

CHAPTER ONE

Monaco, Grand Prix Week

A vampire lived in the cellar.

Glaring at the basement door, Antoine Bittar wondered if his elusive tenant might drag himself up into the real world tonight. He shook his head and ambled toward the dining room's double doors. They burst apart, forcing him to duck to avoid Jean-Luc's tray as the harried waiter bustled past.

"Sorry," Antoine called. Jean-Luc didn't hear him since he was already barking orders at Marcel, their chef, as he dumped dishes into the sink.

Antoine pushed through the doors and surveyed the crowded room. Conversations hummed around him, the voices layered on top of each other to create a steady drone that allowed only snippets to be overheard. Forks and knives kept time with the jazz music as they clanked against the china. The raucous laughter of a fat woman in pearls near the piano drew his eye.

He walked up behind the bar. The dinner rush was nearly over. Even though most of the tables were occupied, the sun sat low on the horizon where the silver sky met the Mediterranean. Business trickled down to coffee and dessert.

Bracing his forearms on the sturdy oak counter, Antoine inhaled the scents of fresh bread, full-bodied espressos and fine wines. His chest puffed with pride. The Calypso Café was his. After being in business four years, the restaurant had finally made it into the guidebooks. They noted its location in the Condamine near the Port of Hercules, raved over its fine cuisine, the limestone building and its cobbled terrace perched on the edge of a cliff, high above the roiling blue-green seawater. The most jaded traveler, they insisted, would be hard-pressed to find fault and in no hurry to leave.

Antoine grinned as he glanced back at the kitchen doors. He doubted the guidebooks would list the Calypso anywhere if they knew his restaurant was—essentially—a vampire refuge.

He was exceedingly careful when it came to that. Even his staff didn't know. If they thought his occasional *tenants* odd, they rarely mentioned it. Above average wages not only bought loyalty, but discretion.

Things were good. Antoine stroked his jaw. Now, if he could only do something for his resident vampire friend who was stuck in a rut and desperately needed out. Rebuilding a life wasn't easy. Antoine understood that. For Vasilios of Sparta, who dedicated centuries to his clan only to be banished was a hard blow to his pride. However, all that moping around had gone on long enough.

He eyed the manila envelope he'd stashed under the bar earlier. He grabbed it, whipped around, and wove his way through the kitchen to the cellar door.

A delicate draft tickled his cheeks as he descended the staircase pitched in darkness. When he reached the bottom, he blinked several times, allowing his 'inferior mortal vision' to adjust to the soft glow of the forty-eight inch plasma TV.

He wished he hadn't. The stone compound was composed of four bedrooms, two bathrooms and one common room. Set-up with a conference table, a billiard table, a computer station and two wide leather couches flanked by two bulky recliners, with the electronic dartboard flashing on the wall, it normally looked like a cross-between a frat house and a gentleman's club.

Now, it looked looted.

Blue jeans, shirts, rickety old shoes and boots lay *everywhere*. Not to mention the empty beer bottles, CDs, DVDs, notebooks and adult magazines. A thick, blue-white cloud of marijuana smoke hung low in the room.

At the center of the chaos, Vasilios of Sparta sat on the couch with his feet on the coffee table, his big toe poking out from a hole in his sock. His short, dark hair tousled, shirtless, scars riddling his chest and arms, in the same jeans he'd worn all week, he idly strummed the chords of the unplugged electric guitar in his lap. The notes sounded suspiciously like Pink Floyd's "Comfortably Numb". He stared, seemingly mesmerized, at a French infomercial for a face cream promising to make you look ten years younger.

Even if no one knew he was a vampire and a former legionnaire in the Roman army, at six-five, weighing-in at a solid two-hundred-and-thirty-five pounds of lean, raw muscle, people tended to avoid him. Many would describe his hazel eyes as eerie. Only a handful knew why. Truly indicative of his mood, deep earth-brown meant anger whereas grassland-green meant joy.

Sadness weighed on Antoine's shoulders. He hadn't seen any green in his friend's eyes in a long, long time.

