

Legend of the WindKeepers

IN THE TIME OF THE GODS, the terrible vices of lust, anger, pride and greed were assigned to the cardinal winds for safe-keeping. But the terrible monster, Typhon, wanted them free to plague the world. He created the *Venti Tempesta*, the Tempest Winds: evil, violent demon winds to infect the world with the vices.

The gods assigned four human brothers as WindKeepers to the cardinal winds, to give the wind form and to fight the *Venti Tempesta*. But the WindKeepers had a flaw: they were susceptible to the call of the vices. The gods, seeing the WindKeepers' struggle, created the *Aurae*. Women who were keepers of the seasonal breezes, women able to calm the greed, lust, pride and anger.

The WindKeepers succeeded in trapping the Tempest Winds in the bodies of horses, imprisoned in the stables of the immortal Keeper of the Winds. All was calm. The WindKeepers kept watch, the *Venti Tempesta* plotted from their prison and the *Aurae* died out.

But now the Tempest Winds have escaped and a new battle has begun...

Auster, Keeper of the South Wind battles Africus, the Southwest Wind and the vice of pride
Favonius, Keeper of the West Wind wrestles Corus, the Northwest Wind and the vice of lust
Aquilon, Keeper of the North Wind combats Caecius, the Northeast Wind and the vice of anger
Vulturnus, Keeper of the East Wind fights Apeliotus, the Southeast Wind and the vice of greed

Chapter One

He was naked and chained to a wall.

Antonio Favonius Venti yanked on his arms. The silver links wrapped around his wrists rattled but held him firm.

Dio. The restraints had been designed for his superior strength.

He shook his aching head, working through the fog. *What the hell had happened?* He eyed his prison. It was a damned elegant one. The bedroom was decorated in an ornate style—silver and black wallpaper and an elaborate four-poster bed.

Memories poured in. Chasing Corus through the twisting streets of Florence. The Northwest Wind was a cunning bastard. For the last week, he'd eluded Antonio while infecting the people of Florence with the vice of lust.

Antonio sagged against the chains, his chin touching his chest. The rise in sexual assaults alone... His throat tightened. He *had* to stop Corus. It was his duty as a WindKeeper.

He'd cornered Corus in the Piazza della Signoria. The Tempest Wind had been raping a woman. Oh, she'd appeared to be enjoying it, but Corus had the power to make people want things they didn't truly desire. Antonio's fingers curled into fists. He knew that all too well.

He'd ripped Corus off the woman but high on lust, Corus had caught Antonio with a huge windstorm and knocked him out.

Now Antonio was trapped.

But not for much longer, damn it. He summoned his wind.

Air swirled around him, the West Wind filling the room. It was familiar, carrying the brisk scent of ocean from the Atlantic and the warmth and promise of the spring.

Like his brothers, like their father and grandfather before them, he was a WindKeeper. He existed to hunt the *Venti Tempesta*.

The chains rattled and Antonio pushed with all his strength. He felt them give. An inch. Two. He thrust with all his power.

Nothing. They wouldn't budge any farther.

Cursing, he cut his power and the wind died away.

Before he could regroup, the door opened.

The man who stepped inside gave Antonio the eerie feeling of staring in the mirror. Strong jaw, patrician nose and a muscled frame. But his dark, curly hair fell to his shoulders in a wild tangle and unlike Antonio's green eyes, this man's were black, soulless pits.

As the man stepped forward, the atmosphere in the room grew warmer. A lazy push of air curled around Antonio, carrying the scent of sex. Two women stepped in behind the man. They wore very little—wispy scraps of black lace. They had long winsome bodies, slim legs and small, high breasts. One was blonde, the other a redhead. Antonio smelled warm female flesh and arousal.

He swallowed hard and spat out the man's name. "Corus."

Corus smiled, rolling up the sleeves of his white shirt. "Such venom, Antonio. You should think of me as a friend. We're the same, you and I."

"We're nothing alike." Antonio jerked against his bindings. It was the truth. He had to

believe it.

Corus stalked closer. “Our winds both carry lust. I embrace it.” He reached for the blonde and cupped one of her breasts. She arched into him with a purr. “And you want to embrace it.”

