

DESCENDANTS of DARKNESS
LUCIUS



MARIANNE LACROIX

DESCENDANTS OF DARKNESS: LUCIUS

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PRAISE FOR DESCENDANTS OF DARKNESS: LUCIUS

“4 1/2 FLAMES...Marianne LaCroix has penned another winner in her *Descendants of Darkness* series. Lucius is the perfect vampire. Strong, protective and incredibly sensual, his need to be with Tala above all else is endearing and heartbreaking...A sexy, seductive tale of forbidden love between a vampire and a werewolf...delivers the kind of heart-pounding sizzle readers have come to expect from Ms. LaCroix's writing.”

—Liz Cooper
Sizzling Romances

“5 ANGELS...Lucius and Tala's love for each other transcends their different species and they show us all the code we should live by...a great love story...”

—Alma Crockett
Fallen Angel Reviews

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DESCENDANTS OF DARKNESS

LUCIUS

BY

MARIANNE LACROIX

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DESCENDANTS OF DARKNESS: LUCIUS
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To Trace Edward Zaber

LUCIUS

Sitting on the roof of the tomb of the Voodoo Queen, Lucius knew the moment Alonso turned Jolie into a vampire. He still wished she was his. But, she had been right. What if the one destined to be his mate truly was still out there somewhere? Hundreds of years of waiting, and how much longer did he have to wait?

With a fingernail, he carved three Xs into the stone roof and knocked, the rumored way to make a wish to Marie Laveau. “Grant me my wish, bring me love everlasting.”

A howl rang through the air. Lucius glanced up, then closed his eyes, inhaling the scent of a beast in the distance. With his ultra-sensitive senses, he picked up the trail of a female wolf, hunting in the far-off bayou. A wolf in the swamps of Louisiana? Alligators, he could understand, but a wolf?

She howled into the night once again, a call of loneliness cutting through the dark. His heart ached for the beast, knowing all too well the pain she felt.

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There was something odd about her scent. Something strange. He zeroed in on her location and watched her with his mind's eye. She sat upon a log underneath a great cypress. Magic and mystery surrounded her body, and she howled at the full moon yet again.

Could it be this was no ordinary wolf?

As if sensing someone watching her, the beast turned and loped off into the black cover of twisted trees.

Lucius stood upon the roof of the tomb and gazed out over New Orleans toward the distant bayou.

Jolie had been right. His mate was out there...

And she was a werewolf.

* * *

The night air filled her lungs as she leapt over another fallen, rotting log. Moisture clung to her fur from the mist rising from the murky bayou. The strong scents of mud, wet wood, and decaying foliage permeated her nostrils.

None of these familiar smells or sights could ease her troubled mind.

Someone had watched her.

Tala couldn't shake the feeling of an unknown observer piercing the darkness with his intense gaze. Her entire being shuddered at the experience, yet it wasn't entirely unpleasant. She could almost see him in her mind's eye, a tall, strong figure perched atop a stone building, gazing over the horizon. His long blond hair fluttered lightly in the breeze, but those crystal-blue eyes full of pain and wonder intrigued her.

The image sprang to mind as she eyed her muddy domain. Within the deep Louisiana bayou, she was queen, but the man made her feel vulnerable. It was a strange sensation, since she had lived her entire life in complete control.

She chose to live outside of human existence because of her double life. Born to shifter parents, she had been raised in isolation with her

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twin sister. It was better not to mingle too much with the humans anyway. They didn't understand the life of a shifter, nor were they capable of learning.

Most of her kind traveled in packs. She disliked the pack life. Pack politics always made the females subservient, and she couldn't live like that. Running with other werewolves was one thing, but allowing herself to be used only as a sexual vessel for breeding purposes wasn't for her.

Unlike popular movies, a werewolf didn't retain their human form in any way. When she transformed to the beast, she was able to maintain only her awareness, but her body changed into the animal—the *loup garou*.

Werewolves could shapeshift at will anytime they wished. She could change into the wolf with the slightest thought, or feeling. Sometimes, the beast would fight to the surface, and her animalistic instincts took over. This was especially true during mating season. The urge to join with a male was so overpowering at times, she'd lose control during the actual act. Nothing like sinking her teeth into a man's shoulder as her body sang with a climax.

In human form, she retained some of the beast's instincts and animalistic reactions. If she interacted with a person she disliked, her entire being would rebel against the contact. Or if she felt attracted to a man, the beast would claw its way to the surface and demand sexual gratification, if only for temporary relief.

Wolves mated for life, and Tala had yet to meet that one true mate. She did relieve her sexual urges with those humans she found appealing, but none filled that empty place in her heart. Years of painful longing had gotten to her, part of the reason she lived in the bayou.

Leaping over another fallen log, she fought the rise of sexual fires within at the thought of the Viking god from her vision. On four paws, she felt freer than within human form. Her beast-like sensibilities,

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however, stayed always on alert.

