

CHAPTER ONE



LADY OF THE MOUNTAINS

SPRING 1928: LUCERNE, SWITZERLAND

Blood was imperative. The hot ruby fluid of life... Charlotte caught the scent and stopped mid-stride. Around her, a maze of lanes wound between timbered houses. Rain drizzled from the night sky, shrouding the meadows and mountains above the town. Although she had fed once tonight, the waft of salty, musky warmth arrested her.

She rarely scented blood in the open air, unless a human was injured.

There and gone. The miasma blew away on a rainy gust of air.

She sensed motes of human life inside the medieval houses of the Altstadt, but the alleys were silent. This lull between one seasonal festival and the next felt uncannily quiet; the noisy parades of *Fasnacht*, meant to drive out demons before Lent began, were over. The ritual herding of cattle up to the Alpine meadows was some weeks away. How eerie the town seemed when the drumming stopped and the hollow turnip lanterns went dark.

Although a passionate vampire, Charlotte wasn't voracious. She loved to walk alone at night, savouring the life around her without wanting to devour every drop.

Now she sensed someone walking parallel with her, a street or two away... perhaps a trick of her too-vivid imagination. The impression lasted a few seconds, then – like the blood-scent – it vanished.

She reached the end of the lane where it opened on to the banks

of Lake Lucerne. A few hundred yards away, the old wooden Chapel Bridge crossed the river Reuss, connecting the old and new sides of town. The water was black obsidian, full of wavering reflections from the town lights. Two men leaned on a railing with their backs to her. They shared the same slight, elegant build, blond hair and matching dark overcoats.

One of them turned and came to greet her with a smile.

"Well, my sweet friend," he said, taking both her hands and kissing her cheek. "What a delightful coincidence. What brings you here?"

"Stefan," she said, embracing him. They exchanged a light kiss on the lips. Stefan gave his usual flirtatious grin, as if to say, *Ah, if only...* "What brings me here? I could ask you the same. I felt too languid to stray far from home, but I thought you were in London, so...?"

He drew her under the eaves of a big hotel that faced the lake. Niklas followed. He was Stefan's twin, identical except for his eyes – Stefan's were blue, his pale gold – and for the fact that he never spoke. He only echoed Stefan's actions, like a mime.

Charlotte kissed Niklas too. Although he didn't react, she always acknowledged him because she knew this pleased Stefan.

"A pleasant night's hunting?" he asked.

"I would never call it pleasant," she said quietly, "but I would call it my own business."

"You and Karl are so strange, still hunting separately after all this time. Eccentric." Stefan's white smile grew broader. "But we like you for that. Don't we, Niklas?"

Niklas gave a faint smile. His eyes stayed unfocused.

The brothers had been vampires since the eighteenth century. Stefan still preferred the fashions of his own time, when circumstances allowed. Charlotte thought modern dress never looked right on them, but it was essential for camouflage. Her own taste was for silk and lace in subtle colours, but tonight she wore a black coat with an enveloping fur collar and a cloche hat that half-concealed her eyes.

Better for disappearing into darkness. For hiding stray blood splashes.

"Sometimes we hunt together," she said. "But we never plan it,

because... well, it can be unsettling. Almost too intense."

"Ah." Stefan's eyes shone with wicked knowledge. "Of course. I can imagine."

"I would prefer you not to imagine anything." Charlotte tried to sound haughty, but he only smirked.

"Forgive me. However, as the world's greatest proponent of pleasure, I can only state my view that the more... *intense* a shared experience, the more cause for celebration, not shame."

"And for discretion," she said.

"Oh, I am all for anything secret, clandestine." He slipped a friendly hand through her arm. "Are you on your way home?"

"No, my night isn't over yet." Charlotte fed sparingly, careful not to kill outright, but this meant she needed more than one victim. "Yours?"

Stefan shrugged. "You won't spend the rest of this beautiful, wet evening wandering with us? Lucerne is the loveliest of towns in all seasons. Have you seen the Christmas parade, where Santa Claus has a terrifying demonic companion who goes around threatening to punish the bad children?"

