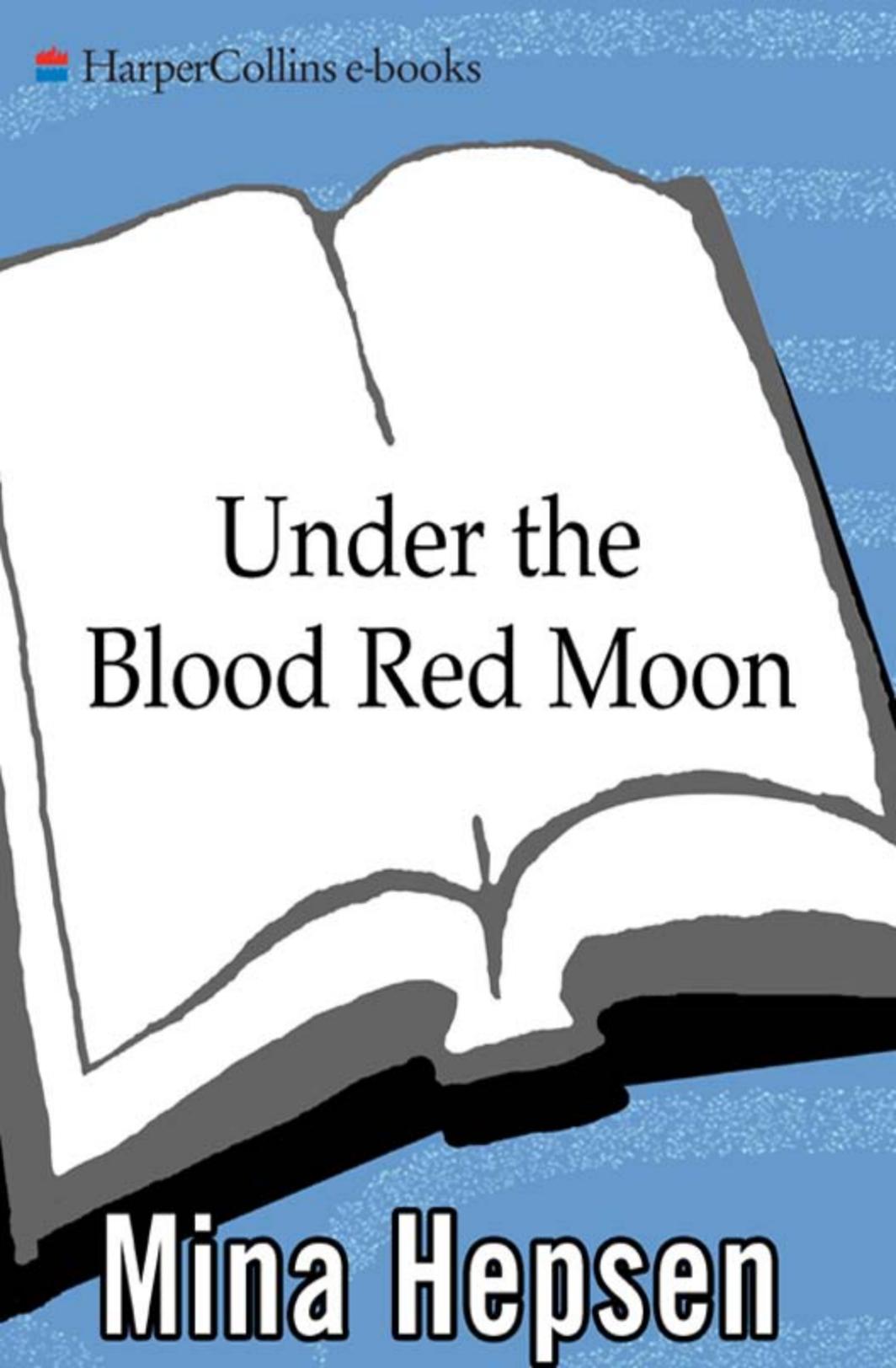




HarperCollins e-books



Under the
Blood Red Moon

Mina Hepsen

under the
blood red moon



MINA HEPSEN



HarperCollins e-books

For Mom and Dad

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prologue

The history keeper scratched his head with the end of the wooden quill before dipping it into the pot of ink. There wasn't much light in the basement of the monastery, but that did not bother his vampire eyes.