Then, she sensed a new scent. A stranger within her domain. She sprinted into the direction of the intruder. Danger filled the air as she closed in on the new arrival.

Within the dark vines and wildly twisted roots of cypresses and other swamp vegetation, she spotted the white glow of fur. Standing still, his icy eyes stared at her. No, they pierced her, stripping away the external creature and baring the inner soul of her very being.

A white wolf. Not just any wolf, but one surrounded with ethereal magic and supernatural power.

Sniffing, she knew he wasn't one of the shifters, a *loup garou*. She would have immediately recognized the signature scent. He was different.

And still he stood, his pale coat reflecting the moonlight, making him appear heavenly. But, an underlying sense of danger betrayed that image.

She stepped closer. With a low howl, she invited him to run with her. He answered with a bark. Even in this form, her body tingled with awareness.

He loped to her and licked her muzzle, then rubbed his strong body along hers in a sign of animalistic tenderness. His touch sent shivers of electric desire through her veins.

Mine, Tala heard whispered in the recesses of her mind.

She returned his affectionate caresses by rubbing along his body. Strong and toned, he was a fine wolf. Playfully nipping at his neck, she started a game of tag and trotted off for him to chase her.

He did. They ran through the muddy land surrounding the swampy depths. With the humid air, a dampness had settled over everything. Wet soil and leaves beneath her paws, and the male wolf by her side, made her feel alive and free. She remembered what it felt like to run with the pack, to belong. Now, to have a male so obviously want her, exhilarated her. Running through the bayou was a sure way for him to

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come into her heart.

Something about him made Tala's heart race in tempo with the beating of their feet as they played tag. He'd chase her, then they'd reverse, and she'd chase him. When they switched again, he tackled her in the wet foliage. Her body fell, and she laughed, sounding like a hyena rather than a wolf.

He pinned her beneath him and rolled onto her left side. They licked each other's faces, and Tala cherished the moments of their unexplainable connection.

Then, he stilled and stared at her.

His weight increased, and his body shifted in size and shape.

No, he wasn't a shifter.

Worse—a vampire!

Now in human form, a handsome face stared down at her. A smile curved sensual lips, and blond hair fell about his head in long waves. Those same piercing eyes from her vision studied her—vampire eyes.

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Colors swirled about her as he penetrated her slick core. He devoured her in a hungry kiss while his body commanded hers in a domination of her senses. He pounded into her body with a violent need to reach the pinnacle of pleasure, no tenderness, no gentility. Just raw, carnal savagery to mate, bonding their bodies together in a fierce coupling.

She gasped with each invasion, squeezing his cock within her. His body slid over hers as a layer of sweat and the moist bayou air coated their skin. Crickets and other insects called into the night, the only other noises heard among their grunts, heavy breathing, and the sound of flesh on flesh.

He broke his hungry kiss to roughly nibble her ear. Damn, he was everything she could ask for in a male.

No, your mate.

He whispered into her thoughts while holding her arms above her head with one hand. Her breast pushed upward toward his body, and her nipples strained against his hard, muscled chest. His other hand cupped and fondled one of her breasts, squeezing her sensitive nipple between his fingers. She moaned and arched her hips upward, meeting his continued thrusts.

God, what a sensation. His entire body overwhelmed her, a sensual domination of her entire physical being. His powerful legs rubbed against her own, creating an awareness of his massive sexual prowess. How many women had sampled a fierce taking at this vampire’s hands?

She tried not to surrender to her body’s call to join with him, to

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shatter in his arms in an all-consuming orgasm. But the beast within her clawed; the animal begged for release. She needed to quake and come for this savage vampire who appeared in her domain to fuck her like no other male ever had, or she suspected, ever would.

His pace quickened. The thrusting grew more insistent. He released her arms and cradled her hips to receive his cock deeper. Yes, she needed to have him to the hilt, touching her inner walls, filling her hollow core. She clawed his shoulders with her fingernails, scraping his skin and drawing small amounts of blood.

God, yes, he matched her ferocious need to mate, to fuck. She wanted no words of love this night. She needed only a hard cock and a man who used it with expert skill.

As her tidal wave crashed and the dam broke, she howled into the night with each spasm of her muscles. She needed to milk him, wanting more as each erotic sensation washed over her.

He united with her in the frenzied joining, spilling into her in spurts of hot seed. He yelled in primal delight, then savagely bit into her shoulder, deep and hard.

At his bite, she screamed as another orgasm shook her. He drank her blood, a soothing sensation. She wanted to be bonded to this incredible vampire, this blond demon who ravaged her body upon the moist earth and foliage.

The crashes of pleasurable desires ebbed, and he released his teeth from her skin. He licked the sore spot, more tenderly than expected after such an animalistic coupling.

“So sweet and rich,” he said against her skin. “And all mine.”

“A bit sure, are we?” She stroked away the soft, silky blond hair from her neck. So long, it practically wrapped her in its own embrace.

He leaned upward, breaking the welcome feel of his body on hers. “Very sure, Tala. You’re my mate. You shall be mine for all eternity.”

