

Prologue

Charlie Logan couldn't believe his father had allowed him to bring Mattie on patrol without another teammate along. Da had always been protective of Mattie, being the youngest of his three children, never allowing him to come along on a hunt.

This night, however, Da had told him Mattie was ready to take his place on Team Logan. Charlie had trained hard and their father trusted that he was strong enough and wise enough to keep his little brother out of trouble.

After all, they were bloodline uccisori; a bold and powerful lineage of vampire slayers dating back to the First Crusades.

No vamps had been seen in their assigned patrol area and Charlie was looking for an easy night ahead. That was alright, though. It would give his little brother a bit of learning but he'd still be safe enough to appease their parents' worries.

There'd been attacks bordering near the northern edge of the village but those had been more animal than vamp attacks, from what Charlie had heard at the pub. There had been one report of a vamp attack in the southernmost sector where he and Mattie now patrolled, but that one had been ended by their father two nights before.

Charlie looked over at his brother and grinned at the intensity that set the boy's face in a grim mask.

Mattie may be a pain in the arse, but he was still his brother and Charlie loved him.

The silvery glow of the full moon gave the night a surreal feeling as the brothers strode across the meadow, armed with swords strapped to their backs and wooden stakes shoved into their boots and belts.

"You look like you're ready to jump out of your skin, Mattie. Try to relax your grip on your sword. You'll have more control if we're set upon by vamps."

"Did you hear that, Charlie?" Mattie asked softly as he halted his steps.

Charlie tilted his head and scanned the edge of the woods, searching the shadows for any movement.

"I didn't hear anything. Probably just the wind," he told Mattie, after a long moment of quiet. "Or, with your hearing, it could have been a mouse breaking wind."

Charlie laughed like a loon and gave Mattie a light slap on his back as the younger man's face turned bright red, matching his hair.

"No, Charlie. That would be Ma that could hear a mouse fart. I swear she has the hearing of a hound and the eyes of a hawk. She hears and sees everything."

"That's true, little brother. That is true," Charlie laughed again.

"I did hear something though, a rustling in the bush. There," Mattie said, pointing directly in front of them. "In the verge of the tree line. I think we should see what it was. I'd love to end the bastards that hurt Uncle Stephen."

"That was to the west of here, Mattie. Besides, Uncle Stephen said he'd ended the vamps that jumped him. Remember?"

"Right," Mattie said with a nervous laugh. "But they move around fast, you know. As quick as lightning. They'll sink their fangs into you before you know what's happening. I remember what both Da and Uncle Stephen taught us . . . and you'd best remember, too, Charlie."

Charlie gave his brother a nod as he, too, remembered the story. A chill ran through him as he scanned the shadows, once more.

News had come to the team, earlier that week, that vamps had been seen killing sheep at a local farm. Stephen McGinnis, their father's Second in Command, and a man Charlie and Mattie had known the whole of their lives, had gone with stake and sword in hand to find the vamps that terrorized that area. He'd been attacked and, though no one truly knew what happened, they'd torn at him like animals; bite and claw marks covering his body, before he finally ended them.

Or, so the story was told. When Guinness was flowing, the stories tended to grow to unbelievable ends.

Charlie knew his little brother wanted to prove himself on his first mission and show their father, that he was just as capable of ending vamps as any other member of Team Logan. It was, after all, his birthright.

"Lead the way, little brother. This is your night."

"No, wait. I'm wrong," Charlie corrected as his dimples flashed.

"That would be this weekend coming. I hear you're taking pretty Brenna Muldoon to the pub for dancing Saturday. You can regale her with your tales of heroism and retribution. Perhaps she'll bestow more than a kiss on you."

Heat climbed up the back of Mattie's neck as Charlie laughed. Mattie had been trying to get Brenna to go to the pub with him for weeks and she'd finally said yes.

“You’re just jealous,” Mattie stuttered. “Because you can’t find a woman that would be seen in public with you. They can’t abide that ugly mug of yours. Brenna can’t wait to feel my arms around her and . . . There it is again.”

Mattie put his hand on Charlie’s shoulder to halt their advance. “Did you hear it that time?”

“Aye, I heard it. It came from over there.” Charlie pointed to his left and slowly moved in that direction. “We need to go check it out.”

Simultaneously, they pulled a stake from their belts and took a firmer grip on their swords. They took several steps apart before advancing into the woods, and stooped low to make themselves less of a target. They’d gone no more than ten feet into the trees when a low, guttural growl sounded, bringing goosebumps to their skin.

Charlie crouched into a fighting stance, preparing for attack. They were being stalked, but the scent was all wrong. He didn’t smell the stench of rotted flesh and death that always accompanied a vampire. This was no vamp. It was something worse. He had to get Mattie out of the woods. *Now.*

“This is wrong, Mattie,” Charlie whispered. “Go! Get back to the house and tell Da to bring help.”

“No! I’ll not leave you here alone.”

“Run, Mattie! Now!” Charlie demanded as the growl grew into a roar and the sound of something huge broke through the undergrowth, launching itself at him. He spun to face his attacker, but he was too slow. A mountain of foul smelling fur slammed into his side.

The next moment was pure chaos as he battled something that he’d only seen in a horror film at the cinema. In his periphery, he saw Mattie standing only a few paces away, frozen with fear.

