

DEAD MEN DON'T WASH

ALLY BLUE

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Chapter One

The second Luciano Octogano spotted Kermit strolling down the private beach from their *palazzo*, he knew he was screwed.

Again. And not in the way he generally enjoyed.

Luc groaned as Kermit splashed into the shallow turquoise water and waded toward where he'd been swimming naked in the warm, gentle Gulf of Mexico swells. "All right. What have you stolen this time?"

Kermit's brown eyes widened in horribly false wounded innocence. "Is that any way to greet your Ke-Ke after three weeks away?" He took a long swallow of his already partially depleted drink, then glanced down at his own sleek, beautiful body. "I wore your favorite outfit, and you haven't even noticed."

Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, as the natives of this delightfully quaint land would say.

"Oh, I noticed all right." Swimming closer, Luc got his feet under him and stood, the better to tower over his much shorter, much slimmer lover. He reached out and snapped the elastic of the deep red thong that set off both Kermit's copper skin tone and his manly assets to full advantage. "You only wear this when you wish to charm me into protecting you from whoever you've angered with your little hobby. As if you really need to use such underhanded tactics to make me do your bidding." Luc plucked the Mojito that wasn't half empty from Kermit's hand and took a sip. It was cold and strong, with just the right amount of mint, and tasted good in the south Florida summer heat. "So tell me, my little thief. Whose delicate toes have you trodden on this time?"

Kermit flashed the evil grin that had made Luc fall for him in the first place. "A very powerful, very beautiful woman who is very angry with me right now." Kermit pressed close, slid his free arm around Luc's waist and gave his bare ass a squeeze. "I missed you, Luc."

"Hmm. Ditto." Tilting his head down, Luc took the kiss Kermit offered. Kermit's tongue was cold and slick and tasted of mint. Luc smiled when Kermit's hand slid between his legs to cup his balls. "You're trying to distract me, darling. Why?"

With a deep sigh, Kermit leaned against Luc's chest. He let go of Luc's testicles and slid his arm around Luc's waist. "I think I'm in big trouble, Don Luci."

Unease settled in the pit of Luc's stomach. Kermit hadn't called him that in ages, not since he'd tried to steal Luc's priceless set of guest soaps from Atlantis—the vanished island civilization, not the Caribbean resort—and ended up working for him instead.

*That* hadn't lasted long. Kermit possessed many talents, but performing as a personal assistant was not one of them. He'd ceased using the tongue-in-cheek "Don Luci" moniker when he'd moved from Luc's office to his bed more than two years ago.

Which made it particularly disturbing to hear it now. What on earth had the boy done, that he thought he needed the Octogano family's Miami mob connections to protect him?

Luc took a deep swallow of Mojito for courage, then wound the fingers of his free hand into Kermit's short black hair and tugged his head back, the better to look into those huge brown eyes. "Ke-Ke. Tell me what you took, and from whom."

Kermit bit his lip. "Um. The Dead Man Hanging."

He didn't need to say anything else. Luc shut his eyes. *Great Cthulhu give me strength.*

"Luc?" Kermit's fingers dug into Luc's back. His voice sounded distinctly worried. "Are you mad?"

Luc fought the urge to laugh. He'd gone into this relationship knowing all about his lover's passion for collecting rare soaps, usually by less-than-legal means. After all, they'd first met when Kermit climbed through Luc's bathroom window at three in the morning to steal his soap. It was a strange but mostly harmless hobby, especially since Kermit was a gifted cat burglar and had only ever been caught once, by Luc. And that was only because Luc, being a shapeshifter, was stronger and faster than a normal human even when not in his octopus form.

The Dead Man Hanging, though? That could be a problem. *No one* took the world's rarest soap from under the very nose of its enormously rich, blue-blooded, paranoid vampire owner. No one.

Except Kermit. The lovely, light-fingered darling had done what no other soap thief on this planet had ever managed.

She'd be coming after him. No doubt about it. Women who turned the corpses of their pre-vampire husbands into soap-on-a-rope were not the sorts to let go of said spouse-soaps without a fight.

Opening his eyes again, Luc lifted his glass to his lips and finished most of his Mojito in a few deep gulps, because he was going to need more strength than even Great Cthulhu could give him. "I'm not angry, sweetheart. But you are indeed in big trouble."

Kermit gazed up at him without anywhere near the level of terror which Luc felt the situation deserved. "You'll protect me, won't you, Don Luci?" Dipping his head, he planted a soft, cool kiss on Luc's collarbone. "I couldn't help it, you know. I *needed* that one."

Oh, Luc knew *that* very well. His beautiful, talented, entirely frustrating Ke-Ke had been after the Dead Man ever since before Luc met him. Luc let out an involuntary moan when Kermit's wicked little tongue dug into the spot on his throat that always made him shiver. "Darling, why didn't you stake her when you had the chance?"

Kermit raised his head, frowning. "Huh?"

"I'd always heard Madame Gabriella kept the Dead Man in her coffin with her during the day while she slept. Surely you would have had to open the coffin to get it." Luc ran his hand down Kermit's back and over the thin strip of his thong to cup one firm buttock in his palm. Oh, the Old Ones knew he ached to sink his cock—or possibly a tentacle, Ke-Ke liked that—into that luscious ass. "Madame Gabriella is over seven hundred years old, you know. You could've been killed. Why would you put yourself in that kind of danger?"

One dark brow arched upward. "The Dead Man Hanging is one of a kind. It's priceless."

"Kermit..."

"Luc, stop. I was never in any danger. Madame G didn't sleep with the Dead Man in her coffin. She kept it in a glass cabinet, with alarms and shit just like anyone else would."

Relieved, Luc hugged Kermit closer, his hand spread possessively over his lover's delectable rump. "Good. I don't like it when you put yourself in mortal danger."

