



Dark Ghost (Carpathian Novel, A)

By Christine Feehan

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In the new novel by the #1 *New York Times* bestselling “queen of paranormal romance,” (J.R. Ward) a wounded warrior and a woman on the run find salvation, passion and unimaginable danger in the ghostly darkness of the Carpathian Mountains...

He wasn't civilized or tame. He had his own code and he lived by it.

Monk. Bounty hunter. Vampire slayer. Andre Boroï has spent centuries battling the undead, holding out against the dark with honor. But now, gravely wounded by master vampire Costin Popescu, Andre will be easy to track—his spilled blood marking the killing trail for Popescu and his hungry band of underlings. Andre's only chance is to disappear into the gray mist of the Carpathians. To wait. To hope.

She had a healing touch and a scent that was his lifeblood.

In the mountains in search of a precious crystal, geologist Teagan Joanes suddenly finds herself hunted by those she once trusted. Then she comes across the warrior—wounded, wanting and irresistible. Andre has been craving her for an eternity: his lifemate. Her warmth envelops him. Her scent pulsates. And with every beat of her heart, Teagan surrenders to a passion she can't possibly comprehend.

Now they are bound by destiny, but is it enough to keep them safe from a stalking, relentless darkness that threatens to swallow them alive?

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Editorial Review

Review

PRAISE FOR #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR CHRISTINE FEEHAN AND HER CARPATHIAN NOVELS

“The erotic, gripping series that has defined an entire genre...I love everything [Christine Feehan] does.”—J.R. Ward, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Immortal*

“Carpathian lovers will be happy.”—*USA Today*

“After Bram Stoker, Anne Rice and Joss Whedon (who created the venerated *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), Christine Feehan is the person most credited with popularizing the neck gripper.”—*Time*

“Feehan has a knack for bringing vampiric Carpathians to vivid, virile life in her Dark Carpathian novels.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Intense, sensual, mesmerizing.”—*Library Journal*

About the Author

Christine Feehan is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Carpathian series, the GhostWalker series, the Leopard series and the Sea Haven series. She lives in northern California.

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Chapter One

The mountain range was high. High enough that Andre could reach the lonely, craggy places others avoided. The higher up he went, the more fog swirled, enclosing him in a soft, wet, gray veil. He was the “Ghost,” and he could easily disappear into the cool gray world he knew so well. He never used a last name if he could help it because the only name that mattered to him was not his own, and unless he found a lifemate, he would not chance ever dishonoring it.

Situated a couple more miles up, almost at the very top of the mountain, was the monastery, the one that had been there for centuries. Built on the precipices, the monastery was shrouded in mystery and the ever-swirling clouds. It was a sacred, protected place and few knew of its existence, although word had gotten out over the years that such a place existed. Only the bravest ever attempted to go there. Had he been inclined, he could have sought sanctuary there to recover from his latest battle.

The monastery, known as the Retreat in the Veil of Mists, held a virtual army of ancient Carpathian hunters—men who had not yet sought the dawn, but who, like Andre, could no longer trust themselves around others. They stayed strictly to themselves, avoiding all humans, all battles, and lived their lives simply until they were able to let go and seek the dawn.

For men who had lived centuries with honor, it wasn’t easy to let go of life. Even without emotion and color, some felt it was cowardly, and without sustaining a mortal wound in combat, they couldn’t just lie outdoors and allow the sun to take them. It felt . . . wrong . . . to too many warriors. Andre would have been welcomed among them, yet he had been too long away from others. He had thought to go there, but in the end realized

he couldn't even accept the sanctuary and the camaraderie he might find there.

Andre didn't bother to stanch the flow of blood coming from various wounds. He knew he should. It was a trail leading straight to him. Still, it was also an invitation, pure and simple. Anyone who came near him was going to die. He would awaken—that was if he awakened at all—starved for blood, his body writhing with the craving, with the need, and that was the most he'd feel or ever could feel.

One didn't take blood from the ancients, not unless the need was dire, and certainly not without permission. Andre wasn't the type of Carpathian who ever asked for asylum or permission, not even from his own kind. He would find what he needed as he always had done on his own. His way.

Some things were a matter of honor. Andre had lived more centuries than he cared to count. He'd held out against the darkness with honor and served his people, hunting the vampire over several continents. He'd battled the undead so many times he honestly couldn't keep count of the numbers any longer, nor did he care to. There seemed so many more of them and so few hunters. They were losing the war.

He had searched centuries for his lifemate—the one woman who could restore his ability to feel real emotion. The one woman who could give him back color and life. He hadn't found her. He had long ago given up the idea that she could possibly be in this time realm. Had she been somewhere on this earth, he would have found her by this time.

The relentless whispers of temptation to kill and feel something, if only for a moment, no longer tempted him. For centuries he had carried that burden, but now it too was gone, and that was bad, because at least he'd felt something. Now there was only a dark gray void and endless weariness.

He wouldn't go to the monastery to rest because, among other reasons, he no longer trusted himself to be around anyone, humans or Carpathians. Once he realized how far gone he was, he knew, in order to preserve his honor, he would have to allow the sun to take him. That had been his intention until Costin Popescu had attacked him. Popescu, the name Costin had assumed was a joke. Son of a priest. Costin was anything but that.

Andre turned to survey the waning night. Light streaked through the gray, and already he could feel the first prickles of warning on his skin. That didn't matter to him, either. It only served to alert him to the rising sun. He didn't need the caution, he'd been alive too many centuries not to know the exact moment of sunrise and sunset anywhere he happened to be.

Had the master vampire Popescu attacked him man-to-man, vampire to Carpathian, as he would have in the old days, Andre would have been more than happy to go to his death with honor as long as he took the vampire with him. Battling a master vampire was very dangerous. They had immense power. Coupled with experience in battle, it made for a very fair fight.

The world had changed too much for Andre's liking. He no longer belonged and he was well aware of that fact. He'd never been a man to be around others. He preferred the high places or the wild places, anywhere he didn't run into masses of people. Or even a few. He wasn't civilized. He wasn't tame. He had his own code, and he lived by it.

Even vampires had changed. There was no longer honor in that battle. In the old days, vampires hunted and killed alone. Now, master vampires had begun recruiting lesser vampires, and they ran in packs. Costin Popescu had four following him, doing his bidding. Two were probably eager enough to follow Andre's blood trail. The rich ancient Carpathian blood would draw them straight to him. The other two had been around a while and Popescu had taught them a thing or two about battling an ancient hunter. Fortunately, he

had managed to kill one of the more experienced followers, leaving Popescu with just three pawns in his little army.

Now, Andre couldn't go quietly to the dawn and rest as he should have been able to because he was honor bound to rid the world of Costin Popescu and his band of bloodthirsty underlings.

Andre found the narrow entrance to the cave he intended to use to rest and heal. He'd used this particular cave before. It wasn't easily accessible. One had to stumble upon the entrance to actually see it, and very few ever came up the jagged cliffs to this height. He had used this cave for a resting place since he was a boy.

He still remembered the glittering gems, crystals of every color sparkling across walls in the various chambers. Sometimes a gleam of light burst through the narrow chimney and lit the interior walls with veins of precious minerals. He used to come back to the cave in the hopes of seeing that beautiful sight, the one that he thought he'd burned into his memory, the one he'd been so certain would never fade. He lost his emotions far earlier than the normal two hundred years, and the loss of his ability to see in colors followed quickly. The cave, like everything else, was gray.