Time slowed to a snail’s pace as the beast latched razor sharp fangs onto Charlie’s left shoulder. The pain was like nothing he’d ever experienced as his knees buckled under the weight of the animal. His sword flew from his right hand, the stake all but useless in his left.

As the beast opened its maw for the kill, Charlie shoved his arm into its mouth, buying him time to scream a warning.

“*Run, Mattie! Run!*” He roared, knowing that once the beast had finished him off, his baby brother would be killed too.

His shouts finally brought Mattie out of his unresponsive state.

“No! Leave my brother be, you bloody bastard!” Mattie bellowed, his sword held high. He brought the honed edge down on the shoulder of the beast, doing nothing more than enraging it further.

It released its downed prey, turning to the newest threat. With Charlie's blood dripping from the wolf-like snout, its glowing amber eyes locked onto Mattie. An angry howl emanated from it seconds before it leapt.

Mattie's cries of pain and terror did more to drag Charlie to his feet than fear for his own life. He moved on shaky legs as he picked up his sword and stumbled to the mass of blood-matted fur as it feasted on Mattie, ripping at his stomach and chest.

Charlie screamed out his brother's name as he ran the blade of his sword through the skull of the beast.

A deathly quiet settled around him as Charlie stared down at the giant wolf. When his sword pierced the wolf's skull, it had fallen to its side. He'd never seen one so large.

It must have weighed nearly five hundred pounds and was as tall as a man. The dark brown, bloody fur was thick and coarse as the wind ruffled through it and its eyes faded from a glowing amber they'd been in the heat of battle, to a dead, glazed, unseeing, black.

Charlie fell to his knees next to his baby brother as blood poured from his own wounds and pain wracked his body.

"Oh, Mattie," he cried. "Why didn't you run like I told you to?"

He lifted his hand to try to stop the bleeding, not sure what to do first as Mattie's entrails spilled out. Blood pooled around him, drenching the grass as moonlight glistened off the exposed bones of his ribcage. There was a hole where his heart should have been and his stomach lay in pieces next to his lifeless hand.

"Why didn't you fucking run?" he screamed at his dead brother.

Charlie howled in agony as a cloud passed over the moon, casting him in total darkness as he wept over his baby brother's body.

His rage came as the tears dried on his blood-streaked face. He pushed himself to his feet, ignoring the pain raging through his own body as he picked up Mattie's sword. He was hell-bent on chopping the beast into pieces so tiny not even the buzzards would find enough to eat.

As he turned with sword raised over his head, however, he saw the beast's body was gone. In its place was a naked man, the back of his head a bloody hole where Charlie's sword had cut it away.

"Uncle Stephen?"

No, Charlie thought to himself. It can't be.

"How could you do this to us? You were one of us! You murdered Mattie, you son of a bitch." He raged at the dead man, hacking at him with his brother's sword, until he was too weak to stand

upright.

He let his body fall, reaching for Mattie's hand and waited to die.

At least death will keep me from having to face Ma's grief at the loss of her sons, Charlie thought.

He stared up at the full moon as the cloud passed by. As its glow washed over him, he closed his eyes and prayed that God would have mercy and bring him a quick death.

He could feel every nerve in his body as they stretched and knitted themselves back together. His skin felt like it was on fire and his bones and joints felt as though he was being pulled apart.

God wasn't listening and his prayers went unanswered as a new, horrifying reality washed over Charlie Logan.



Chapter One

Fourteen years later

He wasn't alone.

That was Chuck Logan's first thought when his eyes popped open. Her scent was all around him; inside him.

Sunlight filtered in through a small slit in the drapes he'd pulled closed before drifting off in a sated, contented, slumber. A slow smile slid across his face as his thoughts went back to the magic of the night before. He knew it was a mistake when he invited her back to his flat over the restaurant. He knew they'd both end up regretting what they'd done but it was like a compulsion Chuck couldn't, or wouldn't, resist anymore than he could resist taking his next breath.

He could blame it on the fact that two of his best friends and teammates had gotten married. Or, that he'd drunk too much champagne and let his God-given common sense slide away.

He'd known he shouldn't bring her home. It was wrong and it was dangerous, but after holding her in his arms on the dance floor at Hunter and Sheila's wedding the day before, Chuck had let his wanting for Scarlett James overtake him and he made excuses for his careless actions.

From the first moment they'd met, at the diner where she'd worked at the time, Chuck knew she was his perfect match. The one person whom he could love with his whole heart and not have to hide any part of him.

He'd flirted with her and charmed her phone number from her, telling himself it was to save Hunter Blackfox, the newest member of Team Nightly, from Sheila's rage. She'd had some major issues controlling her temper at the time and Hunter seemed to be the target she aimed for, more often than not.

Hunter had joined Team Nightly as Chase's second in command. Chase Nightly, the leader of the team, had hand picked him to take the place of a fallen uccisore brother. Gabe Collins had not only been a teammate but one of Chuck's dearest friends and was killed during a vamp ambush, choreographed by Gordon Charles the self-proclaimed Vampire King.

Everything changed the morning after Chase and Rae Nightly's baby daughter was born, Chuck remembered with a smile. Hunter and Sheila had gone to the diner for breakfast after a few of

Gordon Charles' vampire minions had tried to kidnap the newborn. Luckily, Hunter and Sheila had decided to make a midnight visit to the hospital nursery—for reasons neither of them were willing to share—and interrupted the vampire king's plan.

