalent of Wonderland yet.

The van pulled to a stop in the parking lot, and they piled out. They ended up taking almost the exact same path Raina’s coven had walked to, where they cast their spell to banish the hurricane.

For a minute, he expected to end up at the exact spot, but then Aurora led them to a different fork in the path. They walked another fifty feet or so before the hairs on Valentin’s arms slowly stood on end, and the scent of ancient magic reached his nostrils. When they halted in front of a huge bald cypress tree whose vase trunk formed a tall, wide gap that one could walk through like a door, Valentin’s skin prickled with goosebumps.

Aurora reached into her pocket and pulled out a violet crystal that looked a little like amethyst but also not. “Before I open the portal, I’ll give you all the option of staying here. Once we pass through, everything will be different, even the gravity.”

No one declined. Aurora closed her eyes, lifted the crystal, and muttered some words in a language Valentin was pretty sure didn’t come from Earth.

The space beneath the cypress trunk glowed a faint violet and rippled like a mirage. Aurora disappeared through first, followed by Anthony, then Razvan and Jayden. Raina's hand closed around Valentin's, and his heart surged with elation that she'd seek comfort from him. They walked together, flanked by Cinna, Jack, and Alma.

The first thing Valentin noticed about this new world was the feel of the air. It was a little cooler than the swamp they'd left and far less humid. He also felt strangely lighter, his steps having a slight buoyancy, reminding him of how it felt to remove his roller skates back when he'd regularly visited the rink in the nineteen-seventies.

Raina's voice pulled him from drowning in sensation. "Oh, Goddess, look at the moons!"

"Moons?" he questioned the plural, then broke off as he looked up at the sky. Two moons, one a waxing three-quarter silver, the other a gold crescent, hung in an indigo sky full of alien constellations.

"They're so beautiful," Alma breathed beside them.

"Right?" Aurora favored them all with a grin. "The first time I was here, I didn't really get to appreciate how gorgeous it is here because Xoch' was first imprisoned by Zareth's half-brother, then she was in a coma from killing the fucker. Not to mention that so much was dead and barren because the world had gone four years without a sun."

Jack whistled. "Damn. That is *a lot*."

Valentin agreed and wanted to ask more.

Raina gasped beside him. “So *that’s* where Rage of Angels disappeared the year before last. It wasn’t rehab like you and your lawyer implied.”

“Yup.” Aurora sighed. “But it’s not like we could tell the truth. Zareth and Xochitl aren’t here to give you a tour, but I figure we can head over to Caledonia’s. It’s a restaurant and bloodhouse.”

“Bloodhouse?” Valentin repeated.

Razvan nodded. “As part of the treaty the vampires made with the Conclave of High Sorcerers, vampires are forbidden to feed on anyone in this world without consent. And the territories that haven’t banned us from their lands have established bloodhouses, where we pay donors for our meals. Some double as brothels, others as restaurants where our non-vampire companions may dine as well.”

Aurora led the way through the copse of pines, and they emerged on the outskirts of a village. Valentin couldn’t help but stare in wonder at the roads and buildings that reminded him of a cross between his own French Quarter and Nineteenth Century Amsterdam. People of various races dressed in an overwhelming variety of clothing, from hooded robes to elaborate gowns to jeans, t-shirts, and modern coats, walked along sidewalks paying no interest to the vampires, witches, and the seeress. As if groups of people coming out of the forest was an everyday occurrence. Maybe it was.

Like Valentin, Raina and her coven frequently paused to stare at the shops. Some sold herbs like Raina and Alma, and others proclaimed to be full-service mage shops. He spotted an

Earth music store, Earth clothing, Earth movies, and other various wares from his world. They turned down another street and passed a weapons store, a few food markets, a cookware store, and a spice shop. When they turned another corner, they reached what appeared to be a restaurant and hotel district.

Caledonia's looked like it came straight from the French Quarter, especially the balconies with elaborate wrought-iron railings and the beautiful men and women smiling and waving at them from above.

The skunky smell of marijuana reached Valentin before he noticed one of the women on the balcony smoking a joint.

"Whoa, they have weed here?" Jack said. "And it's legal? Aurora is right. It will be hard to go back home after this."

They entered the bloodhouse and were greeted by a tall, willowy woman who was resplendent in a crimson velvet gown trimmed with black lace. Even though she wasn't his type, Valentin couldn't help but warm to the sincere smiles she bestowed on them.

"Aurora, Razvan, Jayden, Anthony." She embraced each in turn. "One of my girls foresaw your arrival."

"Hello, Callie," the two vampires and their Brides chorused.

Caledonia turned to Valentin and the witches. "And you've brought guests! I'll have to seat you in one of the larger booths. Follow me."

Valentin tried to follow, but he and the witches kept bumping into each other as they paused to take in the elaborate

surroundings. The interior of the bloodhouse reminded Valentin of the pleasure houses in Storyville at the turn of the century. Rich gilt damask wallpaper, leather and suede cushioned booths, dark wood tables, and intimate lighting from hanging globes framed by elaborate gold fixtures.

When they reached their large table framed by an equally large plush booth, nine glasses of water and six tea cups were already set in place, along with six sets of silverware and nine napkins. Valentin admired the efficiency as he sat down next to Raina.

A man dressed like an Old World waiter passed out menus to the humans and took their drink orders before addressing the vampires. “The available donors will be here shortly.”

“How do we pay?” Valentin asked.

“We take coin from any region, some items for bartering, and Earth currency,” the waiter answered before departing to assist other customers.

“That is so cool!” Cinna exclaimed before picking up her menu. “I love barter systems.”

Valentin looked over Raina’s shoulder at the menu. Most of the items were recognizable. Por roast, rotisserie chicken, chili, various pastas, seafood, and something labeled “The Queen’s Favorite.” Reading the description, he realized it was shrimp and grits, creole style.

Raina let out a low, agonized groan. “Everything looks so good. But after Jacques Imo’s last night, I’m gonna need something light.”

The waiter returned with two women and a man. “Here are tonight’s available donors. And here are their profiles and prices.”

Valentin gaped in awe at the donor menus. At first, the text consisted of symbols and characters he couldn’t comprehend, then they blurred and shifted to French, his original language. Even then, he couldn’t understand some of the terms, such as green-level mage, faelin sorceress, and Wurrak healer. More interesting was that different feeding areas commanded different prices. The wrist was the cheapest, the neck cost more, and the thigh cost the most. There was an additional note as to whether the donor was a sex worker and thus offered those services as well as blood. The man closest to him was labeled “yes,” and the two women were labeled “no.”

When he looked up from the menu, the waiter spoke. “You may feed here, in a private room, or on one of the couches there.” He pointed to a dim alcove a few feet from the table.

Valentin couldn’t help but glance at Raina. His face grew hot, and a knot of nervousness twisted his belly. Was he *afraid* of feeding in front of her?

To his further embarrassment, Raina read his feelings. “I don’t mind if you feed in front of me. But if you want privacy, go for it.”

“Not at the table, please,” Alma said, looking pale. “It’s a little crowded as it is and I don’t like the sight of blood.”

Valentin nodded, selected the male donor, and pulled out his wallet, counting out the price of a wrist-feeding of one pint. The price wasn’t too high for a vampire. Humans

probably spent more on their meals every day. He couldn't help but wonder what the economy was like in this world. Did Queen Xochitl and her husband collect taxes?

The donor cleared his throat, and Valentin realized that while his mind had wandered, Anthony and Razvan had followed their donors to the plush, cushioned sofas framing their table.

He was stalling. Unbidden, his eyes locked on Raina's. The look she gave him sent a frisson of heat through his body, all the way down to his toes. "I don't mind if you feed in front of me. Honestly, I'm curious to see it."

Valentin had planned on taking his donor behind one of the curtained areas, but at Raina's words, he took up the challenge. After mesmerizing the donor to feel no pain, he gripped the man's arm, then met Raina's gaze as he sank his fangs in.

He maintained eye contact with Raina the whole time he fed, willing her to know that he was fantasizing that each swallow of delicious, magical blood was hers instead.

By the time he'd drunk his allotted amount and removed his fangs, Raina's cheeks were a delightful crimson. Grinning, Valentin healed the donor's wounds and gave the man a tip. The donors left, and another employee opened the curtains above the couches so the light from the silver and gold moons could stream into the room.

The humans' meals were served, and they seemed to enjoy their food, though the views from the windows provided many distractions.

“They have cars too!” Cinna said, pointing at the unmistakable shape and headlights of an automobile pulling into a motel parking lot.

“Not many,” Aurora said. “Since it’s easy to travel by portal and more pleasant for some to bond with horses or elk, cars are more of an eccentric amusement here. What’s awesome is that Aisthanesthai cars and trucks are powered by magic, not gas.”

Alma gasped. “That is amazing.”

“Right?” Aurora said after taking a big bite of chili. “Xochitl forgets all the time, which leads to Little Beast not running when she goes back to Earth.”

“She still has Little Beast?” Awe imbued Raina’s voice.

“*Little Beast?*” Valentin asked, hating how often these talks left him completely lost.

Raina turned to him and smiled. “It’s an ’80s Datsun wagon that Xochitl’s had since she was sixteen. She claims it’s possessed.” She turned to Aurora. “Wait. Is it?”

Aurora looked up from buttering her cornbread. “Yes. And even Zareth can’t tell what exactly makes the car sentient. Little Beast usually will only permit Xochitl and Akasha—her mechanic and our general—to even sit in the driver’s seat, but she let me drive her once when we were being chased by some mafia guys.”

Valentin didn’t know what was more overwhelming, a sentient car or the offhand reference to a mafia road chase. “Can we circle back to that story later?”

“Did you seriously say ‘circle back?’” Raina laughed.

His face heated again. “I’m a business owner. Some of the terms tend to stick.”

Laughter broke out at the table, but since they were laughing with him and not at him, Valentin joined in.

After the meal, Aurora led them through the straight cobblestone streets to a residential area. “There is one more thing I think you all—but especially Valentin—need to see.”

She stopped at a small manor house and knocked on the door. The man who answered looked like a mythical god, with his long, wavy locks of blonde hair that shone like real gold, smooth, chiseled skin that seemed to have no pores, sapphire blue eyes, and a body like Adonis. Valentin’s first reaction was pure envy at the man’s beauty, then wary interest, for this was not a human being nor a vampire. And, in spite of attempts at shielding, power radiated from the man like a hot furnace.

“Well, hello there, Miss Lee.” The guy rubbed his sleepy eyes. “You know I love visitors, but what are you and your friends doing here so late?”

Aurora drew herself up in her regal pose. “I’m here in the Queen’s stead in fulfilling a promise she made to the Lord Vampire of New Orleans. He wanted to see Aisthanesthai before pledging fealty. But I think he needs to see Medicia as well.”

Valentin sucked in a breath at his position being outed and turned to see Raina. He used to laugh at scenes in movies and

TV where a woman gave a look that promised her man there would be hell to pay, but seeing that look in Raina's eyes was not funny in the slightest.

Thankfully, Aurora moved on to making introductions. "This is Lucien Jagwolfe of Luminista. Lucien, this is Valentin St. Scarasse, Lord Vampire of New Orleans, and a coven of witches, Raina Callahan, Jack O'Brien, Cinna Parker, and Alma Chan."

Lucien bowed. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance and to finally see the proof that magic is returning to Earth."

"Lucien *Jagwolfe*?" Raina echoed. "Are you related to Sylvis Jagwolfe?"

"We're distant cousins, yes." He turned back to Aurora. "I take it you're here for my help in transporting your party to the ruins of the Leonines' kingdom?"

"Yes," Aurora said sweetly. "I'm still a novice at this whole portal thing."

Lucien bowed low. "I'm honored that you came to me. Most don't. Fates know Xochitl never will. Follow me."

He led them through the side yard and into a backyard that was in surprisingly beautiful shape, with ordered herb gardens, flowers, a small orchard, and marble statues of angels.

"Stand close together," Lucien ordered gently. He then made a similar gesture to the one Aurora had made when she took them through the portal on Earth, only he had no crystal and didn't even chant.

One minute, they were standing in Lucian's exquisite gardens. The next, they were at the edge of a dead forest. The trees were mottled and twisted as if in agony, and the soil was barren and dried into a chunky, gritty surface. But the most disturbing sight was the vast crater past the forest. It was wider than the Grand Canyon. So wide that he couldn't even see to the other side.

Lucian's voice broke through Valentin's petrified horror. "This is what Mephistopheles does. He takes beautiful, magical lands full of life and steals them to piece together Qua' al-fán, the world he's attempting to create and reign over like a demented god. Medicia used to be miles of mountains, forests, lakes, and valleys. The Leonine clan of luminites ruled over those lands for centuries, creating beauty and magic and trading peacefully with all of Aisthanesthai's territories and peoples. Twenty-six years ago, Mephistopheles and his evil horde attacked this great land, captured and slaughtered the people in a way where they couldn't transcend home to Luminista, raped Princess Kerainne—" Lucian broke off with a choked sob, took a shuddering breath, and continued, "and stole all the land, leaving this desolate crater you see now. "He's done this to Earth too, taking Atlantis, Avalon, Kunlun Mountain, and countless other magical territories. Mephistopheles is the primary reason magic left Earth all those centuries ago. But now that magic is returning, it's only a matter of time before he takes that too. As for Aisthanesthai, he's already attacked three times, stolen lands twice, and is now starting to abduct mages. And he will keep doing it because his corruption ensures that his world is barren."

Lucian turned blazing eyes on Valentin. “Will you fight with us, Lord St. Scarasse? Will you pledge your oath to the Queen?”

Valentin surveyed the vast abyss before him and pictured New Orleans being reduced to this black empty chasm. Then he turned back to Lucien Jagwolfe and bowed. “I will.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When they passed through the portal back to Earth, Raina found herself too stunned to speak about all they'd just experienced. There was just too much to process. A whole world with two moons, different gravity, people who all had at least a touch of magic, a seeming commercial fandom for Earth, and establishments that fed both people and vampires. Then there was Lucian Jagwolfe, a distant cousin of Rage of Angels' lead guitarist, Sylvis Jagwolfe. Lucian who looked like an old-school painted romance cover model and was so powerful that he didn't even need to use stones or words to work his magic.

And that vast crater that used to be a place called Medicia, where the Leonines ruled. Xochitl wasn't just the daughter of the creator of vampires, Queen of the entire world of Aisthanesthai, and frontwoman of one of the most popular metal bands on Earth. She was also the daughter of a princess of a lost kingdom. The way Lucian had looked and sounded when he spoke of the princess being raped almost made Raina cry.

But according to interviews and the Rage of Angels Wiki page, Kerainne Leonine died on Earth when Xochitl was either sixteen or seventeen. How had a princess from another world ended up on Earth in the first place? And what did Lucian mean by the people of Medicia not being able to "*transcend to*

their homeland of Luminista?” Raina had a lot to ask Xochitl about—whenever she deigned to visit New Orleans.

Another thing that struck her was the revelation that Valentin wasn’t just any vampire. He was the Lord Vampire of New Orleans. *That* was why he’d often say “*my city*” and why the vampires at his club addressed him so formally and often seemed like they slipped and almost called him “my lord.” *That* was how he managed to wrangle a promise to see the world of Aisthanesthai.

That was why despite the many explanations and truths, it still seemed like he was hiding something from her.

Raina gave Valentin a sideways glance as they walked through the cypresses and marshy undergrowth back to the van.

She wanted to tear him a new one for his deception, but she couldn’t help flashing back to how noble, protective, and fiercely determined Valentin looked when he’d bowed before Lucian Jagwolfe and vowed to fight Mephistopheles. Her heart had ached fiercely for him at that moment.

Besides, tonight had been *a lot*. She could confront him later.



The following day was a bizarre contrast to the previous night’s crazy adventure. Raina, Alma, and Cinna accompanied Aurora to check out her list of prospective wedding venues.

The requirements were steep. Room for at least a hundred guests but preferably more, no plantations, willing to accommodate a nighttime wedding, and availability in May.

As they drove from venue to venue, talking with the owners and weighing out their prospects, Raina envied Jayden, who'd stayed behind because her psychic senses were overloaded. Valentin had permitted the clairvoyant to spend the day with her husband in the secret quarters for vampire guests. A place Raina was still not allowed to know about.

Her sulking about Valentin's secrets was diverted when Aurora received a phone call.

"It's Xochitl," she whispered, then strode away.

The heavy metal drummer ignored the venue owner's protests, and she entered the carriage house by the mansion.

Raina, Alma, and Cinna paced outside, shivering in the damp, chilly air. They exchanged curious glances at each other and the carriage house, waiting for Aurora to come out with her news.

Unfortunately, the suspense remained.

Aurora met their anticipatory stares and said quietly, "I'll tell you when we're back in the car."

Raina held back a sigh of frustration and did her best to sincerely help analyze the pros and cons of this venue. This particular mansion and its manicured grounds had belonged to a wealthy family of the *gens de couleur libre*, or free people of color, in New Orleans's pre-Civil War society. Even though everything outside was drab and gray with the coming winter,

Raina could envision the place looking lush and alive in the spring. She especially liked the gorgeous arch between two massive oak trees adorned with Spanish moss. Aurora agreed.

This time, Aurora took a sample contract, a list of recommended caterers, and other information on her way out. Raina allowed a sigh of relief. Not only because she was pretty sure Aurora had found the perfect place for her wedding, but also now they'd hear what news Xochitl had. And if she'd be coming here any time soon.

Once they were back in the rental car, Aurora turned the heater on and turned to face Raina and her coven sisters. "Xochitl and the others found out who was following the New York coven. It's a secret organization called The Nightwatch Society. Apparently, they're like a cross between paranormal investigators and a safe haven for people with supernatural abilities. You guys haven't heard of them, have you?"

"We have," Raina said. "One approached Alma and me to try to recruit us and offered to protect us from Valentin. Then another was there at the Waffle House incident and helped erase people's memories and offered an alliance with the vampires."

"Are you considering joining them?" Aurora asked. "The New York Coven is interested. And it would do good to have a structured organization on our side to help deal with the war's spillover into Earth."

"No," Raina said at the same time Cinna said, "Yes."

Raina swiveled in her seat to face her coven sister. "Wait, what?"

Cinna's eyes darted up to hers, then flitted away guiltily. "Jack and I talked to Emma Hoffen last week. She sent us a ton of information, and all of it looks wonderful and, most importantly, *safe*."

Raina scoffed. "They can't even decide whether they're for or against the local vampires."

"We asked about that," Cinna said defensively. "Apparently, their further surveillance determined that the vampires were not a threat to us, so they concluded that it would be beneficial for them to ally with the vampires as well."

"I still don't trust them," Raina said, then sighed. "But this coven is not a dictatorship, so if you and Jack want to explore joining the Nightwatch Society, I'm not going to let that break us up. Just promise me that you two will be careful and not rush into things."

Aurora turned to her with respect shining in her eyes. "You're a good leader, Raina."

"Th-thanks," Raina stammered, reduced again to a fangirl at hearing such praise from one of the greatest drummers in the world.

"Is it okay if we go to my grandma's house next?" Aurora asked. "She's making a big lunch and wants to hear *everything* about the wedding venues."

"Sure. As long as she doesn't mind having three extra mouths to feed."

“Oh, she knew you three were coming along, so each of you already has a plate waiting for you.”

When a New Orleans grandmother cooked, the odds were good that the food would be delicious. Plus, it would be nice to save some money. They’d been eating out way too often this week, and with tourist season over, Raina’s and Alma’s shop was getting fewer sales.

“We’d love to meet your grandmother,” Alma said.

“What does she think about your music?” Cinna asked.

Aurora smiled warmly. “She was the only one who supported me from the first. My mother hated that I wanted to be a drummer. And hated even more that I loved metal. Grandma got me a djembe drum first, so I could learn rhythm, then helped plot with my dad to get me my first drumkit.”

“That is so awesome.” Raina’s voice broke a little at the end as unbidden envy gripped her chest.

Her grandma hated everything about her. She hated that Raina was interested in all things dark and mystical, that she preferred to wear all black, and, most of all, she hated that Raina was fat. Memories of her grandmother berating her through church meals flitted through her head. *“Slow down, you look like a pig.” “No boys will ask you out when you look like this.”*

It was also Grandma’s idea to have her sent to fat camp, Grandma’s idea to put her on every fad diet that was popular at the time, and Grandma’s idea to have her parents put locks on the fridge and all the cupboards, except for one that held foods

that adhered to Raina's diet. And so many other degrading things.

Not that her parents were any better, but at least their hatred came more from Raina's interests in metal music and witchcraft than from her body. Hell, even her father sometimes had somewhat supportive things to say about body positivity and that she had a beautiful face. Her mom told her she was a graceful dancer and very smart.

But when they found Raina's hidden spell implements and spell books, they kicked her out of the house and disowned her.

When Aurora pulled up to a gorgeous Queen Anne mansion in the Garden District, Raina and her coven sisters couldn't help but gasp.

"Did you buy this for her?" Cinna asked.

"Nope. She's always had this place. But I did help her catch up on taxes and pay for a much-needed renovation, so she didn't lose her house or have it come down around her ears."

They got out of the car and when they neared the freshly painted wrought-iron gate, Raina gasped as she felt a powerful ward and spotted chalk *veve* symbols and an intricate cord tied around the fence, mostly hidden by the bushes. *Voodoo protection charms.*

"You never said your grandma was a voodooienne."

"I didn't?" Aurora shrugged and placed her hand on the ward to identify herself. "Does the witch community have any

beef with the voodoo practitioners like in *American Horror Story*?”

“Not that I know of.” Raina bit back a laugh at all the inaccuracies of that show. “Some will buy herbs from our shop, and a Voodoo Queen dropped off a message from Valentin when he finally decided to come clean about stalking me. Apparently, she’s an old friend of his. I gave my email in case she wanted an invite to the witch’s message board, and we talked once on the phone, but I haven’t been able to get in touch with her since.”

“Maybe Grandma will know her.” Aurora opened the gate. “And now that I know there are no hostilities between your communities, you can pass through her threshold.”

