



“Paranormal romance at its best!”
—Cynthia Eden

REBECCA ZANETTI

HUNTED

There's no escape from your own desires...



Chapter 1

“She’s going to kill you,” his old friend muttered.

Conn Kayrs raised an eyebrow, cutting his eyes to Kellach from across the scarred table. He hadn’t been in Shea’s tavern in a century, yet the tables were the same. Beaten and solid. “She can try.” Damn, he hoped she tried. For no other reason than the excuse it gave him to put his hands on her. Finally. After all this time.

Kell tipped his ale back, his dark gaze remaining steady on the tavern door. “She’s coming.”

That she was. The air thickened as if in anticipation of a lightning strike—or a witch’s temper. Conn relaxed in his chair, stretching his long legs to cross at the ankles. His boots caught on worn grooves in the wood. “You might want to make yourself scarce.”

Kell tied his dark hair back at the nape, his shoulders tensing. “You may need backup.” He glanced at the row of patrons lining the bar on hand-carved wooden stools centuries old. Mostly witches, maybe a couple humans. People who lived on the northern coast of Ireland, happy in the knowledge most of the world didn’t know they existed. “Though we should clear everyone else out.”

Conn fought a grin. His friend sounded almost . . . concerned.

As a fierce witch and a dangerous warrior, the enforcer

for the council was trained in witchcraft and traditional war. Kellach's main job was to protect the leading council, the Coven Nine. He feared no man. But a woman? Well now, that was another story.

"Your cousin isn't that dangerous, Kell." Though what did Conn know? Moira had been training for a century. Her skill set might be deadly. If so, they needed to get a couple things straight.

Several folks lining the bar cast wary glances over their shoulders. Even in this day and age, vampires were a scarcity in the north, so Conn kept his fangs hidden. He didn't want to spook them—although his metallic eyes probably gave him away.

Watching carefully, he wondered if anyone would challenge him. He'd never battled a witch. They'd been allies of the Realm for centuries, though he often wondered about that. Witches kept their powers shrouded in secrecy. Not even his king knew the full extent of what magic allowed them to create.

Kell's lips tightened in his rugged face. "Moira is the seventh sister of the seventh sister. All power. You have no idea what you're doing, my friend. She told you not to come to Ireland, and you should've listened. You shouldn't be—"

The door swept open on a gust of wind. Electricity crackled through the room. Moira stepped inside, her green gaze hard on Conn. His heart seized. How had he forgotten her beauty? Her power? Her tiny size?

Conn scraped back his chair and stood. "Hello, mate."

Her focus remained on him. "Get out."

Stools toppled, chairs clattered, and patrons stumbled in a mass exodus. He couldn't help his grin as the door slammed shut behind her. Even from across the room her scent of lilacs whispered toward him. Tempted him. "Feeling dramatic, *Dailín*?"

“I believe I’ve asked you not to call me a brat.” She stepped into the empty tavern, all grace, all intent. “Kellach, please leave.”

“Yes, Kell. Get the hell out,” Conn said cheerfully, his gaze on his mate. He’d missed those rioting red curls and that translucent skin—almost as much as he’d missed the fire in her eyes and the spirit in her tiny form. Almost. Her lilting voice grabbed him around the throat and squeezed.

With a muttered, “It’s your funeral,” Kellach stalked outside. The air relaxed as his power dissipated.

Silence. Alone in the bar, Moira and Conn stared at each other for a moment.

Finally, she sighed and tugged a hand through her wild curls. “You need to go home, Connlan.”

He ran his gaze to her toes and back up, truly appreciating the faded jeans and tight white shirt decorated with Celtic knots. The sight of the dainty witch in modern clothing reached deep in his gut and twisted. The need to take her to the floor nearly had him lunging. “Or what?”

Fire flashed in her emerald eyes. “Or I’ll destroy you.” Power all but danced on her skin with the threat.

Damn. That voice, that spirit. His heart leaped to life and his cock jumped to attention. “Think so?”

She sucked in air, her hands fisting and then relaxing at her sides.

That’s right, sweetheart. Center yourself. He gesture toward Kell’s vacated chair. “Have a seat.”

“No. You need to leave, Conn. Please.” Determination and a hint of desperation broke through her calm façade.

He cocked his head to the side, unease tickling his nape. “Did you just say *please*?” Every instinct he owned flared to life. “What the hell’s going on, Moira?”

Her eyes widened just enough for him to doubt her intent. “I need time, Conn.”