Leaning over the fragile papers before him, he wet his lips with his tongue then began to write.

The 24th day of the seventh month of the year AD1678

Amidst a human war between the Ottoman Empire and Imperial Russia, vampire slayers attacked a castle where one-hundred-twenty vampire children and forty adult vampires waited to be taken out of Eastern Clan territories.

Slayer assassins were also dispatched to the Ottoman and Russian camps along the Tyasmyn River to

kill two well known vampires: Grand Vizier Ismail and Prince Alexander Kourakin.

The prince was in Ismail's tent at the time of the attack and the assassins that came to the Ottoman camp were killed.

Prince Alexander's sister, Helena, was in her brother's tent and died in his stead.

Upon finding Helena's body, the two vampires made their way to the castle to rescue any survivors. They found only eight-year-old Kiril and five-year-old Joanna. The children were taken to safety by Ismail.

Prince Alexander stayed behind to fight the slayers who were still in the castle.

Sixty-seven slayers were killed.

Unused to being at a loss for words, the history keeper hesitated, his quill frozen above the parchment. Only hours had passed since the slaughter of the vampire children, only minutes since Alexander Kourakin walked into the castle, his sword drawn.

For a hundred years, vampires were hunted and killed by slayers and only seconds ago it had all come to an end. A hunt for the last slayers had been called by the clan leaders.

The history keeper breathed deeply. He had been writing about the deaths of vampires each day for the last century and this day would be the last such day.

He bent his wrist forward and wrote.

Prince Alexander Kourakin of the Eastern Clan ended the Age of Vampire Slayers.



Chapter 1

London, January 1871

Nearly Two Hundred Years Later . . .

*G*rooms as far as the eye could see. Men with blond hair, brown hair, black hair, auburn hair . . . was that green hair? Angelica stood amidst thousands of white-gloved hands holding dozens of multicolored flowers all belonging to equally smiley faces.

“Marry me!” one of them called out. He was old, quite old, Angelica realized, and reminded her a little bit of a drawing she had seen of the philosopher Plato.

“No! Marry me!” others sang. Sang? Yes, they were quite literally singing! Oh God, this had to be a dream. A really bad dream . . .

“Come on Angelica, you know you want to marry me!”

“Prince Albert?” Angelica asked with some shock. “But you

died ten years ago from typhoid! Queen Victoria mourns you still!"

Albert wiggled his brows at her lecherously and had Angelica stepping back.

"Now, just wait a minute. I don't really want to marry, and if I must, I could hardly pick from all of you!"

Silence followed her frustrated declaration and had her glancing about warily. The smiles were fading quickly, and Angelica watched as several bright flowers dropped to the ground.

"Gentlemen?"

"Freak!" The word came from somewhere in the distance and echoed eerily. The eyes that had looked upon her with devotion only a moment ago were accusing.

"Freak!"

"Monster!"

"Wait, let me explain!" Angelica raised her voice so that she might be heard over the growing chanting, but to no avail. The anxiety that had begun to flutter in her stomach was quickly turning to dread.

"Kill the monster!" It was Albert. He pointed his royal finger at her and repeated, "Kill the monster!"

The men closest to her seized her, and try as she might Angelica could not shake them loose.

"Wait. Please, I am no monster. I'm innocent! Pease, I did not ask for this curse. No! Someone, help!"

Angelica woke with a start to find her brother watching her, a wry smile etched on his boyish face.

"Did someone fail to tell you that it is bad manners to sleep at the breakfast table? Supper or dinner maybe, but breakfast, it is a definite faux pas my dear."

It took her a moment to get her bearings. Her eyes darted across the table to ensure that none of the men in her dreams were here in their sunny breakfast room. They were not. Of course they were not, she thought with a hefty dose of relief.

Mikhail was looking at her with a slightly quizzical expression that served to pull her out of her thoughts. Straightening her hair with an expert hand, Angelica pushed aside the remnants of her dream and smiled for her brother's benefit.

"At least I am *at* the breakfast table. If you had gotten as little sleep as I did last night, you would have skipped it altogether."

Mikhail ignored the truth of her declaration and continued with his jibing, laughing at his sister over a warm cup of tea. "I really do not know what is more scandalous. Falling asleep at the breakfast table or burning away the candles reading all night."