He had made the underground chambers a home in his youth, long after he'd lost all family members. Everything that meant something to him from his earlier days was stored in an underground "vault" he'd fashioned out of rock, deep beneath the chamber where he often rested. A few centuries earlier, when he realized he would be the last of his family line, he had sealed the vault and only returned to the caves when necessary.

He sighed as he stepped inside the cool, narrow opening. He had to set safeguards. Popescu's minions wouldn't be able to be out in the sun, but it would be suicide not to ensure no one found him while he slept. He didn't have that luxury until he rid the world of the vampires preying on civilians. He lifted his hands and began the complicated but very necessary ritual of putting safeguards around his resting place.

He'd lost a tremendous amount of blood and unexpected weakness hit him as he began to open the earth. Perhaps he had waited too long. His injuries were severe and maybe, just maybe, fate would take a hand and he would not rise again.

Teagan Joanes sat on her sleeping bag in her small travel tent with her heart pounding. She'd made a huge mistake. Huge. She was an experienced traveler, and when she went hiking in other countries she always checked out the guide carefully. She knew better than to go off alone without a buddy in any foreign country. She had never, not one single time, considered it would be unsafe to travel into the mountains with a man she had known for over three years.

They were friends. Good friends. In the United States, at the university, she had tutored him, studied with him, ate lunch and dinner with him while they studied. He was from another country and very good-looking, with a deep accent, so therefore popular with the women on campus. He dated a lot. All the time. Rarely the same girl more than twice. Their relationship had been strictly friendship. He never made a move on her, not once. She'd always felt comfortable with him. What happened?

Teagan tried desperately to think what she could have done or said to make Armend Jashari think for even a minute that she suddenly wanted more from their friendship. They'd continued their relationship online, messaging back and forth every few days, just to keep in touch, but there hadn't been a hint of anything sexual. When she needed to visit the Carpathian Mountains it had been natural—she thought—to tell Armend she was coming.

He volunteered immediately to be her guide into the high country, and of course she'd accepted. She was

comfortable with him. Correction. She had been comfortable with him. Now, the bad vibes had become really scary.

She slept dressed in her jeans and a tee, just to be safe. Now, she pulled on her boots quickly, hearing him prowling around her tent. He was working himself up, she could see that with his pacing. She hastily rolled her sleeping bag and fixed it to her pack, all the while wishing she could exit her tent without being seen.

She trusted her instincts, and right now they were screaming at her to run for her life. Without preamble, her tent door was ripped back and Armend launched himself into her space.

Teagan narrowed her eyes at the man who crawled into her tent. Her guide. Her friend, so she thought. He wasn't acting the least bit like a guide or a friend, more like a spoiled rich kid who was entitled to take anything he wanted, including her.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded in her most haughty, how-dare-you, you're-going-to-die-if-you-come-one-step-closer-to-me voice. Most of the time, the voice didn't work. She wasn't tall and threatening in the least, but she could back the voice up whenever necessary, and right now she was afraid it was going to be very necessary.

"You want this. You've wanted me from the first day you ever saw me three years ago," Armend snarled at her. "Don't pretend. You've been panting after me all that time and then you decided to come over here and ask me to guide you into the mountains."

"You offered, Armend," she felt compelled to point out. "It was your idea."

"You wanted me to guide you."

"You were my friend and I thought . . ." She trailed off. She had never considered this would happen, but she should have.

"I know what you want. Stop playing hard to get."

"We went to college together, Armend," she said, keeping her voice low. She didn't want to agitate him or set him off. Sometimes logic worked. The tent was small and there wasn't a lot of room to maneuver. "We had classes together. We ate lunch and sat outside and talked. I thought you were my friend."

He rolled his eyes. "Women and men aren't friends. Did you think I wouldn't notice the looks you gave me?" His accent was thick and it thickened more with passion.

Armend Jashari had been sent to school in the United States. His parents were very wealthy in a land where few people had much. Clearly Armend had grown up believing he could do anything he wanted, including keeping coming at a woman when she unmistakably said no.

"I apologize for any misunderstanding that happened between us. I honestly did think we were friends. I have a very good reason for coming here, which I explained to you, and I thought you understood. It seemed a natural thing to do, contact a friend who was familiar with the mountains I needed to explore. I didn't mean to lead you on, or give you the idea that I was interested in being anything more than your friend," Teagan said.

She had never flirted with him. Not once. Armend hadn't given her any indication that he wanted more than friendship during the entire time he was at school with her. She was young to be in the master's program in geology. Armend was a good five years older than she was, and on top of that, she looked extremely young.

Like a boy. Armend had treated her more like a younger sibling. He spent a great deal of time with her, but he dated a lot of women—women who looked like her sisters rather than looked like her.

She had three sisters. All were tall, with womanly curves and the faces of models. She had come along ten years after all of them. All three were athletic, beautiful, intelligent and now married with children. She was . . . Teagan. She could see Armend being attracted to her sisters, but she wasn't five foot ten and she didn't have full breasts and curved hips. She didn't attract men like her sisters did. And she definitely didn't lead men on.

"You aren't really here looking for a certain type of crystal or stone," Armend objected. He inched forward.

Teagan picked up her one cooking pot. She used it to cook everything when she was hiking—which was often. The pot was black from spending so much time in flames. "Don't you dare come any closer."

"You're a tease. A bitch," Armend snarled. His face turned ugly, and he clenched his fingers into tight fists. "I came all the way up here for a pity fuck. That's what you are to me. My boys laughed when I showed them your letter. They're camping a couple of miles from here and waiting their turn."

She kept her expression blank. He had friends camped close by? She was in the Carpathian Mountains alone with him. She'd trusted him to guide her up the mountain in order to find the exact crystal or stone she needed. It was imperative she find it. She was on a quest—a mission—and she needed the crystal. She'd know when she found it. Her body was a tuning fork for such things. The moment she stumbled on the trail she'd track it to its location, but she had to feel a hint of it first. She'd come prepared to spend a month in the mountains, knowing sometimes it was very difficult to run across the faint sign that would allow her to find what she needed.

"I guess I should thank you for thinking of me, but really, Armend, a pity fuck is out. I don't want you to touch me, let alone get that personal. So pity or not, that's out of the question and off the table. Get out of my tent."

"You're just a stupid little virgin, aren't you? A cock tease."

She raised an eyebrow, gritting her teeth. She had a temper and he was pushing very close to it. He was definitely going to attack her, and she might as well prod him into it so she was ready for him. "There isn't anything stupid about me, Armend. I'm far more intelligent than you'll ever be. I had to tutor you, remember? You never would have gotten through any of your classes without me."

He flung himself on her, knocking the cooking pot out of her hand. She was small. Five foot two to her sisters' five foot ten and eleven, and that was when she wore shoes. She was extremely slight. She didn't exactly have lush breasts or anything else that men found enticing. What in the hell was Armend thinking?

His body slammed into hers, carrying her over backward. Her head hit the frame of her backpack and her back hit the ground—hard. He landed on top of her, forcing the air out of her lungs. She punched him as hard as she could from the awkward angle she had, driving her fist into his left eye.

He swore and punched her back. Three times. In the face. She actually saw stars and the edges of her vision blackened. She refused to pass out. He tore at her clothes, ripping her favorite camping shirt. She had only brought a few changes of clothing, because when she hiked, it was all about the weight of the pack she carried. He'd just reduced that meager amount by one.