Chuck and Simon had decided to join them when they passed by the diner and saw Hunter's Ducati motorcycle parked out front.

Something about the beautiful, caramel-skinned, waitress had set off Sheila's temper that day and it was aimed at Hunter.

It was hard to believe that those two had found a way to resolve their differences and ended up falling in love and getting married.

Chuck looked over at his bedmate and his heart stuttered in his chest. *God, she's a beauty*, he thought. But he can't let this go any further. One night with her was all he could allow himself. Anything more than that would put her life in danger, and he loved her too much to let that happen.

He reached out a hand to touch the silky skin of her cheek when he heard his cell phone vibrate on the bedside table. He grabbed it and sat on the side of the bed as he looked at the caller ID.

He didn't recognize the number but knew the 212 exchange was a New York City number.

He looked down at Scarlett's sleeping form, a warmth and longing overtaking him, as he slowly rose to his feet, careful not to jostle the bed and wake her. He stepped out of his bedroom and slipped into the only other room with a door, other than the small closet where he kept his stash of wooden stakes and swords, hidden behind his clothes.

"Hello?" he said, quietly closing the bathroom door.

"Hello, Charlie. How are you doing?" It was a man's voice. One Chuck hadn't heard in several years. They'd kept in contact, however, through e-mail and text.

"Jesse? Is that you?" he asked, incredulous.

"Yeah, it's me. You sound like I woke you up."

"No, I was already awake," he said, rubbing his eyes and grinning. He put the toilet seat down and sat on it as he continued. "Damn, it's good to hear from you. Sorry I haven't kept in touch lately. It's been busy . . . You know what I mean?"

"Yes, and don't worry about it, I've been out of the country and Tina's been keeping me updated."

Chuck laughed at the mention of Jesse's baby sister. She was a precocious little thing with a talent for drawing anything she saw with whatever came to hand.

“She told me you’d gone to Ireland.”

He wasn’t going to ask. No matter how much he wanted to know, he couldn’t ask about his parents and his sister. It was better they thought him dead.

Like Mattie. God, it had been so long since he’d seen them and he could still see his brother’s brilliant green eyes and fire-red hair, so like their mother’s. Chuck had taken his coloring from their father’s side with his dark chestnut hair and blue eyes. Their sister . . . well, she’d been blessed with the best of both their parents.

Jesse remained silent and he continued. “How’s Tina doing? I haven’t heard from her in months.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about, Charlie—or would you prefer I call you Chuck?” Jesse asked. Chuck could almost hear the smile in Jesse’s voice as he spoke of his little sister.

“Tina’s the one that started calling me Chuck. That silly joke of hers,” he laughed. “It sounds more American, I suppose. Now everyone calls me that.”

“That’s right. She kept asking you, ‘what’s up Chuck.’ She thought that was the funniest joke ever.”

“She was only what? Five? Six, when I met your family? Everything is funny at that age.”

Chuck paused for a moment, knowing that Jesse wouldn’t have called just to chat about old times. “Is something wrong? Is Tina alright?”

“No, Chuck. Nothing’s wrong. Tina’s great. As a matter of fact, she’s heading down your way. She’s going to start classes at Savannah College of Art and Design in a couple of weeks and I was hoping you might keep an eye on her for me. I’m going to be tied up here in the city for a little while longer. I’d feel better about her being there if I knew someone was watching out for her. I keep hearing about the rising crime rate down there and it scares me. She’s too friendly for her own good, you know that.”

“She’s not old enough to go to college, Jesse . . . is she?”

The sound of deep laughter echoed through the phone, bringing another grin to Chuck’s face.

“That’s what Mom said when Tina announced she was moving to Georgia to go to college. She’s going to be nineteen in December, Chuck. She’s not the little girl you used to carry around on your back.”

“Holy shit, I can’t believe it’s been that long since I saw her. She was only sixteen two years ago, she can’t be grown up.”

Chuck laughed at his own absurdity as he stretched out his long legs. “You know you don’t even have to ask, Jesse. I’ll keep an eye on her. She’s like my own sister, you know. It’s true the crime rate has risen over the past few years and you know why, too. The damn vamps are multiplying faster than we can end them.”

“To tell you the truth,” Chuck said in a lower tone. “It’s scaring the shit out of all of us. The bites are harder to cleanse and taking so much holy water, we can’t get the local priest to bless it fast enough.”

“Yeah, I heard that, too. As a matter of fact, that’s part of why I’m stuck in New York. I’ve heard rumors about the vamp venom’s increased toxicity, and I have a couple lines as to the cause.”

Chuck could hear the concern in his friend’s voice as he spoke. He’d known the man long enough to not waste his breath asking questions Jesse wouldn’t answer until he was ready.

“Chuck, you need to be careful. You’re in more danger than you know and so is your lady friend. You need to keep her safe.”

“Wait, how do you know about Scarlett?”

Chuck heard Jesse chuckle and shook his head, grinning at his friend’s jab. The man had an uncanny way of just knowing things you wanted to keep private. But, that was part of Jesse’s charm.

“Tina will be there this afternoon. Have fun, Charlie. Try to keep your heart and mind open. You’d be amazed at how fate works.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“By the way, I put flowers on Mattie’s grave, for you,” Jesse told him, disregarding his question. “Your parents are doing well, and your sister is married to a good man. You need to tell them, Charlie. They deserve to know the truth.”