"Well, if you did not insist on dragging me to late dinners and balls each night of the week, I would hardly have to be up till all hours, now would I?"

Rolling his eyes, Mikhail sighed in frustration. "You cannot still be mad about your debut, Angelica. You had to be introduced to society formally sooner or later, and in this instance it was definitely later!"

Angelica made no response. There was no use in telling her brother that she would wholeheartedly prefer to be living in their country home, where no such fancy debuts would have ever been necessary to begin with! No, she definitely could not tell her brother of that desire, not when she had to stay in London to keep an eye on him.

Receiving no answer other than a frustrated exhalation of

breath, Mikhail shrugged good-naturedly. "So, what do you have planned for today?"

"Oh this and that, though first I will have to change my dress, since we took Rotten Row today. I swear that path must be the sandiest track on this side of the globe."

Mikhail tried valiantly to hide his smile. "I can see that our rides in Hyde Park before breakfast take a rather large toll on you, dear sister. You can always take Ladies' Mile next time."

Angelica did not bother to make a response in the face of that piece of rubbish. Ladies who rode for the sake of showing off their new riding habits and elaborate coiffures rode Ladies' Mile. Anyone out to ride for the sake of riding would not even consider it. Then again, anyone out for the sake of riding would probably not find themselves in Hyde Park, where the fashionable members of the ton could invariably be located in the mornings.

"As I was saying, I will have to change," Angelica said quickly. She picked up the paper she had been reading before she had fallen asleep and continued, "After that, I honestly haven't a clue. What can a lady in London do during these hours of the day? She can shop, for which I am in no mood for, pay bills, which I have already done, or pay house calls, which I cannot do."

Mikhail laid down his own paper to regard his sister with puzzled eyes.

"And why, may I ask, can you not visit with friends? I saw you speaking avidly with the Spanish ambassador's wife just last night. And what about that German chit . . ."

Angelica thought back to her brief conversation with

Felipa the ambassador's wife, and barely managed not to sigh. The woman had seemed pleasant enough, but Angelica had not been able to concentrate on a single thing she had said. She had been too busy wishing herself at home with a good book.

"I hardly spoke a full five minutes with the ambassador's wife. In either case, a *well-bred person never calls on a casual acquaintance during the morning.*" Angelica mimicked the high-pitched voice of her aunt with a mockingly serious expression. Aunt Dewberry was their only living relation and took great pleasure in her monthly visits, during which she lectured Angelica on everything from ladylike behavior to catching a husband. The poor woman could not seem to understand why her charge did not act more like a normal lady. Angelica thought she might have had a better chance at acting the part of a normal lady if it were not for the tiny setback caused by her tendency to hear other people's thoughts.

Mikhail laughed as he lifted his paper once more. "I see. So I suppose, since you are such a stickler for convention, you will be keeping yourself busy in other ladylike fashions as you have been doing since my arrival in London?"

At Angelica's pointed silence Mikhail turned the page of the paper with much ado and asked, "Did I see you reading *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* the other day?"

Angelica swirled her spoon through her tea sheepishly. "I am almost finished. William Paley has some interesting ideas by the by; I think you'll enjoy his contemplations."

"I am sure I will." Smiling now with secret enjoyment, Mikhail looked over his teacup at his sister, who was once more busily reading the papers. "If you had your way, this

town house would be overflowing with books, wouldn't it?"

"A room without books is like a body without a soul," Angelica quoted seriously, and then smiled up at her brother. "Cicero said it, not I. If you will not take seriously the words of a mere woman, I am sure you will his."

Mikhail did not take her words to heart. His sister knew well that he respected her mind.

"Did you read this piece on the Blood Stealer? This must be his fifth victim at least!" Setting down her spoon before she sloshed more of the tea on the tablecloth, Angelica's brows furrowed as she read on with interest.

"Angel."

"*Hmm?*"

"Angelica!"

The frustration in Mikhail's voice had her instantly alert and looking up from her paper.

"What is the matter?"

Sighing, Mikhail tried to pick up the trail of their previous conversation. "You know I would be concerned if it were not for the rumors that have been flying about."

"Oh?" Knowing firsthand that rumors had little to do with truth, Angelica was only vaguely interested and tried to finish the article without appearing to do so.