There was no bucking him off, no getting out from under him by rolling, so she used her very strong stomach

muscles and sat up, into him, slamming her head under his chin and driving up with the top of her head. It hurt like hell, but she didn't care. It got him off of her. He rolled into the side of the tent, nearly bringing it down.

She scrambled on all fours to get out of the tent. He kicked her hard in the back of her thigh. Her leg went numb but the force sent her flying out of the opening. She landed on her stomach and rolled away from the tent as fast as she could, trying not to sob with the pain. He wasn't fooling around. He definitely meant business and he didn't care whether he hurt her or not.

She'd taken lessons in defending herself—a lot of them. She climbed, both bouldering and sport climbing. She hiked all the time, all over the world. She was in good shape and strong for being so small. She was not going to let someone like Armend Jashari beat and rape her, not without hurting him.

Her hand found the rock she was looking for. It was a good size and solid. As she pushed herself up, struggling to fight off the waves of nausea the punches to her face had caused, Armend hit her from behind, slamming her back to the ground. His hands found her hair and he yanked her head back savagely, turning her as he did so, still straddling her. He punched her hard in the ribs and then leaned down and bit her lip. Hard. The pain was excruciating. She tasted blood.

When he lifted his head, he had blood around his mouth. Her blood. He laughed. "I'm going to have fun with you, Teagan. And then my boys are going to have fun. You'll do whatever we tell you to do and you'll beg us to fuck you if you want to get off this mountain alive. You're not the first stupid bitch we've taken up here. A few are still wandering around trying to find their way off the mountain. Oh. Wait. They fell off a cliff. We didn't bother to bring their bitch bodies out, just left them for the scavengers."

Now she could put down "poor judge of character" beside all the other "cons" on her list about herself. As his head came down toward hers again, she slammed the rock against his temple, using his downward momentum and her strength. He grunted. His eyes rolled. He slumped over top of her, a dead weight. Crushing her.

Teagan wasn't certain she could find the strength to move his body, but the thought of his friends being close by—and she was certain he was telling the truth about them—had her shoving him hard with every bit of strength she possessed. She managed to shift him enough to crawl out from under him.

Shock took over, adrenaline leaving her shaking and close to tears. Neither was a good thing when she needed to get out of there fast. She couldn't help herself, she had to reach over and feel for his pulse, just to assure herself she hadn't killed him. Touching him was abhorrent, but she did it. Unfortunately he was still alive. She scowled at him, staggered to her feet and hastily caught up her pack. She left her tent and started up the mountain rather than going down it as he would expect.

She had no idea how good he was at tracking someone, but she wasn't going to make it easy for him. She needed a plan, and she'd figure out what to do while she climbed. Her face ached and she knew it was swelling. Her ribs hurt. She wanted to go back and smash him again with the rock. At least there was some satisfaction in hitting him hard.

First, she had to calm her breathing so her ribs wouldn't hurt so darned bad. She wanted to climb into the high country so she could make a wide enough circle that she could head back down the mountain and not run into Armend and his friends if they really decided to come after her. Remembering the look on Armend's face and the way his eyes turned hot and eager at the thought of him and his friends having so much power over her, she was certain they would come after her.

Teagan pushed herself hard, using the trees and brush to hide as she moved steadily up the mountain. She kept herself in good shape and usually she could hike for hours uphill when needed, but she was at a higher elevation and the back of her thigh throbbed and protested with every step she took. Her face hurt so bad she wanted to cry, and one eye was swelling, along with her cheek. Her lip seemed the worst, which was silly. She poured water on a handkerchief and held it her lower lip while she walked.

Eventually she came to a narrow deer path winding uphill through a much thinner grove of trees. Thin wisps of fog drifted through the trees—a few fingers only, but the air had cooled already considerably. She was grateful for the respite. Up high, the sun and thinner air wreaked havoc and she had very fair skin and her ribs hurt like hell with every jarring step.

She cursed Armend Jashari with every breath she took. She'd gone a few more miles and was wondering if she dared to take a break. She needed one. She'd drank water and stopped a few times to find a place she could do her "girl" thing, and she hid any sign of that carefully, afraid it would help Armend find her trail much easier.

She spotted a depression in the low brush and thought it might be a good place to rest, even if it was only for a few minutes. Her leg needed it. She took several steps toward it and stopped dead in her tracks, her heart suddenly accelerating. There it was. Just like that. When she almost let everyone convince her she was crazy, she felt a strange fluttering along her veins, like a vibration.

Immediately she halted, allowing herself water while she absorbed the feeling. She needed to be able to tune her entire body to the vibration, until it was a song in her veins, rushing with her blood through her system. Her gift. The one she could never explain to anyone and not make it sound insane.

Elation swept through her. She hadn't thought she'd find the trail so quickly, but somewhere ahead of her, the wonderful stone or crystal or gem she needed so desperately was waiting for her. She had to make a decision right now. If she followed the trail of the stone she sought, she would be risking Armend and his friends finding her. If she didn't, she could lose this stone forever, and that meant losing her beloved grandmother.

Trixie Joanes had taken her and her three sisters into her home when Teagan was born. Her mother died in childbirth and not once had her grandmother ever blamed her for the death of her daughter. If anything, she had loved her all the more. She owed everything to her grandmother and loved her beyond anyone else in the world. Lately, her grandmother's mind had begun slipping.

Her sisters were terrified she was drifting into a world of delusion and they kept taking her to psychiatrists. No one seemed able to help. Teagan had decided she had to do something herself, and that meant using her special gifts few wanted to know about. Talking about them put her in the same "insane" category as Trixie. Still, she knew what she could do with anything of the earth, minerals, gems, crystals, any type of rock. She knew the power each stone held and she was able to tune it to her, unlock that power and use it. Finding the right stone to help clear Trixie's mind was essential. Teagan was willing to risk everything for her grandmother.

She changed direction immediately and doubled her pace, determined to put as much distance between Armend and herself while she followed the trail of rock or crystal her body had tuned itself to. Armend had never believed her that her body could actually find the trail of types of rock and crystal.

She'd told him, of course, one time during an all-nighter at the university. He'd wasted a few days partying as usual and she'd agreed to help him study for an exam. She'd been a little tired and sometimes that made her talk too much. He'd laughed at her, just like everyone did, so she didn't bring it up again. Until now.

She felt like an idiot confiding in him, relaying her fears about her beloved grandmother, explaining why her quest was so important. She could understand him thinking she was crazy, but seriously, he was the crazy one. He was most likely a killer. A serial rapist. How was she going to explain that one to her grandmother and sisters?

She winced remembering his cold statement. "Pity fuck." That was harsh. Mostly men ignored her. Well, okay. Not ignore; she had mostly male friends. But they always saw her as a friend. A little sister. Which was fine by her because she wasn't attracted to anyone. Not male or female. She had no idea why, but she wasn't.

Her sisters endlessly set her up, calling her and asking her over for dinner. Inevitably when she arrived, there would be a man—or a woman—one of her sisters had also just happened to invite, and of course she had to sit through dinner next to them and be hit on all evening.

But now, up in the mountains, all alone, without anyone around, she just had to get the attention of a man, and he turned out to be a killer. What was up with that? She sighed. She realized her legs were about to give out. The pain in her side now radiated up into her chest so her lungs burned for air. She had to rest, but fear drove her to keep going. She needed to find a place out of the way, somewhere she could lie down for a while.