“What do you mean, ‘all eternity’?”

“I shall make you as I, a vampire.”

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"I can't," she said, a tear welling in her eye.

"Why not?" His voice told of his growing anger.

"Because, the blood mix of a *loup garou* and a vampire is forbidden. I can die at the change."

"And how do you know this?"

"I saw it happen to my sister."

"What do you mean?" He rolled onto their earthen bed at her side.

"She fell for a vampire about five years ago, when we lived in the Okefenokee swamp in Georgia. They exchanged the blood bonds, thinking they would be joined for all eternity. But something went wrong. We didn't know what caused the reaction, but it proved fatal, even to her superior strength."

* * *

Lucius stroked her raven-black hair, wishing to shed light on the entire situation. How could the gods see him mated to one that is forbidden to him? "What exactly happened to your sister?"

"She went insane. The chemical reaction of the mix between vampire and werewolf blood drove her over the edge, killing her and condemning Damon, her lover, to eternal pain and loneliness."

"I'm sorry, Tala." He meant the words, his heart wrenching at her pain. How many centuries had he not cared for another? It almost seemed foreign. Yet, at this moment, he *did* care for her, wishing she'd not feel the loss of her sister.

My mate. It ran through his mind, and he could hardly believe it. After all this time, he held his mate.

And so beautiful. Dark black hair framed her face and fell softly down her back and around her shoulders. A man could lose a day just absorbing those silken hairs between his fingers. And with her skin, flawless and slightly tanned, her entire body held an exotic hue. The most interesting feature were her eyes, deep, emerald green, like a grassy morning on a hillside in Ireland. He could see her there among the stony walls, her eyes perfectly matching the luscious greens

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surrounding her.

Her body was made to entice him, with curves in all the right places. God, he hated the idea of any other man touching her, but from this moment on, none would get the chance.

Sliding his hand over the firm swell of her breasts, tipped with dark brown aureoles and even darker nipples, he watched in curiosity as her skin reacted to his touch. Yes, he could spend another entire day just worshipping those taut beauties with his tongue and mouth.

Unfortunately, time grew short. He could feel the dawn's approach after so long of existing within its shadow. "Tala, I must seek my rest, for morning swiftly approaches."

She groaned and curled into his embrace. By the gods, she was perfect. So responsive, so tender, and she met his fierce need with her own wild instincts, recognizing him as her mate.

But what of this curse of insanity? They needed to explore that more. Restraining his urge for her to drink from him, however, would be extremely difficult. He needed to have her. He had just found her, after centuries, and would do anything to keep her.

"I wish you wouldn't leave," she said in a low voice, nuzzling his neck.

"I must. But tomorrow night, I shall find you and we'll talk of this curse of which you speak. Maybe, together, we can search for an answer."

"I only wish you were right, Lucius."

"There are those who can help. Don't lose hope so quickly. We've been brought together and I intend to keep you. Let me check with some who may know more of this curse, then, I'll come to you."

With that, he caught her face with his hand and kissed her. It was unlike their earlier kisses. This was gentle and emotional. Promise laced the very movement of his lips over hers, and he wished for more time this night to explore her body's wonders.

As he bent away from her and stood, his own body screamed in

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protest. Even after plunging into her, he was ready to take her again. His rock-hard erection jutted out from his body, and he forced himself to turn and step away.

He shifted into the form of a large raven. Change in size and shape took more concentration than ever before, since he wished to dive into Tala once again. After the crackling of his transformation died away, he flapped his wings and jumped, perching in a nearby tree. All to take one last look at his mate.

She had shifted into her wolfish form, and looked magnificent. What should it be like for them to mate as wolves? Someday, he'd find out, but now, he had to go.

Reluctantly, he spread his wings and lifted off into the night.

As he soared away from the swamp, he heard upon the wind the mournful cry of his mate, calling him back to her side.

* * *

The next evening, when Lucius emerged from his tomb in the great St. Louis number one cemetery, he sniffed the wind, looking for Tala.

Tala. Such an appropriate name for a beauty such as hers. He had sampled only some of her the evening before, but planned on more of the same tonight.

That is, once he looked into this curse of mixing vampire blood with that of the *loup garou*.

Against his better judgment, he went to the one place where the vampires converged. They'd drink and party in complete secrecy to the humans in New Orleans. He'd known of the Devil's Talon, but had never appeared there, preferring the lonely existence instead of making vampire buddies.

Down an alley off Canal Street, he approached the spell-covered entrance to the exclusive club. The doorman slid open the peephole, gasped, then slammed it shut. For a minute, Lucius thought he'd been denied entry, but the door opened slowly and the protection spell dropped away.

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“Wait,” the doorman, a burly vampire, said. “I know you’re up to no good. What do you want here?”

“I need to find some answers to the curse of mixing vampire and *loup garou* blood. I hoped someone could help.”

The man allowed him entrance. Behind him, as the door slammed, Lucius felt the protection spell close out the human world from this far more dangerous vampiric haunt.