Raina and her coven sisters followed Jayden and Aurora through the gateway. Even though the wards welcomed them past, their sheer force made Raina a little dizzy. “Your Grandma is very powerful.”

“Right?” Aurora grinned over her shoulder as they walked up the flagstone path to the house. “I inherited my powers from her and have *a lot* of stories.”

Again, Raina suppressed a tug of jealousy. But then all her mixed emotions morphed to shock when the front door opened, and Claudette Fontaine stepped out onto the large covered porch.

“Claudette is your grandmother?” Alma and Raina’s words came out in simultaneous breaths.

Aurora whirled on them with wide eyes. “You two know her?”

Claudette regarded her granddaughter with an amused smile before turning to the witches. “Raina, Alma, I’m glad you’ve come. Cinna, I’ve been looking forward to meeting you too. Please, come in. I made jambalaya, fried okra, and cornbread.”

“It smells delicious,” Raina managed as her mind spun at the revelation of this connection. It couldn’t be a mere coincidence that Aurora Lee’s grandma was friends with Valentin, the very vampire that the Rage of Angels assigned to monitor Raina’s coven.

Although a thousand questions burst into her mind, manners came first. Raina and her coven sisters lined up behind Aurora and Jayden to wash their hands. Then, when they made their way to the dining room, she, Cinna, and Alma took turns complimenting Claudette’s beautiful home.

The food got even more praise. The jambalaya was more flavorful than any Raina had tasted before, with just the right amount of spice. The fried okra tasted fresh and green, while the breading was full of delicious seasonings. And the cornbread... Goddess, Raina didn’t think she could eat the instant kind ever again. She tried half with the jambalaya and half with honey and couldn’t decide which way was best.

Although Raina’s mind was rabid with curiosity, Aurora spoke first. “Grandma, I have two questions for you.”

“Yes, Aurora-baby?”

“My first one is, did you cast a spell to make yourself younger?”

Claudette laughed. “Guilty as charged. With all the excitement going on, I wanted to make sure I could be there for you for a few more years. But not too many. I do plan on finding out what’s on the other side eventually. Also, I can’t be too conspicuous. My book club is already demanding to know who did my facelift. What’s your other question?”

“How do you know the Lord Vampire of New Orleans?”

“We’ve been friends for a long time.”

“How long?”

“A little over fifty years.” Claudette shrugged.

“How did you meet?”

“Val had only recently become Lord of the City and wanted a protective charm to ward off harm from any vampires who disputed his rule. As I’d gained a reputation for the strength of my magic, he came to my shop.”

“Did you know what he was?”

Claudette nodded. “My mama taught me how to identify blood drinkers and protect myself from them since they had a reputation for either coveting or fearing humans with magic. Valentin was definitely among the former. He flirted shamelessly but never meant me any harm. If things had gone differently, I may have accepted his offer of immortality. But I love the sunshine and wanted a family more. We remained good friends, and he even gifted me this house as a wedding present when I married your grandfather.”

Raina's breath caught in her throat at Claudette's story. Each word tightened the vise on her heart. Valentin had been in love with Claudette. Sure, he may have wanted her blood, but that wasn't reason enough to offer immortality and then buy her a mansion when she turned him down.

Aurora's reaction was also one of mingled shock and outrage. "Wait. You had an affair with Valentin St. Scarasse?"

"I never slept with him, if that's what you mean. It was a brief flirtation that grew into a deep friendship." Claudette rolled her eyes. "But even if things had gone that far, it was before I even met your grandpa, so it shouldn't upset you."

"I'm not upset," Aurora argued. "It's just...weird."

"You only think that because I'm your grandma." Claudette's tone turned teasing. "It can't be the vampire aspect since you're marrying one."

"Did you ever let him drink your blood?" Raina blurted.

Claudette nodded. "Yes, but only on the condition that he give me some of his blood. It was a good bargain because while he only got one taste and possibly a small, temporary burst of power, I was able to work many powerful spells with vampire blood. Don't let him sample yours without making the same bargain. I can teach you those spells if you like."

Raina's heart, mind, and gut grappled tumultuously with mixed feelings. One illogical part of her was jealous that Valentin had loved this woman. Which was ridiculous, since Raina hadn't even worked out what exactly she felt for him. Another part was tantalized by the notion of working even

more powerful magic. And another part fantasized about what it would be like to have a vampire love her even as she feared that Valentin had a fetish for magical blood and wouldn't ever *really* love her.

But did she even want him to love her?

Aurora saved Raina from herself by holding up her hand and changing the subject. "Ok, I don't want to hear any more about the pros and cons of letting Valentin drink my grandma's blood. Let's talk about the wedding venues." She pulled out a bunch of brochures from Goddess knew where.

"Wait," Cinna said. "Where did you pull those from? Your purse is over there."

"From my bottomless pouch. I got it in Aisthanesthai."

"Holy shit," Alma gasped. "They have bags of holding? Like in Dungeons and Dragons?"

Aurora laughed. "Pretty much. But they're not completely bottomless, and one has to perfect the magic of using one, or you'll pull out a bunch of random shit and look like a clown show gimmick."

"I want one." Cinna danced in her seat with excitement. "I could finally have somewhere to put all my shoes."

"Or my movies," Raina chimed in.

"Books!" Alma added.

Jayden cleared her throat. "We should get back to Aurora's wedding plans."

Claudette looked over the brochures and they all gave their feedback. As Raina guessed, Aurora decided on the riverside mansion they'd visited last. She ended up calling and booking the place before they left Claudette's to head back to Raina's and Alma's house. Raina grabbed some strawberry candies for Valentin on the way out the door.

Valentin was waiting for them on the bench on the porch. He looked unfairly gorgeous, with his auburn locks falling over a black leather trench coat like Spike's from *Buffy*. His black jeans and a tight Rage of Angels t-shirt emphasized his rangy muscles.

Raina didn't even have a chance to greet him before Aurora charged over to him, pointing an accusing finger. "Why didn't you tell me you had a thing for my grandma?"

Valentin blinked at her in surprise at the burst of hostility. "Aside from the fact that said thing ended before it could even begin well over fifty years ago, I didn't think that would be something you would want to hear about."

"I didn't, but still." Aurora crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. "You could have mentioned that you two are friends. I mean, it's been almost a year since we met."

"I only learned that you're Claudette's granddaughter a few months ago," Valentin told her in a gentle, placating tone. "The only pictures of you that she has in her living room and parlor are from when you were a child."

Raina broke up the argument, but couldn't help but add her own bit of snark. "Valentin loves to withhold information. I'm

still waiting on an explanation as to why you never told us you're the Lord Vampire of New Orleans."

"That was for my own safety, *mon cher*." He gave her an unfairly smoldering look. "A witch of your power could do great damage with that information. Furthermore, you and your coven sisters and brother have avoided telling me about the Nightwatch Society's efforts to recruit you. And I sure as hell don't want *them* knowing of my rank."

Cinna cleared her throat, then shuffled awkwardly on the cracked concrete driveway. "That's mostly mine and Jack's fault. We were talking to them behind Raina's back. And we definitely won't tell them about you, I promise."

Valentin shot her a surprised look before his features shifted back to his usual indolent mask. "I think a formal meeting is in order to talk about the Nightwatch Society. But for now, I will offer myself up for punishment for my omissions to Ms. Lee and Ms. Callahan."

Aurora let out a snort of laughter. "I say we subject you and our vampires to more *Twilight* movies."

Before Raina could counter that Valentin *enjoyed* laughing at those movies, Anthony's affronted voice rang behind her. "What did *we* do?"

"Slept all day while we ran all over town looking for wedding venues. Shit was exhausting, and I'm in the mood to watch something brainless and see you suffer a little."

Razvan groaned in dread. "If you were not such a formidable creature, I'd make you pay for making me suffer

those films for a second time. And where is Jack? Shouldn't he be punished as well?"

Cinna answered. "He's having a game night with his online buddies, but don't worry. I have my own plans for him."

On their way into the house, Raina couldn't help asking Aurora, "Why do all the vampires seem intimidated by you?"

Anthony answered, "When we were in a battle against a stronghold of rogue vampires, she called forth the ghosts of every person the leader killed. They tormented him until he was blithering mad and begging for death, and the surviving rogues surrendered and declared fealty."

"That was the fight with the vampire mafia branch in New York last summer, right?" Valentin asked.

Anthony shook his head. "It appears that *La Cosa Nostra Segreto* is not so *segreto*."

Valentin laughed. "Word traveled fast about that one. But my fear of Aurora Lee is because she's the granddaughter of possibly the most powerful voodoo queen in the world."

Anthony chuckled. "Yes. Grandma Fontaine is indeed terrifying. It is a relief to be on her good side."

Alma threw on *New Moon* and passed out snacks to all the human women. Watching Twilight movies with real vampires was a hilarious experience. Anthony and Valentin complained every time a vampire was seen biting someone, dropping the victim to the ground, and letting the blood go to waste.

Razvan, meanwhile, was frustrated with the vampire-werewolf rivalry. "If werewolves were real, we'd most

certainly be allies. The wolves could guard us during the day, and we could reward them with all the meat they'd desire."

"True," Valentin replied with a so-so wave of his hand. "But they probably smell like wet dogs."

During the break before they started *Eclipse*, Raina gestured for Valentin to follow her out to the backyard.

Once they were alone, she sucked in a breath and blurted the thought that burned in her head since Claudette suggested it. "I'm considering letting you have a taste of my blood."

"Are you now?" Valentin's hungry, glowing eyes made her step back, even as his seductive voice gave her a tremor.

"Yes. But I'd want a pint of your blood in exchange."

His lips curved in a crooked smile. "I see you had an illuminating talk with Claudette today."

"I did. I'm also starting to wonder if your interest in me is real or if you just have a fetish for magic."

He stalked towards her, the feral hunger in his eyes shifting to something equally unnerving. Raina resisted the urge to step back.

Valentin reached for her and cupped her face in his hands. "If all I cared about was your magic, I wouldn't spend every moment in your presence aching with longing to kiss you, and every moment away from you fantasizing about having you by my side."

Raina's knees wobbled. His words painted pictures that she'd never dare wish for herself.

Before she could think of something to say, he continued. “And what about you? First, you push me away, deny me the joy of kissing you, and ask me to slow things down between us. But now you offer me your blood in exchange for mine. Perhaps you’re the one who is more interested in power.”

“What if it’s both?” she countered. “With those creepy vampire cultists and this war, we could both do well with an increase in power.”

Valentin caressed her cheek. “Then let’s seal the bargain with a kiss.”

“Okay.” She parted her lips, waiting for him.

When he didn’t budge, she opened her eyes and saw him grinning down at her with wickedness dancing in his dark green eyes. He wanted *her* to kiss him.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Raina willed her shaky legs to cooperate as she threaded her arms around his shoulders and lifted up on her toes. Tentatively, she brushed her lips against his. Frissons of pleasure coursed through her at the lightness of the kiss. Emboldened, she threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled him closer, deepening the kiss. Valentin returned her efforts by gripping her hair and pulling her tighter against him.

Her tongue traced the edges of his lips before slowly delving between his fangs. The vampire’s groan of lust sent a fresh pulse of heat between her thighs. His tongue caressed hers in a delicate dance until Raina couldn’t suppress her moans of desire.

The back door opened, making Raina break the kiss, leaving them both breathing raggedly with unfulfilled need.

“We’re about to start *Eclipse*.” Alma’s voice rang with barely disguised amusement.

On their way back in, Valentin stopped her. “I accept your bargain, but let’s have it wait until my guests depart at the end of the week. I’ll want you in my lair. *Alone*.”

Raina nodded even as goosebumps prickled the back of her neck. She’d struck a bargain with a vampire that would have her alone in a Lord Vampire’s secret lair with his fangs in her neck. What the hell was she thinking?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Valentin shook his head in amusement as he escorted Raina to Claudette's gates. For Aurora's second to last night in town, her grandmother had decided to throw a bridal shower, and Valentin had been invited. Angelique and Calixto walked sullenly behind. Normally, he didn't require backup to visit the Voodoo Queen, but this time, with several witches and voodoo practitioners in attendance, Valentin's people insisted on him bringing protection.

He reluctantly accepted, not telling his people that Claudette could singlehandedly render all of them helpless. Besides, Claudette was always flattered if he showed any sign of fearing her power.

"I can't believe you're doing this," Eniel complained as the gate opened by itself. "A mortal's wedding shower should be beneath you."

"Not when the bride is one of the Brides that the Prophecy spoke of," Valentin countered. "And not when the bride is also a close friend to our Queen, to the point where she is sometimes in command."

"Wait, when is she in command of Queen Xochitl?" Calixto asked.

"Aurora Lee is more than the drummer of Rage of Angels," Valentin explained patiently. "She is the band's

manager, and all of them, even Xochitl, defer to her. Plus, she can summon ghosts and make the earth move at will. It would be good to cement our alliance with her, as well as with the Queen.”

“And watching *Twilight* with her helped?” Calixto muttered with derision.

Valentin whirled around to face him. “Who told you about that?”

“Razvan was complaining about it when he returned with you and Anthony the other night.”

“I see,” Valentin grumbled as he passed through the threshold, his skin prickling with the magic of Claudette’s barrier touching him before it would close behind his party.

When they entered the house, Valentin followed the sound of cheerful voices. Everyone was gathered in the ballroom, with its gleaming heart pine floor. Valentin had only attended one of Claudette’s gatherings in this room, which happened to be her baby shower when she was pregnant with Loretta, Aurora’s mother. Much as his heart still twinged to see Claudette fully entrenched in life as a mortal woman married to a mortal man and starting a family of her own, his heartache at her rejecting both his romantic love and offer of immortality had finally worn off enough for him to feel genuine happiness at her joy.

Just like at Claudette’s baby shower, the same group of voodooienne women were in attendance at Aurora’s bridal shower. And just like before, they glared at Valentin with blatant recognition of what he was.

As she had forty-six years ago, Claudette rushed to greet him with kisses on both cheeks. “Cousin Val!” she exclaimed. “I am so happy you were able to attend this joyous occasion. I have a pot of tea on the hot plate. Please, introduce your friends.”

Valentin turned to his bemused Second in Command. “This is Eniel, who is ever-persistent in ensuring my safety.” As Eniel bowed, Valentin gestured to his Chief Enforcer. “And this is Calixto, the best bodyguard a man could hire.”

“Bodyguard?” Claudette repeated with a chuckle. “I know you’ve risen in status, but surely you don’t need to bring one to a bridal shower.”

Valentin bent to whisper in her ear. “Begging your pardon, madame, but with the combined powers of your guests being enough to vaporize me, my people thought it prudent I not come alone.” Louder, he said, “I would have had them take the night off but thought my celebrity cousin could benefit from the protection in case the tabloid parasites have found out about this celebration. I’ve already seen enough covertly snapped photographs of your lovely granddaughter on clickbait sites.”

One of the guests, who was not a magic practitioner of any sort, nodded sagely. “That is a wise decision. The last thing we need is an interruption from those weasels.”

The voodooiennes nodded, then turned to Valentin and his guards with knowing smirks, reveling that a vampire had admitted to needing protection in their presence. Raina and her coven sisters rose from their seats around the long table

between the food and the pile of gifts, and greeted Eniel and Calixto with such cheer that the Third and Enforcer blushed.

Claudette's eyes sparkled with amusement. "I know your guards probably aren't allowed to eat while on duty, but they can help themselves to tea and candy if they'd like. I also have a pitcher of ice water over by the punch bowl.

"You remain the most gracious hostess," Valentin told her before turning back to his vampires. "You really must try this tea. I can easily drink a whole pot of it."

Eniel sighed, having heard Valentin expound on Claudette's wonderful tea. Calixto eyed him with curious surprise.

"A tea that you can fully drink?" the Enforcer whispered.

Valentin nodded. "It's wonderful!"

Eniel refused and took position against the wall while Calixto and Valentin poured themselves cups. When the Enforcer went to stand by the window to ostensibly watch for paparazzi but really for any signs of rogues or spies, Valentin pulled a small wrapped box from his pocket and set it on the overflowing gift table.

Aurora gave him a shocked look. "You didn't have to bring me anything."

"I beg to differ, Ms. Lee," Valentin countered. "Aside from basic guest etiquette, it is an honor to be able to give my favorite drummer a present and congratulate her on marrying one who I know has the reputation to be a very good man."

The bride-to-be's warm brown face reddened before a pleased smile—so like her grandmother's—curved her lips. “When you put it that way, I happily accept.”

Valentin took a seat beside Raina and inhaled her intoxicating scent of herbs, flowers, and magic. In two more days, Aurora's party would return to Coeur d'Alene. Then, Valentin would finally taste Raina's blood.

As if aware of his thoughts, the beautiful witch's skin pinkened as she slid him a sideways glance. He knew he should worry about the other half of the bargain. With a whole pint of his blood Raina and her coven could enslave him if they wished. Claudette could have too, but he'd only given her a small vial, and she'd been very clear that she wanted to use the vampire blood to heal the man she wanted to marry when he'd been diagnosed with a fatal illness.

At the time, he'd almost have preferred to be enslaved.

Now, looking at Raina, he was relieved that his relationship with Claudette remained a friendship. Now he knew that what he'd felt for the Voodoo Queen was mere infatuation and lust for power. Because what he felt for Raina was stronger, deeper, more visceral. And it held more realism. Now he knew better to keep things light until he knew for sure whether she'd want to give up daylight, food, and having a family to be like him. If she didn't, he'd keep his heartache to himself and love her for the fleeting mortal years she'd have left.

“Are you okay?” her husky voice broke through his melancholy thoughts.

“Yes,” he whispered, remembering he’d come here for more reasons than basking in Raina’s presence. “I’m merely wondering how many...normal people are at this gathering.”

She leaned in closer until her breath caressed his ear. “As far as I can sense, only four. And I’m pretty sure they’re going to leave soon. Why?”

“Because Anthony and Razvan told me some disturbing news that I feel obligated to share with everyone with a drop of magic in their blood.” And if Raina didn’t change her mind about letting him Mark her after that, Valentin didn’t know what he would do.

When the guests had finished eating, everyone took their chairs and formed a semicircle around the gift table while Aurora sat in the middle, visibly uncomfortable at the scrutiny. But once she began opening the presents, her eyes took on a giddy, childlike gleam of excitement. Looking at Claudette’s adoring smile watching her granddaughter, Valentin at last understood why she wasn’t even slightly tempted to become a vampire. Immortality had its benefits, but one could never experience the joy of seeing their children’s happiness.

That was, unless, some mad scientist used one’s blood to create a vampire hybrid child...but Valentin still didn’t like thinking about the Lord Vampire of Coeur d’Alene’s surprise daughter. The implications were too unknown.

Aurora thanked everyone personally for each gift. Valentin couldn’t help but be touched by her delight with simple things like bedsheets, towels, and kitchenware, and amused at some of the more metaphysical items the voodooiennes gave her.

And when she opened his gift, a pair of gold Alice Cicolini sari marbled Creole hoop earrings with a psychedelic marbled lower fan framing carnelian cabochons, Valentin felt a bloom of happiness that he understood as a sort of familial love, with her being Claudette's blood.

He'd be proud to go to battle at her side, but he also wished he wouldn't have to.

When the last gift was opened, four women excused themselves with delicate yawns and gathered their coats and purses.

As soon as they departed, Claudette turned to him with narrowed eyes. "Although I'm honored that the Lord Vampire of New Orleans came to my granddaughter's bridal shower, what *really* brings you here, Val?"

Valentin poured himself another cup of tea and took a deep drink before surveying the curious witches and suspicious voodooiennes. "I don't know how much you all have heard or sensed about malevolent vampires encroaching on our city, but my people have been handling the situation with ease for hundreds of years."

"The Order of Eternal Night," Claudette said with a nod. "I've warned all my people about them, and we haven't been bothered as of yet. I assume that is about to change?"

"Yes. There's been a worrying development," Valentin said solemnly. "The cult is now breaking more laws and creating what we call Renfields. They're humans who have been mesmerized to the point of being brainwashed. One of them

tried to abduct Aurora's bandmate, Sylvis Jagwolfe, a week ago."

Claudette gasped. "Not my sweet Sylvis!" She turned to Aurora. "Why didn't you tell me about this right away?"

Valentin blinked at the Voodoo Queen's anger and at her referring to the eccentric, standoffish guitarist as "sweet."

Aurora looked down and drummed her hands lightly on her lap. "I don't have a good reason for not telling you, but we'd put off telling the witch coven so as not to overwhelm them with everything else going on because we learned that the people who'd been following the New York coven were members of the Nightwatch Society, not Renfields. We also didn't tell the New Orleans vampires yet because we wanted to make sure they were trustworthy and not in league with the Order of Eternal Night."

Claudette's expression softened. "And you were also overwhelmed with wedding plans. I understand now. Tell us more about these Renfields."

Aurora lifted her head and regained her regal poise. "We don't know how many cultist vampires are daring to make them and what use they're intending. Razvan and Anthony think Sylvis was targeted to harm Xochitl and send a message to the Lord Vampire of Coeur d'Alene. But in other places, mages were abducted by cultists and other parties."

Raina spoke suddenly. "Wait, what element does Sylvis command the most?"

"Water." Aurora studied her intently. "Why?"

“When that cultist vampire tried to grab me, he called me ‘water mage.’ They’re targeting magic users who are strong with water.” Raina studied Aurora intently. “Why?”

“That’s something we’ll definitely have to figure out.” Aurora turned to Claudette and the other voodoo practitioners. “In the meantime, we all need to work on protective and defensive magic. Sylvis blasted the Renfield with a water spout, but I know not all of us have that power. The good news, I suppose, is that the magic users most likely to be attacked by a Renfield are probably powerful enough to take them down.”

“And take them down we will,” an elderly but lively Black woman with a light Haitian accent declared. She turned to Valentin with a sly smile. “St. Scarasse, I understand that you own a club?”

“I do,” Valentin answered cautiously, unsure as to where this was going.

The woman’s grin broadened. “Well, I think we should go back to celebrating Claudette’s granddaughter’s upcoming wedding, and surely you can afford to supply the drinks.”

Another elderly voodooienne gasped. “You want us to go out drinking?”

“And in a vampire club?” another added.