She looked around, hoping to find a more hidden area to rest in, just in case she did fall asleep. She was exhausted, and the pain seemed to be worsening, although intellectually, she knew it hadn't, she just wasn't occupying her mind and keeping it at bay as well as she had been while she followed the trail. She had to pay attention to her body, to the strength of the song she heard in her veins. If she went too far in the wrong direction, the vibrations dulled. It took total concentration, which was a good thing to block out the pain, but she'd been traveling for a good part of the day and she had to stop.

Movement caught her eye. The trees were mostly gone up this high. Only a few straggly ones hung grimly on to life. While she'd been hiking, the mist had grown thicker and she hadn't really noticed. Around her, the world seemed gray, alien even. The wind blew, so that the fog swirled in pinwheels, but it didn't seem to go anywhere. Still, even with the sounds muffled, she had definitely spotted movement a few yards to her left.

She bit at her lip and nearly swore aloud. Instead, as she crouched low to keep from being spotted, she heaped curses silently on Armend's head, wishing she was a witch and could consign him to a living hell. Maybe have fire ants crawling up his legs and biting the heck out of him everywhere, especially his manly parts. That might be nice.

It took a few minutes to realize it was no human being moving around in the brush, but an animal. No. More than one animal. Wolves? She knew there were all kinds of wildlife making homes in the mountain range. This was nearly the last refuge for larger predators.

She shrugged carefully out of her backpack, wanting to groan as the weight came off her back. Instead, she kept her eyes on the wide field of dense brush. She spotted movement in at least five different spots. Alarm grew. She hadn't cleaned up and the scent of blood probably clung to her. She brushed her hand across her face and it came back smeared with blood.

Her lip actually hurt more than her head, which was silly since her face was swollen up like a balloon, but the pain in her lip made her sick. It didn't help, either, that she had a habit of biting at her lower lip. The scrape of her teeth when she forgot was agony over the wound. She hadn't looked at it, not even once, afraid maybe she needed stitches. Or worse, the asinine idiot had rabies or something. Sheesh. She should have hit Armend harder.

Another strange thing was she felt inexplicable sorrow. Not just that, but despair. Hopelessness. An agony of loneliness. She knew it wasn't her own, but something carried in the mist. A song. A song of great sorrow, not just from one individual, but from many. The notes blended into the symphony of the mountain.

One of the animals moved out of the brush into the open. She stared at it, heart pounding. Mouth dry. She kept trying to make it into a wolf. Right size maybe. She could even think the shape was sort of right. But no way was that creature a wolf. It looked more like a sheep. Or a goat. Were there wild goats or wild sheep in the Carpathian Mountains?

The fog was very heavy and she hadn't even noticed it had become that dense. The air felt damp, but she was grateful for the cover. There wasn't as much foliage up this high and she didn't want Armend or any of his friends to spot her moving up the very faint trail she followed. The animal moved again, a slow steady few steps, and her body sagged with relief. Clearly the Carpathian Mountains were home to wild sheep.

She sank down onto a small, flat rock and let herself look around. Her tuning fork, as she called it, was leading her up higher into the mountains than she'd ever intended to go. Teagan drank more water. It was important to stay hydrated.

She glanced at her watch. She'd been hiking up the trail for several hours. She was hungry and tired and out of sorts. Worse, she was now totally enshrouded in the fog and wrapped in a blanket of intense emotions, none of them good. The notes playing through the song of the mountain were painful to listen to. She was a healer and she naturally wanted to do something to ease that pain. If it was pressing on her shoulders and crushing her chest, she couldn't imagine what it was doing to those who felt such despair.

She'd only taken a couple of small breaks because she was really afraid now that she'd decided to hunt for the gemstone or crystal that could aid in clearing her grandmother's mind. Of course, if Trixie knew she was hiking alone in the wilds of the Carpathian Mountains, with a pack of rabid men on her heels, she'd get out the mythical wooden spoon she'd always threatened Teagan with.

She needed a place to rest. Her leg, where Armend had kicked her, cramped and throbbed alternately and she began to limp. She drank more water and searched above her for a place that might be hidden. There didn't seem to be any real cover other than the fog, but it was so thick, she couldn't really see anything above the elevation where she was.

With a sigh, she capped the bottle and stood. She couldn't stay there. She needed shelter of some kind, and that meant looking for it. While she did, she might as well follow the trail the strange vibrations in her body were leading her to. Both paths seemed connected. Both led up the mountain, instead of down toward civilization.

She shrugged into her pack and started up the trail, putting one step in front of the other, trying to feel her way. The blood sang in her veins. She was definitely close to her goal. She veered to her right. The song grew louder. She heard it in her ears, a pounding drum of satisfaction calling to her. Another few yards and the song burst through her body. She was that close—so close she actually could push aside those sad, weeping notes that counterpointed the song in her body.

Teagan stopped and examined the wall of rock directly in front of her. Her stone was somewhere inside the rising tower of rock. She slipped her palm over the small boulder. The fog was even thicker up here and she literally felt her way around the mountain. Her hand abruptly slipped off and she realized instantly she had found an opening.

She stared into the darkness for a long moment. She was small enough to fit inside if she took her pack off

and carried it. Her heart pounded. Wild animals could live in the cave. Still, if nothing else lived in it, she could rest. The chances of Armend finding the cave were slim, and she desperately needed to go to sleep. More, she needed to try to calm the swelling in her face and take a look at her stinging lip.

“Courage, Teagan,” she whispered to herself. “You’ve come this far for Grandma Trixie, are you going to fail because you’re scared?”

She often asked herself that question. Was she going to fail because she was scared? She might be afraid of a lot of things, but she never once had allowed fear to stop her from doing anything she wanted to do. In fact, often times, that fear spurred her on, because she was so determined not to allow it to rule her.

She started to slip into the narrow opening and something stopped her. Something completely invisible. She put her hand out and felt the barrier. A shield. It seemed to be constructed of notes, like the music inside her body. She’d never encountered such a thing before, but her mind was all about puzzles and patterns. She loved to boulder because that was a world of puzzles and patterns. She could see a problem in front of her and her mind feasted on it, needing to solve it.

She didn’t know if nature had spun that tight netting, or if something else had done it, but she knew she had to solve it. The compulsion was on her, and there was no going back from it.

She sank down in front of the opening and lifted her hands into the air, closing her eyes and tuning herself to the invisible threads of what she saw as a harp in her mind. The strings of the harp were all knotted, forming a tight net. She simply had to unravel them and set them straight again.

It was a complicated pattern, and she found herself completely absorbed, forgetting Armend and the sorrowful notes in the fog and everything else, even the pain in her body while she worked to sort out the strings of the harp. Everything had to be reversed and she had to do it by sound alone. There was no visible shield, just a song she felt in her body.

It took her two hours, she knew because she’d looked at her watch. She was shivering with cold, her clothes damp from the thick fog by the time she’d straightened out all the strings and knew she could walk through the entrance. Feeling triumphant, she got to her feet and, pushing her pack ahead of her, slipped inside. The moment she did, the despairing notes faded away, left behind in the thick mist.

Darkness swallowed her instantly and with it came the thud of her heart. Loud. Scary loud. She jerked out her flashlight and carefully examined the way ahead of her. The tunnel was narrow, but still, she could walk upright through it. She scrutinized the ground carefully for tracks of animals. She couldn’t see that the dirt had been disturbed. She was fairly certain that if wolves occupied the cave, there would be evidence, like a pack surrounding and eating her.