Even in the early evening, the club had a good crowd. Lucius could smell the warm and sweet Bloody Marys being served to the patrons. How any could prefer a meal served in a glass as opposed to fresh from the vein was beyond him.

The music coursed and pumped from the loud speakers, and vampires moved to the deafening beat. He wondered how their extra-sensitive hearing dealt with all the noise.

Many near him stopped dancing and stared. Obviously, his reputation had proceeded him. Vampires had learned to fear him. That would all change, now that he’d found his mate.

But what if the curse was true? Would Tala drinking his blood bring on insanity and eventually her death?

He doubted he could exist without her, now that he’d mated with her. She would be the only string of balance to his existence. If he lost her, he’d meet the dawn, and gladly do so.

“What are you doing here?” Alonso asked as Lucius approached their table. He had brought over the dark Italian to this existence.

“I need advice.” Lucius knew he looked menacing in his typical black suit and holding his silver-tipped walking stick. He was of the Old World, and modern T-shirts and jeans didn’t suit him.

Next to Alonso, Jolie sat with two other male vampires. “You found her, didn’t you?” she asked, still lovely and tantalizing. Her beauty and inner psychic power had initially drew him to her. Alonso was lucky to have her as a mate.

“Yes, but there is a problem.”

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“What?”

“She’s a werewolf.”

Alonso and the two males moaned.

“What does that mean?” Jolie asked as Lucius took a chair and sat next to her.

“It means they can’t exchange the blood bonds to unite them for eternity,” one of the males said, another Italian with short black hair and an accent that probably drew females like sugar. “Legend has it, the mixing of blood between vampire and werewolf is forbidden. To do so will reap insanity, and eventually, death to the werewolf.”

“Thus condemning the vampire to eternal pain and loneliness,” finished the other male, a dark-blond with a clipped British accent.

Lucius knew he had come to the right place, even though Alonso watched him with suspicion. But Lucius couldn’t blame him. After all, only last night, he had stolen away Jolie to try and force her to be his.

It all seemed like so long ago. Now, Lucius had Tala. But...

“Is there anything that can be done to counteract the curse?” he asked.

“I’ve heard of no solution to prevent the insanity,” the blond said. “I’m Raife, by the way.”

The other Italian vampire added, “And I’m Leonardo.”

Lucius nodded, then turned to Jolie. “Do you know of anything that could possibly help us?” He took her hand in his, her flesh warm to the touch. “Please, we need...I need to keep her. She’s my mate. I’ve waited so long to find her. I can’t lose her now.”

Sadness touched her eyes as she squeezed his hand. A menacing growl from Alonso made Lucius release her. No sense getting into a battle with her mate.

“Let me look into a few things.” She paused, then a light shown in her eyes. “Have you thought of visiting a voodoo priestess?”

“What good will that do?” Leonardo asked, then sipped his drink. “They hate us. To them, we’re evil creatures.”

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“How about a vampire voodoo priestess?”

Just then, a Cappuccino-skinned woman with large dark eyes approached the table. “What?” she asked as they all gazed at her.

“I believe our voodoo priestess has arrived,” Alonso quipped.

After they explained to Monique the problem, she agreed to try and help. “Understand, as far as I know, this has never been done. The mating of vampires and werewolves has long been forbidden, but we can try to remove the curse in a ceremony.”

For the first time all evening, Lucius felt hope. “When can we do this?”

“Tomorrow night. Bring your mate to this address.” She pulled a card from a small purse and handed it to him. “I’ll have everything ready.”

“Need us to come?” Leonardo asked.

“Not necessary. If something goes wrong, I’ll call.”

If something goes wrong? The worst thing Lucius could think of was losing his newly found mate.

* * *

Tala paced the wooden porch of her swamp shack. Located deep in the bayou, it kept her isolated, the way she preferred.

An alligator emerged and skided across the still water, leaving ripples in its wake. They were also solitary creatures, not traveling with others of their kind. She felt closer to the gator than another werewolf.

Loneliness filled her, surrounded her with its painful curse. She found her mate in a Viking vampire, and they were to be denied the consummation of their bond. How could she fall so quickly for one so dangerous? Just loving him could cost her life.

The sun had set hours ago, and she knew he had risen from his rest. She could almost feel his onslaught of emotions regarding the curse. He was seeking an answer, but she had doubts anything could remove the destined insanity their blood bond would cause.

“Do not lose hope, my Tala. I may have found someone to help.”

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His thoughts became a comforting caress through her mind.

"Come to me, my mate. I need to have you near. I need your strength," she whispered back to him in her thoughts.

"Coming. We'll talk of this."

"We'll talk after we've mated. My body aches for you."

"As does mine."

Her body hummed as his mental touch eased through her mind and across her skin. She gasped as he cupped her breast with an invisible palm through the thin fabric of her dress. *"How can you touch me and not be here?"* she asked in a breathy voice, grasping the porch railing for leverage.