Claudette spoke up. “As Valentin is a close friend, we’d be safer there than anywhere else. Also, it’s been a long time since we had a night on the town.”

Valentin nodded, realizing that inviting the voodooiennes to his territory would amount to more than a group of old aunties going out drinking. It could lead to a powerful alliance. “I can have a shuttle here in twenty minutes, all drinks on the house, and cars to deliver you home as soon as you want.”

Some of the women begged off, too tired to continue the party. But in the end, Valentin ended up escorting three witches, one psychic, one mage, and nine voodoo grannies into the VIP section of Bloodletting.

The gothic décor and vampire-themed garb garnered some friendly jibes from Claudette’s friends, but they seemed to be in a festive mood. Valentin’s staff, however, were visibly unnerved at the presence of so many powerful voodoo practitioners. Razvan and Anthony, who’d already been waiting at the club, further reassured the New Orleans vampires by agreeing with Valentin’s course of action.

Valentin repeated the benefits of an alliance to each of them before giving Claudette’s friends a tour and then turning them over to Jacques to serve them anything they wanted to drink. And drink they did. He’d never imagined that a bunch of little old ladies could put away so much. Then, Claudette’s colleague, Octavia, won his heart when she clapped her hands and declared, “I adore Concrete Blonde,” when “God is a Bullet” came on.

Octavia and some of the others went down to the dance floor below to dance and request songs. Aurora, Anthony, and Raina followed them, while Jayden remained upstairs with

Claudette, Razvan, and some of the voodooiennes who didn't care to dance.

Valentin left them to it and joined Eniel on the balcony. They watched over the wrought iron railing, making sure no one hassled any of the old women and got themselves cursed for it. Once he saw them given proper space and courtesy, Valentin's attention drifted to the club regulars. Immediately, he noticed something different, though not alarming. Several goths were taking small thin pieces of plastic out of their pockets and bags. Then they cracked them to reveal colored, phosphorescent light.

"I wonder why so many of them have glowsticks," Valentin said.

Eniel shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it's time to play some techno and industrial music again."

And then it happened. The rich tones of Bauhaus faded, and that odd song that Aurora had requested her first night in his club started: "*Laser Shooting Dinosaur.*" Every person with glowsticks congregated in the middle of the dance floor to dance and spin the glowsticks. Even Raina had acquired a glowstick. She skipped over to the group and danced and twirled her glowstick in sync with the others.

Valentin could only stand there bemused and unable to stop watching as the mass of goths danced like ravers to a song that was very *not* goth.

But when his gaze focused on Raina, he was immediately captivated by her gleeful abandon as she danced with surprising speed and agility and sang along. Suddenly, it didn't

matter if the song completely destroyed the dark and seductive atmosphere he carefully cultivated to maintain his club's branding or if it had a meretricious melody that was guaranteed to get stuck in his head and annoy him for hours.

What mattered was that Raina was happy and having fun. With all the complex and dire situations plaguing them, Valentin hadn't gotten to see her so completely unburdened and carefree ever since she caught on to the fact that he was following her. Guilt knotted in his gut at being the first source of her discomfort, even though it had granted him his selfish wish to be closer to her. He couldn't undo the past, but maybe he could make up for it.

And if a silly song gave her such delight and ease, it was a good song. But Valentin wanted to give her more.

Still, that didn't stop him from confronting Aurora as soon as she and Raina returned to the VIP floor. "What have you done to my club?"

Raina laughed beside him. "The crowd seems to love it. And don't tell me you've owned a goth club for the past four decades and never played any dance music."

"We have. Skinny Puppy, Lords of Acid, Crystal Method..." Valentin said. "I may put those back in the rotation and see how the younger generation like them. But I've never heard something as silly as this 'Laser Shooting Dinosaur' song."

Aurora gave him an impish smile. "That's because I haven't requested 'Fireflies of Doom' yet."

His eyes widened, and he gave her a look of mock horror.
“Don’t you dare.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Raina sucked in a breath and headed up the stairs of the imposing building off Allen Toussaint Boulevard. The neoclassical design made the place resemble an old museum. Yet though she was born and raised in New Orleans, she had no idea what it used to be before it became the headquarters and resting place of the Lord Vampire of New Orleans and some, or all, of his people.

She withdrew a pinch of sage and dropped it on the doorstep before gripping the brass doorknocker held in the mouth of a stone lion and knocked.

Eniel answered the door, glaring at her with more hostility than usual. “Follow me. I’ll lead you to His Lordship.”

“Look, I know you don’t like me, but is there anything I can do to make you hate me a little less?” Raina blurted, unable to hold in her frustration with Valentin’s cantankerous Second in Command. “Like, I promised Valentin that I would tell no one about this place and that I will not use magic against him unless in self-defense.”

He gave her a startled look before his stoic mask returned. “I’m not worried about any of that. Lord St. Scarasse has the resources to protect himself from witches.”

“Then what’s your problem?”

“I know you’ll break his heart.” Eniel’s voice flowed with bitterness. “And just like last time, I’ll be the one to clean up

the pieces.”

His words took her back. Too startled to think, she blurted, “What if he breaks mine?”

“You have friends and family. He does not.”

“My family disowned me,” Raina countered. “Besides, *you’re* his friend. And Claudette *is* his friend, even if it hurt Valentin’s feelings that she didn’t reciprocate his love.”

Eniel shook his head with a rueful frown. “A Lord Vampire can’t afford to have friends. Not really.”

“Well, maybe that should change.” Raina crossed her arms and spoke in her coven leader’s voice. “A witches’ coven is based on friendship, and that only makes us stronger.”

Eniel’s only response was a grunt that she couldn’t tell if it meant he’d consider her words or outright dismissed them.

Before she could ponder the weight of one powerful vampire worrying about another’s feelings, Jacques emerged from a room and gave her a cheerful wave. “Welcome! You’re probably not allowed to get a full tour, but if Valentin gives you permission, I’d love to show you around. We rarely have guests.”

“We just had guests,” Eniel grumbled.

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m sure I don’t.”

Jacques shrugged and walked away while Eniel continued down the hall in long strides that made Raina have to jog to keep up.

“How old is Jacques?” she asked.

“Only around seventy-five,” Eniel answered in the same way anyone else would say “Twelve.”

Raina knew better than to ask how old Eniel was. Instead, she kept jogging alongside him. The special plus-sized pushup corset she chose was both a blessing and a curse. It held her breasts in solid confinement, but they still jiggled a little ridiculously as she ran. Her thighs, adorned in stockings and garter belt, chafed a little too.

When they reached an elevator, she held back a sigh of relief. When Eniel pushed a button to a lower floor, she whirled on him, startled. “How does this place have a basement?”

“This area is above sea level,” Eniel answered, sounding proud. “After Katrina, Valentin had us take up residence here.”

“Oh.” Raina had countless questions about how that tragic disaster had affected the vampires of New Orleans but decided to save them for Valentin.

Eniel escorted her into a room that looked fit for a prince of darkness. Valentin lounged on a black leather-covered sofa, looking decadently sexy in a black satin robe and matching lounge pants. “I’m sorry for the late hour. I’ve ordered you some food if you’re hungry.”

He gestured to a platter of Mediterranean dishes. Pitas and hummus, a Greek salad, spanakopita, and a gyro.

Raina spotted the takeout bag in the small wastebasket by the coffee table. “How did you get food from Anatolia’s at this

hour?”

“I know that’s one of your favorite restaurants, and I can be very persuasive.” Valentin regarded her smugly. “I also have wine, juice, tea, and water.”

“Water’s fine.”

He leaned over to what Raina had thought was an end table and opened a mini fridge that held several bottles of water.

“Thank you.” She sat on the couch beside him. “I was too nervous to eat today.”

And to be honest, she was still a little too nervous. So, she started with the salad, a light but delicious mixture of romaine, spinach, and cucumbers topped with feta cheese and a balsamic dressing.

“I would assure you that I won’t bite, but that would defeat the purpose of your visit.”

Raina almost choked on a bite of cucumber as heat scalded her face. “You don’t have to rub it in.”

Valentin’s teasing eyes went solemn and intent. “I won’t hurt you, Raina. I promise.”

“I know.” She sighed. “That’s not what I’m afraid of.”

“Then what is?”

I’m afraid I’ll like it too much, Raina thought, but didn’t dare admit aloud. Even though she was pretty sure that Valentin already knew their relationship was at the precipice of something colossal, pivotal, and possibly cataclysmic, where there’d be no going back for either of them.

Instead, she reached for the spanakopita and took a bite. Valentin continued to watch her intently, making her blush.

He spoke casually. “Razvan told me that his twin can use his powers to taste the food his Bride eats. Somehow, it works through their Mark.”

“I didn’t give you permission to Mark me.”

“You should.” Valentin’s eyes glowed like emeralds as he gave her a forbidding look. “The cult and their Renfields are targeting people who can do water magic. That guarantees that one of them will try to take you again.”

“Given that they’re not giving a shit about vampire law, why would your Mark stop them?” Raina cocked her head to the side and frowned.

“Because I can use the Mark to locate you,” he explained in an impatient tone.

She glared back at him. “Like a toxic boyfriend who sneaks a tracking device in his girlfriend’s purse.”

“It’s not like that at all, I promise.” Valentin spread his hands defensively. “The magic would be in the background, only alerting me when you’re in danger.”

“I bet you can tap into it at will, though.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “And there’s still the ownership aspect of the whole thing. I was raised with that bullshit and was renounced by my whole family for not buying into it. I’m not about to submit to it now.”

Valentin ran a hand through his hair. “I wouldn’t see you as my property and would never presume to treat you as such.”

His voice grew more exasperated. “It all comes back to trust. I am trusting you with my blood. Something you could use against me. Why can’t you trust me?”

She reached for an evasive answer, but the truth crept out. “Every time I’ve trusted someone, I’ve been hurt.”

“You trust your coven.”

“That’s different.”

“How?” Valentin said, then slowly smiled. “Ah, I see. This goes back to your earlier metaphor.” He leaned forward and caressed her cheek. “Am *I* your boyfriend now?”

“I mean, kind of?” Raina struggled to think straight under his gentle touch. “We dance together, have movie nights, and...” she sucked in a breath, “kiss sometimes. So, the criteria does fit. But our involvement is predicated on other parties ordering you to watch me. We wouldn’t have become involved otherwise.”

“Yes, we would have.” Valentin twirled a lock of her hair around his finger. “Remember, the reason I was tasked with monitoring your coven was because they knew I wanted you.”

“Fine.” She surrendered. “But boyfriend is still an awkward term when we have an almost two-hundred-year age difference.”

“Then how about ‘lover?’” he whispered against her neck.

Frissons of pleasure roiled through her body, converging in that tender, aching place between her thighs. “Maybe....” Raina whispered weakly. “I still don’t know you that well. And we still have to finish our bargain.”

“Ah, yes.” Valentin’s eyes glowed again, and his fangs flashed as he grinned at her hungrily. “Our bargain. Shall we begin, then?”

“Um...” That was what she was here for, but the sight of a hungry vampire looming over her was more than a little unnerving. “Promise you won’t brainwash me or anything.”

He regarded her solemnly. “All I will do is take away the pain and give you pleasure.”

That was a sort of brainwashing, but Raina let it go since she didn’t want his bite to hurt. “And only a pint?”

“Only a pint.” Valentin leaned forward again until his breath whispered across her lips. “An even trade. Now, where do you want me?”

Inside me! Her horny side screamed. But her rational side compromised. Raina took a deep, shuddering breath and moved her hair over her shoulder, baring her neck.

Valentin’s eyes glowed brighter, and his smile grew hungrier. “I’d hoped you’d let me bite you there.”

He scooted even closer to her on the couch. The belt of his robe slipped, exposing a huge erection protruding from his black satin pants. Raina’s breath hitched, and she forced her eyes to look away, but the sight of his bared abs and chest inflamed her further.

When his left hand grasped her shoulder, she thought she’d burst into flames if he touched her more. But then his right hand slid around her other shoulder, pushing her hair away and clasping her upper back. His grip was gentle but firm. Raina

knew that with his preternatural strength, she wouldn't be able to pull away.

Yet she wasn't afraid. Maybe she did trust him.

Valentin's hair gleamed in the lamplight like burnished copper as he bent his head. "Are you ready?" he whispered against her neck.

Goosebumps rose all over her body, and she shivered. "Yes."

His lips closed over the side of her neck, then the unmistakable feel of magic swirled around her head just before it coalesced around his mouth. Then, his fangs pierced her flesh, but instead of stabbing pain, deep, heady pleasure coursed down her neck, spread across her chest, fluttered her belly, and sent a zinging jolt between her legs.

A low moan escaped her throat, and unable to help herself, Raina plunged one hand into his thick silken hair and the other around his waist, pulling him tighter against her.

They fell on the couch, his weight sinking into her, his heart pounding against hers. His erection pressed against the place where she ached the most. Reflexively, her hips undulated against his, seeking deeper contact.

Valentin obliged, grinding his hardness against her. His mouth pulled at her neck with the most intense eroticism, and every time he swallowed, it sent a pulse of electric ecstasy through her whole body. If he kept this up, she knew she'd climax right then and there.

But then, he withdrew his fangs, and Raina whimpered in protest, wanting more. There was a warm wetness as he licked her wound, then a strange tingling sensation. The vampire's pleasant weight lifted from her body, and, with gentle gallantry, he pulled her up.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" he said hoarsely as he pulled the lapels of his robe together, concealing his body and hardness. "You should eat more and drink some water to make up for what I took."

"Uh...huh," was all she could manage.

His arrogant smile made her want to snap at him, but instead, all she could do was babble an inane observation. "You felt warm. And you have a heartbeat."

As she spoke, she could see the artery in his neck pulsing.

"Of course I do." His eyes narrowed. "Why does that sound like a revelation?"

"I thought you were...dead."

"No. We're quite alive. I thought that was clear when I explained how vampires came to be." Valentin shrugged. "However, Mephistopheles does have necromancers in his army to raise corpse-walkers to aid them in battle."

"Oh shit. Zombies are real?" She latched onto the gross subject before she completely lost her mind and begged him to fuck her.

"In a sense. Though the reanimated corpses will drop dead if the one who raised them isn't keeping his magic flowing. So it's not like they go rogue. And they don't eat human flesh.

They don't eat anything. They're just automatons who follow the necromancer's will." Valentin grimaced in revulsion.

"That's still crazy." Raina shook her head in wonder at yet another revelation about that other world and the things that existed within it. "Wait. How do you know all this stuff? Mephistopheles hasn't attacked Earth in your lifetime."

"Razvan told me all about their last battle in Aisthanesthai." Valentin leaned over and took a water bottle out of the fridge. "The Evil One attacked a mage school a few months ago and abducted a few students. Blood mages. But now it seems he's after water mages. I wonder what his plan is."

Raina shivered in remembrance that an ancient, world-destroying entity had directly targeted her. "I don't know, but I wish Aurora and the others would have told us more when they were here."

"Me too." Valentin took a deep drink of water before continuing. "I wonder if they were trying to avoid overwhelming us or if they want to make sure I've pledged myself to the Queen before revealing everything."

"If that's the case, that's really shitty of them."

He shrugged. "Very pragmatic, though."

Raina gave him a wry smile. "Like you holding off on telling me things?"

"No. I've been quite open as to what I want from you." His green eyes danced with wickedness. "Speaking of, it's time I

fulfill my end of the bargain. Let me go and get the materials to draw my blood and the jar I sanitized.”

He rose from the couch, leaving Raina feeling bereft. She hadn't realized she'd still been pressed up against him. While she waited, she nibbled at some spanakopita and drank some water.

After a few minutes of waiting, she squirmed on the sofa, needing to pee.

“Is there a bathroom down here?” she called.

Valentin's voice came from one of the rooms to her right. “Yes. Second door on your left. I'm almost ready.”

The bathroom was huge and luxurious, with an enormous jetted bathtub, a walk-in shower, and two sinks. There was also a pristine toilet and bidet. Did vampires pee? She'd have to wonder about that later.

After taking care of her almost emergency, Raina washed her hands, then touched up her makeup and hair. Valentin had done a number on her. Her lipstick was smeared—probably from her burying her face in his shoulder—her eye makeup smudged, and her hair was disheveled and frizzy.

By the time she finished putting everything back in place, Valentin was on the couch. He had an IV in his arm, and blood flowed out of a tube and into a pint jar. Raina raised a brow at the clinical sight. “I thought you'd just bite your wrist and let it drip like in the movies.”

He chuckled. “I'd heal too fast to get a whole pint out. Besides, this way is less painful.”

“I didn’t think of that.”

“I always cringe when the vampires in movies tear into their wrists. There are some cases when one does it that way. Like when my maker Changed me.” Valentin lifted the tube from the now full jar, removed the needle from his inner elbow, and carefully put the lid on the jar before handing it to her. “This should remain useable for about a month as long as you keep it cold. Vampire blood deteriorates pretty quickly, and the first thing to go is the magic.”

Raina felt the heat of the blood through the glass jar and felt a wave of dumbstruck awe at the surrealness of holding a pint of Valentin’s blood in her hands. “Thank you for keeping your end of the bargain. And for the food.” Feeling awkward, she rose from the couch. “I’d better head back.”

Valentin gave her a rueful smile. “I’m afraid that’s not going to be possible, *chérie*.”

“Why not?”

“The sun came up ten minutes ago.” His smile broadened, abandoning any pretense of remorse. “The building is locked down until dusk.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Raina's jaw dropped in the face of his mild tone. "You planned this on purpose!"

"Maybe." Valentin gave her another smug smile. "You may as well put that blood in the fridge and text your friends so they don't worry about you."

She followed his first suggestion since she didn't want to destroy a rare and powerful tool for her magic. The sight of the bottles of water, juice, wine, and fresh packages of lunchmeat and cheese made her want to kick herself for not noticing that he'd planned for her to stick around all day.

Instead, she whirled on him and summoned two fireballs in the palms of her hands. "Let me out now. Or else."

The vampire vanished, and then she felt hot, steely manacles on her wrists before she was spun around and propelled forward at light speed. Raina blinked and found herself in the bathroom. Before she could process that, cold water sprayed on her hands and face.

Valentin's lips grazed her ear as he growled in a terrifying voice. "Don't you *ever* summon fire in my lair. Fight me all you want, but I will not allow you to endanger my people."

I'm sorry, she almost said, but her anger, both at his trapping her here and how easily he'd overpowered her, bubbled back to the surface. She'd worked hard on being able to summon flames like Xochitl. And he'd managed to break

her concentration and snuff them the minute he seized her. Yet he'd still drenched her in the shower when that wasn't even necessary.

“Fine,” she snarled back. “Have some water then.”

Gathering her power, she redirected the shower spray over her shoulder so it would hit him in the face.

Valentin's gurgled sounds of outrage told her she'd aimed true. A torrent of French curses escaped him, somehow managing to sound both scary and sexy. His grip on her tightened almost painfully, then she was spun around again and pinned against the shower wall.

“I endured the stinking floodwaters of Katrina, witch. Your little waterspouts won't harm me.”

His eyes glowed green fire, his lips were drawn back to reveal his fangs, and his hair hung in wet dripping strands over his face. *Damn him.* Somehow, he managed to look hot and terrifying at the same time. Mingled arousal and fear chased away her bravado.

He must have seen her momentary defeat, for his lips curved in a feral grin. “What's your next move, *chérie?*”

Damn him! She bared her own teeth in a bitter grin. “You told me you wished you could fly.”

Raina shoved her power outward, intending to propel him into the wall. But Valentin's grip remained on her shoulders, so she went flying with him. They slammed into the wall above the bathtub with a sickening crack of tile. The impact

knocked the wind out of her. A pitiful “oof” escaped her mouth, and her head spun with dizziness.

Wearing a corset had been a terrible idea. The wire boning dug into her breasts and ribs uncomfortably.

“*Mon pauvre,*” Valentin murmured in a husky voice before she was once more flipped around and pinned. “I think that hurt you worse than it did me.”

“I’m fine,” she lied. “Your move.”

“If you wish.”

Then his mouth was on hers, hot and insistent. Raina melted under the onslaught and returned the kiss hungrily. She tried to reach for his hair, but he kept her arms pinned against the cold tile. Whimpering in frustration, she gyrated her hips against his erection.

Another low growl rumbled from Valentin’s chest. He released her arms only to seize her legs. Then he lifted her like she weighed nothing, settling his hardness between her legs. Raina gasped and grabbed his shoulders for balance. Somehow, he’d lifted her skirt, so between the thin wet satin of his pants and her drenched panties, it felt like nothing was between them.

Valentin continued to kiss her, tangling his tongue around hers, feeding at her mouth. His hands dug into the flesh of her thighs, holding her against his hardness. She moaned and arched her hips against him, aching for more.

When he dragged his mouth from hers, Raina was gasping with need.

“Do you want this, *chérie*?”

“Yes,” she whimpered.

She thought he'd fuck her right here against the wall, and part of her wanted him to. But instead, he switched his grip with vampiric speed so she was cradled in his arms like a petite damsel being rescued.

Then he stepped out of the tub—they'd been in the tub? – and carried her back toward the shower.

“Could you turn that off, please?”

She reached out for the faucet, wincing as the cold water sprayed her arm, and turned it off. That made her aware that her wet clothes were cold as well, and she shivered. Valentin chuckled and held her closer to his chest as he carried her out of the bathroom.

He crossed the main room in easy strides, her weight nothing to him. She hadn't thought of his vampiric strength having that benefit. For the first time in her life, she felt small, delicate, cherished.

But when he carried her into a room that had an enormous four-poster bed, the impact of what was about to happen sank in. She was going to have sex with a vampire. A vampire she'd threatened to torch and had slammed into a wall only minutes earlier.

But Goddess damn him, he was so hot with his damp hair curling over his bare shoulders, his wet robe hanging torn and open to frame his bare muscular chest and stomach.

Meanwhile, she probably looked like a drowned raccoon.

“Is something wrong, Raina?” his husky voice pulled her out of her tumultuous thoughts.

She shook her head. “I look like hell.”