She pushed forward. Her heart continued to pound, no matter how hard she tried to breathe away fear. She moved down the narrow passageway, realizing she wasn’t only going deeper into the cave, but downward as well. The angle wasn’t terribly steep, but she became aware of the heavy rock over her head. The cave had high ceilings and the farther she went into it, the higher the ceiling became. She stopped every few feet to shine her flashlight in all directions. She wanted to see the walls surrounding her and the ceiling above her.

There was no sign of wolves or any other animal, and she was becoming excited that she might have found the perfect base camp to hunt for her stones without Armend or his friends finding her.

The narrow passage abruptly widened and she had a choice to go left or right. She listened to the song in her veins and chose right. The tunnel was short and opened almost immediately into a wide chamber. It was

beautiful. The walls sparkled when she shone the light over it. Something drew her toward the very back, and she followed that need.

Teagan placed her backpack against the farthest wall beside another opening that, when she shone the light there, appeared to be an entrance into another chamber, just a bit smaller. She stepped inside to look around.

The dirt had been moved recently. She could see that, and when she flashed the light over the freshly disturbed earth, she spotted drops of dark red blood. Lots of it. And it was definitely recent. Her heart stopped pounding. Stopped beating. She was so certain her heart stopped that she put her hand over her chest and opened her mouth to drag in air. Blood. Right there in the cave with her. What now?

Chapter Two

Teagan found herself following the trail of blood through the small chamber, down farther into the earth. The cave was far warmer as she went deeper. It should have been cooler, and that made her wonder if there was volcanic activity beneath her. The thought made her pause, but the compulsion to follow the blood trail was too strong to ignore.

She knelt down beside a particularly large splash of dark red blood and touched the substance with shaking fingers. It felt sticky, as if it had congealed there a few hours earlier. The moment she touched it, something inside of her answered. Opened. Needed. She should have wiped the blood off her hands in the dirt, but she couldn't make herself do it. Instead, she curled her fingers tight into her palm, as if holding him there. Instinctively she knew the victim was a man, and she had to get to him. She had to save him.

Teagan found him in the fourth chamber. It was a small, room, completely dark, and he looked to be in an open grave. Her flashlight caught the edge of his body, lying in the ground about two feet deep. The dirt had filled in around his body, but his face and chest weren't covered. Her mouth went dry and her throat closed. It was impossible to breathe for a brief moment. She couldn't run and she couldn't move forward. She could only stand still, praying, the flashlight shaking in her hand.

She stared at him, her heart continuing to pound as the song in her veins burst into a crescendo, as if somewhere on or beneath this man was the very stone she needed to cure her grandmother. She stepped closer, although she was reluctant, afraid he truly was dead, and she couldn't bear that, but if he was still alive, she needed to help him.

Teagan forced her feet to work, moving to his side, dropping down to her knees to feel for the pulse in his neck. The moment she touched him, the terrible dread in her increased. She needed him to be alive more than she needed anything else. He had to live. She waited for his heartbeat. Prayed for it. There was nothing at all. Not even the faintest thread of a pulse.

A small moan of fear escaped. Not of him. For him. For her. She knew, deep down, that she'd come to this place to save this man, but her injuries had slowed her down. Slowly she laid her head over his heart. Strangely, his body felt warm, although if he were dead, and had been for a few hours, he should have been cold. She pressed her ear to his chest and held her breath to keep from making the slightest noise. There was no discernable heartbeat, although she felt the heavy, defined muscles in his chest.

His shirt was bloody and torn. There were terrible gashes in his chest. Open wounds. Wounds that she knew

should have killed him and probably had, but still, she needed him to be alive and she had no idea why, but the need was so strong she shook with the force of it. More, there was evidence of old wounds. Four of them. One in each shoulder and one in each side. Circular scars that were a good two inches in diameter. This man had seen battle.

She closed her eyes, sorrow crushing her chest. The need to wail with grief rose in her like a tidal wave, coming out of nowhere, but so strong another sound escaped, an agonized cry that seemed terribly loud in the silence of the cave. She didn't know this man, but the blow was tremendous. She placed her hand in front of his mouth to try to feel air.

"Come on, sweetheart," she said softly. "Don't be dead. Unconscious is okay. I can deal with unconscious, but you need to come back to the land of the living." She dared to press her lips against his ear, needing him to hear her. He was so warm, it seemed impossible that she'd lost him before she'd had a chance to save him. "Stay here with me. Don't go. Come back to me." She didn't know why she structured her plea that way, but the compulsion inside her, the one that couldn't let him go, forced the wrenching words from—not her heart—but her aching soul.

His skin was pale, and hers was darker, a soft mocha latte, her grandmother had always described her. Her mother was African American but her father was Caucasian. He had been a businessman who had pursued her mother and then dumped her the moment he learned she was pregnant. Technically, her three sisters were half-sisters, but never once had they ever acted like she wasn't part of them. They called her their heart because Grandma Trixie always called her that.

She could heal. She'd always had an extraordinary gift to do so, but not if someone was already dead. She couldn't raise the dead. Her throat closed in protest. This man couldn't already be gone, out of her reach.

She leaned down again, trailing her fingers gently over his chest as if the small sensation could penetrate deep to his heart. "Seriously, open your eyes right now." She tried to make it a command. Instead, it came out a plea. Tears burned her eyes as she stared down into his handsome face.

He was beautiful. Even in death, he was beautiful. If she'd been an artist, he would be the man she would want to sculpt. To draw. To put into any medium to preserve.

His lashes fluttered, and her heart fluttered right along with them. The breath rushed from her lungs. She stared at him. His eyelids remained closed. Had that been an illusion? She'd planted her flashlight in the ground, the light beaming toward the ceiling, casting a glow over him, but most of him was in the shadows. It had to have been an illusion. But still . . . Her heart began to pound all over again.

Whether he was dead or alive, she wasn't leaving him in this state. "Listen, handsome, I'm going to run back and get my pack. I can clean you up. That's the least I can do for you." Even as she spoke to him, whispered into his ear, her hand went to his chest, directly over his heart. Hoping. She was still praying. She needed him to be alive, but there was no indication whatsoever.

Pushing back a sob, she jumped to her feet, wincing when her leg protested—when her face told her the swelling hadn't gone down at all. She glanced at her watch as she hurried back through the various chambers to the one she'd left her backpack in. Sunset was approaching and hopefully, since Armend and his friends hadn't found her yet, they wouldn't as night fell. She'd be able to rest.

Andre only had one dream in his entire existence, a recurring one, and it was a nightmare—or more precisely, a memory he wished to forget. He slept the sleep of Carpathians. Heart stopped. Breath gone. Essentially, by human standards, dead. A paralysis settled over them and they couldn't move even if their

minds were still active. But he had to be dreaming.

A soft voice—a woman's voice. His lifemate. The whisper of a touch against his skin. The little plea that touched his heart even though it wasn't beating. He dreamt in color. Bright, vivid color. It was so beautiful, so real, each color distinct, not bleeding gray into it, but there behind his eyes, in his brain. Blues and greens and vibrant reds.

He struggled to lift his lashes, to open his eyes to see. He hadn't buried himself completely in the soil as he should have. He'd lost far too much blood and he knew his safeguards were strong. The vampires would have gone to ground as well. All of them were wounded, including Costin Popescu, the master vampire. He knew he was safe enough and he was just too tired to do anything but lie down in the fresh, clean soil.