"I'm an ancient of my kind, and I wish to touch you. I will with my magic if I can't physically."

With that, he tweaked her nipple, making it taut beneath his caress. She moaned, and in the recesses of her mind, heard him laugh.

"Oh, you're so evil," she whispered with a mental chuckle.

"You don't know how bad I can be, sweet."

She could hear the smile in his voice. Then, his magical caress dipped lower over her abdomen. He still teased her nipples to aching berries, but he also held her hips and eased down over the apex of her thighs. God, it was like he had eight hands, touching, examining, driving her into ecstasy.

She raised one of her legs, allowing him access to her core. Her juices flowed, hot and slick, moistening the crotch of her panties and preparing her body for his intimate contact. Or his intimate magical touch.

"Ah, I can almost smell your perfume, so exotic...so fuckable..."
His invisible fingers touched her throbbing clit.

"Lucius," she called aloud. Feeling her clothes an unwanted barrier, Tala pulled the dress over her head and yanked down the offending fabric of her underwear to stand naked. Only alligators and frogs witnessed her surrender. A cool breeze caressed her flesh, but it did

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nothing to ease the burning within.

Still, Lucius stroked her nubbin, driving her closer to the edge with each pass. Tala felt the phantom fingers slide through her slick folds, sampling her, tantalizing her. Holding onto the wooden railing, she arched her back while his unseen hands worshipped her entire body.

Her heart raced, pumping blood through her veins, along with the increasing thrills of the experience. Consumed with desire for her vampire, she wished herself beneath him, his penis plunging into her body, bonding them in the physical sense.

"Ah, sweet, I'm on my way, soaring above the bayou, coming to you. You're so ready for me, and I wish to taste your sweet center like a human would an Oreo cookie. I'd lick away every bit of the sweet cream, then eat the entire treat, relishing the texture and taste on my tongue. Then I'd enter you, and pound into that tightness until we both screamed in passion..."

She moaned in frustration. *"Where are you? Damn it, get here!"*

He chuckled and thrust his phantom fingers deep into her canal. She screamed as her muscles contracted in climax. She couldn't hold out, and her body reacted to his touch and seductive words in wave after wave of orgasm.

As Tala began to recover from the overwhelming spasms wracking her body, arms wrapped her into a warm embrace. She became aware of the warm, naked body pressed against her backside, the erect penis nestled between her butt cheeks.

This was no illusion. This was her mate, her lover, there, holding her.

"You're my every dream, every hope, every wish, Tala," he breathed into her ear, his hot breath sending chills down her spine.

She leaned back into his warmth. "Lucius, is there hope for us?"

"Tomorrow, we are to meet in town to take part in a ceremony to rid us of the curse."

"A ceremony?"

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“A voodoo priestess will perform a ritual. A vampire voodoo priestess.”

“That should be interesting,” she quipped, humor tainting her voice.

“Yeah, I’m curious, too. At this point, it’s our only hope.” His fingertips traced the outer curve of her breasts.

She sighed at the trickles of excitement shooting through her entire being. “How can we be so connected after one meeting?”

“Your body recognizes mine as its mate, just like mine knows yours. We have been bound together by chance and destined for each other since the moment of our creation.”

She turned in his arms to face him. Cupping his strong jaw in her hand, she said, “But we hardly know one another.”

“I know enough.” His sureness echoed in his voice.

“Make love to me, Lucius.”

His mouth covered hers in a gentle kiss. The tender mingling of lips almost caused Tala to burst in joy. For the first time in her life, she was in love, and this vampire held her heart within his grasp. He was her mate, her man, her life. In such a short time, he had become her reason to go on, the purpose in her isolated life.

She ran her fingers through the silky strands of his hair. He moaned into her mouth as she pressed him closer to her. She couldn’t get close enough. She wanted to have him consume her, take her, love her.

He broke the kiss and dipped down to pick her up. Cradling her in his arms, he carried her into the small shack, basically a large room with all the necessities of life, a small kitchen, bed, eating area and a reading area. She had the barest of essentials for life in the bayou. A simple full-sized bed with standard no-frills sheets. On the walls hung oil paintings of wolves and Native Americans, out west, from a time long ago.

“You like to read a lot?” he asked, easing her onto the white cotton bedspread.

“Yeah, romances. Shapeshifters.”

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He chuckled as he covered her body with his. His weight was welcome, warming and comforting. “Ever read about a vampire falling for a werewolf?”

“Seems to be a favorite theme.”

He nibbled the curve of her neck where it met her collarbone. She never knew that area was so sensitive or erotic. Shots of flaming excitement coursed through her when his teeth grated across her skin. “And how do they turn out?”

“Always happily ever after.”

“So will we. We’ll find a way to be together, even if it is only for a lifetime.”

“I’d rather it be an eternity.”

His body moved along hers, his hard planes in contrast to her softer curves. They fit together like pieces to a puzzle. His cock grazed her thighs. She opened to him so he could fit into her completely. Her body ached for him to join with her. She needed to have him fill her.