“I can’t.” His heart lurched at the thought of seeing his family again. No matter how much he missed them and would give anything to ask his father’s advice or hear his mother’s laugh, it hurt too much. With Mattie’s death and his own part in that nightmare their pain and condemnation would be more than he could stand.

“It’s best they think I’m dead.” He tried to keep the sadness from leaking into his words but wasn’t sure he’d succeeded. Jesse had a way of knowing what was in his heart as well as his head.

“You’re lucky to find Scarlett,” Jesse said, changing the subject. “There’s always hope, Charlie. Never forget that.”

The call abruptly ended, leaving Chuck sputtering questions to himself.

“How does that bloody bastard know about Scarlett? No one even knows she’s here.”

Chuck looked at the time on his phone, shaking his head.

“Five o’clock in the morning. How does he do that?” he asked himself, again.

He crept back into the bedroom and slowly crawled back under the sheet, trying not to wake Scarlett. He rolled over and saw her eyes were open. She smiled at him sweetly.

“So, was that one of your other girlfriends, wanting a booty call?” she asked.

“No, smartass. That was an old friend calling to ask a favor. *His* little sister is coming to town and he was asking me to keep an eye on her.”

Chuck wasn’t sure why he felt he needed to explain himself. Had it been any other woman, he would have changed the subject and charmed another energetic round of love-play out of her before sending her off with a smile, never to see her again.

“Good,” she said as she reached out touched his face. “I’m not done with you yet and I’d hate to mess up my manicure by kicking some ho’s ass. We still have a few more hours before I have to be at work.”

“Oh, is that a fact, Ms. James? And what if I’m done with you?”

She slid her hand down his chest and under the sheet, gripping his erection and slowly massaging him.

“You don’t feel like you’re done with me,” she told him as she leaned in and licked his left nipple.

A shudder went through him and Scarlett giggled. “You like that, don’t you?”

“God, you’re an amazement to me, Scarlett. I can’t keep my hands off you.”

He pressed his mouth to hers, letting himself go as he made slow, devastating love to her again.

I’ll never get enough of her, he thought as he pulled her closer and snugged her to his side, savoring the feel of her in his arms. Her scent intoxicated him.

But, he knew, he couldn’t keep her.



Chapter Two

Scarlett stood staring out the window, a tender smile on her face. She couldn't believe she'd just spent the night with Chuck, screwing like animals. Her thoughts drifted back over the night and the things he'd done to her. What they'd done to each other.

His body was incredible. Hard slabs of muscle wrapped in warm silky skin that seemed to fit perfectly with her softer curves. She wondered how he'd gotten the scars that covered his left shoulder and back. His pale, beautiful skin was marred with deep-looking puncture marks and long slashes that looked as though they'd been made by sharp claws. It almost looked like an animal had mauled him. She shivered at the thought of how vicious that battle must have been.

He didn't seem self-conscious about them, however, and he had excellent dexterity in the joint, so whatever it was hadn't done any permanent damage as far as she could tell.

She felt deliciously sore and satisfied, a testament to how well Chuck's injuries had healed.

She turned around to look at his sparsely furnished living room. It wasn't much different than her brother, Rhett's, apartment.

That thought brought on a whole new set of problems. Not only were they all members of Team Nightly, but Rhett lived right across the hall. She'd stupidly let herself fall in love with Chuck even though she knew there was no way he could love her in return.

It wasn't in him to settle down with one woman. He was a charmer and he had a deep seeded phobia to any form of commitment. He didn't even own a car.

Just because he was from Ireland, didn't mean he couldn't adjust to the traffic patterns. He just didn't want the responsibility and upkeep of a vehicle.

But, she wasn't going to let it get to her. She was a strong, independent, woman who didn't need someone else to make her feel special and needed. She'd been brought up by a woman who instilled a healthy self-esteem in her daughter.

Just because Scarlett and her twin brother were the result of a mixed marriage was no reason that either of them should allow anyone to degrade them or see them as less than the vital human beings they were; a rule her mother and father pounded into their children from birth.

“This is the twenty-first century,” her mother had pronounced on a regular basis. “And it’s high time people accepted that you love who you love whether they are black, white, pink, purple or the same sex. When you hurt us, don’t we all bleed red blood?”

Scarlett giggled at the memory. *God, I miss you, Mom. I could really use some good advice right about now.*

She’d known last night, when they’d decided to come back here, that it was going to be one night. Nothing more.

She would treasure the memory of how sweet and loving he had been with her. He’d treated her like it was her first time, even though she’d assured him it wasn’t. Not that she’d been with that many men. Chuck made number three and for a woman in her mid-twenties, in this day and age, that said something.

As the door to the bathroom opened, she turned to watch Chuck saunter into the room, wearing nothing but a towel draped around his lean hips.

His dark, chestnut colored hair was damp and stuck up all over his head as though he’d rubbed it vigorously with a towel and left it at that.

“Don’t you look a picture, standing there in the morning sun?” Chuck told her with a dimpled grin.

“And don’t you look all sexy standing there in nothing but a towel?” she quipped.

“You could stay a little while longer, Scarlett. I think there are still some places that we haven’t tried making love yet. Like the kitchen counter over there.”

Because if I don’t go now, she thought to herself, my heart won’t survive when you walk away.

“You sure know how to tempt a girl, Chuck. But I have to get home and change for work. My shift starts at noon.”