A sweet smile spread over Kermit's face. "I love you too."

Luc's heart lurched. They should talk. They should work out a plan to face the extremely dangerous preternatural forces Madame Gabriella would no doubt send across the Atlantic to reclaim her soap. But Kermit's body was warm and tempting in Luc's arms, and the abundance of slightly-mint-and-lime-flavored rum currently hitting his brain told him he should take advantage of the situation while they were both still alive to enjoy it.

Tipping his face downward, Luc nuzzled the thick, sun-warmed hair at Kermit's temple. "Hoffstadt," he murmured.

Beside him, a faint *pop* and a whiff of sulfur announced the arrival of his butler. He held out his nearly empty glass without looking. Hoffstadt took it, claws clicking on the glass. "Ssssir?" he hissed in Kermit's direction, reaching a scaly hand for his glass as well.

Kermit handed it over with a shudder. Fighting laughter, Luc petted the poor dear's back. "Thank you, Hoffstadt. Please warn me immediately if anyone approaches the estate from any direction, but otherwise we're not to be disturbed until we come inside for dinner."

From the corner of his eye, Luc saw Hoffstadt's horned head bob. "Yessss, Masster."

"Thank you, that will be all." Hoffstadt vanished with a sound like a flame going out. Kermit shuddered again, and Luc laughed out loud this time. "Darling, how many times have I told you, you needn't fear Hoffstadt? He's bound to me. He cannot harm me or anyone else unless I specifically order him to, and anyway he's only a *minor* demon."

"He gives me the creeps." Kermit pressed closer and squeezed Luc's ass with both hands. "What're you going to do about that? Gonna make me feel better, Luci?"

By way of answer, Luc ripped Kermit's thong in half. Kermit squeaked in surprise. Grinning, Luc tore away the scraps of red Lycra. "The chair, love."

Kermit's breath stuttered. His dark eyes went hot and heavy. He stumbled backward, turned, tripped, recovered and splashed through the water toward a large rock near the shore.

Luc waited until Kermit was out of sight on the other side before ducking beneath the surface and shifting into his octopus form. He jetted toward the special chaise lounge he'd had installed in the lee of the false boulder just for these sorts of situations. It didn't help if the waves were very large, but on more average days the boulder kept poor Kermit from getting a faceful of seawater every time he cried out in ecstasy. And the reclining chair was quite handy for satisfying Kermit's kink for tentacle sex.

Such a dirty boy. Luc *did* adore him.

When Luc came around the boulder, Kermit was already sprawled on his back on the chair's waterproof padding, his legs spread wide enough to hang off either side and his naked rear poking through the specially designed opening in the seat. His cock, thick and fully erect, swayed in the gentle current.

If Luc's octopus form had lips, he would have licked them. By Nyarlathotep's insane flutists, his boy had the most gorgeous prick in the western hemisphere. The temptation to take it into his cephalopod mouth was almost overwhelming.

The memory of the last time he'd tried that stopped him. Kermit hadn't allowed him within touching distance for weeks. Lesson learned: penises and octopus beaks most definitely did not mix.

Luc swam forward, hanging just above the sand. When he drew close enough, he slid a tentacle over Kermit's tempting posterior. Kermit's entire body bucked when Luc's octopus appendage snaked between his legs, wound around his cock and squeezed. Another tentacle around Kermit's hips served to hold him in place so Luc could plunge a third muscular arm inside him.

Kermit's cry came right through the water, muffled but clear. His hole clenched hard around Luc's tentacle. Luc stroked Kermit's cock, toyed with the sweet little slit in the head and pulsed the tentacle in Kermit's ass in... out... in again, with just the barest, gentlest movement, letting his body adjust.

He'd need to, because when Luc shifted back to human—well, *mostly* human—he planned to fuck Kermit until he forgot his own name.

Within seconds, Kermit had his hands hooked behind his knees—the better to spread his legs up and apart—and his body rocked so much in a quest for more friction that the surface of the water became agitated into bubbles and foam. Luc

could barely see through it. Which simply would not do. Even as an octopus, he loved to watch Kermit's face as he lost himself in pleasure.

The Octoganos were a long-lived line, and though Luc was still quite young by their reckoning, he was decidedly not by that of the human world. He'd had many decades to perfect shifting back to (mostly) human while retaining certain of his cephalopod traits. The fact that he'd had so many opportunities to practice the partial shift in the midst of sex said something about the surprising number of human men who loved a partner with extra, not-so-human appendages.

Kermit let out a low, tortured moan when Luc rose from the water to kneel between his legs, one tentacle-arm still deep inside him and another sprouting long, lithe finger-tentacles to caress his prick. His body shook. "Luc, oh yeah, love it when you do that."

Grinning, Luc wound a thin, fleshy whip around the base of Kermit's balls tight enough to turn them taut and red. "Sometimes I think you wouldn't love me if I were truly human, darling." He gave Kermit's testicles a tug.

Kermit, clearly pushed past spoken language, merely glared, but his expression said enough. Of course, Luc already knew perfectly well that his Ke-Ke would love him whether he possessed the talent for this particular brand of kink or not.

Luc expanded his tentacle just so to press Kermit's gland. Kermit cried out. "Oh, God. Luci."

"Mmmm. You're beautiful like this, my dear." Trying not to think about his own so-hard-it-hurt prick, Luc slipped the very tip of one slender whip inside Kermit's cock. Merely an inch or so, as that was about Kermit's limit and being kicked in the face was not a turn-on for Luc.

Not that he didn't work doggedly and daily to push his boy's limit in this case. He wriggled the little tentacle in another centimeter or so.

Kermit squealed and swung one foot, only missing Luc's head because he ducked away out of instinct and, it must be said, plenty of practice. "Luuuuuc!"

For Luc, that single drawn-out syllable held a plethora of various and occasionally contradictory pleas. Luckily, being both human and not meant he could oblige most of them.