“You look luscious.” He carefully set her down and let his robe slip off his broad shoulders to tumble to the floor. “But you’re shivering. Let’s get you out of these wet clothes so I can warm you.”

Valentin bent down and kissed the tops of her breasts. The feel of his hot mouth on her chilled skin was a sensory cataclysm. Then, before she realized what he was doing, Valentin hooked a fang in the top of her corset. He seized the ripped fabric and tore it until Raina’s breasts were freed.

“Damn it, Val,” she exclaimed when the remains of her corset fell to the floor. “That was expensive!”

“I’ll buy you a new one,” he promised as he slid her skirt and panties down her hips.

Though on the surface that was all fine and romantic, Raina couldn’t help but think about how corsets of that size and quality had to be special-ordered. Yet how could she scold him when he was on his knees at her feet, carefully removing her shoes? Especially when he was looking at her like she was the sexiest, most beautiful creature in the world?

Raina thought she’d feel self-conscious standing before him in nothing but thigh-high stockings and a garter belt, but instead, she felt like a powerful goddess. Again, Valentin gathered her in his arms and lifted her. She could get used to that.

He set her on the edge of his bed. His soft, down-filled comforter made her feel like she was seated on a cloud.

His eyes glowed as he gave her another sinful smile. “Remember what I said when you asked me about my intentions when you heard that I looked like I wanted to eat you? I’d like to do that now.”

“Okay,” she managed in a weak whisper.

Valentin grasped her thighs and coaxed them apart, exposing the swollen source of her need. He didn’t dive in right away. Instead, he taunted her with light kisses over her hips and above her pubic bone. His hands slid up her stomach to caress her breasts in feathery strokes. Then, just as he’d vowed that fateful night, his mouth closed over her labia, and his tongue darted between.

Raina gasped at the electric sensation and fell back onto the mattress. He’d barely begun, and already the pleasure was almost too much to take.

But Valentin gave her more, swirling his tongue up and around her clit as his lips worked their own magic. She moaned and reached down to grasp his hair, arching her hips for more. He obliged, sucking her vulva in a pulsing rhythm that had her moaning and shuddering. How he kept his fangs from scraping her tender flesh, she had no idea.

The magic he wrought with his mouth grew more and more potent, intensifying her pleasure until it spilled over her in intoxicating waves. Just as the first tremors of her orgasm hit, Valentin pinched her nipples, sending jolts of sensation to her already quaking body. She cried out, her hips writhing in

an unconscious effort to escape the overwhelming climax, but his hands slid back down to pin her thighs as his mouth devoured her mercilessly.

Only when she lay limp and trembling did he lift his head to grin triumphantly at her.

“That was more enjoyable than my fantasies.” His breath tickled her thigh. “You taste like nectar and magic.”

He climbed up on the bed, straddling her hips and crouching over her. “I’m not finished with you yet.”

Raina recovered her breath enough to scoot back on the bed until her legs no longer dangled off the edge. “I’m not sure I can take more.”

“I’ll bet you can.” He fell upon her then, licking and nibbling at her neck before working his way down her breasts. Somewhere in his ministrations, her stockings and damp garter belt vanished.

He lavished kisses all over her body like she was someone precious and cherished. Tears prickled the corners of her eyes before giving away to arousal when he removed his pants and loomed naked over her. Although Raina had felt a pretty big bulge when they’d first started making out, he was even bigger than expected.

Valentin leaned over her, propped up on his elbows, his chest grazing her hard nipples and the swollen tip of his erection pressed against her aching entrance.

“Tell me you want me,” he whispered against her lips.

“I want you,” she replied, realizing he wasn’t just indulging in dirty talk. There was a vulnerability to him that she’d only begun to sense and would need to explore.

But not now. Not when his delicious weight settled on her and his hardness slid into her slick heat.

The feel of him inside her made her cry out with bliss. Her arms wrapped around his firm body, and she arched her back to meet his thrusts.

He fucked like he danced, with an instinctive rhythm and innately sensual heat. Raina matched his movements, contributing to the fire they stoked. Magic bubbled within her, dancing across her skin. Valentin shivered in her arms, possibly feeling it too.

As the heat and pleasure climbed, Raina arched her hips, encouraging him to go harder. And oh, Goddess, he obliged. Valentin’s cock pounded into her with savage brutality that made her bite his neck to suppress her screams of ecstasy.

His groan vibrated against her neck, and his fangs grazed her neck as he drove into her mercilessly.

The pleasure spiraled upwards, reaching a pinnacle before exploding in a million bursts of light. Raina screamed again, but he captured the sound with his kiss.

The magic flowed back and forth between them, pulsating alongside the orgasm. Valentin threw his head back with a growl, his eyes glowing and fangs bared. Raina felt him shudder inside her, intensifying her own climax.

He collapsed on top of her, and they trembled in each other's arms, catching their breath.

"I...felt your magic," he gasped against her neck.

"I thought you did."

That tender vulnerability returned to his voice. "Was it like that for anyone else?"

"No." She answered honestly. "Just you."

"Good." Valentin rolled off her and gasped for breath. "Want some water? I mean, when I can move?"

"Please," Raina managed, shivering with aftershocks.

After rehydrating and making her way to the bathroom to clean up, some semblance of sanity returned. She'd just had sex with the Lord Vampire of New Orleans. Her gaze strayed to the cracked and dented tiled wall above the bathtub. And that was after she'd tried to fight him, and he'd overpowered her with frightening ease.

Her memory sent her vivid memories of the times he'd pinned her, his immense strength making it very clear that he could have snapped her neck any time he felt like it.

This likely wasn't the best foundation for a healthy relationship. The problem was, she'd already fallen too hard.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Valentin sighed with bliss as Raina returned to his bedroom. Her pale skin, slightly splotchy from their exertions, both in and out of bed, reminded him of strawberries and cream. But then she froze in the doorway.

“Fuck. I need to text my friends and let them know I’m okay.” She went back out, and it took every vestige of his willpower to remain where he was and not let the sight of her voluptuous ass inflame him into pouncing.

He lay back on his pillows and listened to the alternate chimes of her phone in the other room. She seemed to have different notification sounds for each coven member. After what felt like an eternity of back and forth, Raina returned.

“How did that go?”

“Alma was most annoyed since today’s supposed to be a work day. But they’re all relieved that I’m safe and they don’t have to storm your fortress.” She met his gaze and shook her head. “I still can’t believe you purposefully trapped me here.”

“I was desperate,” he confessed. “I never get to spend time alone with you.”

“You could have *asked*.”

He sighed and reclined his head under his hands. “I suppose I should have.”

“You’ll have to make it up to me.” She got back into bed beside him. “Will you tell me how you became a vampire?”

“That wasn’t the sort of making it up to you that I’d imagined,” Valentin teased. But her solemn curiosity made him sober. “All right, but it’s not a noble or romantic tale. They rarely are.”

He put his arm around Raina and pulled her closer so he could feel her warmth and smell her delightful aroma of magic and woman before he began. “My relationship with my father, Antoine du Lorre, was always rather fraught. His mother was a *placée*, a glorified mistress to a white landowner, but he was *passee blanc*, white-passing, and so was I.”

Valentin paused at the admission, reflexively nervous as memories of the hostility of those in the Irish Channel. Back in those days, even he would have been too afraid to go near Raina’s neighborhood. But one glance at Raina’s warm brown eyes and open curiosity brought him back to the fact that those times were gone...at least mostly.

He reached for one of the bottles of cold water on the nightstand and took a deep drink before continuing. “My father was given a custom European tour and Paris education from his White father, where he found a Parisian bride with a good dowry because she’d had a child out of wedlock. Antoine had the foresight to know that a gentleman’s lifestyle wasn’t for him, so he studied business, and when his father died, he used his small inheritance to set up a nightclub near Storyville. It wasn’t a brothel, either, because such a business venture reminded Antoine of the roots he tried to hide, or because he knew my grandmother would disapprove. She encouraged their estrangement as much as he did.”

Valentin closed his eyes as he was haunted by memories of the fraught estrangements, pretenses, ambition, and shame his family members drowned in. “Antoine tried to raise me to follow in his footsteps. I, too received a European tour and Paris education, but I had little interest in the gambling aspect of Father’s club, no matter that it was the biggest moneymaker. Instead, I was in love with the musical entertainment aspect and did my best to be in charge of selecting the musicians who’d perform at the club. *Mon Dieu*, it was *wonderful* to hear the roots of what would become jazz and blues. But Father rarely let me hire those musicians.”

He ground his teeth at the memory of fighting for his beloved music and took another sip of water. “I also clashed with my father on the matter of our kinspeople of color. I wanted to know them, to embrace them as family. I sought out my grandmother and great-aunts, uncles, and cousins. And when the war was coming to New Orleans, I convinced as many of my kin as possible to come with me to France, where my mother owned an entailed estate. My father disowned me as much as was legal and refused to speak with me again. That was the last time I saw him.”

Valentin closed his eyes, swallowing the old hurt and shame. “I know I could have used my resources to fight the Confederacy, but all I cared about was my own family. Sometimes I wonder if I was punished for that selfishness. Some of my kin opted to return to New Orleans after the war, but my grandmother and a few cousins who’d found prospects for a better life chose to stay in France. Those of us who returned home were subjected to the disaster that was

Reconstruction, and an increase in segregation laws that were more draconian than before the war. My father had been killed by Union soldiers in a gambling dispute during the occupation. I inherited his nightclub, apparently not disinherited *that* far. But the building was in shambles, so I didn't do much but live in it while I tried to help my St. Scarasse kin reunite with their formerly enslaved family.”

He shook his head at the naïve optimism he'd had at the beginning of that endeavor. “The result was bittersweet. We only found a handful before the entire St. Scarasse clan *and* my French mother died of yellow fever in 1878.”

Valentin closed his eyes, fighting the prickle of tears. Raina squeezed his hand.

“That must have been so hard for you to cope with,” she said softly.

He nodded. “I went insane. There's no eloquent way to put it. I hoarded land deeds, money, and jewelry from my dead kin and spent all my time in the dilapidated ruin of my father's club. People called me the ‘Phantom of Storyville.’ And that was how the vampire, Marcel, found me.”

Valentin sighed. “I should have known right away that he was also crazy, but my mental state rendered me blind. Marcel offered me comfort in my grief, with his seeming empathetic listening and companionship. When he revealed himself to be a vampire, I don't recall being shocked, much less frightened. I accepted his offer of eternal life out of sheer desperation to become *anyone* but the lost madman I was.”

A bitter laugh escaped from his lips. “Needless to say, I walked right into the vampire’s trap. Marcel didn’t want me for companionship. He wanted my building, and he wanted a plaything. I spent almost ten years locked away. Marcel claimed it was for my own safety. So I wouldn’t lose control around humans and bite them in public. Instead, I fed on victims he brought me or fed directly from him. He kept my mind occupied with novels on strategy and warfare and my body active with sword practice.”

An involuntary shudder ran through his body at the conflicted memories of that first decade of being a vampire. The blood and knowledge were wonderful, but the captivity was terrible. Raina ran a soothing hand down his shoulder, giving him the strength to continue. “I didn’t know how wrong things were until a group of vampires barged in, arrested Marcel, and brought me before the Lord Vampire of New Orleans. Marcel had been banished from the city but used my building for shelter instead. He was executed for Changing a human without his lord’s permission. I was questioned intently before the Lord Vampire decided to permit me to live. He had some of his subordinates guide me on Vampire Law and teach me how to truly survive in the city. I soon learned that vampires in this city *did not* have a good survival rate. Mostly due to fires and hurricanes, but also from power struggles. At first, I wanted to return to Paris, as well as find out if the vampires there had better prospects of survival. But my lord refused, and in retrospect, I doubt the Lord of Paris would have welcomed me.”

Valentin took another deep drink of water and continued in a lighter tone now that the worst was over. “Since I was able to keep my building, I threw myself into restoring it and creating a successful nightclub. I eschewed gambling and whoring as the business model, only wanting a place where people could drink, dance, and be merry. I’d had my fill of suffering and wanted to be surrounded by joy. The explosion of jazz and blues helped me flourish. I employed lower-ranking vampires at first, but the higher ones grew envious of the wages and easy meals, so soon I had vampires older and more powerful than me under my employ. With their help, I was able to gain more power and authority over the following decades and work out why New Orleans vampires perished so easily. Yes, fire and hurricanes were a big factor, especially when the Lord Vampire at the time wasn’t doing any preventative measures for his people. But there were also issues with vampire hunters and the local voodoo practitioners. I used brick and steel in the construction of my club’s sleeping quarters, helped the lower-ranking vampires invest in lead-lined coffins, and found enterprising writers to mock vampire hunters while simultaneously encouraging anything in popular culture that celebrated fictional vampires. Soon, many of us were hiding out in the open, and vampire hunters were reduced to laughingstocks.” Valentin chuckled at the memory.

“As far as the voodoo community went, I made alliances where I could. Supporting Civil Rights helped somewhat. Discouraging my kind from feeding on anyone connected to a voodooienne helped even more. But the real headway was my friendship with Claudette Fontaine.”

“Did you Mark Claudette?” Raina asked suddenly.

Valentin noted the glimmer of jealousy in her gaze and hid a smile. “She didn’t need it. If anything, she Marked me in her own way. Vampires aren’t well-liked amongst the voodoo community, but none of her people have harmed me.”

Valentin threaded his fingers through Raina’s and squeezed her hand. “There are many jokes about my having a fetish for women with magical blood, and while tasting such power on my tongue is indeed like the best of drugs, my first concern was, and always will be, the safety of my people. Claudette’s goals were the same, which is how she climbed so high and so young. And she’s just plain *awesome*. I don’t even regret my foolish infatuation with her. Not when it grew into such a beneficial friendship and not when her advice helped me find something better with you.”

Raina’s cheeks pinkened, and she leaned in closer to him. “When did you become the Lord of New Orleans?”

“After Katrina. The Lord and his cronies didn’t listen to my advice. They clung to their opulent lair in the Lakeview neighborhood, which resulted in the roof being blown away, and the vampires on one floor perishing in the sun, and another floor burning down in an electrical fire. I formed search parties and gathered up the survivors. They voted for me to take over as Lord. The Elders told me I was the youngest Lord Vampire to take control of a city this size.”

“You mentioned spending hours in the floodwaters,” Raina said softly.

“Yes. My lair used to be at my club downtown. The bricks and steel held, for the most part, but the water still found its way in. I woke up submerged and had to wait hours hiding from human rescue crews until dark. The first thing I did when the former Lord’s fortune was transferred to me was to build a shelter above sea level that would be safe from both fire and hurricanes.” Valentin shook his head at the futility of such an effort. “Well, as safe as can be. This area was supposed to be in the path of Hurricane Shelley, so who knows how it would have fared if you and your coven hadn’t prevented her from making landfall.”

He leaned forward and kissed her, not only to convey his gratitude but because it felt so natural and nurturing. “Anyway, that’s my story. Now I think you should tell me yours.”

Raina’s hair fell forward to hide her face in an unusual display of shyness. “Mine isn’t that exciting. I’m not like you or Claudette, taking on leadership of a whole community. It’s just us four.”

“You four *are* exciting.” Valentin brushed her hair behind her ear.

“Our power doesn’t even come from me,” Raina protested. “We couldn’t do more than brief spirit summoning and tiny luck spells before Rage of Angels brought all that magic with them.”

“If that were true, every person who attended their concerts would have magic,” Valentin said firmly. “But it’s only those who already had a little power who’ve gained more. Furthermore, you’re a successful business owner in a city

where shops like yours close regularly. So please, tell me, what set you on your path to becoming leader of one of the most powerful witch covens on Earth?”

“I don’t know if you know that most girls have a witchy phase.” Raina laughed. “But it’s *especially* the case for Catholic girls. The difference for me was that some of my spells actually worked. So instead of outgrowing it, or channeling all that mysticism back into the church, I continued with my craft. I ended up getting disowned for it and kicked out of the house when I was seventeen.”

“I’m sorry.” Valentin had suspected as much when he didn’t see any family visiting her. “I know how it feels to be rejected by your family. It’s admirable that you found the strength to get your business degree.”

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

“That part of your social media is public.”

She blushed. “Oh yeah.”

“How did you meet your coven?” he prodded.

“Alma was already friends with me since high school. She had her own issues with her family. We met Jack and Cinna in college when Cinna clocked us doing a luck spell before finals.” Raina smiled in fond memory. “We formed a study group that eventually evolved into a coven. Jack came from money, so he set up his store first, and we all worked there. But Alma wanted to focus more on herbs and tinctures than stones and amulets. Eventually, she and I took out a business

loan and opened our store. We paid that off the year before last.”

Valentin’s heart swelled with admiration for her. He’d encountered many women with a good head for business but seen most fail because of external challenges that weren’t there for men. A buzz of satisfaction also enveloped him at finally having Raina in his bed and for the opportunity to finally be alone with her long enough for her to open up to him about her past, her present, and her dreams for the future.

“Does your family know about your store?”

Raina nodded. “Yes, but only because I had to return for my grandmother’s will reading.” She shook her head, an uncharacteristic bitter smile curving her lips. “I still can’t believe that she left me anything. I thought she hated me the most.”

“For being a witch?”

“For being fat.”

What followed was a bitter summary of abusive summer camps, starvation, fad diets, and constant beratement from people who should have valued her and cared for her most. Valentin gathered her into his arms and cursed everyone who’d ever made her feel like she was less than others.

“You know, your grandmother did get one thing she claimed to want for you.” He kissed the top of her head.

“What?”

“A wealthy man who loves you.” Valentin sucked in a breath, not meaning to confess that his feelings for her went

that far. “She was just too stupid to realize you were perfect all along.”

Raina let out a derisive snort, seeming to miss the baring of his heart. “I’m not perfect. And if you hold onto that delusion, our relationship is doomed.”

“You’re perfect for me.” Valentin kissed her temple. “One of the biggest threats to eternal life is stagnation. Challenges to my authority from other vampires, nuisances that they are, help keep me on my toes, but your power, your challenges to not only my authority but also to my very psyche, help me learn and grow. Not to mention all the things I am learning about your generation, your influences, and all things, great and small, that bring you joy.”

She shook her head and yawned. “That still sounds a little too much like a pedestal.”

He laughed and kissed her again before pulling the covers over them. “Keep helping me learn.”



When Valentin awoke hours later, he couldn’t stop smiling. Hopefully, he’d be able to wake up next to his beloved witch more often. Having her beside him, in his bed, gave him a peace and satisfaction that he’d never dreamed could exist. The magic of her blood sang in his veins, possibly strong

enough that he may actually be able to fly tonight. And yet her presence at his side, in his bed, was more potent.

Raina frowned at him. “You look hungry.”

“I am, but I’m not going to fall upon you like a ravening beast.” Valentin bared his fangs before giving her a teasing smile. “I’d much rather make love to you, but I can tell by the worried glint in your eyes that you want to get back to your coven.”

“I do. Though I’d like a shower first if that’s alright.”

“Of course.” He slipped out of bed and grabbed a clean pair of boxers from his dresser. “Just let me sweep the floor in there first. I don’t want you to cut your feet on the tile we broke.”

“Fuck, I forgot about that. I’m sorry.”

Valentin laughed and shook his head. “Don’t be. That was the most diverting foreplay I’ve ever had the pleasure of experiencing.”

She blinked at him and followed him out of the bedroom “I hope you don’t plan on it being like that all the time. I’m not really into hurting people or breaking things.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t either. But that doesn’t change that it was hot as hell.” Valentin smirked as he got a broom and dustpan out of the closet. “Next time I’ll be perfectly happy to seduce you with my fingers and tongue.”

Her cheeks turned red, making him struggle to resist teasing her further. Instead, he swept the bathroom floor and gave her privacy to shower. The mental image of her naked

under the hot spray made him harden, so he went to his office to check his emails for a much-needed distraction.

The first message in his inbox made him sigh. The damned Nightwatch Society refused to leave him alone. They'd tracked down his email through his club, and Valentin wasn't certain if they knew if he was the Lord Vampire of this city. Or if they even knew how vampire power structures worked. But they'd figured out what he was, which was dangerous enough.

However...

Valentin sighed again and untangled a lock of his hair. If the Order of Eternal Night was targeting witches and could be looking into the voodoo community, there could be a chance that they'd also come after Nightwatch Society members. And much as Valentin didn't trust them, they were still citizens of his city, and hell if he'd allow any of them to be harmed without his approval.

So he opened the email. And laughed when he read the contents.

“Mr. St. Scarasse, I know my correspondence is a nuisance, but could you please respond to this one. We have reason to believe that more members of certain parties are in the area whom you did not invite. I would very much like to know if you are aware of said parties, and if they are indeed unwelcome, I'd like to arrange a meeting on how best we may combine our resources to oust them.”

“However, if you did invite them, I must warn you that my associates and I do not want them around our property and will take all necessary measures to keep them away.

“Regards,

Genevieve Moreau.

Valentin smirked. So they *were* aware of the increase in invading rogues. He quickly typed up a reply.

“Dear Ms. Moreau,

“Thank you for informing me about these intruders. You are correct in that they’re not invited. Furthermore, there is more information that I’ve gathered that I believe is only fair to share with your organization. As trust is still tenuous between your associates and mine, let me propose a public meeting tonight. I will be waiting at the Denny’s in Metairie at ten o’clock.”

Valentin considered adding a line about Raina’s coven but decided against it. He had a better suggestion for how she could deal with those who were trying to recruit her friends.

Raina emerged swathed in a towel, her dark wet hair gleaming in the lamplight. “Um... do you have a shirt I can borrow? You ruined my corset.”

“Of course. And be sure to send me a link to a replacement I can purchase.” He shut off his laptop and went back to the bedroom with her. “I think you should visit the Nightwatch Society’s safehouse.”

“Okay?” Raina’s eyebrows drew together in a perplexed frown. “What brought this up?”

“The Order of Eternal Night has been creeping around the society’s members. I’m not inclined to fully ally my people with theirs, but I also don’t want them harmed. I also don’t want your coven harmed. So perhaps it would be a good idea for you to determine if they can be of help to you.” He removed a Nine Inch Nails T-shirt from his closet that he rarely wore because it was a little too big and handed it to her. “And more importantly, such an action will reduce the risk of a rift in your coven. I know it bothers you that Cinna and Jack talked to them on the side. The sooner you four get on the same page, the better.”