“I’m in good with your boss. I could call him and tell him that you’re, uh, indisposed and can’t work today.” Chuck reached out and pulled her against him, wrapping his arms around her waist.

“Cute,” Scarlett said, pulling out of his grasp. “But we both know that this was a one-time thing, Chuck. And it’s okay. We had fantastic, incredible, mind-blowing sex. At the risk of giving your already immense ego un-needed stroking, I’ve never had better.

“But, neither one of us is in the market for a relationship. It would just make things awkward since we sort of work together. I don’t expect anything more than what we had. I want us to remain friends.”

Chuck tilted his head a little, as though silently studying her. A slow grin crossed his face as he leaned in and kissed her cheek. She closed her eyes and savored the touch of his warm breath on her skin.

“You are an amazement, Scarlett,” he told her once again. “If that’s the way you want it, I’ll do my best to abide by your wishes.”

Scarlett nodded and opened her mouth to speak then closed it again. As she turned toward the door, Chuck beat her to it and their hands met on the knob. When she looked up into his azure gaze, her breath caught.

“Don’t make the mistake of thinking that you’re one of many, Scarlett. You, my love, are one of a kind.” He pulled open the door and she locked her stunned eyes on his, then bolted.

She could still hear his soft snicker as she hurried down the stairs and through the kitchen of The Blue Mermaid restaurant.

Why her brother and Chuck wanted to live above a busy establishment like this, was beyond her. Give her the little house she’d shared with Carly any day and she’d be happier than a cat fat with cream.



Chuck finished dressing and headed down to the restaurant for breakfast. Scarlett’s words were still on his mind and he couldn’t shake the idea that he’d hurt her somehow.

He still carried her scent. He’d showered, twice, and covered himself with the woodsy body spray he liked, trying to keep himself from going after her and telling her everything.

“Wow, Chuck,” Carly said as he passed her on the way to the dining room. “You have a hot lunch date or something?”

He grinned at Carly as she leaned into him and took a big whiff. He’d always had a soft spot for the curvy, dark-haired woman who had stolen his friend’s heart.

Tony Sargento, the manager of The Blue Mermaid, had fought his attraction to her thinking that his own empathic abilities were the cause of his growing feelings. That was until she’d been nearly killed a few months ago and then kidnapped, by Gordon Charles, the Vampire King. He finally admitted to himself that he and Carly were meant to be.

It warmed Chuck’s heart to see them both so happy. But, it didn’t stop him from his expected flirtations.

“Now, Carly, love. You know I’d never cheat on you. You’re the love of my life. When are you going to leave Tony and run away with me?” he asked with a cheeky grin that made his dimples deepen as he hooked his thumbs into the front pockets of his worn jeans.

“If Tony thought you were serious, Chuck, he’d rip your head off and spit down your neck before feeding you to a pack of vamps.” She stepped up to him, putting a hand on each shoulder, and pecked a kiss on his cheek. “Now, get out of here before I tell Tony you made a serious pass at me and he poisons your breakfast.”

“Ah, Carly, you’re breaking my heart here.”

“Yeah, right. Go. Get out of my kitchen.” She shooed him away, both of them laughing at his antics. “And go sit with my guy. He works too hard and needs a good laugh.”

Chuck gave her another wink as he pushed through the door and into the dining area. There were only a few tables with patrons, but it was early yet. Not even eleven. The doors had just opened for brunch an hour before, so he had plenty of time to try and put Scarlett out of his mind.

“I was given explicit orders to disturb your work,” Chuck said as he strolled to the table in the back corner of the room where Tony sat studying papers.

“Yeah? Who gave you those orders and since when do you do what you’re told?” Tony asked, his eyes not lifting from his work. A dark brown curl fell across his forehead and he carelessly pushed it back before returning to his paperwork.

“When a beautiful woman tells me to do something, I can’t tell her no. It just isn’t in me to break a poor woman’s heart. Especially when it’s my own true love.”

“So, Carly told you to get lost again, did she?” Tony said, grinning.

“That she did, my friend. That she did. You are one lucky bastard, you know?”

There must have been something in his voice, Chuck thought, which caused his friend to stop what he was doing and finally look up at him. He had just enough time to cover his lapse with a wicked grin.

It didn’t seem to fool Tony, however. “Yes. I am a very lucky bastard, Chuck, and I count my blessings every time I see Carly or hear her voice.”

Tony dropped the pen he’d been using on the table and leaned back in his chair. “Is there something you want to talk about?”

Chuck thought that maybe he could tell Tony about his feelings for Scarlett. That he’d let himself fall in love, that she was his life-mate, and why he couldn’t let himself claim her.

“Actually, there is something I’d like to talk to you about, Tony, if you’ve a moment or two.”

“Sure, I’m just putting together the inventory list so I can place an order on Monday. What’s on your mind?”

After a brief pause, Chuck took a deep breath and spoke from his heart. “I have this friend, from before I joined Chase’s team, and he has a little sister.”

Damn, that isn’t what I wanted to say.

“Oh, boy. What happened, Chuck?” Tony asked. His expression told Chuck that he expected the worst.

“Nothing like what you’re thinking, boyo,” Chuck said, laughing at the look on his friend’s face. “I promise you that. No, she’s only eighteen. But if you ask her, she’ll tell you she’ll be nineteen in December. Never wants to admit her true age because she thinks it makes her sound older.”

Tony’s features visibly relaxed as a smile tilted his lips. “Okay. I deserved that one. What about this friend’s sister?”