He lay there now, his heart beginning its slow revival. He took his first breath, drawing her scent into his lungs. She was real. He didn't know how to feel about that after centuries of hunting her. Centuries of giving up on her. Centuries of being so alone he didn't know how to be with anyone else, or even how to be civil.

The brief moment when he'd managed to beat the paralysis and open his eyes just enough to glimpse her had to be real, not a figment of his imagination, because he saw her in all her glorious color. Still, how had she gotten into his sleeping chamber? Into his cave? He had put up safeguards. Intricate safeguards, not based on mage guards, but ones he had devised himself over the centuries. Guards that shouldn't have been penetrated.

He had to be dreaming. But in color? Nothing made sense. The moment his heart began to beat, blood began to stream from the various wounds on his body. Hunger struck. Clawed. Pain had to be shut off. Automatically he repaired the internal damage to his body, even as his mind went over every detail he remembered of the brief glimpse.

His lifemate had been very slight, very small, but he could see the steel in her. The determination. She was beautiful, more beautiful than any woman he'd ever seen—that in itself should tell him he was dreaming. Her skin was amazing, a dark soft expanse that any man would have a difficult time resisting touching. But she'd been covered in bruises. He could see blue and black in the mixture of color along her cheek, up by her eye and along her jaw. Her face was swollen, her lip torn.

She had a beautiful mouth, tilted at the corners, an inviting bow, her teeth small and white. Her eyes were a dark, dark chocolate. The lashes surrounding them were full and very black.

Her hair was long, a luxurious gleaming black, not dull gray, done in intricate cornrows and then swept back in a ponytail of small braids. The ponytail was easily as thick as his arm and fell to her waist. When she walked away from him, she was limping. He had to have been dreaming, because how could she be real after all the long centuries? And how could she have gotten past his safeguards?

He stayed very still, absorbing the feel of the cave. His senses told him he wasn't alone. He smelled her. There was a mixture of fresh air, fog, the mountains, sweat and something else, something that called to him, like a particular scent carried on a summer wind. Almost like the earth smelled after a fresh rain. He needed more of it. He wanted more.

He heard her then, the soft running as she returned to him, just as she'd promised. She thought him dead. He'd heard the sorrow in her voice. She had asked him to stay. To come back to her. Had she come to find him? Had he been close to dying? He doubted it. He had work to do. Several vampires to kill. He wouldn't have left them alive to harm others.

She dropped a backpack that was nearly as tall as she was onto the floor beside the entrance to the small chamber. She had a flashlight in her hand, the light dancing along the walls as she hurried toward him. He could see the colors of the wall. The rich veins of various minerals and the few gems that sparkled in the light. The edge of the light caught a crystalline rock jutting out of the wall. He remembered the formation from his youth, and was shocked that he hadn't noticed it again until her dancing light spotlighted it for him.

Her scent enveloped him. This time he recognized the interesting mixture of wildflowers and rain. He inhaled her. The moment he did, she cried out and dropped to the ground beside him.

"You're alive. Oh. My. God. You're totally alive."

Her hands ran over his chest. Her touch was featherlight, but everywhere the pads of her fingers touched he felt heat and something else, something that penetrated deep, right through his skin. He recognized the touch of a natural healer. She had immense power. He stayed very still, listening to the musical cadence of her voice. The sound of her struck an answering chord in him.

He realized she spoke English. Not just any English, but American English. She wasn't from the Carpathian Mountains. She didn't feel Carpathian. But she belonged to him. Absolutely belonged to him. He turned his head and locked his eyes on his prey. Seeing the swelling in her face hurt him. An actual pain. He couldn't leave her like that. He refused.

She was an amazing healer and should have seen to herself before recklessly running into a cave. What was wrong with her that she didn't see the danger to herself even now? Because she was in danger. Didn't she feel it? He was starving. He'd lost too much blood, and there she was, bending over him, her throat exposed, her pulse pounding, her heart calling to his. He could hear the ebb and flow of her blood. Smell it even, through the wound on her mouth. The tear.

Someone had hurt his lifemate very recently. A male. He could smell the testosterone on her. Her shirt was torn, exposing the curve of her breast. She was tiny, but he could see the small, beautiful curve and he ached. The ache wasn't enough to hold the beast at bay. Someone had attempted to harm her.

He lifted his hand to her face, his thumb sliding gently over the bruised swelling. "Who did this to you?" His English was good, but he had an English accent. He was unfamiliar with the American accent. His first words to his lifemate. He spoke softly, his voice pitched low, but there was a distinct growl, a note that made her entire body go still.

She pressed her lips together and then winced. "Let's concentrate on you. Your wounds are horrific. I'm Teagan. Teagan Joanes."

"I do not want to invade your privacy by taking this information from you, but I refuse to argue. Give me his name."

Her long lashes swept down and then back up. She sank back on her heels, wincing as she did so, as if that movement hurt as well. He saw trepidation in her dark eyes, the beginnings of fear. He knew what she saw. He'd been alarming humans for centuries—and she was definitely human. He'd alarmed his own species. He wasn't a man to trifle with. But his first obligation was to the safety and health of his lifemate, not the other way around. Fear or not, he would get his answer.

"Armend Jashari," she replied, her voice a whisper. "He's somewhere behind me. He told me he had friends camping nearby and they were going..." She trailed off.

He scowled at her and decided to take the information from her. He wasn't the coaxing kind. This was too important. He needed to know what this man had done and what he intended to do. He needed to heal his woman and decide a course of action. Her dithering wasn't helping the situation at all.

"Look at me," he commanded, keeping his voice low. He deliberately didn't move from his resting place, allowing her to keep a false sense of security.

Her gaze jumped to his. He didn't allow her to look away. The moment her dark eyes met his, he ensnared her, whispering his command to her, so that she would accept his dark embrace. He sat up, pulling her into his arms, his mind reaching for hers, pushing past barriers, seeking information.

He found himself snarling. Lethal. Furious. His lifemate had been in jeopardy, nearly raped. She'd been beaten. Some man she trusted, the man he could see in her memories who she believed had been her friend, had assaulted her and then threatened her. Armend Jashari would be receiving a visit from him, and then Armend Jashari would know what real terror was.

He laid his hands on her face gently, the pad of one finger over the jagged tear on her lip. Before all else, before he allowed himself to taste her, to stop the terrible clawing need in his body for sustenance, he was compelled to heal her. He couldn't look one more second on her bruised face, or feel her discomfort and pain beating at him.

Andre sent himself out of his body. Letting go of one's self to become pure healing light had always been a little difficult for him, but this time, for the first time, he did so easily. For her. For his lifemate. He tasted the word even as he entered her body and began to heal her from the inside.

He didn't forget to examine her leg—the one she'd been limping on when she hurried away to get her backpack. He found dark bruising almost to the bone. She'd been kicked hard, hard enough to do major damage. Jashari was going to pay for that as well.

Andre made certain every damaged place on her body was healed before he returned to his own body. The pain of his wounds jolted through him. He'd stopped the bleeding, but he had suffered a severe loss. He needed. The need was becoming desperate. More. Much more. His lifemate's scent called to him. He could already taste her. A perfect addiction he would crave for all time, would never be able to get enough of.

He pulled her into his arms, wrapped her close to him to warm her. Her body shivered against his, and she blinked, looking up at his face. She looked a little frightened and he knew she was coming out from under his thrall. Part of him wanted that, but he knew she wasn't nearly ready to understand she would be coming into his world and what that would mean for her.