"Yes, I've seen that." She gave a small grimace. "They call him *Krampus*, don't they? Or *Schmutzli*? I'm glad I didn't grow up here. I should have been terrified."

"Now we *are* the demons," he said. "Will you stroll with us?"

"I'd love to, but not until..."

"Other needs are satisfied. I understand. In that case, I'll let you go on your merry way. But you always see through me, don't you?"

"Usually," she said, her eyes narrowing. "Why? Were you looking for me?"

"Guilty," said Stefan. "We tried your chalet but no one was there. However, you were easy enough to find. Hardly fifty miles away, in one of your favourite towns... The lovely warm trace of you was like a sunlit cloud-trail through the Crystal Ring."

"That's a poetic way of admitting you were pursuing me." *I can never be annoyed with Stefan*, she thought. *Not for long, at least.* He'd perfected the art of being a complete rogue, so charming that she couldn't help but love him.

Also, he was one of the vampires who'd helped transform her. However difficult the memory, that created an eternal bond.

"We have news."

"Oh, is something wrong?"

"Not at all. Niklas and I have taken a house beside Lake Lucerne. It's beautiful." He pointed across the water, where a scattering of distant lights gleamed. Mount Pilatus was a vast pale shadow in the night. "You can't see from here, but it's outside the town, near the water's edge, like a fairytale chalet surrounded by forests and meadows... Why are you frowning?"

"It sounds idyllic," she said, "but you know perfectly well Violette has opened her new ballet academy here."

"Yes. So?" He looked innocently confused.

"You know she won't tolerate a houseful of vampires so close to her dancers!"

"Hardly a houseful. Only Niklas and me."

"And your guests. After all that happened recently, she sees danger everywhere, and I don't blame her."

Stefan drew a half-circle on the air with his forefinger. "The house is by the lake, at least ten miles away, even by boat."

"That's still close. She won't be happy."

"That's not my concern. You're one to talk – here you are, hunting hardly a mile from her new premises?"

"I know," she said with a twinge of guilt. "Not my cleverest idea, but I won't make a habit of it. I'm always drawn to where she lives, even when she's away."

"We won't trouble Violette," said Stefan, "but she certainly won't dictate where I choose to live. You know Niklas and I would never touch her dancers, and besides... is there any power on Earth that *could* make Violette happy?"

"You have a point," Charlotte said softly. "It's only a bare few months since her heart was broken."

Violette – who believed herself too damaged to fall in love – had found someone precious, only to be cruelly bereaved. Beautiful Robyn, a human woman caught between Violette and an even more dangerous lover, had preferred to die rather than become a vampire.

"And her reaction was to work like a maniac on a brand new tour, new theatre and school, all at the same time?"

"That's her. Anything to distract herself, rather than moping. Pain like that is so raw, I don't think it ever heals."

They stood without speaking for a while, listening to raindrops pattering into the lake. Charlotte felt rain penetrating her coat, but cold and wet meant nothing to a vampire. Last year she'd staged her own death and funeral – for her family's sake – and afterwards she had crawled up through heavy clay to escape the grave. The experience would haunt her forever. Rain, storms and snow were nothing in comparison.

"I know." Stefan shivered. "I can't imagine such loss. I'm not devoid of feelings, you know. Behind this ice-cold, manly exterior I'm as soft-hearted as you, my beloved friend."

"Ice cold and manly?" she exclaimed. "Stefan, you do this every time."

"What?"

"Make me laugh so I can't be angry with you."

He grinned. "Well, I came to say that you and Karl are welcome at our new house whenever you wish. Will you break the news to Violette, or shall I?"

"I'll tell her," said Charlotte. "She's away, touring America again. I'm not sure when she returns. Within a few days, I think. Don't worry, I'm used to handling her with the softest of kid gloves. Heaven knows, she's always been temperamental. These days she's stronger, but in some ways... stormier than ever."

"Never predictable. Tell me you don't find that a little thrilling?"

"That's one word for it."