“Well, she’ll be coming into town this afternoon. She’s going to start classes at SCAD and Jesse asked me to look after her. I was wondering if you might be needing a part time waitress now that Carly isn’t working as many shifts. It gets busy during the summer season and I thought you could use some extra help.”

And I don’t want Scarlett working extra shifts. She needs to be with me. That thought nearly blurted out of his mouth as well, but Chuck had clamped his jaws tight before they could escape.

“SCAD student, huh? Has she had any experience waiting tables?” Tony asked.

“Sure. She worked the past two summers at a place in Manhattan. She’s a hard worker and great with the customers. I can promise you won’t be disappointed.”

“Okay. Tell her to come on in and we can talk. I can’t promise anything until then.”

Carly placed a tall, icy, glass of Coca Cola on the table in front of Chuck before dropping into the empty chair between the two men.

“What can’t you promise, honey?” she asked, touching his hand.

“His friend’s sister is looking for a job. I told him to have her come in and we’ll talk about it.”

Carly gave Chuck a look. The one that said, *tell me more and if I don’t like what I hear you’re going to be very sorry.*

“She’s eighteen and starting school at SCAD in a few weeks,” Chuck explained. “Her name is Tina Brody and she’ll be here sometime this afternoon. Her brother, Jesse, and I have been friends for a dozen years, give or take. He and his family were the first people I met when I came to this country.”

Chuck stopped short of telling them that had it not been for Jesse Brody and his father, Travis, he would have died many years ago.

“Okay, enough said. It’s nice to know you had a life before Savannah.” Carly gave him a smile to soften her words. “Now. What would you like for breakfast?”

“How about one of those omelets with the cheese and ham and mushrooms? With extra jam for the toast?” Chuck asked, giving her his pleading, poor hungry orphan look.

Carly laughed. “Give it up, Chuck. I’m immune to your charms. But I will get you that omelet. What kind of jam do you want?”

“Do you have peach? I love peach jam.”

“I’ll look. The customers love it and we go through a lot of anything peach. It’s that Georgia peach legacy, I guess. Do you want anything, Tony?”

“No, thanks, babe. I ate earlier.”

Carly turned to walk back to the kitchen when a high-pitched squeal echoed throughout the dining room. A young woman rushed toward them, short and slender her sweet face beaming a thousand-watt smile. Her blue eyes brightened as they seemed to focus on Chuck, her long blond ponytail bounced, and another high-pitched squeal erupted from her cherry-red lips.

Chuck jumped out of his chair and caught the girl as she launched herself at him from several feet away. She pressed both hands against his face and started kissing every inch of it.

“Hey, there! What’s up, Chuck?” the girl demanded before planting a loud, smacking kiss on his lips. All the while, Chuck laughed as he spun her around in a circle.

“Well, now there’s my girl!” Chuck said, as he placed her on her feet. “I thought you weren’t coming until later this afternoon?”

“I wanted to surprise you. It’s been ages and ages since we saw each other.”

She spun around, the mile-wide smile on her face growing even wider as she took in the décor of the restaurant. Her eyes landed on the large, hand-painted mural, of a mermaid with a blue tail and flowing dark hair, along the north wall. The graceful blue tail and the long tresses of the mythical sea creature drew an awe-inspired breath from the exuberant teenager.

“Oh, my God! That is absolutely the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Who painted it? Do you mind if I try to copy it? Oh. That is incredible!”

“Tina, stop. Take a breath,” Chuck said, laughing at her.

“Sorry,” Tina said, her face flushing as she looked around at the people who had begun staring. “I get a little overly excited sometimes. I just haven’t seen Chuck in ages and, well, I missed him.”

“Yes, that was obvious,” Carly said with a smile as she held out her hand to the girl. “I’m Carly Hardin.”

“Tina Brody.” The women shook hands, both wearing wide smiles, before Tina looked back at Chuck.

“Sorry, little bit,” Chuck said, using the pet name he’d given her when she was just a child. “I should have made introductions right off. This is Tony Sargento. He’s the chef and owner of The Blue Mermaid. If you ask nicely, he might even let you work here a few hours a week and you can draw mermaids to your hearts content.”

Tony nodded and then motioned for her to sit down in one of the empty chairs.

She’s here.

The thought flashed through him, giving his heart a jolt. Chuck didn’t have to turn around. He’d caught Scarlett’s scent the moment she walked through the door. He drew in a long slow breath, letting it permeate his nostrils. It reminded him of the meadow he and his little brother had played in in their youth. Filled with heather and lilies after a warm summer shower. Damp sunshine and gentle breezes. She was. . .

Home.

Scarlett stood next to Carly and smiled at Tony. “Hey, boss.”

“Morning, Scarlett. You’re a little early for your shift,” Tony said.

“I thought I’d grab something to eat before I started work. Who’s this?” she asked, a smile plastered on her pretty mouth as her gaze swept over the unfamiliar young woman.

“This,” Chuck said, as he draped an arm over Tina’s shoulders. “Has been the biggest pain in my arse since she was a sprout of six years. Tina, meet Scarlett James. A good friend and lovely person inside and out.”

Okay. That may have been a little over the top.

“It’s nice to meet you, Tina,” Scarlett said with a polite smile that didn’t quite reach her dark chocolate eyes.

