

Chapter 1

“Never! Never again am I working for Valadon! Have you forgotten what happened to me the last time I worked there?!” Miranda Crescent paced back and forth in her living room trying to decide if she should smash her phone against the brick fireplace or simply strangle him; but as Remare was one of the most powerful vampires in New York City that would probably do no good. She looked down and noticed her palm was pulsing with heat and started taking deep breaths. As an *Elemental*, Miranda had limited control over the elements—fire being her strongest power. But if she ever lost control and unleashed her full power, there was no telling how much damage she could inflict, and Miranda never wanted to find out—not ever!

“Mir-randa, please, hear me out. Do you really think I would be contacting you if I didn’t believe it was tremendously necessary?” Remare would never forget the painful ordeal Miranda had suffered several months ago while working at ValCorp. He knew well of her scars and how much worse they could have been had he not shared his blood with her—something he’d never deigned to impart to her or anyone else, least of all Valadon, High Lord Vampire of New York: His liege and oldest friend who loved Miranda dearly, even though she had chosen another.

Miranda shuddered at Remare’s Mediterranean accent and the way he evocatively pronounced her name; she’d never forgotten the way it sent shivers up her spine. Although he was Valadon’s second and leader of his Torian guards, he was also one helluva sexy beast: With

his ebony hair and neatly trimmed goatee, Remare was as handsome and seductive as his boss . . . and no less lethal. “Not a chance, Remare! Not happening! No way am I going back there!” Miranda shook her head, even knowing he could not see her.

“If there’s the slightest chance Brandon is still in NY, I need to know and know quickly. Nick has brought it to my attention that at least one of Valadon’s paintings has gone missing; but we can’t determine how many more have been stolen without your presence as you were the one who compiled the catalog.” Remare sat back in his chair and smiled; he knew the mention of Nick’s name would light a fire under Miranda as Nick had always been one of her weaknesses. He was not above resorting to manipulation when necessary and . . . now was definitely one of those moments.

Miranda had loved working with Nick for Valadon in his magnificent archives where the high lord housed a world of art treasures he had collected through the centuries. As an art authenticator for City Museum, Miranda had validated and cataloged many of Valadon’s paintings. Had it not been for the evil ancient vampire, Mulciber, who had her kidnapped and tortured, she might have completed the work Valadon had hired her for. But it was Brandon, Valadon’s treacherous younger brother, with the face of an angel and the soul of a demon, who would have seen her die a brutally painful death. “You think Brandon’s still in New York?”

“I’m not sure, that’s why I need you here. You know Valadon’s art collection better than anyone. I need to know if there are any other works missing. If I can locate the painting, I can find Brandon.” *And destroy him.* Even though Valadon had issued a “*capture only*” directive, if the chance arose for him to finally be rid of the traitor, Remare would not hesitate to kill him. He knew Valadon had frozen Brandon’s assets after he committed the most heinous of betrayals.

However, Brandon must have realized what Valadon would do and had raided the vault and stolen at least one rare painting.

“What does Valadon have to say about all this?” Miranda never forgot the seductive high lord and how he had wrapped her in a soul-dissolving rapture in his attempt to seduce her. Admittedly, she had been attracted to the handsome vampire, but not enough to forsake her involvement with Valadon’s progeny, Gabriel—a man Miranda had wanted to build a future with. Unfortunately, it turned out both of them had been married to their careers and over the last few months that relationship had devolved into a mutually satisfying friendship.

“Valadon is in Montreal and unaware of the missing items.” Remare turned to look at Nickolas, Valadon’s heir and Miranda’s former student at NYU. “I’ve only recently been informed of the theft and want this matter cleared up before Valadon’s return. Will you help me?” Remare pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled slowly. “Please.”

Miranda was startled to realize she was contemplating her options. If Valadon was out of town on business, she might be able to work out a deal. “What’s Valadon doing in Montreal?”

Remare didn’t like discussing vampire politics with anyone who wasn’t a Torian, but said, “he’s attending a summit of vampire leaders from North America and is scheduled to return next week. We don’t advertise when he’s out of his territory and I would appreciate it greatly if you would refrain from such as well.” Remare, impatiently, had to signal for Nick to sit down as he kept gesturing for the phone. Finally, he relented and gave Nick his phone.