Thank Azathoth Kermit was flexible, adventurous and unafraid of double penetration.

A swift thought sent more of the lubricant Luc had trained his tentacles to produce oozing through the skin of the one up Kermit's ass. Kermit moaned and squirmed, forcing Luc to tighten his grip on the boy's prick. "Be still, love. You'll hurt yourself."

The look he got in return told him precisely what Kermit thought of *that*. Luc laughed out loud for sheer joy, then bent forward and planted a kiss on the head of Kermit's cock to stop him from speaking. "The chair, if you please, Ke-Ke."

Kermit's face lit up. Dropping his legs so they floated in the water, he undid the hook on his right that allowed the plastic straps of the chair's lower portion to fall away from the frame, giving Luc unfettered access to his body. Kermit thought—and Luc agreed—this was a most clever way to design a halfway-underwater sex chair in which a partially shifted wereoctopus might make sweet, kinky love to his human mate.

Once Kermit had the free-floating chair parts secured out of the way, the only things supporting his lower body were Luc's tentacles wound around his cock and balls and lodged deep inside his ass. Luc loved the feeling of power that gave him. He scooted closer, kicking up a cloud of white sand with the scuff of his knees across the seabed. Kermit's feet came to rest on his shoulders, his bottom inches from Luc's groin.

Concentrating as hard as he could past the waves of need clouding his mind, Luc sprouted a smaller tentacle from the large, thick one currently penetrating Kermit. The new one shot forward and snaked inside next to its brother. Together, the two flexed, stretched, massaged, worked the already obedient muscles looser and looser.

"Oh, oh my God." Kermit raised his arms above his head and grasped the chair's frame in a white-knuckled grip. "Yeah, fuck me now, Luci. Both of you."

*Both of you.* Yes. Smiling, Luc held Kermit open and plunged his prick into Kermit's ass.

Kermit's body arched, his mouth falling open in a silent cry. Luc took advantage of Kermit's distraction to inch the tiny whip a little bit deeper into his cock. Then

Kermit's hole squeezed his prick and his tentacles both almost to the point of pain, and everything but the need to fuck *right now* evaporated from Luc's brain.

Clearing his blurred vision with a shake of his head, Luc stiffened his tentacles inside Kermit and pounded into him like he hadn't felt the clutch of his lover's body around him in, oh, three weeks.

Apparently three weeks was two weeks and six days too long for Kermit to go without sex as well, because it couldn't have been more than two minutes before he came, every muscle in his body tight and his cries echoing in the damp, salty air. The force of his orgasm dislodged Luc's tentacle from inside his cock, but he didn't seem to notice. His semen alternately dissipated into the Gulf and hit him in the face as his hips bucked in and out of the water while Luc's tentacles stroked him.

The sight of the pearly droplets against Kermit's dark skin and the smell of his seed pushed Luc over the edge. He shoved his prick to the root inside Kermit and let his climax take him. Great Cthulhu, it felt so incredibly *good*. Inside Kermit's body, Luc's own tentacle wound around his shaft and squeezed him from base to tip in an undulating wave. He shuddered, and Kermit yipped.

"Okay. No jerking yourself off inside me." Kermit's voice emerged rough and breathless, but amused. He gave Luc a gentle shove with one foot. "Get your arms back and help me up."

Luc scrambled for his still-scattered wits. Shapeshifter or no, his post-sex mental recovery time was slower than Kermit's. Of course, *everyone's* recovery time was slower than Kermit's. No one else could jump up and be functional again within seconds the way he could. It was eerie.

Carefully withdrawing his tentacles, Luc flipped the switch in his mind from "octopus" to "human" and his arms returned to normal. He slid his cock from Kermit's hole, grasped his hands and tugged. Dropping his feet from Luc's shoulders, Kermit floated to him, wound both legs around his waist and looped his arms around his neck. Luc held him close, one hand cupping his ass and the other spread open on his back.

Smiling, Kermit tilted his head to press a somewhat semen-flavored kiss to Luc's lips. "You always fuck me so good, Luci." His tongue came out to lick off the bit of spunk he'd left on the corner of Luc's mouth. "I love you."

"I love you too, darling." Luc kissed him again. His lips, his chin, his adorable little nose. "It's wonderful to have you back home. Even if you *have* gotten yourself into a dreadful fix."

"You'll think of something. You always do." Kermit's smile widened, his eyes sparkling. "Let's go inside. I'm *starved*."

It was close to dinnertime. Luc set Kermit down, and the two of them headed toward the *palazzo* together. He tried not to think about just how much trouble Kermit had gotten himself into, but he couldn't help it.

Trouble was coming. And he had a terrible feeling that this time, Kermit's faith in his ability to stop it might be misplaced.

Chapter Two

Madame Gabriella's goon, if one wanted to call him that, arrived that very night.

He was not what Luc had expected.

Hoffstadt popped into the air next the hot tub where Luc and Kermit were relaxing, startling a frightened yip from poor Kermit. "Your pardon, Massster. You assssked me to warn you if anyone approached the essstate. A man isssss driving toward ussss in a car. He will arrive at the gate in approximately five minutesssssss. Shall I kill him for you?"

"A man, you say?" Luc reached for his wine and took a sip. "Human, then?"

"Yesssss, Massster."

"Not a vampire?"

"Or a werewolf? Or a dragon?" Kermit shrugged when Luc shot him an incredulous stare. "She has dragon shifter bodyguards. Ghouls and demons, too. *Major ones,*" he added with a sour look at Hoffstadt, who ignored him.

Luc raised his eyebrows. "Surely she didn't send a ghoul."

Hoffstadt shook his head. "He issss a ssssimple human, Massster." He flashed a rare smile, showing wicked fangs. "I shall be mosssst happy to kill him for you, Sssssir."