“Chuck tells me that you’re looking for a part time job.” Tony said, his voice breaking the spell that Scarlett’s stare had over Chuck.

“As a matter of fact, yes. I’d love to earn some extra money.”

“Chuck also told me you have waitressing experience, is that correct?”

“That’s right. I worked at Carmine’s, on the West Side, for almost two years. Before that I worked a little bistro in Greenwich Village after school and on weekends.”

“I’ve been to Carmine’s,” Tony told her with a wide grin. “They have great Italian food there. My parents go their quite often.”

“Wait. Are your parents’ names Sylvia and Richard Sargento? I thought you looked familiar! You have your father’s eyes!”

“Yes, and I hear that a lot,” Tony said, shaking his head and laughing. “I can’t believe you know my parents.”

“Are you kidding? They were my best customers. They always requested my section. They are the greatest. I just loved it when they would show off pictures of their grandson and tell me some of the things he’d come up with.”

She paused and took a breath, her eyes growing and her mouth forming an O. “Oh, my God! You’re Davis’ father.”

“That’s right.” Tony grinned at the mention of his six-year-old son. “If you can handle my mother’s demanding temperament then I know you can deal with the customers that come here. You’re hired. Give me your class schedule and we’ll work around it.”

Tina squealed with glee, again, and hugged Chuck. “Thank you so much.”

“That’s great,” Scarlett said, a little too cheerfully. “I don’t mind showing her the ropes, Tony. It wasn’t that long ago I was the new girl on the block. I haven’t had time to pick up too many bad habits yet.”

Carly chuckled, shaking her head at her friend. “Thanks. That will be a big help, Scarlett. I’ve been so busy lately I wasn’t sure how I would squeeze in training a new server. You’re an angel!”

“I have ulterior motives. We’ll talk about it later,” Scarlett said with a wink.

“Oh really?” Carly asked, her eyes gleaming with anticipation and humor. “What kind—”

“Okay, then,” Tony said, cutting off Carly’s inquiry. “Carly can set you up with the paperwork, schedule, and uniform. Between Carly and Scarlett, they’ll have you settled in, in no time. Welcome to The Blue Mermaid, Tina.”

Tony shook her hand before sending her off to the office to fill out the pre-hire paperwork.

Once the women had gone, Tony looked at Chuck and smirked.

“What?” Chuck asked, his innocence, feigned.

“Don’t give me that. I’ve known you long enough to know that there’s something going on between the two of you.”

“Oh, don’t be daft, Tony. The girl’s only a child,” he said as he dropped back into the chair. “What do you take me for?”

“Not Tina, butt-head. Scarlett.”

“Oh.” Chuck looked down and focused on a drop of condensation slowly dripping down the side of the glass he’d yet to sip from.

“Yeah. Oh,” Tony said, tipping his chair onto its back legs and grinning slyly at Chuck. “Tell me what’s going on. Carly’s probably going to grill Scarlett before she ever starts your omelet so you might as well spill it.”

Chuck took a deep breath and blew it out in a heavy sigh. “I’ve really screwed the pooch, Tony. I don’t know what came over me. Too much Champaign and too long between tumbles, I’m thinking.”

“Jesus, Chuck!” Tony exclaimed as he let the chair fall forward. “You slept with Scarlett? You do know that when Rhett finds out, and he will find out, he’s going to tear you a new one.”

“I know it.” Chuck stood up and started pacing around the table. “I let myself get tangled up with her, Tony. I mean, if it were any other woman, I wouldn’t be so damn confused.”

“She’s not just another woman, Chuck. You have feelings for her, don’t you? I mean more than just friends.

“Holy shit!” Tony said, stunned as he fell back into his chair, laughing. “You’re in love with her!”

“Keep your voice down, would you? I don’t want the whole world to know what kind of idiot I’ve turned out to be.” Chuck ran his fingers through his hair and then leaned forward as his voice became a whisper. “What am I supposed to do now? She’s inside of me, Tony, and I can’t get her out.”

“Why would you want to? This is great, Chuck. Scarlett is a wonderful woman and you’re lucky to have her.”

“You don’t understand, Tony.” A chill ran through him making the tiny hairs stand up on the back of his neck. “This isn’t a good thing. This can’t be happening. If I try to hold on to her, her life will be in danger. I can’t have that. I won’t have it.”

“What are you talking about? Is it that woman you’ve been seeing? Ashley . . . something?”

“Ashley Connor.” Chuck picked up the soda and took a long drink, draining the glass. “I’m not now, nor have I ever been romantically involved with Ashley Connor.”

Just the thought of that woman stoked his ire. “She’s a right bitch and you can tell Detective Dalton I said as much. I’ve only been trying to help her find her missing brother because Dalton asked me to.”

“Okay. So, what’s the problem with you and Scarlett being together?” Tony pressed.

“There are things—never mind. I’ll figure it out.” Chuck sat back in his chair as he picked up his drink, downing almost all of it before slapping it back on the table. The rattling ice and the murmur of voices in the background helped keep him grounded. He wanted so desperately to confide in his friend.

He’d come too close to telling Tony his secret. He’d made sure Chase, the leader of Team Nightly, knew everything when Chase had offered him a place on his team. It was the right and honorable thing to do.

But Chuck hadn’t even told Simon Grant; not only a fellow teammate but a man he’d called his friend for over a decade.