“Miranda. Hi, this is Nick. God, I’ve missed you! After you left, Uncle Valadon put me in charge of the archives and I’ve been trying to complete the catalog, but some of your notes were incomplete, and I hate to say it . . . but your handwriting is difficult to understand in places.”

Miranda smiled at the sound of her former student's voice and was disappointed he didn't enroll in any of her night classes this past semester. Of all the vampires in Valadon House, Nick warmed her heart more than anyone with his youthful exuberance and honesty. She'd missed him—considerably. “Which painting do you think is missing?”

“I'm not sure, but I think it is Titian's *The Venus de Urbino*.”

“Oh no!” Miranda gasped. “That's one of Valadon's favorites!”

Nick sighed. “I know.”

“And you just noticed it missing now?”

“I was assigned to record the paintings you *didn't* catalog, *not* the pieces you had already completed, so no, I didn't notice it was missing until recently.”

Miranda let her eyelids drift shut. *The Venus* was a heavenly work of sensual beauty and she remembered when she had worked on the research, alone, down in the archives; the time Valadon . . . Miranda quickly shook herself of the carnal images, she asked, “Nick, what other pieces are missing?”

“That's just it Professor Crescent, I can't figure out what else is missing because Brandon changed the location of some of the paintings; that's why I didn't notice it immediately. Ouch!” Nick rubbed the side of his head where Remare had hit him and then taken his phone back. He wanted to remind Remare that he was vampire royalty, but Remare would probably just hit him again.

“Miranda, will you at least consider coming to ValCorp so that we can sort this out?”

“You're sure Valadon is out of the country? Ah . . . we didn't exactly part on good terms.”

Miranda felt a wave of erotic images flash through her mind—images she had let happen. Even

though it had been common knowledge she was with Gabriel, Valadon had been determined to sway her interest and had nearly succeeded . . . until logic had prevailed.

“Yes,” Remare exhaled impatiently. “That is why I want to move on this matter as quickly as possible.”

Miranda hesitated, then figured this was probably a mistake, but the vampires of Valadon House had been good to her and she realized she . . . missed them. “Fine. I’ll be there in about an hour.”

“Thank you, Mir-randa. We’ll be waiting for you.”

Miranda ended the call and paced. She wondered how Brandon would sell it. He couldn’t take it to one of New York’s premier auction houses; Sotheby’s or Christie’s would have requested ownership documentation and if Brandon had somehow been able to have them forged, the auction houses would have had it advertised by now and she’d heard nothing of Titian’s work going up for sale. None of the benefactors at the museum had made any inquiries about Titian. *Hmm*, she thought. Collectors were a funny lot: Some were more scrupulous than others—and there were those who would do anything to attain a work they absolutely had to possess . . . even attend an underground auction where “*lost*” works were often sold. Miranda knew if she asked any reputable people in the art world about the underground auctions, she would be met with shock, reproach and abject denials of any knowledge of them; however the truth was many upstanding members of New York’s elite knew they existed.

But who could she trust enough to go to and ask questions without getting herself in a ton of trouble? Miranda smiled, she knew only one person who would talk to her without chastisement.

Chapter 2

ValCorp: The austere black tower of New York's financial district and symbol of Valadon's wealth and power. Miranda had avoided it for nearly six months. As she walked through the elegant black and gold veined marble lobby with the rare, exotic plants, she saw Remare waiting for her near the security reception area wearing one of his trademark sarcastic smiles. He'd always had the ability to make her tremble, especially when he had been trying to kill her, she smiled. But that was a long time ago and they'd come to terms with their mutual, if not reluctant, understanding of each other. Now his smile and dark brown eyes evoked other dangerous sensations low in her belly—emotions she chose to ignore.

Remare watched as Miranda walked steadily toward him; his body awakening with painful need. Knowing Valadon's attraction to her, he had hoped to forget Miranda in these past few months, but his desire for her had only intensified. Miranda walked with a graceful stride that spoke of her confidence and with each step his heart beat stronger. With her whiskey-colored eyes and long chestnut hair he had once wrapped around his fist, she was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever met. If Valadon hadn't claimed her for his own, surely he would have. It was the only reason he'd kept his distance. "Mir-randa, it's nice to see you again."