Raina turned her back to him and pulled on the shirt. “I’d been thinking the same thing. Do you want me to say anything to them about the Order of Eternal Night?”

“No need. I’m meeting them at Denny’s tonight.”

“*Denny’s?*”

Valentin shrugged. “It was the most peaceful late-night neutral ground I could think of. I’d invite you to come with

me, but I feel it best that we do these first overtures separately so if there's any hint of duplicity on their end, it will be easier to spot."

"Oh." Raina's eyes widened as she regarded him with an awed yet cautious expression.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because you're treating me like an equal partner."

"You lead the most powerful witch coven in the city. I lead the city's vampires. We *should* be equal partners." Valentin wished the world hadn't made her so insecure as to not be able to see this obvious truth. He grinned and added, "I damn well wouldn't want you as my enemy."

"And I don't want you as mine." Her arms slipped around his waist. "Call me after your meeting?"

"I promise." Valentin bent down and kissed her. He wanted to go straight to her house but knew that, after manipulating her into spending the day here, it would be wiser to give her some space. "You really should reconsider letting me Mark you."

She chuckled and shook her head. "Not a chance."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Raina groaned as she pulled into her driveway. Jack's Hyundai was parked on the street in front of the house. That meant the whole coven was waiting for her.

Just as expected, the interrogation began as soon as she walked in the front door.

“What happened to your corset?”

“He tricked you into staying for the day, didn't he?”

“Did you sleep with him?”

Instead of answering any of the questions, Raina pulled out the pint of Valentin's blood. “I got what I went there for. We should probably try one of the spells Claudette gave us before it loses potency. Valentin said the first thing to break down in vampire blood is the magic.”

Alma and Cinna gave her knowing grins, but Jack immediately latched onto the switch in topic. “Let's try the strength one!”

The spell was fairly simple, requiring herbs and candles they had on hand and an easy to remember focus chant. Yet Raina still screwed up in the concentration department, so it took a few tries. As exciting as it was to take so many steps higher on the stairway to power, she couldn't stop thinking of Valentin's lovemaking. Or the casual way he'd said that she'd gained “*a wealthy man who loves you.*” There was no way he

could have meant it. They'd only known each other for less than half a year. Though he probably counted the time from when he'd first seen her at that Rage of Angels meet and greet.

And yet Raina's feelings for Valentin had already reached a level of intensity that frightened her. They'd crossed a threshold they could never walk back from. She'd talked to him about things she'd never dared to tell other guys. He'd revealed vulnerabilities and strengths that he seemed to keep close to his chest. And the way he'd made love to her... Goddess help her, she'd never had such pleasure before.

When the last step of the strength spell was executed, power flowed into Raina like breathing in a storm. Cinna, Jack, and Alma all gasped with her.

"Holy shit," Cinna breathed. "This feels intense!"

Jack reached over and lifted the couch with one hand. "It feels practically weightless!"

They went outside and had fun lifting cars and other feats of strength. Raina reveled in the power even as she reeled with the knowledge that Valentin possessed this strength all the time. Her mind flashed back to the mini battle they'd had this morning that he'd called "foreplay."

No wonder he was so cavalier about it. He was holding back.

Once back inside, after a pizza was delivered, Jack and Cinna began chattering about other spells to try.

"We could take on a vampire's ability to mesmerize people," Jack said around a mouthful of pepperoni and cheese.

“I could convince the owner of my store’s building to lower my rent.”

“Or stores to give me free shoes,” Cinna suggested.

Alma held up a hand. “We should carefully consider the ethics of using such magic. Remember our vow: First, do no harm.”

Raina nodded as she finished chewing a bite. “I don’t think it would be unethical if we convinced the landlords of our respective shops to give us purchase agreements. They’d still get paid and still own all the other properties they have.”

“I am all in for this idea,” Alma said. “Let’s research the spell and try it tomorrow.”

“There’s something else I want to do tomorrow as well.” Raina took a deep breath and faced her coven sisters and brother. “I’d like to take the Nightwatch Society up on their offer to give us a tour.”

Cinna’s eyebrow shot up. “What prompted this change of heart?”

“Valentin got an email from the lady who helped us during the Waffle House incident,” Raina answered honestly. “The Order of Eternal Night is sniffing around the Nightwatch Society too. And while Val doesn’t want to ally his vampires with them, you and Jack have a good point about looking into the benefits of sharing information and resources with them.”

Alma gave her a wry smile. “Oh, it’s Val now, is it?”

Raina’s cheeks heated. “Yeah. We’re...um...official now.”

Cinna laughed. “Like the movie nights and constant dancing together didn’t make that obvious. Anyway, I’ll send Emma an email and see if we can visit the Nightwatch safehouse tomorrow after work.” She slipped her arm around Jack’s waist. “I think it’s time we head out. But when it’s just us girls again, I want all the dirty details.”

Jack gave Cinna a pout. “You won’t leave me for a vampire, will you?”

“Of course not, silly.” Cinna rose up on her toes and kissed Jack on the cheek. “I love the sunshine too much, and I want to be a badass grandma like Claudette someday.”

Once Cinna and Jack left, Alma put away the leftover pizza and gave Raina a knowing smile. “So, what are the dirty details?”

Raina allowed herself to heave a dreamy sigh before she put the kettle on for tea. “I don’t know if it should be legal for a man to be that good in bed.”

She left out the part where they’d been physically fighting before fucking. After all, it wouldn’t exactly give the impression that she was a good leader if she revealed that Valentin had been able to manipulate her like that. Hell, Raina still wasn’t sure how *she* felt about the way they’d ended up in bed together. All she knew was that next time would be on *her* terms.



The Nightwatch Society safehouse was a luxurious neoclassical mansion in Metairie. Raina gave the password Emma Hoffen had texted them at the gate and drove down a super long driveway. She parked as close to the front of the house as possible so they could make a quick escape if shit went awry. Cinna and Jack pulled in behind them.

Emma and Genevieve, the woman from the Waffle House incident, waited for them on the wide covered porch. Raina reached out with her senses and didn't detect any hints of deceit or hostility, which reinforced Valentin's report on his meeting with the group last night.

“Thank you so much for deciding to give us a chance,” Emma said.

Neither woman extended a hand to be shaken. Raina figured they were either being considerate of her coven's abilities or they each had touch clairvoyance like Jayden.

The tour was fairly limited, only covering half of the first floor and not venturing upstairs where the bedrooms and likely some secret areas were. The library was Raina's and Alma's favorite, holding extensive records of metaphysics and histories of supernatural phenomena all over the world.

Jack and Cinna were more captivated with the grounds behind the house, which were shielded with many-layered wards to keep outsiders from seeing practitioners' works.

Emma and Genevieve led them into a cozy study where they were served tea, fruit, and little cucumber sandwiches.

“The Nightwatch Society was founded in Switzerland in the fourteenth century. Its original purpose was to save women from being tried for witchcraft, but eventually expanded its scope to research and protect those with supernatural abilities. We have safehouses like this all over the world.”

“And what’s with your interest in vampires?” Raina asked.

Genevieve paused for a moment, visibly weighing her words before she answered. “Our organization prioritizes safety first and knowledge second. According to our records, we became aware of the existence of vampires in the sixteenth century. At first, they were a threat to us, killing Nightwatch members who could identify what they were. But something happened in the eighteenth century, surveilled vampires who found out they were being watched by a clairvoyant or a witch would simply warn them off or erase their memory of the encounter—or try to. Many of us are resistant to a vampire’s powers of mesmerism.”

Jack tapped his teacup with the sugar spoon. “I bet that’s when the vampires were ordered not to kill humans.”

“That is precisely what happened.” Genevieve took a delicate bite of a cucumber sandwich before continuing. “One Nightwatch man, a clairvoyant named Hakim, fell in love with a vampire he was originally surveilling and chose to become one. This has happened about a dozen times over the past three hundred years. But we got the most detailed documentation from Hakim before he left the Society and vanished into the night with his lover. He informed the Society about the change in vampire law. He was the one who informed us that

vampires are alive and have heartbeats, and through him, we learned that they can't actually drain a person to death by feeding alone. That was when we decided to stop passively observing vampires and start working on an alliance. But local vampires around all our safehouses refused to consider it. Hakim's lover was commanded to force Hakim to choose between the Nightwatch Society and becoming a vampire. He chose the latter, as did the Society members who also got too close to their investigative subjects."

"Why do you keep trying?" Alma asked.

Genevieve sipped her tea before answering. "Because we share common enemies, people who would lock us in laboratories, people who would burn us at the stake—or stake us through the heart—but also, things are changing. For them and for us. There are vampires who seem to be operating outside of vampire law..." she turned to Raina, "...such as the ones who tried to abduct you at the Waffle House last Halloween. And there is the inexplicable fact that all of us have grown more powerful in our abilities. The amount of paranormal phenomena has escalated exponentially. If we had the resources, we could quadruple our number of Nightwatch members. So lately, instead of watching and recruiting people who show the slightest glimmer of telekinetic, psychic, or metaphysical ability, we've had to become more choosy."

"And you chose us." Raina acknowledged the practicality of that decision, though she wondered why there seemed to be so many holes in their knowledge. "But do you really have no idea why we've all gained more power?"

“We’ve found some patterns that lead to some credible theories, but I can’t reveal those until you become full inductees.”

“I see.”

Something in Raina’s expression must have given something away, or maybe Genevieve’s psychic abilities penetrated her shields. “You have an idea as to where your coven’s power came from, don’t you?”

Raina smiled over the rim of her teacup. “I’m not sure you’d believe me.”

“Will you give me a clue?”

“We’ll get there. First, let’s hear about your member induction process.”

Genevieve dipped her head in a respectful gesture. “Very well.”

What followed was a description of less-than-mystical, more of a cross between AA and an apprenticeship type of process. The witches would have sponsors who would educate them on the Society’s values, rules, and ultimate mission. Their powers would be evaluated and catalogued. They would then offer their talents to the Nightwatch Society and, in turn, learn from the other members’ talents. There were membership dues, but in exchange, they’d have access to their archives, up to a certain classification, and protection. Higher-ranked members gave a percentage of their income but received benefits that were very worthwhile.

Alma looked over those details in the membership handbook Emma brought in the middle of Genevieve's explanation. "How does this organization have so many resources yet charge so little from its members?"

Genevieve gave her a wry smile. "Aside from the magic of compound interest, with certain paranormal abilities comes the benefit of it being easier to accumulate money. Just as both of your respective stores have gained in profit over the past year."

Jack frowned. "How did you pry into our finances?"

"We didn't." Genevieve waved her hand in a placating gesture. "But we observed that both *Bonheur Botanica* and *Cajun Charms* got makeovers to their fronts and then internal improvements soon followed. Customer traffic has doubled from the same time last year."

"Damn, that's more stalking than Valentin did," Raina muttered without thinking.

Genevieve's sharp gray eyes lit on her and she chuckled. "So, you *were* aware that the vampire was following you for quite some time before you started dating him." At Raina's nod, she continued, "Did you ever find out why?"

"His motives were similar to yours."

Another sly smile and sip of tea. "Interesting that he'll ally with your coven, but not with us."

Raina sipped her tea and matched that smile. "A bigger group is more dangerous when they go rogue."

"That's a valid point," Genevieve allowed. "Something did happen with one such group. They were apparently made to

pay the price, and unfortunately, we've learned that they blamed witches."

Emma's voice rang with surety as she added, "But we know it wasn't witches. None were powerful enough at the time to have destroyed an entire government facility and all records and records of what had been going on there."

Raina thought of the incredibly powerful beings in the world of Aisthanesthai. And the power she'd sensed in Xochitl Leonine and her mysterious, glamour-obscured husband. Could they have done it? Probably, if the timeline made it possible. She held her silence about what she knew and instead latched onto the other important factor of their words. "You're concerned that government goons could be snooping around."

"Yes, but it wouldn't be the first time, and we have countermeasures in place to get them off our trail." Genevieve rose from her seat, signaling the end of the meeting. "Anyway, think over what we've shown and told you. There's no rush. Just know that if you want to join us, we'll be here waiting with open arms."

Raina nodded and thanked them before she and her coven were escorted back to their cars. It was already getting dark outside. On the drive home, Alma said, "I have a good feeling about them."

"Me too," Raina admitted. "I just don't know how they're going to react to the fact that there's a whole other world that can access ours. Or that there's this huge prophecy about a heavy metal musician recruiting an army to defeat an evil entity who wants to destroy said world."

Alma laughed. “Not to mention that said metal band is responsible for every person with supernatural abilities gaining power.”

“Maybe the Nightwatch Society will become part of Xochitl’s army too.” Raina speculated aloud. “Damn, I can’t get over how weird that is. The possibility that we could be involved in actual battles.”

“Right?” Alma laughed nervously. “Maybe we should work on learning more attack and defense spells.”

When Raina pulled into the driveway, she saw Valentin waiting on the bench on the porch. Her heartbeat accelerated, and her belly fluttered with excitement and a bit of nervousness. This was the first time seeing him in person since they’d slept together.

Alma gave her a sly look. “Do you think he’ll let us practice battle magic on him?”

“I don’t think that’s what he’s here for.”

“Yeah, we both know exactly what he’s here for,” Alma replied with a snort.

Valentin appeared in front of Raina as soon as she got out of the car and enfolded her in his arms. His delectable scent of some cedar-like soap and masculine musk filled her head with memories of his naked body joined with hers and tightened things in her lower body.

He kissed her hungrily, his tongue mating with hers in an echo of yesterday’s delights.

“How did the meeting go?”

As much as she'd rather he carry her to the bedroom and ravish her, business had to come first. Raina led the vampire inside and told him everything after making him a cup of the special tea blend from the recipe Claudette gave her.

When she finished, Valentin gave her and Alma intent looks. "I think you should become members."

She frowned at how serious he'd sounded. "We were leaning in that direction too, but why do you think so?"

"Because, as irritating as the Nightwatch Society can be, I think they mean well and would be able to provide more protection for your coven during the daylight hours. Not to mention that you'd all benefit from the centuries of knowledge they've amassed."

"And I'll bet you'd like to benefit from that knowledge too."

"Of course." Valentin gave her a shameless grin. "You already learned more about them than I did during my meeting with Ms. Moreau last night."

"I don't get why you won't join them too," Raina said. "You're already secretly protecting them from that vampire cult with stationed guards. Why not get something out of it?"

"I am." A wicked smile curved his lips. "For one, I'm getting back at them for spying on my people by spying on theirs. For another, they're going to make my woman safer."

"Your woman, huh?" Raina raised an eyebrow even though his words made her feel warm and fuzzy. "You're not going to become a crazy, possessive boyfriend, are you?"

He seized her hand and kissed her knuckles. “I’ll be any kind of boyfriend you permit.”

Alma strode into the kitchen and heaved a dramatic sigh. “Ugh! Will you two head to the bedroom already? I want to eat some ice cream in peace.” She fixed a level glare at Valentin, “And don’t keep her up all night. We’re going to try a persuasion spell tomorrow that will allow us to purchase our store building outright.”

“Making good use of my blood, I see.” Valentin gave Alma a smile before vanishing from his chair.

Before Raina could blink, she was lifted from her chair and nestled in his arms.



Valentin didn’t keep her up all night, but still, she spent half the next day yawning. But after a second cup of coffee and a fortifying bowl of shrimp gumbo from Daisy Dukes for lunch, Raina was energized and focused by the time Jack and Cinna arrived at the store to perform the persuasion spell. She kept the “closed for lunch” sign on the door while Alma took out the pre-measured vial of Valentin’s blood from the fridge. Then the coven gathered in the protective circle Alma set up in the greenhouse.

At the last part of the spell, the power that rushed into Raina almost knocked her backward. “Whoa.”

Jack nodded. “Yeah. Now let’s visit our respective landlords.”

Raina left Alma behind to watch the store and drove to her landlord’s office. Mr. Chalfont gave her an annoyed look when she walked in the door, but once she fixed her gaze and will on him, he became subservient to her. It took less than an hour to walk out with a purchase agreement contract.

Raina looked up at the cloudy December sky and allowed herself to twirl in a little dance. The building and attached greenhouse would be hers and Alma’s within a month or less, depending on how long the paperwork took. She couldn’t wait to tell Valentin about her triumph.

When she got in her car, a strong arm seized her throat and an acrid cloth was shoved into her face.

Raina tried to call upon her magic to destroy her attacker. But then her vision dimmed away, and she floated into oblivion.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Raina awoke to a throbbing headache and sharp pain in her shoulders and forearms. Her tongue felt both swollen and dry. Light pierced her skull like a pickaxe, making her groan as the ache intensified. She took a deep breath through her nose, smelling alien scents of old sweat, dust, and a distant stench of rotting food.

When she tried to shift, the feel of hard plastic bindings around her wrists and the cloth gag in her mouth told her the worst. Then it all came back to her. The thick, hairy arm restraining her. The chemical-drenched rag pressed to her face. Someone had been in her backseat, and knocked her out with chloroform or something similar. Raina tried opening her eyes again. She was in a dingy room with a filthy tile floor and surrounded by shiny new bars, like the ones that covered stores in the mall when they closed. Past the bars, she saw a doorway leading to a dim living room with threadbare furniture, takeout boxes, and dirty plates everywhere.

To her right were washer and dryer hookups framed by faded squares where said appliances used to be. Clumsily, she struggled to rise to her knees. The metal clank of a chain echoed in her ears.

“You’re awake,” a flat voice sounded from the living room.

Raina turned to see a pale, doughy man in a stained Saints jersey and cargo pants standing in front of her prison. A graying ring of brown hair framed his head like a monk's tonsure. His brown eyes were vacant, like the mugshot of a serial killer.

"Mmmph," was all she could manage through her gag, but still conveyed her scorn.

"Sorry, I was warned not to let you talk, witch," the man told her, looking past her with dead eyes. "But don't worry. You won't be here for long. Master will be here in a couple hours to collect you. And I will be rewarded."

A Renfield. He didn't sound like any of the ones in the movies. His voice didn't have the mad zeal of the original or the childlike friendliness of the one in the Nicolas Cage film. Instead, he sounded scarily robotic.

With a pained groan, Raina managed to scramble to a standing position. She tried to reach into her back pockets for the salt and herb packets she kept for emergencies, but the thick plastic manacles that were probably zip ties wouldn't let her. The cold air on her bare arms revealed that her captor had taken her jacket too. Damn it, she kept a pocket altar and a few useful stones in there. Next, she did a shimmy to see if she could feel the chains of her amulets. Those were gone too.

The man smirked at her. "Now let's see you do your magic, fat bitch."

For some reason, having that typical insult she'd heard countless times delivered so tonelessly and with those dead eyes was more disturbing. But the initial taunt sparked her

inner fire of defiance. Did this moron think she needed words and gestures to work her magic? She could voice her intentions silently as long as she put enough will behind them.

But the lack of implements hampered her some. Sure, she could probably turn around and shoot a jet of water in the Renfield's direction. Maybe even fire or wind. But that wouldn't get her out of her restraints and out of the cage. If only the strength spell from Valentin's blood lasted longer.

A vampire's strength... Damn it. If Valentin were here, he could free her easily and kill the Renfield. But it was daytime, she could tell from the sliver of weak sunlight streaming through her captor's living room curtains.

Raina turned around to inspect her prison more closely. The wall beside the washer and dryer hookups had a tiny window, but it was boarded up. Therefore, the walled section of the laundry room up to the caged doorway was cast in darkness. If she summoned Valentin, he'd be safe in this area.

Her heart sank. She didn't have candles, crystals, or the salt to make the circle. The Renfield gave another creepy, toneless snicker, further igniting her anger. Raina continued to inspect her prison. Her zip-tie manacles were connected to a chain that was bolted to the wall beside the washer and dryer hookups. The chain was long enough for her to walk about three feet in every direction.

The Renfield interrupted her inner survey. "If you have to piss, there's a drain in the floor. Don't know how you'll get your pants down. I ain't gonna help you. It's probably best you hold it."

Well, that was pointless, she said silently even as she hoped she wouldn't have to pee in here. Raina rolled her eyes at him and searched the room frantically for anything she could use in a spell. Her eyes lit on the place where the wall was cut to accommodate the big hole for the dryer's vent hose. The drywall was exposed there. Drywall had gypsum and maybe silica. Minerals.

Raina headed over to the dryer exhaust hole. She could reach it. When she turned and started picking at the drywall, the Renfield laughed robotically.

“Even if you could get out that way, it would take days for you to pick a hole big enough for your fat ass to fit through. Plus, you're still chained.”

Not for much longer if my plan works, zombie doughboy.

Raina continued to dig at the drywall, working the powder out with the fingers of her right hand and collecting it in her left. Her shoulders screamed in protest at the awful angle, but she kept working, even appreciating the sweat beading from her forehead. Maybe she could use that too.

The Renfield shook his head, grunted in dismissal, and walked away. She heard the sound of a fridge opening, then the airy metallic crack of a beer can opening.

When Raina had gathered a handful of drywall powder, she carefully walked in a circle, spilling it as neatly as possible while concentrating on her intentions. Soon, she could feel the energy of the gypsum, earthy and light. But she needed a little more for the circle to be full. Carefully stepping over the powder on the floor, Raina went back to the exposed drywall

and dug out more powder, breathing slow and deep, gathering her power and will.

When she had another handful and carefully filled in the gaps, her circle flared with power. Now she had to improvise the rest of the spell. Last time she'd had candles for fire. This time, she'd have to light scraps of paper that covered the sheetrock. For water, she had her sweat. Instead of her focus stones, she could use her blood. As for something to represent Valentin...last time she'd used a strand of his hair. There was a chance that there was one still stuck to her clothes.

After gathering small strips of sheetrock paper and setting them on one part of the circle, Raina walked back to the doorway where the light was better to examine her clothes. The Renfield was seated on the couch facing away from her. The TV showing some Fox News talking heads at low volume was at a shitty angle, its light barely reaching her prison.