Antonio’s chest heaved. All his life he’d dealt with the fact his wind carried the promise of new life, but he’d tried to hide its dark underbelly—the seedy side of lust. And now he was balanced on the edge of giving into the seductive vice. “I fight it. I’ll always fight it.”

“Why not give in?” Corus ran a finger over Antonio’s shoulder. “It’ll make you stronger. You won’t have the agony of battling your desires. Slake the lust, Antonio. It feels so good.”

Antonio tore his gaze away from the Tempest Wind. He stared at the silver swirls on the wallpaper, but Corus’s words dug under his skin. Antonio wanted, he *craved*. He yearned for sweet, feminine skin. To press his lips to a woman’s most secret places. To bury himself inside her and just feel.

Damn it, control yourself. Air sawed in and out of his lungs. He’d heard the taunting whispers of lust on the wind every hour of every day since the *Venti Tempesta* had escaped. Every second Corus and the other Tempest Winds were loose was another moment Antonio’s control slipped another degree.

And if he gave in...then Corus won. Antonio would turn as rotten as Corus and lust would infect Florence, then Italy, then Europe. The tourists would carry it around the world like a virus and the entire planet would descend into lust-fueled chaos.

The redhead slinked closer, like a hungry lioness, her blue gaze locked on him. He tensed. She ran a long red nail down the center of his bare chest.

“Why not let them take care of you?” Corus’s tone lowered. “Katya has a mouth from heaven and Nadine loves to fuck. Any hole, any position, any time.”

Antonio gritted his teeth. The woman fingered the hard ridges of his stomach and damn it, her touch felt good.

He couldn't succumb. Not for an all too brief moment of pleasure. "Africus has already been defeated in Rome." Antonio pulled strength from the fact his brother, Dante, had already defeated his Tempest Wind. "I will banish you. I swear."

As the woman grasped Antonio's hardening cock, he closed his eyes and swallowed a groan. His thoughts went to the one person he wished was touching him like this.

Luscious curves, a foxy face with a stubborn chin, large blue eyes and a full mouth a little too wide for true beauty. His forbidden temptation.

A woman with a passionate love for art that rivaled his own and a brilliant skill at restoring damaged paintings. A woman who'd made it very clear when she'd arrived from America a month ago to work in his museum that she had no interest in men—especially wealthy, privileged men. A woman who wanted to uncover secrets Antonio didn't want revealed.

Still, the thought of her and her fresh, floral scent was enough for him to regain a tiny scrap of control. He kicked out, and knocked the redhead aside. She stumbled, her eyes narrowing.

Corus stepped into view and sighed. He grabbed a handful of Antonio's hair and yanked his head up. "I will break you, WindKeeper." The friendly tone was gone, replaced with a cold, dark voice that echoed with hard promise. "And I think I know just the thing to do it."

He spun and barked at the women. Abruptly, the trio left, the door slamming shut behind them.

Antonio sagged, letting the chains take his weight. He welcomed the sharp pain as they dug into his wrists. His skin felt sensitized, the blood in his veins hot and pounding. The air was saturated with lust, filled with whispers. *Touch yourself, work your cock, find sweet release.*

He was at the very edge of his control.

The door opened again and he tensed.

A large man backed in carrying something in his arms. He didn't look at Antonio, just dumped his cargo on the blood red bedcover and left.

Antonio stared. Every muscle in his body tightened, so hard it was painful. His gaze traced the naked curve of the unconscious woman's body. Slim limbs, curvy hips, beautiful full breasts topped with cherry pink nipples. Her dark hair fell over her face, hiding her features.

Oh, no. He didn't need to see her face. Her scent teased him. Like a spring meadow in full bloom.

The newest employee at Museo Venti, Dr. Sophia Crane.

Corus had just locked Antonio in the room, naked, with his greatest temptation.

Sophia blinked, focusing on the red canopy above the bed. Canopy?

She sat up, her hands twisting in the bedcovers. Where in God's name was she? And why the hell was she naked?

She yanked the cover up over her body, the silky satin sliding against her skin. A knot lodged in her throat. She'd been at the museum, poring over some old manuscripts on the legends of the WindKeepers. She'd heard a noise and then...nothing but a big void.