“I’ve given you a hundred years.” Why the hell was she

trying the innocent approach with him? He knew her better. “I told you eight months ago I was coming.” He’d meant to fly across the ocean the next day, but war had intruded. Being commander of the Realm’s soldiers often took a heavy toll.

“I need more. Just a bit, to prepare to, uh—”

“Prepare for what?”

The morning after he’d marked her, when her father wanted his head on a spike, he’d tried to make peace. One moonlit night he’d taken her virginity and she’d taken his heart. Fate had made an appearance, forming the Kayrs marking on his palm that he’d transferred to her hip during sex. Even so, he’d signed the treaty promising to leave her be for a century—to train as the Seventh. Time was up.

“We had a one-night stand and ended up mated. That’s all.” She sighed. “You want to solidify our alliance. But I’m not ready to, um, concentrate on us.”

He waited.

She clasped her hands together. “I’m asking for more time. Just a little.”

“Why?”

“Do you trust me?”

“No.” Not in a million years. “Try to play me and you’ll regret it, *céadsearc*.” Sweetheart. He’d learned the endearment the night she sighed it in his ear, her body wrapped around his, her darkening eyes stealing his heart forever.

“I’m asking you. Go home.”

Studying her guileless expression, he stepped out from behind the table so nothing separated them but highly charged air. He’d trained as a soldier, the best in the world, and his instincts were finely honed. Drawing on those, drawing on his gut, he lowered his chin. “No.”

Fiery temper swirled in her belly and it took every ounce of Moira's control to keep from lighting the jackass on fire. She'd tried to be reasonable with him. A soldier, the best, the only thing he understood was battle strategy and bullets. Fine. "I've asked you nicely."

He smiled. Slow. Dangerous—a warning from a true predator. "Don't get me wrong, *Dailtín*. I like you soft and pleading."

His rumbling voice heated the fire already burning in her. Memories of her pleading for his touch, for his claim, escaped the box she usually shut them in. One night. One long, delicious night with him so many years ago. Her nipples peaked along with her anger. Her gaze swept him. Well over six feet, eyes the color of the deepest riverbed—dark and green and too knowing. Thick shoulders, powerful thighs, and his handsome face proved the Creator was a woman. A goddess. Only a goddess would've spent time ensuring each sharp hollow and rugged peak somehow combined into lethal masculine beauty.

She avoided looking at his broad hands. Too many memories of those clever fingers that had brought pleasure . . . while his leaving had brought pain. He hadn't wanted to keep her a century ago. An emotional shove down took care of the ding in her heart. He sure as hell wasn't going to claim her now just because of Realm politics. "I don't want to hurt you, Connlan." Her voice softened as she spoke the absolute truth. "But I will."

He reached for a band from his pocket and tied back the thick mass of dark hair whispering for her touch. When had he grown it to his shoulders? "Let's get to it then." His stance widened, his gaze narrowed. "Show me what you've got, baby."

She centered all thoughts, her hands opening palms up at her sides. "I hoped you'd be reasonable." Bollocks. She'd

hoped he'd come to get her before now . . . before he had to. Because he wanted her. Air began to stir, tempting her nostrils with the scent of gunpowder and sage. Connlan.

He raised an eyebrow, peering down at her. "Why don't you tell me what's going on?" While he phrased it as a question, command tinged each word. "You're scared . . . and I find I don't like that. At all." He measured her, his gaze roaming her body and leaving tingles in its wake. "Are you frightened of me?" His brows furrowed.

"Not even a little bit." She allowed her voice to quiet to keep from cracking.

His face smoothed out, a dark eyebrow rising. "There's someone more dangerous than me?" His full lips quirked and a dimple winked in his left cheek.

That damn dimple.

"No." Not a being existed on earth more dangerous than Connlan Kayrs. She saw no reason to lie to him. He even dressed as a soldier in black cargo pants and a dark long-sleeved shirt, no doubt hiding weapons. "I'm busy right now, Conn. Events are taking place and I need to be involved. I have work to do."

"Let me help."

Moira shut her eyes. Such an offer—the temptation to accept warred with common sense. With reality. She opened them. "I wish you could." Regret flushed through her. "We mated a century ago. Another decade won't matter." Bitterness tinged her words.

Conn's eyes darkened. "It takes a century for a witch to come into power, to study and learn. So I gave you the time. Because you asked nicely." He took a step forward. "I'm done."

The threat and determination in his gaze washed sadness through her. This was about duty and power, not love or passion. "We shagged once, Conn. One night isn't going to determine my fate, marking or not." She'd never forget

the heated pain of him marking the front of her left hip bone as her orgasm exploded—right before his did. He'd left her the next day to deal with the aftermath, with the anger of her people that their Seventh had mated for all time with a *vampire*.

