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MALCOLM, THE HEAD of the church of Eternal Life, the vampire church, sat across from me. Malcolm had never been in my office before. In fact, the last time I'd seen him, he'd accused me of doing black magic and being a whore. I'd also killed one of his members on church grounds, in front of him and the rest of his congregation. The dead vamp had been a serial killer. I'd had a court order of execution, but still, it hadn't made Malcolm and me buddies.

I sat behind my desk, sipping coffee from my newest Christmas-themed mug: a little girl sat on Santa's lap saying, "Define good." I worked hard every year to find the most offensive mug I could so that Bert, our business manager, could throw a fit. This year's mug was tame by my usual standards. It had become one of my holiday traditions. I'd at least dressed for the season in a red skirt and jacket over a thin silk sweater—very festive, for me. I had a new gun in my shoulder holster. A friend of mine had finally persuaded me to give up my Browning Hi-Power for something that fit my hand a little better and had a smoother profile. The Hi-Power was at home in the gun safe, and the Browning Dual Mode was in the holster. I felt like I was cheating but at least I was still a Browning girl.

Once upon a time, I'd thought Malcolm handsome, but that had been when his vampire tricks worked on me. Without vampire wiles to cloud my perception, I could see that his bone structure was too rough, almost as if it hadn't quite gotten smoothed out before they put that pale skin on it. His hair was cut short and had a little curl to it, because to take the curl out of it he'd have had to shave it. The hair was a bright, bright canary yellow. That's what blond hair does if you take it out of the sun for a few hundred years. He looked at me with his blue eyes and smiled, and the smile filled his face with personality. That same personality that made his Sunday morning television program such a hit. It wasn't

magic, it was just him. Charisma, for lack of a better word. There was force to Malcolm that had nothing to do with vampire powers and everything to do with who he was, not what he was. He'd have been a leader and a mover of men even if he'd been alive.

The smile softened his features, filled his face with a zeal that was both compelling and frightening. He was a true believer, head of a church of true believers. The whole idea of a vampire church still creeped me out, but it was the fastest-growing denomination in the country.

"I was surprised to see your name in my appointment book, Malcolm," I said, finally.

"I understand that, Ms. Blake. I am almost equally surprised to be here."

"Fine, we're both surprised. Why are you here?"

"I suspect you have, or will soon have, a warrant of execution for a member of my church."

I managed to keep my face blank, but felt the stiffness in my shoulders. He'd see the reaction, and he'd know what it meant. Master vampires don't miss much. "You have a lot of members, Malcolm; could you narrow it down a little? Who exactly are we talking about?"

"Don't be coy, Ms. Blake."

"I'm not being coy."

"You're trying to imply that you have a warrant for more than one of my vampires. I do not believe it, and neither do you."

I should have felt insulted, because I wasn't lying. Two of his upstanding vamps had been very naughty. "If your vampires were fully blood-oathed to you, you'd know I was telling the truth, because you'd be able to enforce your moral code in entirely new ways."

"A blood oath is not a guarantee of absolute control, Ms. Blake."

"No, but it's a start."

A blood oath was what a vamp took when he joined a new vampire group, a new kiss. He literally took blood from the Master of the City. It meant the master had a lot more control over him, and the lesser vamps gained in power, too. If their master was powerful enough. A weak master wasn't much help, but Jean-Claude, St. Louis's Master of the City and my sweetie, wasn't weak. Of course, the master gained power from the oath, as well.

The more powerful a vamp they could oath, the more they gained. Like so many vampire powers, it was a two-way street.

“I do not want to enforce my moral code. I want my people to choose to be good people,” Malcolm said.

“Until your congregation is blood-oathed to some master vampire, they are loose cannons, Malcolm. You control them by force of personality and morality. Vampires only understand fear, and power.”

“You are the lover of at least two vampires, Ms. Blake. How can you say that?”

I shrugged. “Maybe because I *am* dating two vampires.”

“If that is what being Jean-Claude’s human servant has taught you, Ms. Blake, then it is sad things he is teaching you.”

“He is the Master of the City of St. Louis, Malcolm, not you. You, and your church, go unmolested by his tolerance.”

“I go unmolested because the Church grew powerful under the previous Master of the City, and by the time Jean-Claude rose to power, we were hundreds. He did not have the power to bring me and my people to heel.”

I sipped coffee and thought about my next answer, because I couldn’t argue with him. He was probably right. “Regardless of how we got where we are, Malcolm, you have several hundred vampires in this city. Jean-Claude let you have them because he thought you were blood-oathing them. We learned in October that you aren’t. Which means that the vamps with you are cut off from an awful lot of their potential power. I’m okay with that, I guess. Their choice, if they understand that it is a choice, but no blood oath means that they are not mystically tied to anyone but the vamp that made them. You, I’m told, do the deed, most of the time. Though the church deacons do recruit sometimes.”

“How our church is organized is not your concern.”

“Yes,” I said, “it is.”