When Lucius slid into her slick wetness, Tala gasped, thinking her heart would burst. Emotions overflowed as he completed her entire being. So, this was what had been missing from her life. She had been lonely, but never realized how important a mate would be.

Slowly, he entered and retreated, rocking his hips with hers in a relaxed beat. Tears welled in her eyes at the sheer beauty of their joining. It wasn’t a physical need, not lust, it was deeper, much more soul-touching than sex.

Running her hands over his toned back, she whispered her heart’s desire, her inner feelings, never heard by any other creature. “I love you. Oh, I love you, Lucius. Please, love me, too.”

He stopped moving.

She had an instant of worry until she looked into his face.

He breathed the words Tala never thought any would say to her. “I love you, too, my sweet Tala.”

They sealed their proclamations with a hungry kiss, and the tempo

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of their mating increased. The need to reach that pinnacle of heavenly bliss lay within their grasp.

Then, her body quaked, sending her soaring into paradise with him close behind. He grunted with each wave of release, joining her in the crashes of passion, the tidal waves of love-induced orgasms.

He relaxed on her body. His breathing returned to normal. Raining light kisses across her hairline, he whispered his love and devotion.

Tala would never feel heartache again. She glowed within his embrace, wishing away the beams of morning so she may enjoy the newfound love of her vampire lover.

* * *

Just before dawn, Lucius had to seek his rest. He hated leaving Tala, especially when she lay naked, tempting, even while asleep against the soft bedcovers.

Before leaving, he covered her body with the sheet and tenderly kissed her temple.

“Tonight, my love, we shall beat this curse that keeps us from the ultimate bond of mates.”

Turning, he stepped onto the wooden porch overlooking the swamp waters. An alligator sat silently within the nearby reeds. He sent a mental command for it to protect Tala. Assured of its compliance, Lucius shifted into a raven. The air snapped in electric charges as his body transformed in size and shape.

He flew toward his resting place. Tomorrow night, Tala would rest with him. Never would he have to sink into the deep sleep without the woman of his heart within his arms.

Lucius glided over the cemetery and spotted Alonso and Jolie slip into their tomb to escape the coming sun.

Yes, the wait would soon be over for Lucius.

* * *

Once the sun went down, Lucius arose refreshed and ready.
And hungry.

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It was then he realized, he hadn't fed off Tala last night.

Was there a meaning behind it? He wasn't sure.

After seeking his meal in a few humans, he discovered he had no desire to take a life while he drank their blood. What was happening to him? Could love change him so completely?

As the last human staggered off and Lucius licked his lips of blood, he realized how much he preferred Tala's sweet blood. It tasted different than a human's, and he wanted to sample her again.

As he was about to contact her to meet him at the edge of the bayou so they could travel to the ritual, the gator guardian called to him in warning.

Another vampire was with Tala.

In a fury, Lucius shifted. As the great raven with inhuman speed, he soared across the early evening sky. On the wind, he caught the vampire's scent, one he didn't recognize.

As he approached the shack, he saw Tala with a tall, dark vampire. She looked irritated, and they appeared to be arguing.

"Tala, you know what can happen. Think of what happened to Telia," the vampire said as he paced the porch.

Lucius landed behind Tala and shifted into human form. Sometimes, like now, it was handy to be able to conjure clothes. He stood dressed in his immaculate black suit and held his walking stick. As if knowing he had arrived, she backed into his waiting arms for comfort.

"Damon, I presume?" Lucius whispered to her, and she nodded confirmation.

"And you must be Lucius." Damon was a tall, blond with a muscular build. He had a telltale American accent with a slight Southern drawl. *Obviously, not an ancient vampire.*

"Yes, and why are you here?"

"I felt trouble and I came right away."

"How could you feel trouble with *my* mate?"

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“Because I loved and bonded to her twin.”

Lucius enclosed Tala flush against his body, crossing her front with his walking stick, protecting her and soothing her shivering body. “We’re going to try and overcome the curse with the help of magic.”

“What magic is powerful enough to rid an ancient curse such as the one that condemned my Telia to insanity and death?”

“The magic of true love,” Tala answered confidently.

Damon stood in silence, then turned away. His shoulders slumped in defeat, or perhaps with painful memories. “I loved Telia. More than any other.”

“And I love Tala. We’re willing to take this risk.” Lucius planted a soft kiss against her temple.

“Come with us,” Tala offered.

“No, you go and try to break the curse. I only wanted to give you a warning. But maybe if your love is strong enough, there is hope.”

“And if it doesn’t work...” Tala turned in Lucius’ arms. “I ask for you to end my life before the madness completely takes hold.”

Lucius felt humbled. “Tala, you must believe in this ritual. That is of great importance. Otherwise, it’s doomed from the beginning. No doubts. We will beat this together.”

“Tala, listen to him,” Damon said. “Go with him. I wish you luck. But before I go, listen to me. The curse goes into effect at dawn. With the morning light, all will be revealed.”