"You are safe with me, Teagan," he said. "Safer than you have ever been in your life. When you are frightened, look to me."

He pushed at her mind again to send her deeper under even as his lips found the pulse beating so strongly in her throat. His tongue stroked the rhythmic throb that told him she was alive and healthy. He kissed her heartbeat. Listened to it. Absorbed it. Savored it. His lifemate. A gift beyond any price. A treasure. His.

His teeth sank deep and the taste of her burst through his mouth. He had thought the colors she'd returned to him were blinding and vibrant, but he had no idea what the real gift was, not until that moment. Hunger took his body, sharp and terrible. Not the addiction to her blood, but physical. His cock swelled. His nerve endings came alive. Life came to his body. The beauty of it was painful and yet a miracle he had never considered or expected. His body craved hers. Just as his need for the taste of her, spicy and addicting,

settled deep into his veins, his need of her body settled deep into his bones.

He didn't hesitate. He had waited centuries for his woman. Beyond centuries. She was his reward. She was his miracle. She was . . . his. *Te avio päläfertii*lam—You are my lifemate. The ritual binding words resonated deep. His ancient language rose like the tides from his very soul.

Teagan Joanes held the other half of his soul. He didn't question why or how. It simply was. And he was driven, bound, to seal their souls together. *Éntölam kuulua, avio päläfertii*lam. I claim you as my lifemate. *Ted kuuluak, kacad, kojed*. I belong to you. That in itself was a miracle. To belong to anyone. To belong anywhere. He hadn't had a home in centuries. Even childhood memories had faded. Now there was this one small woman—this tiny vessel who carried his life in her.

He forced himself to close the small pinpricks on her throat. *Élidamet andam*. I offer my life for you. *Pesämet andam*. I give you my protection. *Uskolfertii*lamet andam. I give you my allegiance.

Her body was very warm and fit perfectly into his. She moved restlessly in his arms. He waved his hand to remove all bloodstains and the tatters of his shirt from his chest so that she was tight against him. Instinctively she turned her face against his heart, her lips rubbing gently over his pulse beating so strongly there.

The simple movement inflamed his body and he reveled in his ability to feel. To come alive. To know that the woman in his arms was truly his. He whispered the command to feed, to take his blood. He needed the first exchange with her to be complete while he completed the ritual binding.

She would be forever bound to him, unable to be away from him for long, just as he would be the same with her. They would be able to speak mind to mind. He would always know what she needed or wanted and he could see to that every need or desire.

More than anything else, at this moment, he had to feel her mouth on him, drawing his blood into her to connect them in the deepest possible way so that the binding of their souls would last for all time, in this world and any that came after.

He drew a thin line over his pulse with a sharpened fingernail. His blood seeped out and he pressed her mouth over the spot, his heart beating hard as her lips moved. It was erotic, so much so that he couldn't move or breathe for a moment. It was also beautiful to him. He could feel the connection growing quickly between them.

"*Sívamet andam*. I give you my heart." He spoke aloud in both languages because later—much later—when he allowed her to remember—he wanted her to know just what she meant to him. Just what he gave to her and demanded from her. It was complete surrender by both parties. Since he'd been a boy, he had never had a heart to give to anyone until she came into his world.

"*Sielamet andam*. I give you my soul." His soul had always been hers. He had walked for centuries, half alive, always the darkness in him growing because his other half had the light he needed to exist. To live.

She made a sound and her palm slid up his chest, over his shoulder to curl in the length of his hair. He was an ancient and he wore his hair in the way of his people in ancient times. It was thick and long and pulled back with a leather cord. His hair had always had far too much wave in it and sometimes, like now, there were long, unmanly spirals, but he'd never bothered to change it even in his mind. Now he liked it when her fingers sought one spiral and slipped through it.

“Ainamet andam. I give you my body. Sívamet kuuluak kaik että a ted. I take into my keeping the same that is yours.”

He had never given much consideration to sex. He’d learned everything he could about it, because down the long centuries, a Carpathian acquired as much knowledge as possible on every subject they could. It was a trick they used, a way to keep their minds occupied, and it served them well. Now he was grateful for those long centuries of study.

He had been so removed from those studies, absorbing all the erotic positions, every way a man could take a woman to please and pleasure her. Every way a woman could please and pleasure a man. With Teagan’s mouth moving against him and his cock full and hard and throbbing, all those images were uppermost in his mind.

“Ainaak olenszal sívambin. Your life will be cherished by me for all my time.” More than cherished. She would be worshiped. Adored. She would be his everything.

She moved restlessly, her buttocks rubbing along the length of his cock, sending an electrical current radiating outward from his groin. The blood in his veins thickened with desire. He had to stop her feeding. She’d taken enough for an exchange, and he didn’t dare lose too much more blood. He’d only taken enough from her to get by until he went hunting the man who had tried to rape her.

“Te élidet ainaak pide minan. Your life will be placed above my own for all time.” And that meant any enemy of hers was his enemy. Any enemy of his could never touch her. His enemies did not last very long.

He gently inserted his fingers between her mouth and the wound in his chest. Her tongue instinctively followed the little trickle of ruby beads away from the slash. The movement was naturally sensual, and his breath hissed out of his lungs as he closed the wound and tipped her face up to his, using two fingers, forcing her eyes to meet his.

“Te avio päläferttiilam. You are my lifemate. Ainaak sívamet jutta oleny. You are bound to me for all eternity. Ainaak terád vigyázak. You are always in my care.”

He took her mouth. Gentle. Reverent even. Tasting the mixture of their blood now flowing together to form a mutual path. He closed his eyes, savoring her. Savoring the moment. She wouldn’t remember other than in a dream. He wanted that for her. He wanted her to get used to his world slowly, taking it in a little at a time so she wouldn’t be too frightened and she would be able to accept her fate over time.

He used his tongue rather than his mind to remove all evidence of his blood from her lips and mouth. He loved touching her. Loved having her next to his skin. He especially loved the silk of her hair against him. Sensations were sensual. He craved them now that he could feel. Every sensation she could give him. How could he possibly let her go, even for a moment, after waiting so long for her?

Still, he set her to one side, his hands reluctantly leaving the warmth of her body. He took a breath and gave the command for her to awaken fully. Her lashes fluttered. Lifted. He found himself looking straight into her dark melted chocolate eyes. So dark a man might get lost there.

She brought up a trembling hand and touched her lips, her gaze moving over his chest—a chest that had no shirt but revealed heavy muscles, four circular older scars and wounds that were healed. Completely. Absolutely healed. Gone.

She swallowed and glanced down at her watch. “I feel like I missed something important.” The moment she

spoke, she touched her lip where it had stung, especially when she talked. Her hand moved from her lip to her face where it had been swollen.

He smiled to reassure her. "I, too, am a healer. The sight of you bruised and battered was abhorrent to me. No man should put his hands on a woman like that. Especially you. I felt compelled to heal you," he added honestly. "Are you in any pain at all?" Because he would start all over if she was.

She shook her head. "I was supposed to heal you."

She sounded a little disappointed and he hid a smile. He had forgotten smiles. He doubted if he'd ever smiled much. The sensation was wonderful and a little shocking. "Next time. I seriously couldn't allow you to be in pain."

"Are you an empath?" Her eyes were on his chest.

She had a difficult time pulling her gaze away, and he was suddenly grateful he hadn't donned a clean shirt. That meant he would have to manufacture a stash of clothes for the time being, enough that she would be eased into his world as gently as possible. She liked his chest and the muscles there. He had plenty from so many centuries of battling the undead.