Luc sighed. "That won't be necessary. When he arrives, show him in. Have him wait in the downstairs parlor. Lock him in, then come tell me he's here."

"Of coursssse, Massster." Hoffstadt vanished, his expression distinctly disappointed.

Kermit eyed the puff of yellowish smoke with distaste. "You're sure he can't kill anyone without your say-so?"

"I'm positive, love."

"Not that I don't agree with him, in this case." Picking up his wineglass, Kermit took a healthy swallow of his favorite Australian shiraz. "You realize that whoever this dude is, Madame Gabriella sent him."

"Yes, dear, I believe we were just discussing that very thing. Surely the

discussion wasn't *that* oblique." Luc took up his own glass again and sipped his Pinot Noir.

Kermit kicked his thigh underwater. "Smartass. We're talking about Madame G here. The *vampire*?"

Luc nodded and sipped his wine.

Kermit stared at him as if he'd sprouted Hoffstadt-style horns instead of his usual tentacles. "Did you forget about the part where I stole the Dead Man and that means she's gonna be after my hot ass in a bad way?"

"I didn't forget."

A pout drew down the corners of Kermit's mouth. "Well, if you don't care about *my* ass, maybe you care about yours. She's gonna be after you too, you know. Which means you might want to rethink letting your demon kill this guy."

Shaking his head, Luc set his wine down and pulled Kermit onto his lap. "Let's think about this logically, shall we?" He kissed Kermit's cheek. "The road outside leads nowhere but to our estate. Whoever this man is, if Madame Gabriella has indeed sent him, then he obviously knows you're here."

Kermit cut him a dark look. "That sounds like a really good reason to kill him to me."

"I beg to differ, love. If we kill him, she'll simply send someone else." Luc caressed Kermit's firm thigh where it lay across his own. "Possibly someone a bit *more* than human, yes?"

The way Kermit's face drained of color said he got Luc's point. He swallowed.

Luc turned Kermit's face to his and kissed him. "Go inside, darling. When Hoffstadt brings him to me, I'll talk to him and see what he actually knows, about you and about the Dead Man."

Kermit seemed less than placated. "What if he knows all about it? What if he's gonna leave here and tell Madame G where I am?"

"Well, there's always Hoffstadt's option, if we have no other choice. He's always wanted to kill someone."

Kermit narrowed his eyes. Luc widened his and smiled for good measure. Kermit

let out a put-upon sigh. "All right, we'll play it your way." He rose to his feet, his wine glass still in his hand. "But I swear, I'm only trusting you with my *life* like this because you've saved it so many times before."

Only Kermit could say such a thing without a hint of irony. Luc laughed in spite of the gravity of the situation. "Thank you for your confidence, my dear. Now go on inside." He gave Kermit's bare ass a smack as he climbed out of the hot tub.

Luc had barely gotten out himself and pulled on his robe when Hoffstadt materialized before him. "Your vissssitor hassss arrived, Masssster. He isssss locked in the parlor, assss you requesssted."

"Thank you Hoffstadt. Bring him up here. You may teleport him. It wouldn't hurt to unsettle him a bit, I think." Luc glanced around and spotted the extra bottle still sitting beside the hot tub. "Oh, but first, take Kermit's shiraz to him, if you would, and bring a bottle of chardonnay and a glass for our guest."

Hoffstadt smirked around his fangs. "Shall I drug it, Sssssir?"

"No. But bring me the vial. I'll slip it to him if I feel the need."

Hoffstadt didn't quite roll his eyes, but Luc got the feeling it was a near thing. "Yessss, Masssster." He vanished, then reappeared a moment later with a decent bottle of California chardonnay and a large glass. He set both on the table beside the tub and handed Luc a small vial of white powder, which he slipped into the pocket of his robe. When Hoffstadt disappeared this time, he came back with a slender young man clad in an unfortunate mix of denim and tweed clinging to his arm. "Mr. Sherlock Holmessss, Masssster."

Luc raised his eyebrows. Hoffstadt hitched up one red shoulder as if to say *I don't know either*. The one claiming to be Holmes let go of Hoffstadt, crossed his arms and eyed Luc with a level of cool calculation which would have been much more intimidating if he were older, taller and less blond and baby-faced. At least his blue eyes were pale enough to come across as cold chips of ice instead of limpid pools.

Sensing that laughter would not do anyone any good, Luc schooled his face into a pleasant smile and held out his hand. "Mr. Holmes. A pleasure."

"I doubt that." Holmes—great Cthulhu, that was distracting, but what else was Luc to call him?—gave Luc's hand a perfunctory shake. That apparently unpleasant

task accomplished, he clasped his hands behind his back, parked himself six inches from Luc's chest and stared up at him with impressive aplomb for a man who'd just been teleported by a demon. "Mr. Octogano, I'll get straight to the point. Your lover, one Kermit Mendez, stole a certain extremely valuable artifact from a certain French noblewoman. She has engaged my services to recover this artifact. To that end, I'm afraid I shall have to ask Mr. Mendez to return the Dead Man forthwith."

Luc's urge to laugh, unfortunately, grew stronger through this little speech. By the Great God Azathoth, this boy was adorable. Luc wondered if he truly believed himself to be Sherlock Holmes, and if Madame Gabriella had actually *hired* him. He barely looked old enough to drive, never mind solve international crimes.

He knew about Kermit and the Dead Man, however, which meant Luc needed to take him seriously.

Biting the insides of his cheeks to control his mirth, Luc gave a solemn nod. "I see." He glanced at Hoffstadt, who still hovered at Holmes's right shoulder. "That will be all, Hoffstadt, thank you."

"Very good, Masssster." Hoffstadt glowered at Holmes, steam rising from his nostrils. "Call if you need anything... disssspossed of." He vanished with a rather louder *poof* than usual. Yellow smoke drifted across the desk.