Miranda admired how handsome Remare looked in his dark blue suit. The European cut clung to his body accentuating his broad shoulders and trim waist. What did it say about her psyche that she had once thought him murderous, and yet was strangely attracted to him. My God, when the man smiled, everything else around her seemed to fade away. “Hello, Remare.” Miranda still wasn’t sure being here was a good idea, but was resolved to see it through. “You wanted to show me something?”

Remare smirked. “Ah yes, it’s down below.”

Miranda grinned at the double entendre. Down below ValCorp was Valadon House: The home of Valadon’s elite vampire guards and friends. And one of the most superb archives she’d ever seen that housed not only Valadon’s prized art collection, but an extensive library as well. Miranda entered the elevator with Remare to make the journey downward and tried not to inhale his intoxicating scent of evening woods. Instead, she asked, “how’s Nick? He didn’t attend any of my classes at NYU this past semester.”

“You’ll see for yourself in a moment. He’s already down there. He’s missed you.”

Remare exhaled softly. “We all have.”

Miranda wasn’t sure she heard the last correctly. Of all the vampires at Valadon House, she was sure Remare had been the most relieved when she left. A human in the house of vampires was an oddity and as it turned out . . . a very dangerous predicament. “I’ve missed him, too.”

When the doors opened to the opulent living quarters, Miranda gasped. Everything was as she left it: the enormous white brick fireplace, the lush couches with rich fabrics, the fine drapes hanging over the French doors where she had once met with Remare in secret. The feeling of returning home was more intensely powerful than she thought possible and Miranda needed a moment to get control of her emotions. The last time she’d walked these corridors with Remare,

she had helped solve the mystery of who was trying to assassinate Valadon. She had felt then that Remare had finally accepted her and that she had earned his trust and maybe . . . his approval. Though why that mattered to her, she wasn't sure.

Remare opened the doors to the archives and led her down the stairs to where Nick was waiting. Miranda's face lit up at the magnificence of the grand room with its striking crystal chandelier, parquet floors with Aubusson rugs and three tiers of world classics, and inhaled its splendor. Overwhelmed by the majesty of the archives, Miranda muttered to herself, *I'm home!*

She then spotted her favorite student and went to embrace him.

"Miranda." Nick hugged her hard, glad she had finally returned. "This place hasn't been the same without you."

"It's good to see you, too. Why haven't you stopped in to see me at NYU?"

"About that . . ."

Miranda saw the look that passed between Remare and Nick and simply said, "yeah . . . Valadon." When she looked around the archives, she asked, "so where did you notice something was wrong?"

Nick led her to the corner of the second level to where *The Venus* had previously hung, but now in its place was a work of lesser value. Valadon's art collection was so vast, that unless you were paying careful attention to where each painting was hung, it would be easy not to notice something was missing. And *The Venus* was definitely missing. "Did you search all of the archives for her?"

"Of course! I knew it was one of Valadon's favorites, so I hunted for it through the entire archives." Nick exhaled with frustration. "It's not here."

“Is anything else missing?” Miranda started walking past the stacks of books looking up at the walls, remembering where everything was when she left.

Nick winced. “Valadon didn’t keep a catalog until you, so it’s hard to tell. But the Titian I knew right away.”

“We were hoping you would walk through each of the floors and give us a better estimation,” Remare added as he walked beside her and watched as she scrutinized the works of art.

Miranda was studying the walls, each painting seeming to be where it was before. “My memory is good Remare, but I would have to check my notes to make sure. Just remember, I never completed the catalog so there might still be others that are missing.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that,” Remare said as he accompanied her in her stroll through the stacks, remembering the exact place where he had once tackled her to the floor and fought with her over an ancient tome of poisons. Even then he had been attracted to her and hated that she could affect him so deeply and sway his loyalty from Valadon. “But you’re the best chance we have.”

When Miranda was in work mode, all else seemed to not exist. She could effectively shut out the rest of the world . . . except for the one virile vampire by her side. “This is going to take some time. But right now, everything else *seems* to be where I remember it.” She looked up at Remare. “It wasn’t just the painting Brandon took, was it?”