The only sign of something softer within the vampire was Ares, the white Turkish tabby, curled up on the sofa behind his head.

"Thought you promised to clean the place up, V." Vasilios didn't say anything, not that Antoine was surprised. In eighteen centuries, he supposed one learned to master the fine art of selective hearing. Trying not to be annoyed, he took two steps and snapped his fingers in front of Vasilios's face, quoting the song's opening lyrics. "Hello? Is there anybody in there? Just nod if you can hear me."

A chord struck off key put an end to the strumming. Vasilios slanted his narrowed brown eyes his way. "Very funny." He turned back to the TV. "Sounds jam-packed up there."

"F1 crowd's in town. You know how wild things get." Extra mortal activity meant extra vampire activity. The clan Antoine was associated to, the macCumail clan, made certain the immortal riffraff that drifted into the city promptly drifted right back out. Last year, they'd officially entered into a partnership with the city's local vampire hunters. An uneasy alliance, the slightest misstep could be a major setback. Being the official liaison between the clan and the Monaco hunters, it was Antoine's job to make sure things ran smoothly. "The guys could use an extra hand." As an elder, Vasilios was one of the most powerful vampires on earth. He could literally glare another vampire into oblivion.

"Busy."

Antoine's fingers tightened around the envelope. He tapped it against his thigh and glanced at the DVDs scattered across the coffee table. "Urgent appointment with Jack Bauer?"

"You here for a reason? Or do you just exist to annoy me?"

He held out the envelope, hardly curious about its contents; he received an identical one three months ago, although his wasn't personally penned. He was, however, very interested in the old Greek's reaction to it.

Vasilios set the guitar aside and yanked the envelope out of Antoine's hand. He glanced down at the scripted handwriting. His head shot up. "You *told* him I was here?"

"Do you think I had to? It's not like you can disappear off the face of the earth."

Vasilios tore it open and extracted the elegant invitation. Antoine scratched Ares beneath his chin. Letting Vasilios read, he waited before finally asking, "You gonna go?"

Vasilios shot to his feet, tossed the card on the table and headed to his bedroom. The door slammed.

Antoine sighed. "I'll take that as a 'No.'"

Unlike most nightclubs in Monte-Carlo, *L'Intrigue* had no neon lights above its door, no line of eager faces waiting behind a red velvet rope, and no Lamborghinis and limousines double-parked out front. The circumspect brass plate on the front door barely drew the eye. A private establishment, the east-side club catered to vampires and mortals who could afford the five-hundred-dollar cover charge. Owned and operated by a small group of vampires with no clan association, it served as a refuge and a conduit to the immortal grapevine.

With the race days away, tonight the regular European jet setters that aimlessly drifted from one hot spot to the next, tourists and several celebrities crowded the club.

The flashing azure lights above the dance floor soothed Vasilios's sensitive eyes. As he stood at the bar, he took in the shimmering jewelry the women wore, the men's elegant clothes and what could only be designer shoes, and realized how underdressed *he* was. *Whatever*. If his favorite jeans, gray T-shirt and black jogging shoes didn't make the cut, these high-flyers could shove it. Did any of them suspect they were rubbing elbows with immortal creatures that, if given half-a-chance, wouldn't hesitate to rip their throats out?

The rule was clear in Monaco: No killing. His clan—damn it, he had to stop thinking of it as *his* clan—the macCumail clan saw to it. Now, thanks to their partnership with the local hunters, they pretty much policed the area.

Antoine was right about the extra immortal activity. There were seven vampires here tonight. More than the usual handful that haunted the place and most of whom Vasilios didn't know.

He took a swig of beer, watching a trio of vampires gathered around a pool table. Women who looked like they belonged in porn flicks surrounded them. They all wore black collars with a single silver fang dangling between their breasts. In his world, it meant one thing: Blood slaves. Mortal women, and in some cases, men, addicted to bloodletting. A black collar meant the mortal belonged to one specific vampire, whereas a red collar meant unattached—owner wanted.