Holmes brushed at his tweed jacket, one fair eyebrow arched skyward. "So difficult to find good help these days."

*Do not laugh. He may look like a precious little boy playing detective, but if Madame Gabriella indeed hired him, he could cause real trouble for you and Kermit.* Luc gave the maybe-a-detective a bland smile. "Don't mind Hoffstadt. Butlering is dreadfully dull work for a demon." He gestured toward the table. "Please, sit down. Would you like a glass of wine?"

The sardonic eyebrow rose higher. "No, thank you. I'd prefer not to be drugged tonight, if it's all the same to you."

Luc resisted the urge to stick his hand in the pocket where he'd put the vial of sleeping powder. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Mr. Holmes."

"Really." The young man strode past Luc, glancing down at his robe as he passed. "I think you do, Mr. Octogano. You see, the right pocket of your robe—silk, by the way, from Tibet, very very nice—hangs just slightly lower than the left

pocket. Do you know why I think that is?"

Luc widened his eyes and shrugged. The corners of Holmes's mouth tipped up in a way that made Luc want to violate him. Luc licked his lips.

"I think," Holmes continued, his pale eyes a smidge less cold now, "that your right pocket hangs lower than your left because it contains a vial of sleeping powder. You had your demon butler bring it to you in case you needed to, shall we say, *take care* of me. You wanted to hear what I had to say, but you wanted a way to dispose of me if the need arose. Correct?"

Luc wasn't sure if telling the truth was a good idea or not, but in his years of operating on the shady side of life he'd learned that once a person suspected you might drug them, you didn't stand much of a chance of actually drugging them. He grinned. "Correct. You're very clever, Mr. Holmes."

"Of course I am. I'm the world's greatest detective, or hadn't you heard?" With a completely enchanting smirk in Luc's direction, Holmes sauntered over to the table and inspected the bottle of chardonnay. "Hm. Nice vintage. Unopened, too. I believe I'll have some after all, thank you."

"Excellent. I'll just open..." He trailed off, amused, as Holmes produced a corkscrew from his jacket pocket. "Never mind. I see you have it."

"Yes, I always carry my own." The theme from Barnaby Jones drifted from Holmes's pocket. "Oh, that's my phone. I'll need you to get that, Octogano. It's for you."

Bemused, Luc sidled up to the detective (looking more likely by the minute to be an actual detective, if not the actual Sherlock Holmes) and slid a hand into his pocket to fetch the phone. An iPhone, of course. The latest generation. Luc decided Holmes must've been watching the BBC, since Doyle's original creation most definitely did not carry a smart phone.

Thumbing on the phone, Luc held it to his ear. "Mr. Holmes's answering service, how may I direct your call?"

Holmes whipped around, the wine bottle in one hand and the cork in the other, and pinned him with an icy glare. Luc winked at him. Holmes turned away, a most fetching blush climbing up his neck into his cheeks. "I *said* it was for you," he muttered. Luc ignored the grumble and the rather cute pout, as whoever had

inexplicably called him on Sherlock Holmes's phone was now speaking.

"Mr. Octogano, I presume."

The second he heard that voice—low, purring, seductive, distinctly vampiric—all other thoughts fled Luc's mind. He cleared his throat. "Indeed. And you must be Madame Gabriella."

"Very good. I'm glad you're as intelligent as I'd been told you were."

He heard the subtle compulsion woven into her words, but it wouldn't affect him as long as he kept his wits about him. Not for the first time, he thanked all the Old Ones for his gods-given ability to resist vampire thrall. "Yes, quite. How may I assist you, Madame?"

She laughed, the sound sharp and without humor. "I believe Mr. Holmes has explained the situation already, sir. I require the return of the Dead Man Hanging. You are a shapeshifter. You have the strength to take it from your nasty little *thief* of a lover." She paused. "Ah. No offense meant, of course."

"None taken," Luc answered, lips twitching.

She plunged back into the dispensing of orders. "You will take it from him immediately. You will give it to Mr. Holmes, who will bring it to me." Her voice dropped down low. "Do you understand, Mr. Octogano?"

This time, the imperative in her voice beat through the phone in waves even Luc had trouble resisting. He allowed his struggle to come through in his answer. "I understand."

"Excellent."

Luc glanced sidelong toward Holmes, who was chugging chardonnay directly from the bottle. Probably afraid the glass had already been coated with sleeping power. Ah, well. Perhaps he shouldn't ask, but... "Madame, if you'll pardon my boldness, what led you to retain the services of... er, Mr. Holmes?"

"Sir, Sherlock Holmes is the world's finest detective! You are a sophisticated man, I would have thought you would know such a thing." Surprise—and not a little smugness—radiated through the phone. "I am well aware of what you expected, Mr. Octogano. But this is two thousand and ten. I believe someone in Miami might notice a dragon hovering around your residence, yes? And it is *murder*

to get any of my major demons or ghouls across the pond these days. Airlines ask so many uncomfortable questions.”

Luc thought it prudent not to point out that his estate lay two hours north of Miami. He thought it even more prudent not to destroy her delusions about the young man she'd sent to retrieve her soap. After all, he *had* tracked Kermit here. “Yes, of course, you're correct. He truly is the best detective the world has ever seen.”

It wasn't even a lie, really. That very thing had indeed been said about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's creation.

“I'm most happy to find you so cooperative, Mr. Octogano.” Madame Gabriella's tone went from merely seductive to something worthy of an Ocean Drive club on Saturday night. “I hope there are no hard feelings. I'd love for you to visit me one day... Luciano.”

*Do not laugh. She is a seven hundred year old vampire who knows where you live.*

With a Herculean effort, Luc kept his voice steady and even managed to sound flattered. “No hard feelings at all, Madame. Perhaps we shall indeed meet one day.” *In another life, in another dimension. Or not.*

“I shall remain hopeful, sir. And now if you'll pardon me, it's time for my bedtime snack. Good night.”