“No.” Remare frowned with disgust. “He helped himself to some items we kept in the vault—mostly jewelry and cash.”

Miranda didn’t need to tell him he’d probably seen the last of those. “Why would he stay in New York this long knowing Valadon and you were searching for him?”

“We’ve had all the airports and other modes of transportation monitored. He probably found a hovel to crawl in while we searched for him . . . biding his time. I believe he waited until Valadon was out of the country to try to sell the painting.”

“Do you think this was a recent robbery?” Miranda tried not to tremble at the thought of Brandon being able to get back inside ValCorp.

Noting her reaction, Remare tried to reassure her. “Our people have been diligent in scrutinizing the camera feeds for any sign of him. There are no traces of him entering or leaving the building.”

Miranda let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. “Good to know.” She stopped and searched Remare’s eyes—eyes of the darkest, most sinful chocolate with a hint of the red rim showing around his irises. She’d seen him angry and enraged, but the way he was looking at her now held curiosity and . . . something else. “Remare, if Brandon intends to sell the painting, the only way I can figure that he might get away with it is if he brokers it at an underground auction. Do you know what those are?”

“I’ve heard of them, but I’ve never attended one.” *At least not in America*, he thought.

“I’d like to be able to tell you only the most criminal of minds attend those auctions, but I’ve heard stories where some of the city’s wealthiest citizens have acquired “*lost*” pieces of art there.”

Remare arched an eyebrow. “You don’t consider some of those citizens, criminals?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think. Those auctions have probably existed for centuries.”

Remare knew that they had. “Do you have the contacts in the art world to acquire an invitation?”

Miranda had to talk herself into coming to ValCorp. Diving deep into the more dangerous waters of illegal auctions was not where she wanted to go. “Still trying to get me killed?” she asked as she smiled sardonically.

Remare felt one corner of his lips rise. “Hardly. But if what you expect is true, I need to be at the next auction or at least question the people who run them.”

Miranda laughed. “No one knows who runs them, Remare, and even if they did, they would not advertise it. Those auctions are illegal and very dangerous. And there’s no chance of knowing if Brandon already sold the painting. The people who attend them are fanatics about their art. I wouldn’t put it past a few to actually kill to acquire what they want.”

“Good. Then I’ll fit right in.” Valadon had made him swear he would not kill Brandon if he found him first. Remare had agreed, but had added that if any of his men were in lethal danger or if it came down to Brandon or himself, Brandon would die. Valadon had reluctantly agreed.

“Listen, the best I can do is . . . ask a few questions. I want no part of those auctions. If I was recognized at one of them, my reputation as an authenticator would be shot.”

“Do you know someone to make inquiries?”

“I know of one, but I’m pushing the bounds of friendship here. I hope you know that.”

“Give me a name and you won’t have to trouble yourself.”

Miranda turned to climb the stairs to the exit on the third level. “As if she’d talk to you. Not happening.”

“All right, when will we be meeting with her?”

“*We?*” Miranda looked at him surreptitiously.

Remare returned her smile. “I need to question your friend. Find out what else I might need to know.”

“Let me talk to her first. I’m not sure she would appreciate me bringing you.”

“Not fond of vampires?” Remare asked as he opened the door for her.

Miranda snorted. Dr. Felicity Walcott was very fond of vampires; one, in particular, very much so. “Well, you do have your reputation.”

“Do I?” Remare smirked.

“As if you didn’t know.” Miranda thought back to what her friend, Lizandra, the Were Queen, had once told her. She had implied that his reputation was fabrication and calculated. Miranda began to have her own questions. “I’ll contact her and get back to you.”

“Thank you. That’s all I ask.” Unable to say goodbye without, at least, touching her, Remare took her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. Then he pressed the button that would take her to ValCorp’s lobby.

When Miranda’s knees threatened to buckle, she knew it was time to leave.

Nick came up beside Remare and they watched as the elevator doors closed. “Will she help us?”

Remare could think of nothing else that would please him more. “Yes, yes—I believe she will.”

Copyright by Diana Marik 2015.

All rights reserved.