Clan macCumail didn't approve of donors. As a former clansman, obviously, neither did he. Despite his beliefs, he'd nevertheless tangled with one a century ago. He was still paying for it. Besides, with first-hand knowledge of what being a slave entailed, he didn't want to be anyone's master, and he certainly didn't need to be anybody's fix. If the women he slept with liked to play games, he didn't hesitate to give full service. And yeah, it could be damn good, but it wasn't *his* thing. It sure as hell wasn't something he sought out.

His thoughts turned back to the invite. Vasilios shook his head and picked at the corner of the label on his beer bottle.

His best friend was getting married.

Married.

Mikael macCumail, one of the first vampires, leader of the macCumail clan, was marrying a twenty-four-year-old mortal girl. No. Not just a mortal. A former vampire hunter.

Great Zeus. He tossed the crumpled label on the floor, turned to face the room, and braced his elbows on the bar. Mik was asking for trouble. He felt it in his gut. It made him edgy. Which was why he needed to get out of the Calypso's cellar and away from Antoine's knowing looks for a while.

"Quelque chose à boire, chéri?"

The cloying scent of perfume, predominantly floral but too heavy for this climate, closed around him. Vasilios looked down at the exotic young woman who approached. He immediately spotted the red collar and its silver fang. Something to drink? Right. The double entendre wasn't lost on him.

With her curly black hair, her almond-shaped black eyes, her full, red lips and her firm breasts tightly sheathed in a black corset, it irritated him to acknowledge it, but she tempted him. All he had to do was pull her outside to the back alley, lift her short, red skirt, have sex with her and drink his fill. She'd let him. No questions asked. No barriers raised. Hell, if he wanted to, he could take her here, in front of all and sundry. But he'd be damned before he went the donor route again. Even when it came to one-night stands.

"*Non, merci.*" He drained his beer then signaled the barkeep for another one.

She brushed her red-tipped fingers down his chest and ground her crotch into his thigh. "*Allez, bébé.*"

Determined to be patient, he set his empty bottle on the counter. "*No,*" he rumbled, adding a touch of *persuasion* to his voice. As an elder, mind-control was second nature, although he tried not to make it a habit. "*I'm not interested and neither are you.*" Her dark eyes glazed over. He caught her by the upper arm when she swayed. "*Now, you're going to walk away and pretend I'm not here.*"

She turned and headed off to a table where a vampire played poker with a group of mortals.

"Michelle doesn't do it for you, huh?" François, *l'Intrigue's* owner, asked. He set a cold Guinness on the counter.

Vasilios reached for his beer. He didn't like to discuss his personal life with anyone. In fact, the one person capable of plucking his private thoughts out of him was Mikael macCumail. He took two long gulps of his Guinness, but the heady, dark beer only made him homesick.

Damn it. He hated thinking of home. Of Ireland. Even if born and raised in Roman occupied Sparta, he'd spent seventeen-and-a-half-centuries living in Northern Ireland. When he and Mikael first met, the macCumail clan didn't exist. Everyone knew they'd built it together. It was his as much as it was Mik's. But after a major fuck-up on his part, four years ago, he'd been banished.

Banished. It still stung. He should have been executed. Things would be simpler if he had. At least he wouldn't have to live with the shame of his betrayal constantly gnawing his gut. He wouldn't have to listen to the hushed whispers or endure the long, speculative looks. Looks full of questions never asked because they were too afraid of pissing him off. No one wanted to be around a pissed-off elder.

He was part of a privileged group, and he knew it. There were only fourteen elders in the world. Vampires who'd lived for so long, their powers and strength were unchallenged. Sometimes though, late at night, when the restaurant closed and he was alone, he wondered why he bothered. Ending it would be as easy as stepping outside to face the rising sun. But he deserved the punishment. Traitors deserved to suffer.