The connection broke before Luc could say another word. Trying to tell himself he hadn't heard the frightened voice in the background—even though he knew damn well he had—Luc sauntered over to where Holmes sprawled in one of the deck chairs with the wine bottle propped on one knee and handed him the phone. “She really needs to get out of the castle more often.”

Holmes narrowed his eyes. “You don't believe I'm really Sherlock Holmes.”

“Well...”

He shrugged and stuck his phone back in his pocket. “Doesn't matter. I know who I am. The insignificant opinions of others do not concern me.”

An idea struck Luc. Pulling up another chair, he sat down and helped himself to more Pinot Noir from the bottle he'd set on the table. “Mr. Holmes, I assume you

know the location of Madame Gabriella's daytime resting place, yes?"

"Of course." A grin worthy of a shark spread over Holmes's face. "She didn't *tell* me, because she is not a stupid woman. But neither am I a stupid man." He swigged from the wine bottle and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, an unconsciously sexy move that had Luc discreetly adjusting himself. "I take very, very few paying jobs, Octogano. When I do, I *will* know every detail about the person paying me, or I won't take the job."

"A most reasonable attitude." Lifting his glass, Luc sipped his wine and studied Holmes in what he hoped was not too blatant a manner. He wondered if Holmes would be amenable to staying the night. He and Kermit would look so lovely together. There was no question Kermit would do it. Pretty little blonds topped his one-night favorites list. "I have a proposition for you, Mr. Holmes."

"Oh, really?" Holmes set the wine bottle on the table and leaned forward, elbows on his knees and all his attention focused on Luc. "Do tell."

Luc took in the wicked sparkle in Holmes's blue eyes and the decidedly rakish tilt of his smile and mused that perhaps they'd start off right here in the hot tub, then move to the tremendous king-plus bed just inside since they'd evidently need a space large enough for three.

He gave himself a mental shake. *Sex later. Focus.* He flashed his very best dazzling smile. "Whatever Madame Gabriella is paying you to retrieve her soap, I'll triple it if you'll find someone to stake her."

"I take it you don't intend to strong-arm your boy into giving over the Dead Man, then." Holmes didn't seem surprised.

"I do not, no." From the corner of his eye, Luc caught a hint of movement in the shadows at the entrance to the bedroom suite. He raised his voice just a bit. "I don't think Madame Gabriella realizes how difficult dear Kermit can be to live with when he's denied what he wants."

Holmes actually laughed out loud, showing deep dimples in both porcelain cheeks. Luckily for him, the laughter started *before* Kermit stormed out into the open. He was a confident person, but no man likes being laughed at while naked.

"I am *not* difficult." Kermit smacked Luc on the back of the head—not hard, but hard enough to make his point—then aimed his death glare at Holmes. "You can

just tell Madame G—“

“Relax, Mr. Mendez. I’ll tell her I have her soap, but it won’t be the truth.” Holmes’s sweet, plump lips curved into a purely evil smirk as he met Luc’s gaze. “You don’t need to pay me, Wat— I mean, Octogano.”

“Luc.” He grinned. “Please.”

The evil smirk melted into something blatantly seductive. “Luc, then. I’ll take your case because I love a challenge.” Holmes lifted the chardonnay bottle. “Salud.”

Laughing, Luc picked up his glass and clinked it against Holmes’s bottle. “Salud.”

The two of them drank while Kermit watched, frowning. “Luci, what’s going on?”

Holmes glanced at Kermit and back at Luc, a question in his eyes. Luc looked up at Kermit, noted the hunger lurking beneath his rapidly waning petulance—not to mention the less-flaccid-by-the-second cock hanging between his sleek thighs—and gave Holmes a nod. “Go right ahead.”

A predatory grin lit Holmes’s face. He shed his jacket and rose to his feet. Kermit watched him with a mix of nervousness and rising lust. Gliding up to Kermit, Holmes wrapped an arm around his hips, slid a hand into his hair and tilted his face for a slow, deep, open-mouthed kiss.

Now, *that* was sexy. Kermit’s bronze skin against Holmes’s paleness, Holmes’s blond curls clenched in Kermit’s fist, the familiar little whimpers that bled from Kermit’s mouth when Holmes’s palm skated over his bare ass. Luc shrugged out of his robe, wrapped a hand around his stiffening shaft and sat back to enjoy the show.

Eventually, the kiss broke. Kermit, looking dazed, reached a hand toward Luc and wiggled his fingers. Holmes grinned. “Aren’t you going to join us, Luc?”

Luc didn’t need to be asked twice. He pushed to his feet, closed the distance between himself and his boys with a couple of strides and wrapped an arm around each of them. Beaming, Kermit raised his face for a kiss, which Luc gladly gave him. “Love you, sweetheart,” he whispered against Kermit’s mouth. Kermit smiled.

Turning to Holmes, Luc bent to nuzzle his soft cheek. "So. Shall we stay here in the hot tub, or retire to the bed?"

"Mmm. I think lying down sooner rather than later might be a good thing for your Kermit here. Oh, and Luc?" Holmes twisted to capture Luc's lips in a hard, swift kiss. "Call me Sherlock."

### Chapter Three

Holmes—Sherlock, rather, as he reminded Luc relentlessly until he remembered—proved to be tireless and innovative in bed. Also on the floor, in the shower, and, as the sun rose over the Gulf a couple of days later, in the ocean. He even managed to talk Kermit into taking one of Luc's finger-tentacles deep enough into his cock to stimulate his prostate from the inside.

Of course, Sherlock's prick up Kermit's ass might've had more to do with it than his admittedly persuasive growl in Kermit's ear. Luc didn't care if Sherlock used fairy dust, as long as the end result was him finally being allowed to caress the inner walls of Kermit's cock with one whip-thin, sensitive tentacle.