* * *

Damon stepped toward Tala. She left Lucius’ arms and hugged her sister’s lonely mate.

In a flash of black fur, Damon fled to prowl the bayou in search of something to ease his pain. As she watched him disappear into the dense trees, Tala felt his depression.

“Come, sweet,” Lucius said. “They await us to start the ceremony.”

Before leaving, the echo of Damon howling a sad, lonely song touched her soul. Tala prayed she would survive and not let Lucius

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exist in similar desolation. She knew they shared a bond already, and if broken, only extreme pain would follow.

* * *

At the small voodoo shop, Monique allowed them in the back door. She led them into a side room, where candles of various scents mixed in the air. Lucius tried to block out the perfumes wafting through his senses. *How can a vampire endure such an assault on the nose?*

Monique, dressed in long, flowing white robes and a turban, looked the part of a voodoo priestess. Lucius still felt leery, however, since her beliefs went against his.

The priestess took them into a circle of candles and instructed them to lie side by side.

“You must trust in one another. Let your love shine through any doubts or negative forces. The evil feed off those negatives. The only way to fight for your greatest desires is to banish all evil from your hearts. Show your love.”

“Are you saying we should make love? Here?”

“If it deems necessary, yes. I ask that you act on your innermost feelings. I will do the rest and call upon the spirits to help banish the evil that curses your joining.”

With that, she stepped toward a tall basket and removed the lid. She pulled out a large white snake. Its hiss vibrated through the room.

“I’m scared, Lucius.”

He gazed at Tala and saw fear in her eyes.

“Fear is one of those negative energies,” Monique said. “Perish those fears, and concentrate on the positive. Think of being in his arms.” She went to the door and called in a few humans of African decent, who formed an outer circle.

Humans. It struck Lucius as odd. He thought they hated his kind.

But then, he focused on Tala. “I’m here. We’re doing this together.” He took her hand and placed a kiss in her palm. “Think of how we meld when the passion overtakes us.”

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The drums and music began as the helpers struck up the beat. Monique began to dance, invoking the spirits.

In what seemed hours later, the music still pulsed through the room. Monique continued to dance and sang, holding the snake about her neck.

Lucius moved closer to Tala and half lay upon her. As he looked into her face, his emotions overwhelmed him. She had become everything to him in such a short while. How could there be anything negative in their union?

"I love you, Tala," he breathed, then closed his lips over hers.

Colors swirled around him as she readily responded. She opened her mouth to him, brushing her tongue along his in a sensual dance, matching the tropical beat surrounding them.

The need to feed ate at him. He wanted to drink from her, fill himself with her essence. He needed to give his entire being to her. Mist encircled him in a warm, welcoming embrace, encouraging him to love and mate.

His body burned to join with her. She was so willing and open to him, he could take her right then.

"Act, my friend. Show her your love. Make her your eternal mate. It is time," the mist seemed to whisper.

As Tala became more insistent, Lucius could sense her struggling to hold the beast at bay, refusing to let go of restraint.

He pulled up the hem of her dress as her body continued to writhe in want. By the gods, she was bare beneath her dress. No fabric to bar his way.

Animal instinct took over. The fangs grew within his mouth in anticipation of sinking into her. He could already taste her upon his tongue, her sweet, salty blood. It was like ambrosia from the gods, and all his.

He fumbled with his pants and released his cock, straining and hard, ready for action. In one swift stroke, he plunged into her slick core. She

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climaxed immediately, milking him with each squeeze.

"Take her. She is your mate," the mist whispered again.

Her screams of ecstasy drove him over the edge. His seed spilled into her, and he sunk his teeth into her shoulder. One gulp, then another, but he needed something more. They weren't complete. They had to fulfill their destiny.

Still wracking with his orgasm, he pulled away and bared his neck to her. She bit him. And drank. Her mouth closed over his neck and warmth shot through him. She drank hungrily, and he gave each drop with relish. Each sip a climatic high. By the gods, he wanted to give his all to her.

Yes, completion at last. She was his. They shared the blood bond.

She broke the contact and gasped for air. Lucius sensed the beast easing back before Tala gained control once again.

Then, Lucius became conscious of his surroundings. He had mated with Tala in front of strangers. He looked up to find they had all left. Only he and Tala remained in the room. The candles flickered in the silence, strange after the endless music and singing.

But now, they had to wait. Would Tala go insane? Did the ceremony rid them of the curse?

Only time would tell.

They lay in each other's arms amid the candlelight, reluctant to leave the comforting embrace of the dim silence.

"How long should we stay?" Tala asked in a sleepy voice.

"We could probably go now." He hesitated. "How do you feel?"

"Tired, but good. I feel...complete." Her face beamed.

The weight lifted from his heart. So far, so good. "Will you come with me to my resting place?"

"Yes, let's go. I'm so tired."

He rose, then lifted her into his arms. "Seems I'm always carrying you around."