He held his right palm toward her, showcasing the intricate design with the raised *K* in the middle. "You're not the only one with a brand, darlin'. I wear the mark, too."

The Kayrs marking. Legend declared the brand appeared when a Kayrs met his mate, transferring during sex. "I've read of your family, Conn. Some matings were arranged."

"So?" His voice rumbled lower with anger and warning.

The wind outside increased in power, beating against the high row of windows to get in. A storm threatened. Moira lifted her chin, meeting his gaze. "Did you mark me on purpose?"

Conn took another step toward her, his jaw firming. "Are you asking if I forced the mark on my hand and then on your flesh?"

She fought the urge to retreat. "Yes." Enough with fate and destiny. She was sick of the pressure. "You know what I am—the line I hold."

"I do. You have the potential to be the most powerful ruler the Council of the Coven Nine has ever claimed."

"Yes." Fire ripped through her. His family ruled the vampire world and thus the Realm, a coalition of powerful allies including shifters and witches. "Quite the allegiance our mating might make for the Realm."

"But our mating didn't cement anything, now did it?" Tension spiraled from him. "Because you needed space—because you haven't declared your intention to be mine." Something in his tone promised she'd be making such a declaration soon.

He didn't know her or what she could do. She'd disappear before allowing herself to be used as a political pawn in his war. "You'd do anything for the Realm."

"Ah, Moira," his voice softened to a deadly tone, "you're miscalculating here."

She suppressed a shiver. "Why's that?"

"The second I marked you, the second you became mine . . ." Something flashed in his eyes. Regret? Anger?

She doubted being forced to wait a century had been difficult for him, and wishing for such a thing was just silly. A century ago he'd agreed to leave way too easily. And now he showed up when the Realm was at war with the Kurjans? The Realm needed the Coven Nine to continue the alliance—especially since the demons had declared war as well. "Your family, the Realm is everything to you. You would've mated for political reasons." He probably had. Duty was all but stamped on his handsome face.

Not by one twitch of an eyelash did his expression alter. "Possibly."

"Did you?" Her voice dropped to a hush. Her body steeled for the emotional blow.

"No." Silver began to thread through the green of his eyes—true proof of a vampire's anger. "I didn't consciously mark you, Moira." Conn blew out a breath. "But I felt the rightness of it. The belonging when the marking appeared." His stance settled again. "You were meant to be mine, and I'm taking you home."

The certainty of his vow convinced her as nothing else could have. He'd told her once he didn't lie or threaten. A vampire like him didn't need to do either. He wouldn't leave easily.

She sighed. "I'm staying here." She drew her fingers in, allowing molecules to reshape from her energy. Quantum physics at its finest. "You're leaving."

He flashed his teeth. "Get to it."

With a nod, she concentrated on the invisible molecules in the air, throwing subatomic particles through them to alter the matter into pure, dangerous burning energy. She'd been coming to Shea's for decades and had taken her first drink at the bar. Damaging the tavern would not only bother her, it would totally tick off Danny Shea, and the old witch would tell her parents. As well as charge her triple for any repairs. She needed to be careful and aim just for Conn.

Electric blue plasma wavered and then formed into the size of a cantaloupe in her right hand, which she pulled back and threw at his torso.

The mass flashed through the air. She felt a quick moment of regret. The energy wouldn't kill him, but oh man would it hurt. The ball would singe his skin like a very bad sunburn. Of course, vampires had no more problem with the sun than did humans. Legends were bunk. This strike was merely the beginning.

She expected him to evade the energy weapon. Order her to stop its movement. Instead, his lips tipped ever so slightly. He held out a hand. The plasma ball halted mid-flight, then swept forward until it hovered above his palm. Captured.

Moira stepped back. Her breath caught in her throat. "That's impossible." She'd focused her own energy into the matter to create the force. No one else could control her creation. Fear slithered down her spine.

He shrugged, shifted, and threw the orb at her with an impressive push-off.

She leaped to the side, the ball rushing past her to collide with a bar stool, sending the worn seat into the air to land back with a crash. The scent of ozone whipped through the space. Her knees gave, and she clutched the edge of the bar, digging her nails into the wood, her eyes wide on Conn.

“How?” Her voice trembled, but she was beyond caring. Straightening, she unclenched her fingers and pivoted to face him. How could anyone not only take her energy but use it against her? Impossible.

He shrugged. “What exactly do you think I’ve been doing this last century?”