Stefan clasped her hands. "If anyone can soothe her grief, it's you, Charlotte. Enjoy the rest of your... stroll. Come, Niklas. We'll see you later, perhaps? Back here?"

Charlotte resumed her walk, climbing a narrow street between rows of timbered houses. She felt pensive now, eager to feed swiftly and return home to Karl. The upper storeys seemed to lean in towards each other, turning the lane into an eerie corridor. Rain fell through the gap to flow down the cobblestones in a shining stream.

Was Stefan being mischievous, taking a house so close to Violette's new academy, or did he simply want to be near others of his kind? If the house was only for him and his twin, there would be no problems – but Stefan loved company, vampire

and human alike. He lived for parties and decadence, luring his victims with the temptations of glamour, music, drugs and sex – not to mention the most addictive narcotic of all: Stefan himself, with his hypnotic charm and his nearly painless bite. All kinds of people would be drawn there, like wasps to honey.

No, Violette would be displeased, on a scale from exasperation to fury. Charlotte trusted only three vampires in the world: Violette, Karl – and Stefan, despite his reckless lifestyle.

Or if she had to choose between them, just Karl.

A fresh conflict between Stefan and Violette was the last thing they needed.

Charlotte had met Karl five years ago, when he'd asked to study science with her father in Cambridge. A year and an ocean of heartache later, she had joined him in his strange dark existence. Her short vampire life so far had been fraught with feuds, danger and bloodshed.

Karl and I want the same thing, she thought. A quiet life. Love. Is that so much to ask?

The notorious tyrant, Kristian, was dead, but he'd left multiple shadows over them. Others had tried to take his place. They had failed, but not without causing chaos and anguish.

Meanwhile, Violette had found Robyn, only to lose her.

Charlotte tried to console Violette, a task akin to nurturing a wounded, raging panther. Comforting a vampire was never easy, still less one who was an avatar of Lilith.

Violette was powerful, embodying a dark goddess who killed or cured by bringing her victims face to face with the stark truth about themselves. But that did not make her invulnerable to pain.

Charlotte's head came up: there was the tantalising blood-scent again. The smell was richer, more complex than that of ordinary spilled blood. Ripe, almost sexual... a fragrance that might fill humans with disgust. To a vampire, though, it was intriguing, delicious.

Her senses came into acute focus. She followed the scent as if it were a visible, crimson mist-trail.

A few yards on, a young woman came stumbling out of a side lane towards her.

She wore a pale coat and hat, button-strap shoes grey with rain.

She staggered, bent nearly double and clutching her abdomen. The hour was long past midnight and there was no one else nearby. Charlotte paused, wondering what to do. The pull of blood was irresistible but she held back, moral sensibility overriding her animal thirst.

She said in Swiss German, "Are you all right? May I help?"

The woman stopped, propping herself with one hand on a wall. She appeared to be in her early twenties, with a sharp, striking face, brown eyes, dark curls showing beneath her hat brim. She looked familiar, although Charlotte was certain they'd never met before.

The woman's brow creased. "*Ja. Nein.* Do you speak English?"

"Yes." Charlotte hurried to support her with a hand under her elbow. "I am English."

"Thank goodness! Sorry – I can get by, usually, but the words have all gone out of my head."

The ripe blood smell rose from her, overpowering. Charlotte's mouth watered and her tongue touched her lips... but she forced back her fangs. Not that she'd never fed on someone in pain, but an instinct stronger than blood-thirst held her back.

"What's wrong? Let me help you. I'm Charlotte."

"Amy. I – really, I'm all right, just..." The girl swayed and her legs buckled. Charlotte let her sink gently to the ground. The pale coat fell open and she saw the source of Amy's blood: a red stain, soaking the fabric of her dress between her thighs.

Charlotte's breath stilled with a horrible blend of shock and excitement. The thought of plunging her head down to taste the blood was hard to resist. At the same time the act was unthinkable. A trace of human, puritan restraint stopped her cold.

Or common sense, she thought. I am a vampire, but not a beast.

"Oh... oh dear, don't worry. I'll get help. Nature is often not kind to women, is it?"