The oppressive dimness made it almost impossible to make out details like hair. There was no telltale bronze glow from one of Valentin's auburn strands. Her heart sank, but she refused to give up, not when she had a circle and all four elements. Maybe she could do it without hair. After all, she knew him better and had full, potent memories of every inch of his body.

...*His body*. He'd been inside her last night. Remnants of him would be there.

Raina carefully turned and stepped over her circle to the metal plate that her chain was bolted to. It took a lot of uncomfortable maneuvering to dig out the drywall to get

access to a sharp corner. And even when she got there, the plate wasn't sharp enough to cut her. She had to saw at the back of her wrist, scraping layers of her skin with torturous, stinging slowness. Raina's breath hitched as she held back whimpers of pain. Tears surged from the corners of her eyes, and she willed them to summon the power of water.

At last, she felt a hot wet trickle of blood down the back of her hand. The final element.

Raina gingerly stepped back into her circle and carefully sat. She leaned back, willing her blood to drip on the floor behind her, opposite from the scraps of paper. To make sure it stuck, she leaned until her weight ground her hands into the floor, and she felt her raw, burning wound make contact with the cold tile. That accomplished, she scooted sharply to the left and leaned over the circle, letting her sweat and tears drip onto the floor. Then she turned to the scraps of sheetrock paper and stared at them hard, pinpointing her will until they ignited. She couldn't manage a full flame, but she got them going by little sparks, forming embers until they burned like incense.

Lastly, she recited all the words and conjured every detail about Valentin's form and essence, willing him to come to her.

Come to me, Valentin St. Scarasse. With the essence of yourself you put inside me, I summon you to this circle. Come to me, Valentin St. Scarasse. I summon you. Come to me...



Valentin awoke from a delightful dream of making love to Raina beneath a warm waterfall. His heart pounded in his chest, feeling like it was going to burst from his ribcage.

He started to sit up, but then his head spun with dizziness, and he collapsed back down. Instead of hitting the pillow, he continued to sink and sink. Black and white flashes of light strobed before his eyes, and a burst of power squeezed him before throwing his weightless body into oblivion.

A loud bang rang in his head, and his ears popped. Then he found himself standing. Valentin swayed on his feet and opened his eyes.

Raina stood before him, a cloth gag binding her mouth, her arms wrenched painfully behind her back. A chain extended behind her to a crude metal plate and ring on the wall.

“Mon dieu, mon amour!” he whispered.

She'd been captured and somehow managed to summon him. Admiration swelled in his heart even as he wondered how she'd pulled off such a powerful spell in such a restrained and obstructed state. But he'd ask her about it later.

First, he carefully gripped the fabric of her gag and gave her a look, silently telling her that it might hurt when he ripped it. She dipped her eyes in lieu of a nod and held still while he used his strength to pull.

The fabric tore in a loud blat.

A human made a questioning grunt past the caged doorway of Raina's prison, followed by the creak of someone rising from a couch or chair.

“Can you release me from the circle?” he whispered, remembering how he’d been trapped in the last one she’d made to summon him.

Raina nodded and kicked at some white powder on the grimy tile floor. “It’s a Renfield. Still day,” she said in a painfully hoarse voice. “Don’t let him open the curtains.”

The circle broke, and Valentin felt the energy holding him release. With his preternatural speed, he rushed to the caged door just as the Renfield approached.

“What the fuck?” the Renfield shouted, oddly toneless.

Valentin gripped the metal bars and shoved them with his vampiric strength. The cage tore from its bolts and studs with a scream of metal and wood in battle. The bars slammed into the Renfield, knocking him backward onto the filthy carpeted floor in front of the laundry room.

Valentin flung the cage away and seized the Renfield. “You will pay for taking my woman, but first, I will learn what the fuck your cultist masters are doing in my territory.”

With that, he sank his fangs into the man’s soft, thick neck. After wincing at the taste of old sweat and dirt, the sweet blood flowed into Valentin’s mouth and with it, the Renfield’s life and memories.

There weren’t many, for the man couldn’t remember much of anything before a vampire—named Ted—enslaved his mind and made him his creature.

Ted was a higher-ranked cleric in the Order of Eternal Night. He’d commanded the Renfield to take Raina—the

water mage—before they launched their attack.

What attack? Valentin commanded the memories. The images and information were muddy, like a distant radio channel. An effect from half the Renfield's brain being wiped and molded by his master. But Valentin managed to piece together a basic picture before his stomach could hold no more blood.

He withdrew his fangs, healed the man's wound, then dragged him down a hall toward the bathroom. A ray of sunlight from the living room windows singed his wrist, making him hiss in pain.

Once Valentin reached the bathroom, he slammed the man's head into the side of the porcelain bathtub, holding back only enough to not crack the tub, but enough to crack the Renfield's skull. Then he turned on the sink and splashed water and soap on the floor to look like a slip.

It was illegal to kill humans, but the law was overlooked as long as one made sure the human's death looked like an accident. The makeshift prison the bastard had built may muddy up the police investigation, but there wasn't much he could do about that.

“Val?” Raina's husky voice caressed him from the hall.

“Don't come in here!” he growled. She'd been through enough. And he didn't want her to see what he was capable of. “Go back to your circle.”

His “accident” staged, Valentin cleared out any chance of his fingerprints being found, then returned to Raina with his

vampiric speed, hissing again when that damned beam of light struck his cheek.

The sight of Raina's tear-streaked face, red angry bands on her cheeks from the gag, and her arms still bound made him want to roar in rage. Instead, he sucked in a breath and forced himself to speak gently.

“Turn around so I can break your bindings.”

The plastic zip-tie broke easily. Raina brought her hands back around front, but not before he saw the ugly raw, bleeding wound on the back of her wrist.

“Did he do that to you?” Thousands of ugly images of the Renfield doing unspeakable things to his love flashed before his eyes.

Raina shook her head. “I did that to myself. I needed blood for my summoning spell.”

“Your spell,” he repeated, mingled relief and awe making him dizzy. Still, that bloody gash on her arm wouldn't do. “Let me heal your wound.”

“Ok.”

He pierced his fingertip with a fang and carefully dripped his blood onto the wound. As he watched it knit back together, he asked, “How did you pull off such a powerful spell?”

“The circle was made from the drywall powder. Sheetrock is made of gypsum and some other minerals. Silica, I think. I ignited the paper for fire, my sweat and tears were water, and there was my blood and...” her cheeks flushed pink. “Your essence and my will.”

Valentin stared at the remnants of her summoning circle. The blackened bits of paper, the smear of her blood, the drywall powder. “You’re incredible.”

He pulled her into her arms and held her, relieved that she’d brought him here so he could save her, but also shot through with terror that this had happened. If Raina hadn’t been clever and powerful enough to manage to summon him, the Renfield’s master would be able to come here at sundown and take her to that dark and vast lair he’d seen in the Renfield’s muddled memories. That cesspit full of vampire cultists and Renfields.

Their ultimate master, Mephistopheles, not seen in the Renfield’s memory, but whispered about by his vampire overlords, wanted Raina for her water magic. Water was one of the paramount desired powers the wannabe god wanted. The vampire cultists were permitted to use her in other ways, and Valentin had heard enough disgusting snippets to piece together what those were.

He shook off his disgust and focused on the present. The sun would be setting soon, and the Renfield’s master would be here with company. Although Valentin wanted to destroy the bastard tonight, he knew that other, more vital, things were at stake. So they needed to leave immediately.

“We need to erase all evidence of you being here. Your blood, your fingerprints...” He nuzzled her soft cloud of hair. “Everything. Then I’m taking you to the club, and we’ll call your coven.”

Raina nodded. “Ok. I bet he has bleach somewhere.”

“Probably the kitchen. You’ll have to go. The windows aren’t covered in that direction.”

“And I need to find my stuff.” Raina’s warm arms squeezed his waist, then relaxed. “Val?”

“Hmmm?”

“You’ll have to let me go.”

Ah, but he didn’t want to. He wanted to hold her forever. Reluctantly, he released her and surveyed the little makeshift prison cell to see what would need to be cleaned. The floor drain would come in handy.

Raina returned with cleaning supplies, and together, like desolate Disney characters, they cleaned the laundry room until the tile floor gleamed. Valentin also used a serrated knife to cut away the chunk of sheetrock that Raina had dug into to make her circle. He didn’t know if the police could dust for prints on that, but better safe than sorry.

“My phone, keys, and jacket were on his couch, thank Goddess,” Raina said. “I got a million texts from my coven. Should I tell them what happened now, or wait?”

“Tell them to meet us at Bloodletting at sundown.”

“Why?”

Valentin rubbed the bridge of his nose. “They aren’t just after you. They have plans. Big plans.” He leaned over to peer through the doorway. The light through the curtains was fading. “It’s almost time for us to get out of here. The Renfield’s master will need to feed before he gets here, so we may have a head start unless he feeds on another vampire’s

servant. Find a bag to put all the cleaning supplies in. We have to take it with us. Don't forget to wipe away any prints you leave."

"I gotta pee first."

"Can you hold it?"

"Why?"

"I don't want you near that bathroom."

"Shit, that's right." Her knowing eyes told him she'd deduced that he'd left a corpse in there.

By the time Raina finished texting her coven and gathering up the Renfield's cleaning supplies, the sun had set, and they were able to leave the wretched house. Valentin was tempted to burn it to the ground, but that would endanger innocents.

Raina's car was parked brazenly out front. The Renfield had been pretty brainless, but that negligence was still astonishing. If the coven had been combing the city for her, they may have found it.

Valentin shoved the bags of evidence in the backseat of the Nissan Leaf and saw Raina trembling as she opened the driver's side door.

"Let me drive," he said gently.

She blinked at him and handed him the keys. "I didn't know you knew how."

He opened the passenger door. "I do. I just don't need to often."

When they buckled up and he started the car, unused to the quiet electric-powered motor, Raina heaved a loud sigh. “I can’t believe I made the dumbest mistake as a woman.”

“What?”

“I didn’t check the backseat. The fucker was waiting back there with chloroform.” She shuddered, clearly reliving the memory. “I might have to sell this car.”

“Do whatever you need to do to heal,” he said. “Did he?”

She shook her head. “No. I don’t think he had the time or the desire. He called me a fat bitch.” She laughed. “It’s nice that I wasn’t his type. The way he talked was so creepy. Like he was dead inside.”

“He sort of was. When a vampire enslaves a person like that, it breaks the human’s brain. That’s the main reason why it’s illegal to make a Renfield. It’s cruel and inhumane.”

“I thought it was so humans don’t find out what you are.”

“That’s a big reason too, but the Elders do care about morality. Most of them, anyway.”

When they got to Bloodletting, Raina’s coven was waiting out front. Valentin had willed Eniel to come here, but his Second in Command hadn’t made it yet.

As if summoned by the observation, Eniel appeared. “My lord?” he questioned nervously, looking at Valentin’s pajamas and bare feet.

“It’s a long story. I hope you have keys.”

Once inside, Raina rushed for the bathroom while Valentin gestured for Alma to follow him behind the bar. “Help me find something decent for Raina to eat. I don’t know how long she was held captive.”

“She’d had the meeting with the landlord for our shop’s building at one-thirty,” Alma looked at her phone to either check a notification for reference or count the time. “Did the guy grab her immediately after?”

“Yes. He was in the backseat.” Valentin felt a fresh flare of anger as he remembered Raina’s visible trauma at being back in her car on the ride here. “And I think it was around three-thirty when she summoned me into her prison.” He looked at the clock above the beer taps. “It’s five-thirty now.”

“Then she needs to eat. But something easy on her stomach. Crackers, maybe some fries. Fruit... do you have cucumbers back here? I know sometimes those go in some cocktails.”

They rummaged through the fridge and put together a limited plate of fruits, veggies, and pretzels while Cinna put some fries in the deep fryer.

Raina emerged from the bathroom with her hair brushed and her face and hands washed. Though she still had those ugly red marks on her wrists and face where the gag and restraints dug in. Valentin gnashed his fangs in anger before closing his eyes, taking a breath, and offering her food and a glass of water.

“Thank you.” She took a deep drink of water, then picked at the food. “I want to get home soon. I need a bath.”

“Don’t worry, *mon amour*,” he said softly. “I’ll make this quick. We’ll be out of here before the club opens.”

Eniel served drinks to the rest of the coven, and they all gathered around a large table and listened as Valentin told them what he’d learned from the Renfield that had abducted Raina.

“There are a lot more rogues and Renfields in the area than expected.” He closed his eyes, piecing together the disturbing things he’d seen when feeding from Raina’s captor. “And they’re planning some big attack. The problem is the Renfield’s brain was too broken to give me clear details. I expect more attempts to abduct Raina and, quite likely, the rest of you. As to the attack, I don’t know if they’re coming here or if they know where our private lair is. I don’t expect them to send their whole force to your house, but as crazy as these cultists are, I won’t rule it out either.”

Eniel nodded. “Do you want me to contact your Third and schedule a Gathering?”

“Yes. Have Angelique round them up and get them to meet here at four a.m.” Valentin’s fists clenched under the table. He wanted to comfort Raina, but he had to do his duty as Lord of the city first. “I don’t know where the cultists are hiding. It’s outside of the city, I know that much, but all I got were vague images of swampland and some stone structure I can’t recognize. I plan to dispatch teams to search for any rogue or Renfield and follow them to try to find their lair. Then maybe we can attack them first.”

Cinna cleared her throat. “We want to help.”

“Our first priority is making sure all four of you have protection in the daytime,” he told her firmly. “Are there any spells you can work that will prevent someone coming up behind you with a rag of chloroform or, heaven forbid, shooting you with a tranquilizer dart?”

Alma shuddered. “I think so. We’ll consult our books when we get home. We also need to amp up our wards.”

Jack tapped his empty beer bottle on the table. “I think we should tell the Nightwatch Society too. Maybe they can get us some day guards or something.”

“That’s a good idea.” Valentin rose from the seat. “Eniel, I want you to double security here tonight. Aside from our routine lookouts for rogue vampires, if any of you detect the slightest hint that any humans trying to enter the club are brain damaged in any way, don’t let them in and send a tail to follow them.”

When they went back outside, Valentin examined Raina’s car, making sure no one had broken in and was lying in wait. This time, she got in the passenger side without shaking, but she was still pale.

He wanted to destroy every cultist vampire for this. He wanted to tear the head off the wannabe god responsible for harming his woman. But he’d have to find them first.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Back at her house, he waited while Raina and her coven checked the wards before he followed them inside.

“I need a bath,” Raina repeated in a dull voice laden with trauma.

“I’ll draw you one,” he said, rubbing her back in gentle strokes.

Alma gave him a strange look that was almost tender before turning to Raina. “We’ll get to work on the protection spells. You take care of yourself and rest.”

“But what if you need my help?”

“We’ll be fine,” Jack said. “We’re powerful and cohesive enough to pull it off, thanks to you. We can even tap into your power through the bond we forged, if necessary. Remember?”

Raina’s eyes passed between Jack, Cinna, and Alma. A line formed between her delicate eyebrows as she visibly weighed the conflicted feelings she had about not being present as head of the coven.

Valentin gently grasped her shoulder and steered her toward the bathroom. “You’re a good coven leader. They’ll be fine without you for a few hours.”

“A few *hours*?” Her voice hitched. “I only said I need a bath.”

“Raina, please,” he bent down and nuzzled her neck, then gently kissed her earlobe. “Let me take care of you. I promise I’ll make it worthwhile.”

Her shoulders relaxed in surrender. “Okay.”

Once in the bathroom, he ran the hot water, seeking her approval for the temperature, and added a special sachet she handed him to the bath.

“It’s for cleansing and healing,” she said, then lit some candles, murmuring an incantation under her breath. “Thank you. You can go now.”

Valentin laughed. “No. You’re going to let me take care of you. I’m going to bathe you, then I’m going to take you to bed and hold you as long as I can.”

“I don’t think I’ve been bathed since I was a little kid.” Her reddened fingers fiddled with the buttons of her blouse.

“I’m not going to bathe you like a child.” He unfastened her buttons and helped her remove the blouse. “I’m going to bathe you like a queen.”

Raina let out a light laugh. “Val, you say the most ridiculous things sometimes.”

“You love it. Admit it.” He kissed her bare shoulders.

Slowly, he helped her out of her clothes. His surge of desire at the view of her voluptuous, Rubenesque body was dampened by the sight of ugly red welts and purpling bruises on her arms, back, and legs. Her intoxicating scent of magic, herbs, and sultry femininity was contaminated with the rank

odor of her captor's house. There was a black rose of a bruise on her left buttock. He knelt and placed a gentle kiss there.

Raina shook her head and smiled down at him. "And now you're kissing my ass."

"I'll kiss you everywhere."

She sank into the water with a blissful sigh. Steam scented with eucalyptus, jasmine, and other herbs enveloped them in a cozy haze. Valentin dipped a washcloth into the water, gave it a dollop of gardenia body wash, and gently set to work on scrubbing away all traces of her imprisonment.

At first, Raina held herself stiff and awkward as he washed her arms, but then she relaxed under his ministrations and allowed him access to the rest of her. Valentin tried to be professional and servile, but when he got to her bountiful breasts, smooth, round belly, and those luscious thighs, his cock hardened.

"God, you are so beautiful," he breathed. "If this tub was big enough for two..."

"It's barely big enough for me." She regarded him through half-lidded eyes. "I'm gonna duck down and get my hair wet."

Watching her sink down, her body half submerged, the water lapping at those gorgeous breasts brought another flare of hot lust. Valentin closed his eyes and willed himself under control. After what she'd been through, he wasn't going to try to seduce her tonight.

When she rose from the water, her hair a wet, almost black mantle framing her angelic face, memories of the last time

he'd seen her with wet hair taunted him. He'd had her pinned in his shower after she'd brazenly threatened to burn him for trapping her in his lair. He should feel guilty about that deception, but couldn't not when the result had been so glorious.

Breathing through his nose, he again struggled to calm his raging desire and focus on washing her hair. He even closed his eyes when she fell back to rinse.

When she surfaced, she let out another contented sigh. "That was nice. Could you get my robe off the hanger on my bedroom door?"

"Of course." When he closed the bathroom door behind him, he heard the shower running and felt a pang of regret that he didn't get to witness that magnificence.

By the time he fetched the robe and returned to the bathroom, Raina stepped out of the shower, an Earthy goddess of bounty. He hung the robe on the bathroom door, grabbed a towel, and proceeded to dry her.

Raina giggled as he dried her toes. "Is it appropriate for the Lord Vampire of New Orleans to be so subservient?"

"I decide what's appropriate."

Once she was bundled up in her robe, a black terrycloth with a large Goblin patch on the back and a hood, Valentin followed her into the bedroom.

"The first time I was in here, I was so shocked at the sight of that robe that I was half tempted to stay in your room and wait for you to talk about Goblin. I love their music."

“Oh yeah, back when you were stalking me,” Raina said dryly. “If I’d come home to find a vampire in my bedroom, you very well might have been obliterated before you had a chance to discuss an Italian progressive rock band who composed the scores for Giallo films.”

“And that’s why I didn’t stick around.” Valentin rubbed her shoulders. “Now, what can I do to help you rest?”

Raina leaned into him and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Why are you so good to me?”

He chuckled at the silly question. “Because you deserve it.”

Still holding onto him, she walked them over to her bed. “I remember you saying that you’d kiss me everywhere.”

He sank down with her and eagerly sank into her soft curves. Raina hummed contentedly, then covered his mouth with her lush lips.

Kissing her was like soaking in paradise. Valentin could bask in her warmth forever. He kissed her cheeks, her nose, her chin, her neck. Memories of the sweetness and power of her blood teased him, but he restrained that line of temptation. He was still mostly full from the Renfield. He kissed his way down her collarbone and across the tops of her breasts.

Raina writhed and moaned deliciously as his hands cupped her fullness and his fingers teased her hard nipples. He lingered there for a satisfyingly long interval before moving down to kiss her soft belly. She stiffened slightly, and he remembered the heartbreaking things she’d told him about

how her family treated her for her weight. Valentin would do anything to erase that pain, to make the world see the beauty he saw in full, curvaceous women.

But all he could do was show her how *he* saw her and pray to the powers that be that his perception meant something to her.

He kissed her hips, then worshiped her succulent thighs, adorable knees, and shapely calves. When he got to her feet, she giggled.

“Turn over.” His words came out in a rasp.

Raina obliged, rolling over to display that round succulent ass that drove him wild. Still, he held himself back from seizing those cheeks and plunging inside her. Not yet. Not until she asked. He frowned at the bruises all over her body. The ones on the backs of her legs and her upper back were the worst. He placed gentle kisses over every bruise, wishing he could get one of those healer mages from that other world to banish them.

As he worked his way up to her shoulders, his hardness pressed against her cleft, and she arched her hips against him in brazen invitation.

And then, as he was kissing her ear, she whispered the words he was aching to hear. “I want you to fuck me.”

“Are you sure?”

In answer, she wiggled her hips, undulating against his erection. “Please.”

Only too happy to oblige, Valentin backed up and removed his clothes as quickly as possible without tearing them. And then he grasped that magnificent ass and plunged into her wet heat. Raina buried her cry of pleasure in her pillow, and arched her hips to meet his thrust.

At first, he went slow, reveling in her slickness and teasing her with every inch. But as she bucked against him, the tight hold he had on his restraint started to fray. The next thrust was harder. The one after, harder still.

Raina moaned and bucked against him. “More.”

He pounded into her with all the savage lust built up since the first time he laid eyes on her. His fingers dug into her plump ass cheeks, reveling at having her right where he wanted her. Raina let out another muffled cry into the pillow and he felt her tighten and spasm around his cock as she climaxed.

The pulsations were too much for him, and he let out a low groan of ecstasy as he too reached the pinnacle of pleasure and plummeted over the edge.

He collapsed on the bed beside her. “I meant to not take you this night, or at least to be gentle.”

Raina rolled over to face him and laughed. “No, this was exactly what I needed after a stressful day.” She rose and left the bed to grab her robe. “I need a glass of water. And a cigarette.” Another delightful light laugh bubbled from her lips as she grabbed her robe from the floor. “Too bad I don’t smoke.”