Luc rewarded the detective by allowing his prick to turn tentacular while buried balls-deep in Sherlock's body. The dear boy's climax would have woken the neighbors, if they'd had any.

The down side of all that fabulous sex was that all three of them overslept on Saturday, even Luc. Normally, it wouldn't have been a problem. But tonight was Kermit's monthly SASS meeting, and he was less than pleased with the possibility of being late. No matter how impressed Luc might be with his darling's daring theft, no one would appreciate the resulting potentially-sudsy trophy—if not the actual crime—quite like the Soap Aficionados Society of the South. And dear Kermit did love basking in the adoration of his fellow soap-lovers.

"Hurry, Luc." Kermit, strapped in the front seat of Luc's Rolls Royce, chewed on his thumbnail and drummed the fingers of his free hand on the locked briefcase handcuffed to his wrist. "We're gonna be late."

"I'm going as fast as I can without killing us all." Luc shot Kermit a half-amused, half-exasperated look. "Relax, darling. I don't believe we're likely to miss anything but gossip and cupcakes."

"I like cupcakes." The pout remained plastered to Kermit's face, but he settled into his seat and stopped biting his nails.

In the backseat, Sherlock waved a dismissive hand in the air. "Never fear, Kermit. According to my calculations, the route I've chosen should get us to the Hamley Community Center in time for cupcakes." He leaned forward to run a hand through Kermit's hair. "You may miss the gossip, though. So sorry."

Kermit turned his head and glared. Sherlock gave him a cheeky grin and a wink.

Kermit faced forward again with a roll of his eyes. “Shut up. Who said you could come anyway?”

No one answered *that*, since they all knew Kermit himself had practically begged Sherlock to “come with us, baby, I have the world’s rarest soap in my briefcase and I need you to help Luci protect me.” Catching Luc’s eye, Sherlock hitched a thumb in Kermit’s direction and mouthed, *he wants me*. Luc stifled a laugh.

They arrived at the meeting not only in time for cupcakes, but in time for Kermit to speak to his many friends and to introduce Sherlock to a gaggle of admiring women and rich queens of all ages before President Maddy Arbuckle called the meeting to order. As always, the group’s finds ranged from the mundane to the surprisingly fascinating—Monty Salisbury and his lover had managed to procure a bar of specially milled Italian moisturizing soap left in a hotel room by Madonna back in the eighties—but Kermit topped them all with the Dead Man. Everyone in the room knew what it was and most of them would’ve given a major organ to possess it themselves.

Of course, very few would be willing to sneak into the daytime resting place of one of the world’s most powerful vampires to get it, as Kermit had done. And not one of them would have been able to pull it off. Perhaps it was wrong, but Luc felt absurdly proud of his thieving love for what he’d accomplished. Especially now that Sherlock had called in a few favors and set some very bad, very dangerous people on Madame Gabriella’s trail. Luc soothed any pangs of conscience he might have had over the Madame’s impending death—a rather more permanent one than her current undeath—by reminding himself how much safer the world would be without her.

After the official business of the meeting concluded and everyone had admired Kermit and his soap, the group adjourned to the community center’s expansive beachside deck and swimming pool for cocktails, music, dancing, swimming and more cupcakes. As usual, it only took a round or two of margaritas before someone suggested karaoke and the party kicked into high gear.

“Who knew the retiree population could be quite so... debauched.” Sherlock, hanging on to the edge of the pool’s deep end, waved his mostly-empty pool-safe plastic martini glass in the general direction of the three drunken men belting out *Sway* while several couples did just that in the space between the tables. “Speaking of which, Luc, don’t look now, but I fear you’re about to lose dear Kermit’s heart to our friend Monty.”

Luc twisted around to glance at Kermit, who was indeed flirting shamelessly with the randy old bastard. Snickering into his fourth bourbon, Luc kicked at the water where his feet dangled, splashing Sherlock in the face. “Kermit only wants him for his soap. Don’t know if you noticed, darling, but it has Madonna’s pubic hairs in it.”

Sherlock blinked, glanced over at Monty and Kermit and wrinkled his nose. “Ugh.”

Privately, Luc agreed, but he didn’t have a chance to say so because at that moment Kermit drew away from Monty and walked over to the karaoke machine. Luc stared in shock. His Kermit loved to dance and party, but he never, *ever* sang.

“Oh my,” Luc murmured, fingering the handle of the briefcase Kermit had transferred to him before hitting the dance floor. “Didn’t realize he’d had *that* many margaritas.”

“Really?” Sherlock wound a hand around the inside of Luc’s leg. “Another bourbon or two and maybe we can talk *you* into a regaling us with a tune, hm?”

“Hush, you.” Leaning down, Luc planted a kiss on the top of Sherlock’s head before returning his attention to his lover. “Pay attention. I’m dying to know what he’s going to sing.”

At the karaoke machine beside the bar, Kermit waved and smiled at the crowd until they settled down enough to hear him. “Thanks, everyone.” Cupping the wireless mic in both hands, he parked his pert, thong-clad rear on a barstool and beamed at Luc. “This is dedicated to my lover, Luciano Octogano. Thank you for always being there for me, Luc. I love you.”

Luc blew Kermit a kiss. Kermit pretended to catch it and press it to his cheek. Sherlock *pffted*, but Luc didn’t miss the faraway look in his eyes. If there was one thing Luc had learned about the detective in the past couple of days, it was that the

dear boy was quite the closet romantic.

The first strains of music from the karaoke made Sherlock clamp his mouth shut over a fit of laughter. Luc glanced at him, puzzled. Then Kermit started singing, and Luc didn't know whether to laugh or groan.