“Would you tell Carly that I had to leave? I won’t be needing that omelet after all.” Chuck stood up and as he turned to leave he tried to ignore the fact that he’d opened himself up to Tony; a known empath. At least his secret was still buried so deep that blocking it was as second nature to him as taking his next breath.

No wonder the bloody bastard knew about Scarlett. How could I have forgotten something like that at a time like this? The woman has me all tied up in knots to the point I can’t think straight!

Chuck berated himself for several minutes while he walked through the historic district of downtown Savannah. He had a problem to solve and there was really no one he could discuss it with.

But, there was someone he needed to talk to. He pulled out his telephone and called for a ride.

His first call went unanswered. Simon was probably working on something to do with the foundation he’d set up for wounded military and their families.

He really couldn’t fault the man for that.

He reached up and touched the stone he wore around his neck. It calmed him, as usual, so, he walked. It was good for a man to stretch his legs. It helped clear out the cobwebs and make room for resolutions.



Chapter Three

“Don’t give me excuses, Ashley,” Gordon Charles snarled. “You and your brother are at my mercy. You made a deal and now you’re telling me that you want to renege?”

“Not renege, Gordon,” Ashley said, turning from the heated glare of the King of the Vampires. She paced a few feet away before turning back with a small smile.

“I just need a little more time, that’s all. The procedure is complicated and not all of your vampires are compatible. Several of them have not survived it.”

“That is not what you told me in the beginning,” Gordon told her as he stepped closer. “Your exact words were, ‘the procedure I have developed will turn any of your vampires into an indestructable soldiers that will not only destroy all uccisori, but will be able to walk in the sunlight.’ Or did I misunderstand?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding as she stepped around him, her shoulders tense. “I did say that. But, in my defence, Gordon, I had no idea that your minions were less receptive to the procedure than you led me to believe. This delay isn’t completely my fault.”

Gordon stared at the woman who had sent her brother to him over a year ago with a “fool-proof plan” to rid him of Chase Nightly and his pesky team of uccisori, and build his army of invincible warriors. The promises she’d made were so appealing that he’d indulged her, even though werewolves and vampires had been notorious enemies from the dawn of their existances.

Wordlessly, he turned away from her and her flimsy excuses and looked through the window of the home he’d made for himself and his army. The moonlight set the meadow aglow and the gentle breeze drifted through the open window.

He contemplated draining the wolf- bitch of every drop of blood in her body, or giving in to her demands for more time and more vampires.

He’d tasted werewolf blood before and the memory of the power that flowed through him had his eyes turning crimson. The taste of wolf’s blood was intoxicating and he craved it almost as much as he craved killing Chase Nightly.

But, he thought, neither of those choices would help him obtain his ultimate goal.

He turned back to Ashley with a grim smile and a warning. “I’ll give you one more month and another twenty vampires. But remember this, Ashley, if you do not fulfill your promise to me of one hundred hybrids by the end of that time, neither you nor your brother will see the next sunrise.”

“Of course, Gordon. I understand and I will do my very best to fulfill all of my promises.”

As she turned to leave he grabbed her arm and spun her to face him, his grip tight and bruising.

“One more thing,” he said, his fangs showing as his lips parted in a malevolent grin.

“What’s that?” she asked, her face not reflecting the pain from his grip nor the intimidation of his countenance .

“I won’t tolerate this disrespect from you again.”

“I apologize, Gordon, if I’ve offended you. It wasn’t my intention.”

“Good. Leave me,” he commanded, releasing his hold on her as he pushed her toward the door.



Ashley did as she was ordered, restraining herself from slamming the door as she struggled to keep her rage under control. She’d never allowed anyone to speak to her in such a manner. If it had been under any other circumstances she would have ripped his head from his shoulders and watched his ashes drift away in the night wind.

What a joke, she thought. Gordon Charles is no more a vampire king than I am human.

If she hadn’t needed his help in reaching her own goal, she would have killed him the first day she’d met him.

It was her destiny to rule. But, she also knew that she would need to mate with a strong alpha to do that. It was ridiculous that, in the twenty-first century, the laws of the werewolves still dictated that a female could not lead a pack unless she was mated to an alpha.

It was a good thing she’d found her alpha, Ashley decided. She’d sent Jackson to Savannah to find any local packs and report back to her. When he’d told her about Team Nightly, and that he suspected at least one of them to be a wolf, she’d begun setting her plans into motion.

From her research into the uccisore teams in the area, Ashley learned it would be next to impossible to lure her future mate away from the team. His misguided loyalties to Chase Nightly would be next to impossible to get around. The only way to pry him away would be if there was no more Team Nightly.

Her brother had tried to talk her out of bringing the vampires into it, but she wouldn’t hear it. She had a destiny to fulfill and Gordon Charles was the perfect conduit.

With his vampire-wolf hybrids, they would submit to her alone, following her orders above all others. They would rid Savannah of all uccisore teams. Once she satisfied that goal, she would end Gordon Charles herself, driving a silver-tipped stake through his cold, shriveled, unbeating heart.

She smiled, picturing the scene in her mind as she wandered through the darkness to her car. The vampire king would be no more and she would be the one to rule over all of them.

Chuck Logan was her perfect mate. He was not only the strongest alpha wolf she'd ever met, but his uccisore bloodline gave him an unlimited power to rule not just the local wolf pack, but he could be Supreme Alpha and, together, they would take over every pack in the country.

They were perfect for each other.

She only had to convince him of that.