Shifting around, the satin cool and slippery beneath her, she scanned the room.

And saw the man.

The naked man.

Oh my God. He was chained to the wall. Powerfully built, with hard muscles on a lean frame. Wide shoulders, six-pack stomach. Helpless to stop herself, her gaze drifted down. A

long, thick cock arched upward. She jerked her gaze up and froze.

Familiar deep green eyes watched her. Her boss. *Antonio Venti*.

She gripped the cover harder. “Antonio?”

He licked his lips, like his mouth was dry. “Are you okay?”

His low, husky voice shivered through her. He had a face ripped from the walls of the museum he owned. A modern day renaissance lord. A hawkish nose, full lips and green eyes that made her think of her favorite Verona green paint.

“Sophia? Did he hurt you?”

She blinked. “I don’t know what happened or how I got here, but I don’t think I’m hurt.”

She had no aches or pains. “He? Who did this?”

Antonio scowled. “His name is Corus.” Antonio shifted and the clank of metal drew her attention to the chains.

God, he was chained like an animal. She slid her legs over the edge of the bed and stood, her knees dangerously wobbly. She made sure the cover was wrapped around her frame. “Corus?” She frowned. “That name sounds familiar.” It scraped at some distant memory.

“He’s my enemy.”

Antonio’s freezing tone sent a rash of goose bumps over her skin. She moved toward him. “Why am I here?”

He drew in a deep breath. “I think you know why. Even if you refuse to acknowledge it.”

She jerked to a halt. Oh, she knew what he was talking about. But she’d come to Italy for a new beginning, for her career. Not to repeat her past mistakes.

A year ago, she’d lost everything. Her perfect life had shattered with terrible consequences. Even now her heart spasmed and she pressed a hand to her flat belly. After a month in Florence,

she was finally starting to feel alive again.

She was excruciatingly aware of Antonio Venti and the charged attraction between them. But she couldn't risk her heart again. It still wasn't whole. And Antonio reminded her too much of James.

All she had, all she cared about, was her art and her dream of finding out the truth about the WindKeepers. "I came to Florence for a fresh start. That's it."

"I don't know what you're running from, Sophia, but you can't have a fresh start if the past still haunts you."

His words were like an arrow to her chest. "You'd know."

His frown deepened. "What do you mean?"

"I've watched you." Even when she knew she shouldn't. But something about him, something hauntingly familiar, had made him far too fascinating. "You do everything you can to let people think you're a playboy without a care in the world. But I see the real you when you think no one's looking."

They stared at each other. The room silent except for their breathing.

She hitched up the sheet and took a step forward. "Look, we need to get out of here. Report this Corus to the *polizia*."

Antonio snorted. "The police can't help. It's my duty to deal with him."

That sounded a little too mafia-like for Sophia, but first priority was getting out of here. Wherever "here" was.

As she reached for the chains, Antonio went rigid. "Stop!"

She stilled, searching the room for any danger. Nothing. Except for a light breeze that twirled around her, ruffling the sheet. The temperature rose, like someone had flicked on a

heater.

“Don’t come any closer.” Antonio pressed his palms flat to the wall. “I want you to go. Find a way out.”

“I’m not leaving you.” She frowned. Her skin felt flushed, her face warm.

“Just go, *per favore*.”

The breeze increased. Where was it coming from? The windows were closed and covered with thick curtains. The light wind ruffled her hair and brought her Antonio’s scent.

God, she loved his cologne. It had driven her crazy from her first day at Museo Venti. He’d lean over her shoulder to see what she was working on and that dark, spicy scent would tease her. Now it was mixed with hot male and it made desire ignite low inside her.

She let herself look at him. Who knew his perfect Armani suits had hidden so much taut muscle? Her skin felt tight and hot. She noted the sheen of perspiration on his skin, the way his muscles strained.

Did he feel it too? This crazy, insane urge to throw caution to the wind and touch each other? Yes, she wanted to touch his skin, explore that powerful, masculine body.

She reached out. Not to undo the chains, but to smooth one hand up his hard chest. Oh God, he felt good.

Antonio groaned. “No. You must leave.”

Sophia leaned closer, fighting the urge to sink her teeth into his shoulder. “I don’t think so.”