"Yes," Mikhail said as he watched his sister's eyes rush across the black-and-white pages of the *Times*. "People are all atwitter about a certain Russian princess who seems to have stolen every eligible bachelor's heart. Some are certain that by the looks of it she will soon be landing herself a marquis, whereas others swear that she can hardly shake the attentions of a certain viscount."

Angelica barely took her eyes off the page, she had given up pretending. “My, what a fortunate princess.”

“You simply can not be that nonchalant!” Mikhail said with some frustration. “Are none of those chaps to your liking, Angel?”

Angelica looked over her paper at her brother and smiled. She did not want to disappoint Mikhail, who had gotten it into his head, ever since he returned home from his studies at Cambridge, that it was his duty to see his sister married. She definitely did not want him to know how difficult she was finding getting to know people, and men in particular. Hearing people’s thoughts had so many disadvantages, and being privy to men’s carnal fantasies was only one of them.

She had tried to assure herself that to have such thoughts, initially at least, was simply part of a man’s nature, but it didn’t seem that they had any other kinds of thoughts—at least not in her presence. Many of them let her speak merely to humor her! So far, she had met only three men whose company she could tolerate: the viscount the gossip mill was obviously blowing about, a foreign ambassador, and a nice man who seemed to have no sexual feelings about her whatsoever.

No, she really did not want to disappoint her brother, but she had no intention of finding herself a husband, not if she could help it, not when most of them wanted her as an accessory and child bearer.

“I just find it difficult to speak to most of the men I am introduced to, that is all,” she said at length.

“You cannot be serious!” Mikhail’s eyes rounded in comic amazement. “I have been trying, valiantly I might add, to get

you to stop speaking since, well frankly, since I could speak! And now you tell me you find it difficult to converse with these men? Who are they! Give me their names so I might shower them with gold in exchange for their secrets!”

Angelica arched a brow at her brother’s dry wit and crossed her arms over her chest in a very unladylike stance. “I suppose, dear *little* brother, that you would have a ready line of conversation for a man who has just finished contemplating how well your breasts might fit his—”

“Angelica!” All humor fled from his face as Mikhail stammered in shock.

“Oh, come,” Angelica said, and smiled, “I was only teasing.”

Her brother did not join her laughter as he regarded her seriously. “This is no matter for jesting, Angelica. I would have to shoot the man if it were true.”

Angelica schooled her features to look remorseful. There was no use telling her brother that he could not very well call anyone out for merely thinking.

“I am sorry, it will not happen again.”

Mikhail lifted his brow, his arms crossing in the same stance that Angelica had assumed only minutes before.

“Do you think to manage me, with such pitiful displays of false remorse?”

Angelica could not help grinning.

“Well you are certainly right, I am not sorry, for I have a brother who would slay all my dragons!”

Mikhail shook his head sadly. “I fear, dear sister, that after you finish *talking* at your dragons, there will be nothing left for me to do.”

“Lout!”

Mikhail grinned. "Our parents were unjust, Angel. They should have named you Kate."

Angelica smiled. "So you say, dear brother, so you say." Mikhail had said that many a time over the years, referring always to the Kate in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, the play she had read to him many a night when they were younger and afraid of the dark. The dark had brought the thunder and lightning and the creepy sounds from the wooden staircases . . . The dark had brought the news of their parents' deaths.

"Has the moping ended then?" Mikhail asked hopefully as he folded his paper.

"I have not been moping! I do not mope," Angelica said indignantly. Looking at the paper in her hand she grinned. "I brood. It is far more 'bluestocking-ish,' would you not say?"

"Yes, well, Miss Bluestocking, I'm off to the club to meet some friends. I will be back for dinner at six." Mikhail winked at her as he pushed out of his seat and made his way out of the room. "Do behave."

Angelica laughed after her brother's departure, admiring the way Mikhail had launched himself onto society. After the carriage accident had taken their parents, they had been left with only one female relation who could hardly take Mikhail to the right clubs and introduce him to the right people. He had managed all by himself.

It was only four months ago that he returned from Cambridge, but in that short while Mikhail had made more friends than she could count. She supposed it was no great wonder. Her brother had learned at a very young age not to take things seriously when several incidents showed him to have a weak heart. Angelica still worried for him constantly,