He almost followed her, not wanting to let her out of his sight, but then he realized she only wanted to use the bathroom. So he reclined back in her bed, noting how her mattress was a little bit firmer than his, though not uncomfortably so. He scanned her cozy small bedroom, smiling at the small altar on one end table and the mishmash of movie posters, band posters, and art prints on the wall. Raina was a woman who lived solely on her terms, and Valentin loved that about her.

When she returned to bed, he gathered her in his arms, sighing with bliss at the warmth and softness of her body.

She felt like heaven.

She felt like home.

Raina's husky whisper interrupted his thoughts. "What time do you have to leave?"

Damn it, he didn't want to think about leaving. "The Gathering is at four." He looked at her bedside clock. It was a little after nine. "We have plenty of time. You should sleep. I'll stay as long as I can."

She kissed him and squeezed him tighter. "You're not going to sit up and watch me sleep like Edward, are you?"

He laughed. "No. I already told you that's creepy. I'm going to nap until my phone pings."

"Ok. I'm going to need to find another vampire movie to tease you about." She ran her fingers through his hair and kissed him again. "Good night, Val."

I'm in love with you, he wanted to say. But at her lack of response when he'd let his feelings slip before, he couldn't bring himself to say it again. "Goodnight, Raina."

Although part of him did want to stay awake and savor being in her bed, Valentin did manage to doze. When his calendar app chimed that it was time to get up and head to the Gathering, his fists clenched with reluctance to leave her. But he needed to alert the New Orleans vampires to the size of their threat and organize them to keep them safe.

Leaving her warmth made him sigh as he despondently dressed and used her hairbrush, hoping she wasn't finicky about that sort of thing.

When he left the bedroom, the rest of the house was dark. Jack and Cinna were spooned together on the foldout couch in the living room. He went to the kitchen and scribbled a note on the whiteboard on the fridge below a note that said to buy more cheese.

"Drink my blood. A tablespoon each. It will help protect you, but won't Mark you."

But it would allow him to detect their presence and wellbeing for at least a week. Raina already had that sort of temporary Mark from when he'd healed her wound.

Then he had one last thing to do. He went out to Raina's car, removed the mop, broom, and bag of cleaning supplies they'd taken from the Renfield's house, and deposited it in the nearest dumpster. Then he returned to her house, hung up her keys, washed his hands, then went back to her room for one

last kiss for the night. Valentin prayed he'd give her a million more.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Raina awoke surprisingly refreshed, though her shoulders and back ached from being restrained. Thinking about it brought forth a fresh surge of anger. Thanks to that stupid Renfield, any chances of doing kinky bondage with Val were probably ruined.

A startled laugh escaped her. “Really? I’m thinking about how that ruined my sex life?”

But it hadn’t. Last night with Valentin may have been vanilla, but the multiple orgasm he’d given her was rich as chocolate.

Some clanks of cookware in the kitchen brought her back to the present. She needed to find out how the protection spells had worked without her. Raina got out of bed and dressed with both style and practicality in mind. They’d be meeting Val at Bloodletting at five. Thank Goddess it was Saturday, when they closed the shop early.

Alma, Cinna, and Jack waited for her at the kitchen table.

“How are you feeling?” Alma asked anxiously.

“Better. Val took care of me.”

Cinna giggled and waggled her eyebrows. “I’ll bet he did. Took care of you *alllll* night long.”

Raina's face burned. "Maybe. How did the protection spells work?"

"Great." Jack reached into his pocket. "We made amulets." His eyes glittered with the passion he always had for making jewelry and other talismans. "Here's yours."

Raina accepted the pendant he handed her and admired its beauty. A moldavite cabochon set in a round silver bezel frame. Across the silver were unique runes for protection and power. Lapis lazuli stones to represent water were inlaid between the runes. The wide silver bezel setting was one Jack used often for amulets, and he'd then engrave the runes and set in small stones according to what the purpose would be. The moldavite stones, she'd remembered Jack acquiring a few months ago, but not knowing where best to utilize their power. "It's gorgeous. And it feels powerful."

"Right?" Cinna held up hers, inlaid with citrine. "They're made to repel anyone who tries to harm us, and if they do manage to touch us, the amulet will give them a jolt of pain and curse them with misfortune."

"Wow." She shook her head in wonder at how far her coven had come. "This sounds more like something out of a D&D game than the magic we used to do."

Alma set a plate of biscuits and gravy in front of her. "Our lives are starting to resemble a D&D game. Now eat up while we discuss the next stage of our plan."

Jack spoke around a mouthful of food. "I also want to experiment with encasing vampire blood in resin for pendants or rings and see if some of its power can be preserved. But

Valentin has other ideas for immediate use. He left a note on the fridge.”

Raina turned and read it. “Drink his blood? The reasoning is sound, but that’s going to taste awful.”

“The movies make it look good.” Cinna shrugged and cut another bite of biscuit with your fork. “Besides, it’s from your boyfriend.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that it’s three-day-old cold blood in a mason jar in the fridge.”

And she was right. The blood tasted coppery and weird. She gagged and almost threw up her breakfast. The choking sounds from the others didn’t make her feel vindicated, though.

But then, an electric jolt shot from the roof of her mouth, up her skull, and down her spine. With it came a tingle of magic and a surge of energy, like she’d just downed three Red Bulls. “Whoa.”

Her coven sisters and brother shuddered as well.

Jack was the first to recover. “Well, I definitely felt that.”

Cinna nodded. “Is it just me, or is everything brighter and louder?”

“It is,” Alma breathed and turned in a slow circle. “I can hear the electricity in the walls.”

Raina could too. Was this how Valentin lived? All hypersensitive like this? Then she felt something else. An invisible thread seemed to tug at her chest, and she felt a

contented presence. When she closed her eyes, she could see Valentin in his bed, sleeping peacefully.

“Guys,” she breathed. “I can feel Val. And even kind of see him.”

Cinna giggled. “I think that’s just you being in love.”

“No, I swear!” Raina looked at each of them. “Y’all can’t?”

Her friends closed their eyes. After a few moments, they shook their heads.

“Maybe you guys made some metaphysical connection when you had sex,” Alma suggested, fingering her amulet, inlaid with emerald. “Jayden and Aurora told us all about crazy things happening when mages make love.”

“Maybe.” Raina didn’t know if she loved that idea or if it scared her. Her phone chimed. “Damn it, we gotta head to work. Jack, we’ll meet you at your place after to make sure no one was around while you were gone. And we’ll help with your wards.”

To her embarrassment, she still couldn’t bring herself to get in the driver’s seat of her car. So they took Alma’s old Prius.

Even though it was winter, customers streamed into the shop pretty much nonstop. Normally, Raina would have been giddy at such a good profit, but she was too on edge, worrying that every person who came in was a Renfield.

She sighed with relief when it was finally time to close. They grabbed some po’boys on the way to Jack’s house. When

they got there, they couldn't sense any disturbances in the wards or any sense of intruders. With the four of them, they were able to get the wards reinforced with extra consequences for any who crossed them wishing to do harm.

But by the time they were done, dusk had fallen. When they finally made it to Bloodletting, Calixto was pacing outside. He shook his head at them. "I hope you four have good reason to be late. St. Scarasse isn't happy."

Raina sighed. "We had important business to take care of. Besides, he should be able to feel that we're fine."

"Yes, but that doesn't stop him from being impatient." Calixto tipped her a wink.

Raina tilted her head and frowned at him. "Has he even had time to feed?"

"I'm not sure." The guard answered as he escorted them inside. "But you don't have to worry. He's more than capable of controlling himself."

That wasn't what she was worried about, but still, she gave the big vampire a smile for his efforts at reassurance. Jack gave Calixto a high five before following behind.

Valentin was pacing upstairs, giving a great show of anxiousness, even though he'd definitely heard them arrive. Angelique—Valentin's Third in Command, who Raina barely saw since she was usually out taking care of vampire matters outside of the club—and Eniel sat in one of the booths, watching their master with amused smirks and waved at the coven when they arrived.

Val whirled on Raina with a stern look. “Where were you?”

“We had to secure Jack and Cinna’s place. And eat dinner.” Raina approached him calmly. “Besides, we drank your blood like you suggested, so you could tell we were fine.”

He ran a hand through his gorgeous copper mane and pulled her into his arms. “Yes, but you could have called or texted.”

“Noted.” She lifted up on her toes and kissed him. “Are you cranky from not having breakfast?”

“Possibly. Are you offering to feed me?”

A trill of heat unfurled in her belly as she remembered what it had been like to have him drink from her. “Maybe? I mean, you could use the magic boost.”

“That’s true,” Valentin said softly, then twirled a lock of her hair around his finger. “But I don’t want to weaken you. Not when we could be fighting at any time.”

“A pint isn’t going to weaken me.”

Jack cleared his throat. “The rest of us can donate too.”

Valentin’s eyes softened as he regarded Raina’s coven. “I’m honored and grateful for the offer. But would you three instead be willing to donate to my Second, Eniel, my chief enforcer, Calixto, and my Third, Angelique? If more of us have the extra power, we can attack with greater force.”

“Have you found the cult’s lair?”

“Not yet, but some of my scouts have discovered some possible leads,” Valentin told her. “Follow me to the couch, and I’ll take you up on your offer.”

Alma suddenly gasped and trembled. Her eyes went blank and distant. Cinna grabbed Raina’s hand, and Jack gestured for the vampires to be quiet. They’d seen her do this before. She was having a vision.

Then, Alma went still and blinked. “Something *bad* is happening.”

Valentin’s phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket, answered, and went pale. A few moments later, he lowered the phone and faced them. “The Order of Eternal Night is attacking the Nightwatch Society safehouse. And they have mages with them.”

“How fast can we get there?” Raina asked.

His eyes widened, and he grasped her shoulders, smiling down at her. “You’re not even afraid, are you?”

She looked up at him and held his gaze. “I am, but that doesn’t change what we need to do.”

At first, he looked like he was going to argue, but then he sighed. “That’s true. We’ll take the van and feed on the way. Should we stop by your place for more spell implements?”

Alma shook her head. “We need to get there as soon as possible.”

“She’s right,” Raina said firmly. “Besides, we have our amulets from Jack and the power boost from your blood.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

On the way out, Eniel gave Raina a nod of respect. She filed it away in her memory to hold it like a talisman.

Once in the van, Valentin pulled his phone out again while Eniel fed from Jack’s wrist.

“Claudette, we need your help.” He explained the situation and paused. “Yes. Call them, please. This is their city too.”

Eniel started the van as Cinna leaned forward to offer her wrist to Calixto. Alma followed suit with Angelique while Raina moved her hair to the side, giving Valentin her neck. He pulled her into his arms and swept her over with a feeling of euphoria that intensified when his fangs pierced her flesh. Raina bit her lip to hold in a cry of pleasure. This was not the right time to get horny. But every swallow sent a pulse of ecstasy between her thighs. Too soon, Valentin withdrew and licked her wound, healing it with his blood.

“Thank you,” he whispered before handing her a water bottle that Jacques had passed to them on the way to the van.

The drive to Metairie seemed to take an eternity. Raina used that time to form a power circle with her coven, all four of them channeling their elements and willing them to summon and circulate power between them.

Once they reached the neighborhood where the Nightwatch Society house was, Raina frowned at how quiet and dark it was.

Cinna noticed too. “Why aren’t the neighbors’ lights on?”

“And where are the cops?” Jack peered out the back window, only seeing the vehicles of other New Orleans vampires following the van.

“It’s a good thing there aren’t any cops,” Valentin told them. “I don’t even want to imagine what that would mean for us.”

Raina thought about it and wondered if either the enemy or the Nightwatch Society felt the same. “I bet they have some sort of shield or other obscuring spell activated.”

“You’re right about that, ma’am,” Eniel called from the driver’s seat. “I can feel it.”

Raina looked out the side window but couldn’t see anything but dark trees.

Calixto suddenly let out a low whistle from the front passenger seat. “There’s a lot of fighting going on.”

As he spoke, Raina saw the wrought iron gates of the Society’s entryway pass by. Then she heard blasts and screams and clashing of metal like someone had disabled a mute button.

The van pulled to the side and parked about thirty feet from the gate. That might be a bad sign. The driveway was almost a mile long. Did the fighting extend so far back on the grounds?

Valentin held up a hand. “Before we get out, listen to me. I want you four to stay close to us. You haven’t met all of my people yet, and I don’t want you to confuse them with the enemy.”

“Shit, I hadn’t thought of that.”

Alma spoke in a confident tone. “I think I’ll be able to tell.”

Jack nodded. “We’ll be able to identify the evil mages, probably. So we’ll target them.”

“Yeah,” Cinna added, squirming impatiently in her seat. “That’s where we’ll be most useful, anyway.”

Valentin opened the van door, and they all piled out. Calixto leapt up onto the roof, opened the luggage compartment, and tossed down swords and guns to Valentin and Eniel.

Raina’s mouth went dry at the sight of the guns. The situation suddenly felt more real. She looked across the grounds and saw multiple cars parked on the lawn. Valentin’s people? Or the enemy? The sounds of clashing weapons and battle cries grew louder as they jogged down the long driveway.

When they got over the slight hill and the battle came into view, she was almost dumbstruck at the sight of over a hundred figures down on the lawn, battling each other. As they jogged closer, she could see Nightwatch people on the balconies. Some were throwing fireballs, others blasts of pure power.

Suddenly, lightning crackled in front of them, and a figure appeared with a rumble of thunder. Valentin aimed his gun, then lowered it and sank to his knees.

“Eminence,” he breathed.

“What?” Cinna whispered beside Raina.

Eniel gave her a sharp look before sinking to his knees with Calixto. Not knowing what else to do, Raina and her coven knelt too.

When her eyes adjusted from the lightning flash, she could see the man they knelt to. He was freakishly tall and wore a black velvet robe with silver runes sewn on the edges of the sleeves and lapels. From the sight of his strange hair that was clear on the outside with dark cores inside each strand, pointed ears, ice blue eyes with jagged white lines running through the irises like lightning, and Nosferatu-long fingers, it was clear that this being was not human.

“Rise, Lord St. Scarasse,” the man said. “We don’t have time for formalities. I see you’ve brought your Bride and her coven. Very good.”

Bride? Raina’s jaw dropped. *Was he talking about her?* Then she received another shock as Valentin addressed the being by name.

“Yes, Lord Delgarias.”

Delgarias. Xochitl’s vampire uncle and the man that Valentin readily admitted to being afraid of. Raina eyed him with awed nervousness, struggling not to stumble under the sheer force of the power radiating from him. It was a good thing this guy was on their side.

Delgarias spoke again, this time addressing them all. “The King and Queen are here, along with most of their close allies. The wolf is with them. He’s smelling out which vampires are

the enemy, so no one hurts New Orleans or Coeur d'Alene vampires. One last thing: These past few battles seem to have the objective to abduct as many mages as possible.”

“We’re already aware of that,” Valentin growled. “It would have been nice if you’d checked your email.”

“My apologies.” Delgarias dipped his head in a bow. “I’m still getting used to that sort of technology, and I’ve been occupied with another cult cell and surveilling other targets. Now come with me. Every fighter is needed.”

They followed the strange entity towards the fighting. Raina and her coven gasped when they saw some familiar faces in the melee. All four members of Rage of Angels were fighting cultist vampires, Renfields, and magic users dressed in gray robes with strange, sinister insignia embroidered over their hearts. One such mage was aiming a blast of power at Sylvis Jagwolfe, recognizable anywhere with her bright blue hair. Raina shunted him away with a jet of water, easily summoned with the power of her amulet and the vampire blood in her veins.

Sylvis turned to face her and gave her a quick wave before kicking a Renfield in the face like she was in a Jackie Chan movie. Xochitl was flinging fireballs at vampires, but what was strange was that she seemed to be intentionally aiming for their legs. Why not a killing blast?

Delgarias and an obscenely gorgeous woman with metallic copper and bronze hair had no qualms about killing. As proven by the blasts of lightning, the former shot at enemy fighters, and gouts of flame shot from the latter’s palms.

There was also indeed a gray wolf running across the lawn, zigzagging between combatants and sending some signals to Sylvis.

“The mullet, the denim jacket, and the guy with short red hair are enemy vampires!” she shouted to her friends and Raina’s coven.

“You can talk to the wolf?” Raina blurted.

The blue-haired guitarist answered without turning. “He’s not a wolf, but yeah.”

Cinna gasped. “Werewolves are real?”

Beau Thompson, bassist of Rage of Angels laughed as he blasted the redheaded vampire with a gust of wind. “He’s something even weirder than a werewolf.”

Raina wished she could ask him to clarify, but just then, one of the gray-robed mages shot a bolt of power at her. It bounced off her talisman and knocked him over. She finished him off with a blast to his heart. The mage jerked with a spasm, then went limp.

Had she *killed* him?

She didn’t have time to ponder the possibility of taking a life for the first time. A vampire rushed her, fangs bared. Then, there was a blur of motion, and the vampire’s headless body collapsed at her feet. Valentin appeared in front of her, blood dripping from his sword. She couldn’t see where he’d stashed his gun.

“I told you to stay close to me.”

“I thought I was!” she retorted, then her voice softened. “Thanks for saving me again.”

He nodded. “Just focus on the mages, as we’d discussed. My people know which vampires aren’t ours.” With that, he raised his sword and turned to an attacking vampire. “Get the fuck out of our city!”

Raina listened to Valentin and spotted a mage who appeared to be trying to go around the house. Likely to sneak in a window to attack more Nightwatch people. “Oh, hell no.”

She pointed at him, gathered her power, and shot him with a stunning bolt.

Razvan drove a sword into the mage’s back. Aurora and Beau shouted some advice to Cinna and Alma. Then Raina and Jack gasped as the two rockstars demonstrated their power. Together, Aurora and Beau made the ground open up and swallow enemy mages.

In moments, Jack and Alma were combining their earth and air magic to do the same. Cinna emulated Xochitl in throwing fireballs at the mages, and Raina alternated with water and bursts of sheer power.

The air became rank with the stink of burning flesh and hair. Her ears rang from gunshots, clashing steel, and screams of pain. But after what felt like an hour of fighting, she was seeing fewer gray-robed mages. Were they winning?

Just then, the air seemed to scream around her as a group of gray robes ripped into the air and formed a portal,

retreating. Some vampires and Renfields followed, but others were too focused on fighting to see that the retreat had begun.

The wolf suddenly shifted into human form, or maybe not human. He had the same otherworldly beauty as the woman fighting beside Delgarias. Even with his face contorted in agony as he screamed, “No!”

Raina watched him run to Sylvis. She collapsed in a bloody heap on the cold ground. As the man cradled Sylvis, Xochitl cried out and joined them. Suddenly, Delgarias appeared. “Give her to me,” he ordered. “I can heal the wound.”

Raina’s stomach churned in dread as he watched the inhuman vampire drag bleeding fingers across Sylvis’s inner thigh. Someone had gotten her femoral artery.

Delgarias confirmed her worry by shaking his head. He argued with the man for a moment before the man shouted something about calling a doctor, then he and Sylvis vanished. With a sigh, Delgarias created a portal, and he, Xochitl, and the woman who sort of looked like the wolf-man went through it.

“Fuck!” Jack stared at the spot where they’d vanished. “I hope Sylvis doesn’t die. She’s one of the best guitarists in the world.”

And a damn fine mage, Raina thought, and then blasted a retreating vampire with a fireball, venting her rage at Sylvis being mortally wounded. Claudette would be devastated. The few enemy vampires left fled with preternatural speed. Raina turned to look for Valentin, wanting nothing more than to be in

his arms, but he'd left her side. *And after all of his scolding for me to stay by him.*

And that's when she saw all the bodies on the ground. She didn't know which ones were the New Orleans vampires, but Valentin did. Slowly, Raina sank to her knees.

This is real, her mind screamed. And this is only the beginning.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Valentin strode across the Nightwatch Society's lawn, inventorying the dead and wounded. Calixto had sustained a deep wound in his chest. He'd need blood immediately to survive. He rushed to his enforcer's side but was intercepted by a blue-robed mage who Valentin had briefly met at that fated Rage of Angels concert.

"I can heal him," the mage said, then placed his hands over Calixto's wound. The healer began to glow with blue light, then the light congregated in his arms, down his palms, then into the vampire's wound.

When the mage lifted his hands, the wound was reduced to an angry red scar.

"Now you can give him a little blood without draining yourself."

"Thank you," Valentin whispered.

But the mage had moved on to the next fallen vampire.

Valentin cut his wrist with one of his fangs and pressed the bleeding wound to Calixto's mouth. The vampire quickened immediately, drinking with such vigor that Valentin hissed. "Enough!"

Calixto withdrew, looking vigorous once more. "Sorry, my lord." He rose to his feet. "I thought I was going to die. You and that mage saved me."

“Hopefully, we can save more.”

Valentin found Eniel feeding Jen, whose arm and left leg were covered with blood. Valentin and Calixto followed suit with the next wounded vampires.

“Aurora!” a familiar voice called.

Valentin turned to see Claudette and four other voodooiennes approaching.

“Grandma!” Aurora yelled and ran to her.

Soon, there were plenty of healers, and a reconnaissance party formed to make sure there were no lingering threats.

Claudette’s people inspected the place where Mephistopheles’s mages had torn a portal to Qua’ al-fán and performed some enchantment to ensure the area wasn’t tainted.

When the wounded were taken care of, Valentin inventoried the fallen. Ten dead Renfields, twelve enemy vampires, and three mages lay dead on the grass, but he knew there were more. He’d seen Aurora, Beau, Alma, and Cinna make the Earth open and swallow some of the enemy.

As for his people, Val found eleven dead and two missing, but hell only knew how many more would have died if not for the healing efforts of the mages. Delgarias had returned at some point, along with his Bride, a woman who’d been gossiped about in vampire circles but remained a mystery. Nikkita Leonine was her name, and she was reputed to be Xochitl’s aunt. And a luminite. A race of magical beings that vampire society had only heard about a few years ago.

Valentin didn't give a damn if the woman was a demon. He watched her heal a vampire, reducing his casualties to ten.