A redhead entered the club. Even from across the room, she drew his eye. The light seemed to bounce off her, make her glow. She was tall for a woman, approximately five-ten. It instantly appealed to him. The black hiking boots were an interesting choice. Her legs went on forever in those tight, black jeans. Her fitted plum jacket made the fire in her shoulder-length hair spark. Vasilios wondered if those straight penny-tone locks were as soft as they seemed. She'd only left the top button of her jacket undone, but he didn't need to see the cleavage beneath it to savor her full bosom.

Now *she* was definitely his type.

He liked big breasts. Always had. He liked them round, heavy and too big to fill his hands. He liked to squeeze his face between them and feel their weight as they bounced.

An aura of power and purpose radiated from her as she stood by the entrance, her arms loosely hanging at her sides, her body coiled, as if ready to spring into action. She

glanced around, noting the exits, easily spotting the security cameras. Vasilios would swear she was casing the place.

Turning away, he downed his beer. *Not my problem.* No way was he getting involved. Sure as hell not tonight. He was about to order another beer when François let out an inhuman growl. "Fuck. Stephan knows not to let her in here."

"Robert's manning the door."

François slapped a palm against his forehead. "Shit." He threw down his dishtowel. "I forgot to tell him."

Vasilios slanted another glance at the redhead, his gut-feeling confirmed. She was definitely trouble. "Who is she?"

"Just a nosy mortal," François said his silver eyes narrowed on her. "She's been coming in here this past week. Let me talk to Robert. This bitch needs to be taken care of." He shot Vasilios a dark look and stepped around the bar. "Permanently."

As François marched across the room to the front entrance, the redhead began to make her way through the crowd. She stopped to study a few faces and, finally, she approached a vampire. Vasilios watched her sexy, pink lips move as she spoke, watched her pluck some sort of wallet from her jacket pocket. The vampire's face darkened at the sight of it. They exchanged words, but despite Vasilios's enhanced hearing, because of the loud music he couldn't follow the conversation. The redhead nodded and moved away. She looked around again. Her gaze drifted across the room, swept past him, then snapped right back to lock with his. She cut a path through the crowd writhing and undulating on the dance floor, directly toward where he stood.

The gentle aroma of lemons and cinnamon enveloped him as she raised her head and looked him in the eye. Her scent reminded him of the lemon grove behind the house he and his mother had lived. He couldn't remember the last time he'd thought about his mother, thought about her gentle touch as her fingers swept through his hair.

"Do ya speak English?" the redhead asked, her accent distinctly American, her voice a hot, night mist. It tickled his nape and sent shivers down his arms. He'd definitely enjoy hearing it soft and sated in bed beside him.

His gaze roamed over her in frank appreciation before he nodded.

She reached inside her jacket pocket, pulled out the black wallet and flipped it open. "Federal Agent, Anne Mathews. I'm workin' on a missing person's case. Could ya answer a few questions?"

Just my luck to stumble on the one nutcase in the place. Vasilios looked toward the front entrance for François. The bartender spoke with the bouncer while gesturing wildly in their direction.

Magic spiked through his body like lightning bolts caught in a loop. His tone harsh with *persuasion*, he said, "*You're going to forget about this...*" He turned back toward the woman, intent on driving his will deep into her mind. A glimpse of her face as she bowed her head and tucked away her badge told him there was no need. He'd seen that look thousands of times. He'd seen it on the battlefield in the eyes of the soldiers struck down by his sword, in the wild gazes of the vampires whose heads he'd claimed. In the horror-filled stares of the mortals he once preyed upon.

The wet shimmer she quickly swiped away? He knew it well. It was the rancid remains of hope. Abject defeat.

Then, with an astonishing show of strength he could only admire, if not pity, her features went blank. She hitched her chin up.

"Never mind." She began to draw away.

"Wait." He stepped in front of her. Gods. He could lose himself in those taffy-colored eyes. Despite the urge to leave, now, to *not* get involved, his fingers ached to touch the fiery

hair falling in a straight, sexy line along her jaw. They ached to glide over the warm, pink blush in her cheek. They really, really wanted to undo two or three more buttons on that tight jacket.