Amy took a few breaths. Her accent was upper-class English, a familiar one to Charlotte's ears. She shook her head. "No. It's not... I can't explain. I'm so sorry, I feel such an idiot, but..."

"I should take you to a hospital, or find a doctor."

"No!" Her face lost all colour. "No doctors!"

"All right. But I won't leave you here... Amy?" Her eyelids fluttered down, opening again as Charlotte tapped her cheek.

"Do not pass out. Do you live nearby? Is there somewhere I can take you?"

She pointed with a shaking hand towards the top of the steep lane. "I'm staying at a house, up there at the forest edge, with my uncle. There are lots of people staying with us. They will take care of me."

"And call a doctor?"

"Yes, if they must. But I'll be quite all right. I just can't manage to climb..."

"Hush, don't worry. I'll take you."

"Thank you," Amy whispered. "Thank you so much."

She was too faint to walk, so Charlotte lifted her in her arms and carried her up the steepening incline. She kept one arm beneath Amy's thighs and let the coat hang free so that the blood wouldn't soak into it. All through the long climb, the ripe blood-scent tormented her, while Amy sobbed quietly into her neck.

"It's an awfully long way," Amy said after a while. "I'm sorry. We can get motor cars up to the house, with great care, but I don't drive."

The town ended and there was only Alpine pasture ahead, a thin rutted track growing ever steeper, rustling forests.

"Amy?" said Charlotte. "There's nothing here."

The woman raised her head. "Along the path. Just a little further."

Fifty yards on, Charlotte glimpsed light through the trees. Around a curve in the track she saw a white edifice: a newly built house in the stark modern style, like a marble monument with tall windows framed in black. The house was so imposing, with its straight lines and brutal facade, that Charlotte could not decide whether it was ugly or beautiful.

"I didn't know this place was here."

"Isn't it grand?" Amy said tiredly. "You can leave me at the door."

"No, I want to be sure there's someone to take care of you."

A few vehicles were parked on either side: a mixture of sleek expensive models, old boxy cars and vans, motorcycles. Light fell down the broad shallow steps. Charlotte saw figures moving behind textured glass panels that flanked the front door. She helped Amy to stand, taking almost her whole weight, and rang the doorbell.

The woman who peered out through a narrow gap was a matronly type dressed in dark brown, greying hair plaited around her head. Seeing Amy, her round, stern face furrowed with concern. She spoke German with the local accent. "Miss Temple? What happened to you?"

"Nothing, Gudrun. I felt faint," Amy said, smiling weakly. "This is Charlotte. She's been awfully good... I'd be lying on the street if she hadn't picked me up."

The woman paused. Her nostrils flared; the blood-smell was strong even to a human. Perhaps she already knew the nature of the problem.

"Bring her in. Miss Temple, you should not have gone alone. What were you thinking?"

As Charlotte helped her over the threshold, a few drops of blood splashed on the pristine marble floor. *God, the gorgeous red blood...* She could scent it on the older woman too, a subtler smell overlaid by sweat and perfume, and wafting from dozens of other people elsewhere in the house... The temptation was unbearable.

"Nothing," said Amy. "I just need to rest. Don't fuss."

Charlotte gave her into the care of Gudrun. There could be any cause for her bleeding. Mere nature: heavy menstruation, perhaps a miscarriage, or – God forbid – an injury of some kind. Also, she knew that unmarried English girls sometimes took a quiet trip to the continent to end an unwanted pregnancy, although they generally went to France... Such matters were never discussed in public, but that was life's reality. It wasn't her place to speculate or judge.

"She should lie down," said Charlotte, "and perhaps a doctor—"

"We thank you for your aid, Fräulein," she said brusquely, "but everything is in hand."

In the background, Charlotte glimpsed a handful of young-looking men and women, but the sight was brief. Guiding Amy, Gudrun turned at an angle to block Charlotte from going any further into the vast hall. She was being dismissed. Even as she stepped outside, the high black door swung towards her face.

Although startled, she was grateful to be severed from temptation.

"Thank you, Charlotte," Amy called as the door slammed between them. "Thank you so much for your kindness."