Valentin called to his vampires. "Those who were wounded, go ahead and depart to feed. There will be another Gathering tomorrow night to discuss this night's events and mourn our dead. Those who are able, please remain here. We will pledge fealty to Queen Xochitl and then attend to other business with the Nightwatch Society."

He hid a smile as he heard the Society members gasp and exchange whispers on the balconies from which they'd defended themselves. Those people had fought impressively as well, keeping the enemy boxed in from both flanks. Valentin had even witnessed a Society member hit an enemy vampire with a blast of fire.

"Wait!" Genevieve called from the front doorstep. "We can feed your people. We owe you that much for coming to our aid."

Valentin fought to keep his surprise from showing. "It's not necessary. I am Lord of this city, and it's my job to protect it from invaders."

"It's our city too." Genevieve crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a defiant stare. "Besides, we need to do something to seal our alliance."

"Alliance?" He raised a brow. "I never agreed to any such thing."

"Come off it, St. Scarasse. You came to our aid, and we fought a common enemy. That makes us allies. We just need to

make it official.”

He frowned at her, then sighed in resignation. “Fine. Allies, then.”

“Wonderful. We’ll set up a meeting soon.” Her gaze shifted behind Valentin. “Madame Fontaine. At last, you’ve accepted my invitation.”

Claudette laughed. “If you choose to see it that way. I was only here to help Valentin and other friends. However, with all of us facing a mutual threat, my community may be willing to consider joining your organization. Call me in the next few days. For now, I want to go home and nap. I have brunch plans later.”

Valentin thanked Claudette and her fellow voodooiennes, promising drinks and limo rides on him any time they cared to visit his club again. He also silently promised not to reveal that he’d seen them take blood, hair, and nail clippings from some of the corpses.

Warm, soft arms encircled his waist. He smiled down at Raina, immediately comforted by her embrace and the scent of her unique perfume of magic and herbs under the reek of burnt bodies and death.

“I’m sorry about the loss of your people.” Her voice rang with aching sympathy.

He spoke past the lump in his throat. “I ordered them to fight.”

She hugged him tighter and looked back up at him with patient warmth in her brown eyes. “Yes, but like Genevieve

said, it's their city too."

Her words comforted him somewhat. "Still, when I pledge myself to the Queen, I will give each vampire a choice."

"You're a good leader, Val."

The sincerity of such praise from her washed over him like a soothing balm. "So are you, Raina." He looked for Delgarias. "Where is Queen Xochitl?"

The Thirteenth Elder turned away from the otherworldly woman he was whispering to and faced Valentin. "Sylvis Jagwolfe was mortally wounded, but between my blood and a transfusion from Gabriel—that was the wolf I told you about—she's been stabilized. Xochitl is her best friend, so she's bringing her food and checking on her while she and Gabriel spend the night and tomorrow at the clinic to make sure the transfusion doesn't have any ill effects."

Genevieve was slowly walking towards Delgarias, alternately gaping at his looks and frowning at his words. Delgarias spotted her and bowed. "Hello, ma'am. Could you tell me how many people you lost tonight?"

The Nightwatch Society woman immediately sobered. "Only three, but that's still a painful loss. *All* of our people are valuable."

"May I ask what their abilities are?"

"Johan was proficient with water magic, Agnes was a clairvoyant, and Diane was an eclectic witch like Miss Callahan and her coven." At Delgarias's calculating frown, her expression hardened. "Tell me what is going on."

“Magic is returning to Earth, and certain parties wish to exploit that for evil,” Delgarias explained in a cool, gentle tone. “That’s why mages are being abducted. It’s quite a long story, but Lord St. Scarasse can fill you in later. For now, take care of your wounded and seal up your alliances. This won’t be the first attack.”

He started to walk back to his wife, but Valentin called after him, “Eminence, wait!”

Delgarias stopped and gave him a piercing look with those strange lightning-struck eyes. “Yes?”

“D-did you mean what you said about...her?” he inclined his head toward Raina, fearing to ask directly, fearing the answer.

The Thirteenth Elder nodded. “She is the sixth that the Prophecy has foretold. I trust you understand what that means for you?”

Valentin nodded, mingled fear and joy spinning in his heart. “I’m the sixth Nightwalker. Wait...who was the fifth?”

“Me.” Delgarias smiled and inclined his head towards the copper-haired beauty. “And my wife, Nikkita Leonine is the fifth Bride. Believe me when I say I was shocked to be part of the Prophecy. I thought my duty was solely to relate it and prepare others, not to have a role myself.”

“Do you know who the seventh is?”

Delgarias’s lips quirked up in a mysterious smile. “You’ve kept me long enough. We both must attend to our duties. But don’t worry. We’ll talk soon.”

“I should hope so,” Valentin retorted, allowing a little of his frustration to creep into his voice. “I was asked to pledge fealty almost a year ago, but now that I’ve agreed, the opportunity to do so keeps evading me.”

But he was talking to dead air. Delgarias and Nikkita had vanished. As had Beau Thompson, his healer mage husband, Aurora, and all of the Spokane and Coeur d’Alene vampires.

“Damn,” Raina whispered beside Val. “I want to learn how to do that.”

“It would be nice.” He turned back to Genevieve. “The sun is due to rise in a few hours. The bodies of our dead will burn. Where is the best place for them? And where do you wish for us to put the human corpses?”

The woman went pale and stammered. “I-I don’t know. Body disposal isn’t something we have much experience with.”

Eniel cleared his throat. “We’ll feed the gators.”

The Nightwatch Society members who’d gathered outside to gawk at Delgarias and listen to Genevieve gasped in horror at the idea. But none argued for a different solution.

Calixto shook his head. “Ten bodies would be a little much for that method. A few will get eaten, but many run the risk of having remains discovered downriver. Let’s plant some in the bogs and others in abandoned crack houses with the appropriate paraphernalia nearby.”

Valentin eyed Calixto with admiration. “And that’s why you’re my enforcer.”

Before organizing the bodies for disposal, they stripped the corpses of their wallets and split the cash between the Nightwatch Society and the vampires. The loot was far from a fortune, but at least the Society would have money for lawn maintenance, and the vampires would have gas money for their trouble.

Three hours before sunrise, the work was finished. The vampires departed in their respective vehicles, and they stopped to get some Waffle House orders to go for Raina and her coven. Back at Bloodletting, he took a deep breath and asked Raina if she'd mind spending the day at his lair.

She paused a moment, then conferred with her coven. "Since you're actually asking this time, and I don't have to work tomorrow, I accept."

He couldn't hold back a sigh of relief. After tonight's horrors, he didn't want to sleep alone. Alma seemed to feel the same, as she accepted an invitation from Jack and Cinna to stay at their place. Valentin couldn't hold back his impatience as he finished debriefing his people and scheduling the Gathering. This time, he would bring the coven. It was past time everyone got to know them.

As he got back into the van with Raina, flanked by his Second in Command and Chief Enforcer, Eniel leaned over and whispered, "I was wrong about my misgivings about Miss Callahan. You chose well."

Valentin smiled and spoke quietly, so Raina wouldn't hear. "It seems I can't take as much credit for that as I'd thought. The Prophecy chose her."

On the ride back, he cradled his witch in his arms and thought about the implications of what Delgarias had revealed. Sure, it was wonderful to discover that the woman he'd fallen in love with was destined to be with him, but on the other hand, that also meant that he and Raina would be key figures in the war against the Evil One and thus be at the forefront of many battles. And there was no guarantee that those future battles would be as easy to win as tonight's had been.

Raina squeezed his hand and looked up at him with concern in her eyes. "Are you okay?"

He kissed the top of her head. "Yes, I mean, considering. Tonight was, as you often say, *a lot*."

They rode the rest of the way in silence, content to lean against each other and just breathe for a while.

Once down in Valentin's private apartments, he shrugged out of his coat, frowning at the blood and grime all over it. "Would you like to join me in the shower?"

"Yes, *please*," she said so emphatically that he couldn't help but smile.

They spent the next half hour under the hot spray, taking turns scrubbing each other. Valentin sighed with bliss. "I could get used to this."

Raina nodded before tilting her head back under the spray to finish rinsing her hair. "This is *much* better than the last time we were in here."

He chuckled and replied once she was able to hear him. "Yes, but it ended quite well, I think."

“Your tiles over the bathtub are still broken.”

“I plan on getting that wall repaired as soon as possible so we can soak in there next time.”

“That does sound like bliss. I do envy you that tub.”

Valentin stepped behind her and cupped her delightfully heavy breasts. “The shower has its benefits too.”

Raina turned around and sank to her knees, wrapping her fingers around his hard cock. “I can see that.”

Then, she took him into her mouth, and all his chaotic thoughts dissipated like a cloud of smoke. Looking down at her, those lush lips closed around his shaft, rivulets of water dripping down her soft and luscious body, Valentin saw an elemental goddess. His fingers slid into her heavy wet tresses, and he basked in the pleasure she wrought.

Too soon, he found himself on the edge of climax. Valentin pulled her up and then knelt. “My turn.”

He plunged his tongue into her cleft, unable to suppress a groan of delight at her sweet, musky taste. Raina cried out in pleasure and gripped his hair tightly. He plundered her treasures with his mouth until her thighs trembled, and she moaned with her release.

Then he gripped her thighs and lifted her in the air. “Hold onto my shoulders,” he rasped, hoping he wouldn’t finish before he got started.

Raina complied, and he impaled her on his cock. She felt so tight and hot that he had to bury his face in her neck to muffle his own cry of pleasure. Soon, they found a frantic,

ecstatic rhythm, her bracing herself on his shoulders, him lifting her thighs up and down as he thrust into her with sensuous abandon.

Her magic crackled around them, making pleasant frissons of pleasure course through his body. Valentin braced her against the wall and swallowed her cries with a deep kiss, drinking in her pleasure and power.

When the climax came, it cascaded through them both at the same time and for a moment, Valentin didn't know where he ended and Raina began. For those precious, cataclysmic seconds, they were one.

He held her tightly during the aftershocks, each spasm of her body clenching around his hardness in hot pulsations that made him gasp.

Once they were cleaned and dried, they snuggled in his bed.

“Val?” Raina broke the silence. “What did Delgarias mean that I'm your Bride? And the sixth, at that?”

“It means we're destined to be together,” Valentin sucked in a breath. His heart seemed to stop as he asked, “You don't mind, do you?”

“Of course not.” Raina leaned up on one elbow and caressed his face. “I love you, Valentin St. Scarasse.”

His heart resumed beating, and joy flooded his body with warmth. “And I love you, Raina Callahan. I think I fell for you the first time you hexed me.”

She laughed and nuzzled his chest. “I think for me, it was the first time we danced.” Then her tone went more dire. “The Bride thing isn’t all romance and happily ever after, is it?”

Valentin sighed. “Unfortunately not.” He quoted the relevant line from the Prophecy that had been passed around to all Lord Vampires. “*“And the Queen shall seek seven night walkers with seven brides to lead their brethren to battle the unholy father...”* And we’re going to be part of those battles.”

“That’s what I was afraid of.” Raina’s gaze softened, and she lifted her face to kiss his cheek. “But I’m a lot less scared knowing you will be with me. And there’s one more thing.”

“What?”

Her brown eyes suddenly became deep enough to drown in. “I’ll let you Mark me now.”

Valentin absorbed what she was saying and let out a laugh. “*What?*”

She frowned. “I said you can Mark me.”

Still chuckling, he shook his head. “After you getting abducted, then fighting in a battle against an enemy who wanted to take you away to the Evil One, now you allow me to Mark you? Now that you’re safe?”

“I won’t always be safe,” Raina’s lips twisted in loathing at the admission. Then she sighed and gave him a wry smile. “Just take the win, Val.”

“Okay.” He bit his finger, slipped it between her lips, and willed the ancient magic to flow through him as he recited the words. “I, Valentin St. Scarasse, Lord of New Orleans, Mark

this mortal, Raina Callahan, as mine and mine alone. With this Mark, I give Raina my undying protection. Let all others, immortal and mortal alike, who crosses her path sense my Mark and know that to act against her is to act against myself and thus set forth my wrath, as I will avenge what is mine.”

Raina shivered as the magic of the Mark flared between them. “Whoa. That is hardcore.”

He laughed. “Yes. It’s not a ritual done often.”

“Does this Bride thing mean we have to live together?” Raina asked. “I’m not averse to spending more time with you, but I can’t move in here with you, you know. It’s just not practical, with this floor locking down during the day.”

“What if I buy us a house?” he suggested, delighted with the notion of her coming home to him every night. “And speaking of, I plan to make appointments with several dealerships so I can buy you a new car.”

“Oh, Goddess, that will be so nice. I can’t get near that car without shaking, and I hate it.” Raina kissed him, then yawned. “Why don’t we talk about the logistics tomorrow—or tonight, since it’s morning. I’m exhausted from the battle, and our activities after.”

“Of course.” Valentin gathered her in his arms, loving how well she fit against him. “I love you, witch.”

She rested her cheek against his heart. “And I love you, vampire.”

EPilogue

Five months later

Raina and Valentin raised their champagne glasses to toast Aurora and Anthony's wedding. She still couldn't believe that she was not only at an exclusive party with her favorite band, but she'd also be following them into other worlds to fight an evil god. With her vampire lover at her side.

A few days after the battle at the Nightwatch Society safehouse, Xochitl and her husband, Zareth—who looked a lot different without the glamour he'd worn when she'd first met him—returned to New Orleans to help the Nightwatch Society, the coven, and the New Orleans vampires shore up their defenses in case the Order of Eternal Night and/or Mephistopheles's army invaded again. They also finally got an explanation as to why specific types of mages, especially water mages, were being targeted.

Qua' al-fán, Mephistopheles's world that was made up of pieces of land he'd stolen from other worlds, was barren. The Evil One had to use water mages to keep his forces alive. Sylvis and her mate Gabriel Leonine discovered this when they found a portal to Qua' al-fán. They'd managed to rescue two captives. Plans were being made to eventually march on

Qua' al-fán but Delgarias declared they couldn't until all seven Nightwalkers had found their Brides, and the Queen made a few more alliances. Xochitl and the rest of Rage of Angels were hoping they'd be able to finish their final obligations to their record contract and go indie before that as well. They'd already dealt with one breach of contract lawsuit and did not want another.

And speaking of alliances, Valentin finally got his opportunity to kneel before Queen Xochitl and pledge himself to her cause. He gave each vampire under his rule a choice. Since they were infuriated at the abduction of the two New Orleans vampires, all but three pleaded their fealty to Xochitl.

Raina and her coven also pledged themselves to fight for the Queen, though their motives were the same as the NOLA vampires. The safety of the people of Aisthanesthai didn't mean as much to them as their fury that Mephistopheles had tried to abduct Raina twice and traumatized her with the Renfield attack. Zareth also privately asked Raina to recommend the more powerful Nightwatch Society members and any voodooiennes as candidates for Xochitl's army.

Claudette and the women who'd come with her to help after the Nightwatch Society skirmish promised to help fight anyone who invaded New Orleans, but their obligation would stop there.

“We're too old to be traipsing about other worlds and marching to battle,” Claudette had told her granddaughter.

Between otherworldly stuff, Raina also had to contend with huge changes in her day-to-day life. Dating the Lord

Vampire of New Orleans came with a lot of benefits, such as the adorable black Honda CRV Hybrid he'd bought her, the house he'd bought for them to share, unlimited free drinks for herself and her coven at Bloodletting—where people danced to 'Laser-shooting Dinosaur' almost every night—and best of all, the experience of being utterly adored by the kindest, sexiest man she'd ever met.

There were challenges to this whirlwind romance too, though. The primary one being her business. No longer could she work ten to five at *Bonheur Botanica*, so they'd had to hire another girl. Thankfully, the Nightwatch Society had a member who specialized in plant magic and was perfect for the position. The extra wages they had to pay her made budgeting for the payments on the shop building a little harder, but Raina refused to let Valentin buy hers and Alma's business outright.

Alma was having the best time living alone at the house. Although she would always have a close bond with the coven and be Raina's best friend forever, Alma always needed solitude. The constant juggling of work, vampire business, coven business, and Nightwatch Society meetings had really over-socialized her. So, when Raina announced that she was moving in with Valentin, Alma's visible struggle to hide her joyous relief had Raina fighting off laughter.

The last thing that took getting used to was the visits to Aisthanesthai. Xochitl and Zareth taught the coven how to open the portal in New Orleans. Aurora had been right in that just knowing about the existence of another world fucks with your head. Cinna and Jack were considering moving there.

Alma kept quiet about what she wanted for the future, and Raina was with Valentin in her love for New Orleans. The vibrant, eccentric city was her home. But if it ended up being lost to rising ocean waters, she was comforted by the knowledge that another home was waiting for her. One that would welcome a witch.

After the wedding toast, everyone but the vampires returned to eating their meals. Xochitl approached their table, the elegance of her blood-red bridesmaid gown slightly hampered by her precariously carrying two overloaded plates of food.

She sat across from Raina, Valentin, and the coven, and everyone let out a sigh of relief when the plates were safe on the table. “Goddamn, I love New Orleans food. Sometimes I sneak through the portal to have some. If you want, I can call you next time I do that, and we can hang out.”

“Okay,” Raina and her coven chorused, unsure of who she was talking to.

Xochitl took another bite of shrimp and grits, chased it with a sip of champagne, then leaned over the table so her bodice almost touched her bowl of red beans and rice. “I want to apologize again for not showing up when you emailed me about your stalker.” Her amber eyes slid mischievously to Valentin, “But I’m glad it worked out.”

“Did you know I was a...Bride?” Raina still had a hard time saying it aloud.

“Nope,” Xochitl said as she scooped up more cheese grits. “We were just slammed with our own issues. We found out

that Sylvis's pet wolf was actually my cousin, then that coven in New York had stalkers of their own that we hadn't assigned to them. Since we knew who was following you, we knew you were okay. I did email Uncle Del to ask him to ask Lord St. Scarasse to back off a little." Her gaze shifted to Valentin. "Did he pass my message on?"

Valentin laughed. "No. He said he's bad at email."

Raina blinked at Xochitl. The way she casually mentioned a wolf turning into her cousin and referring to that tall, scary lightning demi-god as "Uncle Del" was just too much. And although she had a multitude of questions about the world of Aisthanesthai, the Prophecy, and the coming war, another question had burned in her mind ever since she first heard the subject mentioned.

"Is your car really possessed?" The restored Datsun wagon had been featured in many interviews and articles about Rage of Angels. Xochitl named referred to it as "Little Beast."

Xochitl nodded cheerfully. "Yup. But we don't know what, or who, the spirit was. Now she's happy to be a car as long as I always treat her nice."

"Hmmm," was all Valentin could manage while Raina and the others were at a loss for words.

The Queen took advantage of the silence to polish off her shrimp and grits and move on to her red beans and rice.

Zareth approached her, cloaked in a glamour spell to hide the fact that he had the same weird hair, lightning-struck eyes,

and long fingers as Delgarias. A beautiful blonde woman was with him, also shrouded in glamour.

Raina inclined her head toward the woman. “Who is that?”

She’d expected the guest to be another creature like Delgarias or perhaps a ruler of one of the magical territories of Aisthanesthai. Instead, she got an answer that bowled her over.

“My mom.” Xochitl lifted a finger to her lips and winked.

“B-but...she *died*.”

“Yeah, but she’s back now.” Xochitl smiled contentedly and had a bite of cornbread. “I had my first death around a year ago. It sucked.”

Raina’s jaw dropped. She was saved from a reply when Zareth bent down and clasped Xochitl’s hand.

“Dance with me.” The King of Aisthanesthai’s command was softened by the obvious love and adoration in his voice.

“Great idea,” Valentin said and pulled Raina from her seat.

Xochitl’s mom sat down and shook her head, pouting at Raina and Valentin. “Are you okay? You look like you saw a ghost.”

“We’re fine,” Raina said weakly.

The woman gave her a wry look. “Xochitl told you who I am, didn’t she? I told her not to do that. I hope you keep quiet about it.”

“We will,” Raina, Valentin, and the coven chorused.

“Wonderful. I’m going to say hello to Claudette. Aurora has the sweetest grandma. Unlike mine.” Her look at the last was chilling.

Suddenly, the opening notes to Concrete Blonde’s “Darkening of the Light,” began playing.

“Our song!” Valentin exclaimed and tugged her to the grand ballroom.

Raina melted into his embrace, swaying with him to the slow, romantic beat of the song. She’d never tire of dancing with him.

Valentin bent down and caressed her earlobe with his lips as he whispered, “This is a gorgeous venue for a wedding. Do you think we could—”

Raina stepped on his foot, but not too hard. “You can’t start talking about wedding venues when you haven’t proposed.” At his enthusiastic look, she held up a hand. “And don’t you *dare* do that here or anytime too soon. Aside from that being one of the tackiest things you could do at someone else’s wedding, we haven’t been together for even a year.”

Valentin’s grin broadened, and he leaned back toward her to nibble on your neck. “I’ll change your mind, witch.”

“I look forward to it, vampire.”

They continued to dance, and Raina continued to feel blissfully adored. As the last strains of the song faded, Valentin lowered his head and captured her lips in one of his toe-curling kisses.

Once he'd kissed her breathless, she opened her eyes to look for a clock to see how long before it was polite for them to excuse themselves and not be rude.

And then "Laser Shooting Dinosaur" began playing.

"Oh, no," Valentin groaned.

"Yes!" Raina cheered. "And I'll have you know that I want this song to play at our wedding."

He laughed and shook his head. "Ah, *now* you admit that there will be a wedding."

I hope you enjoyed Bewitching the Vampire! If you can leave a review, I'll be eternally grateful.

Brides of Prophecy Book 10 will be available next year!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Formerly an auto-mechanic, Brooklyn Ann thrives on writing romance, urban fantasy, and horror novels featuring unconventional heroines and heroes who adore them. Author of historical paranormal romance in her critically acclaimed “Scandals with Bite” series, urban fantasy in the cult favorite, “Brides of Prophecy” novels, rockstar romance in the award-winning, “Hearts of Metal” series, and horror in the “B Mine” series, horror romances riffing on the 1970s and 1980s B horror movies that feature a Final Couple instead of a Final Girl.

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