"Aren't you out of your jurisdiction, Agent Mathews?"

She swept her tongue across her lower lip. The blood in his loins shifted. His jeans felt too tight.

"I..." She shot a quick glance around. "It's personal."

He watched the top of her head as she fiddled with her purse. FBI. He couldn't help his curiosity. He had a grudging respect for law-enforcement. The world needed order, the helpless needed protection, and in his world, he was the law. *Been* the law, damn it.

He looked away.

"Have ya seen this woman?" She held out a photograph.

After hesitating a few seconds, Vasilius took the picture, more in a secret, devilish need to touch her than to help. His gaze was on her as their fingers brushed. Flesh to flesh. Spark to cinder. The imperceptible shiver rippling through her, rumbled through him. His fangs tingled and threatened to spring to full length. The beast inside, the dark, discontented thing reared its head in interest. It licked its chops and marked her lemony scent. Shock waves roared through his veins. Hunger gripped him. A craving so fierce, he hadn't felt anything like it in centuries. He could so *do* her.

Right now.

He wouldn't. Even if tarnished beyond repair, his honor still chained the dark beast and held sway over his libido.

He glanced down at the photograph and forced himself to look at the young face. A girl dressed in a metallic-blue and gold graduation cape, complete with its gold tasseled cap, smiled into the lens. She was lovely, with pale blonde hair and dancing blue eyes. The familiar shape of her nose and lips made him glance up at the redhead.

He handed the picture back. "Your sister."

She nodded. "Kid sister. Amy. She..." Her voice died away before she cleared her throat. Her gaze remained downcast. "She's into your type, if ya get my drift? Wears a black collar? She was seen here, in this bar, a week ago, but since then?" Her shoulders sagged as she smoothed the fold out of a corner of the photograph. "Nothin'."

"I'm sorry," he said, and meant it. "I haven't seen her. But then, I don't get out much." He wrestled with a grin and resented the effect she had on him when his dimples won. He leaned-in some more, allowing himself one deep whiff of her unique cinnamon-lemon scent. "You shouldn't be in here, you know."

She shot a glance around. "I know. I just hoped with it bein' Grand Prix week and all, I'd get lucky."

Oh, you can get damn lucky if you really want to, Red. From the corner of his eye, he caught another vampire step inside the club, immediately joining François and the doorman. They all stared, and it wasn't because they admired her breasts. "Maybe I should give you a ride back to your hotel."

Her smile was friendly but absent-minded. She shook her head. Her hand settled on his forearm as she gave the club another thorough inspection. Her touch made his body tense. *One word*, he thought. One spoken word and she was his for the night, the week...the decade.

"That's okay. I have other places to check out."

He straightened, his frown coming fast and deep. "Flashing that badge around is going to get you killed." When she simply shrugged and stepped away, he snagged her upper arm and yanked her back. "Did you hear what I said, *Agent Mathews*? That badge is making some very powerful people very angry. People you don't want to mess with."

Flecks of amber ignited in her toffee eyes. The toned muscles beneath his fingers grew taut. She'd like to knock his block off. He knew it, and it amused him. As enraged as she was, she wasn't about to retreat, even if she was pressed against him from hip to shoulder, her breasts pushing into his stomach.

"Quantico trained me to deal with bad guys, remember?"

"Trust me, Red. Even in your darkest and scariest nightmares, you haven't seen what these bad guys can do."

Her face tightened, but he didn't know why. Was it fear? Anger? Or a lethal combination of both? She tugged her arm free because he let her. She backed up two steps. "Thanks for the concern, but I can take care of myself."

Vasilios folded his arms and leaned into the bar as she walked away. He tipped his head, enjoying the sight of her perfect heart-shaped ass and long, long legs. The woman had a death wish. It was the only explanation.

The owner's goons followed as she slipped out of the club.

He reached for his beer. *Not getting involved*. He took one long swig then drummed his fingers against the longneck, following the lead guitar chords in CCR's "Run Through The Jungle". His foot tapped on the hardwood planks. *So not getting involved*.

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