He also had a few scars, including the four circular ones that would never leave his body. Carpathians rarely scarred. The wound had to be mortal—one that was deadly. He'd taken a few very nasty jabs to his heart when a master vampire had nearly managed to rip the organ from his body. He'd been lucky that time. Skill had little to do with saving his life, although his vast experience had definitely aided him. The worst scar was there, and he saw her gaze fall to it several times, no doubt wondering why the scar was the size of a fist and looked as if an animal had tried to rip him open.

"I'm Andre. Andre Boroi." His heart leapt when he gave himself that precious last name—the surname that actually meant something to him. The one he had vowed he would never use unless he used it with his lifemate out of honor. Out of respect. "It is my pleasure to meet you, Teagan Joanes." Which didn't tell her anything. Her eyes told him she was afraid and he didn't blame her.

He was a Carpathian and that meant he was a predator. There was no doubt that showed in his features, in his eyes, probably even in his carriage. He didn't want his lifemate frightened, but there was no softening of what or who he was.

"What happened to you?"

Her voice was very soft, trembling even. Her hands dropped to her lap, fingers twisting together. She'd been attacked by a friend. He was a total stranger and they were alone in a cave. Her fear beat at him, making his belly knot up. He found having a violent and unexpected physical reaction to her fear interesting and yet disturbing.

"Be still, Teagan." He dropped his voice low, using a hypnotic tone. A soothing one. "You are safe with me. I would never harm you."

Her lashes fluttered. He couldn't help staring at them. She had long, thick lashes that curled just a little on the ends. They were midnight black, just like her hair. Black—not gray. He liked that.

She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue and instantly his attention was on her lips, that soft perfect little bow of a mouth. He found himself fascinated with her mouth. Her skin was beautiful, flawless, and as

soft as it looked. He knew because the feel of her was already imprinted in his mind.

“You’re staring at me,” she said in a small voice.

“You are quite beautiful. I have never seen a woman as remarkable as you are.”

She frowned at him. “I’m not, you know. Beautiful. I’m just me. I like being me, and I don’t need compliments and lies to make myself feel good.”

He touched her mind at the suddenly fierce flash of pride in her eyes. He saw her sisters, the women she viewed as beautiful. They were all tall with lots of curves. Her half sisters. She loved them and thought they were the most beautiful women on the face of the earth. He pulled her recent encounter with Armend Jashari out of her brain, hearing the ugly things he’d said to her.

He frowned. “Ainaak enyém, to me, there is no one more beautiful for a variety of reasons. I love the look of you. Your eyes and skin, the shape of you, but more, the way you make me feel. We are sitting in a cave, both injured, both healers, and I can feel your fear, yet you have not abandoned me. You did not abandon me when you found me and that took courage. I find that—and you—quite beautiful.”

The hint of defiant pride faded to be replaced by a small smile. “I’m not all that brave, Andre. I’m afraid of everything, I just refuse to give into it.”

“Do not be afraid of me, csitri. I can tell you this. There are few men walking this earth more dangerous than the one in this cave with you. I will not allow any harm to come to you. Not now. Not ever. That simply is.”

His voice rang with sincerity. He looked her in the eye, hoping she would believe him. He wasn’t a man who talked much. In fact, probably, this was the most he’d spoken at any one time to any human being. But he didn’t want her to fear him. He didn’t like the way her fingers twisted in her lap and the slight tremor he could see in her hands, although she tried to hide it from him.

She sent him a faint smile. It didn’t light her eyes, but it was real. Her lips curved into more of a bow and a shallow dimple appeared on either side of her mouth. “Is that supposed to reassure me? That you’re more dangerous than most men walking the earth? Do you have any idea how that sounds? Not to mention, it might just be a little arrogant.”

He wasn’t about to argue. He didn’t really know what to say. He wasn’t being arrogant. He wasn’t bragging. He was stating a fact.

“I am not used to talking so much with others,” he admitted. “Perhaps my wording is not correct. Nor do I normally converse in this language.”

She looked a little relieved. “Of course. That makes sense. Thank you for healing my face. My lip was really hurting, which seemed a little silly since the injury was so much smaller than the others. How did you know my leg hurt?”

“When you walked away from me you were limping. I heard you.”

Her eyes moved over his face. Watched him. She was very still, other than her fingers twisting in her lap. He couldn’t help himself. He laid his hand very gently over both of hers, his touch calming. At the same time, his mind sought hers. He was very careful about that as well.

Her eyes widened. She took a deep breath.

“Do you feel me? In your mind?” he asked gently. “I established a connection when I healed you. That sometimes happens.” He was being honest, although he knew he was misleading her just a little.

“You’re psychic? You can read minds?” Teagan asked.

He nodded slowly. He couldn’t deny that and he wanted her to become comfortable sharing their thoughts and speaking telepathically to each another.

“Wow. That’s not good. You’re sort of gorgeous, and I’m not certain I want you able to read anything I’m thinking about you,” she blurted out.

That was the last thing he expected, and somewhere deep inside, he felt the beginnings of a smile again. It didn’t quite reach his face, but his mouth twitched. He had never liked the company of others. He always felt too caged in. Too exposed. And he disliked the inane small talk that always seemed necessary in the company of others. He wasn’t good at it and he never would be.

Frankly, he chose his own path and he followed it. The feelings and opinions of others didn’t enter into the equation. He had relied on his own judgment for centuries and had learned from hard experience. The less civilized entrapments he had to deal with the better, as far as he was concerned. The only company he ever kept was with his semi-adopted brothers, triplets he’d shared his youth with, but they would never call him civilized.

“I do not mind if you think I am gorgeous. That is a good thing, is it not?”

Her answering smile was slow in coming, but some of the tension drained out of her. He was fully connected to her now and gently pushing soothing calm into her mind.

“It’s a good thing.”

She was exhausted. She’d hiked uphill all day and covered miles. She needed rest, water and food. His blood had helped to revive her, but even that shot of energy wasn’t going to last her long.

“You can set up your camp in one of the chambers,” he said. “There is a chimney in the one just through there.” He indicated a narrow opening she hadn’t noticed. “You can cook in there and you’ll be safe. Although I would like to know how you got through the safeguards I placed at the entrance to the cave.” He could have taken the information from her, but he was practicing being polite. If she didn’t answer him satisfactorily, he would take it then.

Her face lit up. “That was you? That was so incredibly cool. It took me a long time, but I really enjoyed it. You set some intense patterns. Of course you’re psychic, you’d have to be to do that. I never thought of trying something like that to guard a place I was sleeping. With you wounded so severely, I could see you blocking the entrance.”

She still hadn’t told him how she’d done it. He liked that she wasn’t bothered by it, instead excited that he could do it and eager to try it on her own.

“Teagan.” Her name rolled off his tongue, sounding strange. Beautiful. His crazy, daring woman who had no business being out on her own. The sound was also his only warning to her. He wanted an explanation.

“I see patterns and hear musical notes. Your safeguards were a combination of both. I could see a harp in my head, the strings all tangled and messy. I had to just sort them out carefully to open the lock.”

She was not just beautiful, intrepid and daring, she was brilliant. And she was his. For one moment, Andre could barely breathe with the knowledge that this woman was the woman he had searched centuries for, had given up on, and then she just simply unraveled his safeguards and walked into his life.

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