"It's not that easy, being a twink," Kermit crooned into the mic. "Having to spend each day on a yacht, or on a beach... When I think it could be nicer being a doctor, lawyer, or airline pilot..." He winked at old Harlan Obermeyer, who'd flown in the Korean conflict and retired from United almost twenty-five years ago. "Or something much more regular like that."

Harlan tossed an ice cube at Kermit, who laughed. Sherlock leaned his forehead on Luc's knee. "Oh, gods. That... and... K-Kermit..."

Luc's lips twitched. He raked his fingers through Sherlock's curls. "Yes."

"It's not easy, being a twink," Kermit continued. He stood, mic in hand, and sauntered over to pat the top of Harlan's bald head. "You always stand out from the ordinary peeps... And everybody wants you 'cause you're hot..." Leaning over the table, he pecked young Querin Jonas on her pretty painted lips, making her blush. "And your soap's the best of the lot..." He air-kissed in Monty's direction. "And you've got the biggest... car!" The crowd all laughed. Kermit grinned. "And your man's a stud."

Turning, he walked toward Luc and Sherlock's spot at the edge of the pool, his gaze holding Luc's. "But a twink's life can be the best... And a twink can be sweet and friendly... In bed!" He detoured to nudge Jolene McIntyre's shoulder with his. "Hey, hot stuff."

Jolene grinned, nodded and saluted Kermit with the hand not wrapped around her latest girlfriend's curvy waist. Kermit resumed his slow stroll toward Luc.

"And a twink can be fun in the mountains, or even in a river, or in the branches of a tree." Reaching the spot where Luc sat, Kermit bumped Luc's shoulder with his knee. "Right, Luci?"

Luc thought of that one time when they'd gotten adventurous in the mangroves during that canoe outing and smiled. "Oh, yes."

"When a twink is all there is to be... It could make you go, what the fuck?"

Kermit raised his shoulders and widened his eyes in exaggerated puzzlement. "But why say that?" He turned in a circle, one hand out toward his rapt audience in supplication. "Why the fuck would you say that, huh?"

The men and women gathered at the tables laughed. Kermit flashed a swift grin, then raised a fist in the air. "I. Am. A. TWINK, hells yeah!"

Guffaws, titters and scattered applause followed. Beside Luc, Sherlock's shoulders shook with the force of his silent laughter. Luc chuckled and shook his head.

Moving closer, Kermit sat beside Luc and draped his legs over Sherlock's back, his feet hanging in the water. "Yeah. I'm a twink. And I think that's what I want to be."

Luc thought Kermit might've lost the music ages ago, not that he could actually hear it over the laughter and applause. But it didn't matter, because Kermit's arms were around his neck and Kermit's margarita-flavored mouth was on his, kissing him slow and deep. Setting his drink on the pool deck beside him, Luc held his love close with the arm not shackled to the extremely valuable soap-on-a-rope and lost himself in the kiss.

The tinny cell phone version of the Barnaby Jones theme announcing Sherlock's cell phone broke them apart a moment later. Kermit raised his eyebrows in question. Luc pointed at Sherlock. Kermit's lips formed an *oh* then curved into a grin.

Sherlock shot Kermit a look that clearly said *if you laugh at my ringtone I'll kill you in your sleep*. Hauling himself out of the pool, he dried his hands on his towel, found his jacket in the pile of clothes on the chair, dug his phone out of the pocket, thumbed it on and held it to his ear. "Holmes here. Speak."

Luc waited, stroking Kermit's back and watching Sherlock's face, while the detective stood dripping on the concrete and listened stone-faced to the voice on the other end of the phone. Finally, Sherlock nodded. "Excellent. Thank you." He turned off the phone, stuck it back in his pocket and sat beside Luc. He picked up his martini and took a sip.

Kermit and Luc stared at one another for a moment, then at Sherlock. "Well?" Kermit reached over to smack Sherlock on the shoulder. "Who was that?"

Sherlock pinned Kermit with an amused look. "What makes you think that call was any of your business?"

Shaking his head, Luc spoke over Kermit's sputtering. "My dear boy, we *know* you were expecting to hear from your contact in France any time now. Was that her?"

"It was, yes." Sherlock grinned in a way that reminded Luc he was much more dangerous than he looked. "You needn't know all the details, I think. Let's just say that Madame Gabriella is no longer a threat." He lifted his glass toward Kermit. "Cheers, Frog."

Kermit took another swipe at Sherlock, but his laughter gave away his relief. Sherlock caught Kermit's hand before it could connect with his head, bit Kermit's thumb then sucked it into his mouth. Kermit drew a sharp breath, the hand still on Luc's neck digging in hard. "Hey, Sherlock?"

"Hm?" Sherlock stared at Kermit, blue eyes shining and soft lips pursed around Kermit's thumb.

Kermit bit his lip. "Thanks. For everything."

"Mm-hm." Sherlock pulled Kermit's thumb from his mouth with a *pop*. "Gentlemen, what say we take this back to the *palazzo*?" He cast a significant glance downward at Luc's crotch, then Kermit's. "It does not take a detective to know that we are all of like mind on what we want to do right now."

Luc gazed into Kermit's brown eyes, then Sherlock's blue ones. Both held an identical desire, both for each other and for him.

In all his long years, Luc had experienced many joys and sorrows, pleasures and pains. He could honestly say life didn't get much better than this.

Smiling, he patted Kermit's rump. "My dear Sherlock, you are correct. Let's go home."

The three of them stood, dried off, said their goodbyes to the SASS group and made their way back to the Rolls. Luc eyed the full moon overhead. The night was a perfect one for a swim in the warm Gulf waters. Perhaps his boys would be amenable to a bit of tentacle sex with their very own octopus.

Both expressed their extreme enthusiasm for the idea when Luc broached it on the drive home. Grinning, he stepped on the gas.

Oh yes. Life was good.