Adrenaline flowed down her back through tissue and muscle, causing her to feel a bit light-headed. “Training the Realm’s soldiers for the war we all knew was coming.” The war with the Kurjans, the pasty-white bloodsucking monsters who were afraid of the sun since it fried them.

Conn nearly grinned. “Yes. The vampires and shifters are prepared. But I multitasked.”

“Multitasked?” Her voice wavered while dread ripped through her. The deadliest soldier ever born to the vampires multitasked? He was shagging kidding her. “Meaning what?” Only force of will kept her knees from buckling. Again.

“You know exactly what I mean. Rumor has it you’ve been training—swords, guns, knives . . . even hand to hand.” Two long strides had him a foot away from her. “Now darlin’, where do you suppose you gained those skills?” A dark flush whirled over his high cheekbones.

She angled her head to meet his eyes square on. “I worked damn hard on them, Connlan.”

His thumb and forefinger grasped her chin and his eyes darkened. “I’m sure you did. When we mated, Moira, my skills became yours.” Leaning down, he brushed his lips across hers before straightening back up. “And yours became mine.”

Her breath hitched. Her heart swelled. Her thighs softened. All from one small kiss. She jerked out of his grasp. “Bollocks. You lead the soldiers of the Realm. You don’t study.”

Genuine amusement lit his eyes. “You think I merely hit things?”

Well, yeah. “I assume you play chess once in a while with the king, but other than that . . .”

He laughed—a true throw-your-head-back deep masculine chuckle. “While my brother and I do enjoy games of strategy, some studying is often involved.”

Military strategy, maybe. “You’re telling me you’ve spent the last century studying quantum physics, string theory, and the other applications of magic?”

“Of course.” His gaze dropped to her lips, making them throb in response. “I mated a witch. A basic understanding of all scientific principles, most notably quantum physics, is necessary to manipulate energy and matter.”

To practice magic. True magic. Her mind spun. On all that was holy. “So you can manipulate my energy. Since we’ve mated.” Son of a bitch. How the hell was she going to keep him out of her life now?

He cocked his head. “Now’s the time to tell me what has you so frightened.”

“I can handle my own problems, Conn.”

Irritation curled his lip, hinting at a temper she really didn’t want to see. “Did you truly think I’d leave you alone, Moira? With Virus-27 on the loose? With witchcraft being used to harm people?”

She closed her eyes briefly. The virus created by the Kurjans to attack vampire mates—to take them genetically down to human form and maybe beyond—by using genetic science combined with quantum physics and true magic. “Yes.”

Her gaze focused on him. Virus-27 was the absolute least of her worries right now. Her mind scrambled for something, anything to get him to leave.

He exhaled, taking a step forward into her space again.

Sage and power swirled around her in the scent of male. "I'm done waiting, Moira." One large hand smoothed through her curls, clenching to tangle at the nape of her neck and tugging back.

Her neck stretched and her hands reached out for balance, grabbing the shirt covering his broad chest. She opened her mouth to protest.

His descended.

Firm lips slid against hers. Heat seared her, shooting down from her mouth to her core. She swayed toward him, opening her mouth to allow entrance. Like the soldier he was, he dove in, all purpose, all blazing fire, his lips capturing hers as his tongue took control. The brand on her hip began to burn with desperate need.

He growled low, grasping her waist and tugging her flat against him. His mouth devoured hers, his tongue claiming every inch, the hand on her hip clenching with restrained power. The erection against her belly jumped with demand.

Her knees weakened. Her heart pounded. Desire for him lit her on fire. Need spiraled deep into her womb. She *craved*.

Releasing her, he lifted his head, his fingers spreading out to cup her scalp. Desire shot silver through the green of his eyes. A muscle ticced in his jaw. "Let's go to your cottage, Moira."

She sucked in a breath, her eyes widening on him. Was there anything more intriguing to a woman than a strong man who wanted her? Memories of what this man could do with his hands, with his mouth, flushed through her mind until her body ached. She ran her hands down his flat stomach to curl around his leather belt. They'd had one night. It wasn't like she'd practiced sex this last century. "Not a good idea, Conn."

"Why not?"

Because she didn't know what to do. "I don't want you." She lowered her chin.

"Liar." His eyes softened in what had better not be understanding.

Then he cut his gaze behind her, a frown settling between his masculine brows.

"What?" She released his belt, an odd tingling running over her neck. The air changed. Her skin heated. Matter shifted and energy zapped. Oxygen swirled. A passage opened. "Conn—"

Invisible claws dug into her flesh and ripped her away from him.