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**Opening Extract from...**

# Gabriel Hunt

# Beyond the Frozen Fire

Written by Christa Faust

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A GABRIEL HUNT NOVEL



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# 1

**"I'D ASK WHAT A NICE GIRL LIKE YOU IS DOING IN A** place like this," Gabriel told the brunette sitting at the bar with her back to him. "But I already know exactly what you're doing."

The brunette spun, reaching for the revolver beside her glass, but Gabriel grabbed her wrist before she could raise it to draw a bead between his eyes.

"I also know you're not a very nice girl," Gabriel said, tightening his grip and meeting her furious gaze without flinching.

The bar was a murky, nameless Moldovan hole-in-the-wall, spitting distance from the Transdniestrian border. The angry brunette was Dr. Fiona Rush, professor in Cambridge University's prestigious archeology department and partner in Gabriel Hunt's latest Eastern European expedition. She had also been Gabriel's lover, which made it all the worse when she'd double crossed him and run off with the legendary

jewel-encrusted Cossack dagger they'd come here to find. There were some who claimed that the *kindjal* was cursed, that it would bring sorrow and strife to anyone who possessed it. After everything he'd been through in the past few days, Gabriel was inclined to agree.

When Gabriel grabbed Fiona's wrist, all conversation around them abruptly ceased. Several men nearby, taller even than Gabriel and twice as wide, raised weapons and cold, hostile glares and aimed both in Gabriel's direction. For a tense stretch of seconds, nothing happened. A Romanian melody fought its way through the static on a cheap transistor radio behind the bar. The ancient, toothless bartender suddenly remembered something critical that needed to be done right away in the storeroom in the back. Gabriel silently tried to decide which of the armed men posed the most serious threat and to measure where they were located in relation to both the front and back doors. He did not let go of Fiona's wrist.

Fiona shook her head, offering a few curt words in Romanian. The thugs pocketed their various weapons, some more reluctantly than others. They all continued to stare at Gabriel with undisguised hostility. It was clear it wouldn't take much for the weapons to reappear. Gabriel let Fiona go, but stayed alert and wary.

"Have a drink," Fiona said, casually, as if she'd just happened to run into an old friend. She took an extra glass from the rack above the bar and poured a generous knock of the rich Moldovan brandy known as *divin*. "You must be thirsty."

"I don't want a drink," Gabriel said, pushing the glass away. "I want the *kindjal*."

"You're not still cross about that, are you?" Fiona smiled and topped off her own glass from the dusty

bottle. "Honestly, it was nothing personal."

"Did you think you could just cut me out and sell to the highest bidder?" Gabriel asked. "That dagger is a significant historical artifact. It should be on display in a museum, not locked up by some rich collector. You of all people ought to know that."

"You know what your problem is, Gabriel?" Fiona arched a dark eyebrow. "You're still laboring under this charmingly anachronistic sense of right and wrong. This is the twenty-first century. You need to be more…" She took a sip of her *divin* and looked up at Gabriel with the sultry gaze that had gotten him into this trouble in the first place. "More flexible."

"No more games, Fiona," Gabriel said. "I know you're planning on meeting your buyer in this bar, but I also know you're too smart to have the *kindjal* on hand for the negotiation. So where is it?"

"We could split the money," Fiona said, dropping a hand to Gabriel's thigh. "We can just claim the *kindjal* was stolen. That sort of thing happens all the time in this part of the world. No one will ever be the wiser."

"Where is it?" Gabriel asked again, pushing her hand away. "I'm asking nicely. Next time I ask, it won't be so nice."

"You really are going to be tedious about this, aren't you?" Fiona sighed and emptied her glass, but when she tried for another refill, she found the bottle empty. "Fine, I'll take you to it. But first let's have one more drink, shall we? For old time's sake."

She gestured to the bartender, who had tentatively crept back to his post when it appeared there would be no violence after all. Holding her glass up high, she called out something in Romanian that caused the entire bar to turn her way. Amazingly, the chilly

scowls all melted into broad, gap-toothed smiles. Glasses were raised all around and suddenly Gabriel was surrounded by thick, strapping men slapping him on the back and shaking his hand.

"What the hell did you say to them?" Gabriel asked, searching for Fiona between the moving mountain range of giant shoulders and flushed, grinning faces. Romanian was one of the few Eastern European languages he didn't speak even a cursory amount of.

"I told them drinks were on you," Fiona said with a smirk as the bartender obligingly opened a bottle of vodka and began filling upraised glasses. "I also said that you were a big American movie director from Hollywood looking for Moldavans to cast in your new picture."

An enormous ox with a blond beard suddenly pulled Gabriel into an aromatic bear hug as if he were a long lost brother. Someone began singing a patriotic song loud and off key and the ox enthusiastically joined in, slapping Gabriel's back so hard it nearly knocked him off his feet. Another equally large but beardless man tapped Gabriel on the shoulder and began demonstrating a terrifyingly drunken knife trick on the bar, weaving the blade back and forth between fat sausage fingers.

Gabriel tried to keep Fiona in view, but she vanished between two of the bar's larger patrons.

Gabriel pressed far too many Moldovan *lei* into the astonished bartender's hand and bulled his way through the crowd toward the open back door. He was almost waylaid by a pair of eager Moldavians clamoring for their free drink, but he managed to break free and make it to the door. When he burst through, he found himself in a narrow alley barely wide enough

to accommodate his shoulders. He heard the clatter of horses' hooves approaching. There was only one street light in this remote village and, in typical Moldovan fashion, it had been turned off to save money. The only illumination came from the large, nearly full moon behind swift-moving clouds.

As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he spotted Fiona's distinctive silhouette at the mouth of the alley and called out her name. She turned toward him just as the moon slipped out from behind the clouds, pale silvery light glinting off the steel barrel of her pistol.

Gabriel dove for cover, tasting brick dust as a bullet smashed into the wall inches from where his head had been. He unholstered his Colt Peacemaker and risked a glance at the mouth of the alley just in time to see a massive white horse thunder into view. The rider reached effortlessly down and grabbed Fiona's narrow waist, hauling her up and across the saddle. She let out a breathless shriek and before Gabriel could blink, the horse, its rider and Fiona were gone.