"So romantic. It's right out of one of my books."

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“And how do I compare to one of your heroes?”

“Better than any author could create.” She planted a kiss on his jaw and nestled into his neck. “I love you so much. I just want to sleep a thousand years in your arms.”

“That’s not all *I* want to do with you in my arms.” He laughed soft and low. It vibrated through his chest.

She giggled. “You’re bad.”

“I told you, you don’t know how bad I can really be.”

“Yeah, well, I can be bad, too.”

He growled. *Damn, and this was his woman!*

* * *

That night, they retired into his stone tomb. Unlike what Tala had expected, the room had a homey interior. Black silk sheets covered a mattress. Thank goodness, no coffin!

Candles dimly lit the room, casting a warm glow over Lucius’ handsome features. And he apparently conjured his clothes, disappearing the moment he lounged upon the mattress. Naked, he looked like sin incarnate, his white-blond hair a stark contrast to the dark sheets. His muscles, all sinew, beckoned to be touched. She itched to run her hands over each inch of his body.

A renewed energy filled Tala as she stepped toward the bed. Right now, she wanted to show him her passion. For once, she wanted to dominate this powerful vampire.

She pulled her dress over her head, baring her body to him.

“I noticed no panties earlier. Nor a bra.” He chuckled. “Oh, you *are* bad.”

Tala traced her curves with her fingertips, noting his gaze following each movement. “I wanted to be ready in case we decided to act on our animalistic impulses.” She pinched her already-taut nipples.

He moaned. “Damn, woman. You’re going to kill me by doing that.”

“You want me to stop?” Her voice was seductive, fluid as she

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climbed onto the bed.

“Hell, no.”

“Feeling frisky?”

“What do you have in mind?”

“I wanna taste you...then I wanna fuck you.”

He growled low in his throat. “Talking naughty, too. Oh, you are a bad girl tonight.”

“I’m feeling wonderful. I think we beat the curse.”

His face suddenly fell serious. “Think so?”

“I think so. *I hope* so.”

“We’ll know in the morning.”

“Until then, I wanna love you, explore you. I just can’t seem to get enough.”

“Oh, sounds like torture.”

She pulled away the sheet, uncovering his erect penis, large and pulsing with life. He was hot for her already. Damn, it looked like satin-covered steel, and she caressed it between her palms.

Lucius moaned in answer to her touch.

“Like that, eh?” She couldn’t help but tease him.

He lay against the pillows, his eyes closed and his breathing rapid, already under the spell of her touch. “I wonder if you taste as good as you feel.” She swiped her tongue across the engorged head of his cock.

He groaned and ran his fingers through her hair, silently urging her to continue.

“Oh yes, you taste so wonderful, salty and addictive.” She enclosed his cock in her mouth, taking him deep and sucking hard. Power over this vampire, this immense authority over his entire being, felt incredible. She needed to bring him to his knees more often, weakening him to her, giving his trust and love by surrendering the strength of control.

She increased the tempo of her ministrations, savoring his taste against her tongue.

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He pushed her away. To her questioning glance, he breathed in a raspy voice, "I want you to ride me, Tala. Take me into you."

Crawling up his body, she relished the feel of her taut nipples gliding along his smooth skin. When she poised above his cock, he rested his hands on her hips. The head of his penis slid through the wet folds of her cleft, covering his shaft in her natural lubrication.

Tala slammed down over him, taking him into her to the hilt. She screamed at the immediate pleasure. He filled her body, completing her. She retreated, then roughly took him in again.

He palmed her breasts, teasing her hard nipples into straining points of pleasure. Again and again, she took him into her. She needed him to go deeper, harder, to touch her inner being, her inner core. She needed to have all of him at her mercy.

Her thrusts became barely controlled bouncing as she rode his cock with wild, unbridled desire. When her body reacted to the sensual onslaught of their joining, she plunged over the edge and came. She felt like she flew through the air as her body spasms closed and released around him.

He filled her with his cock and his essence while meeting her at the brink of ecstasy, the pinnacle of passion.

With her strength spent, she lay across his body, catching her breath. Each time they mated, it felt more amazing than the time before. And she had an entire eternity to love him.

Or would she?

She rolled to his side, and he gathered her into his embrace. In the still of the night, he rocked her body in a gentle sway.

Fatigue hit her. Tala eased down to sleep in the arms of her mate, hoping the morning would bring promise to their future.

* * *

Lucius caressed her in her sleep, enjoying the simple warmth of her body close to his. He longed to protect her, treasure her. At the approach of dawn, he'd know if the ritual had been successful.

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Being an ancient of his kind, he could tolerate the morning sun as long as he stayed out of its rays. There within the tomb, they were safe.

Even without seeing the sunrise, he would know when it arrived. And it would be hours from now. Until then, he'd hold her as she slept.

* * *

The sun began to peak on the horizon, and Lucius felt fatigue settle through his body. Tala still slept, and he was reluctant to wake her.

Her eyelids snapped open. Violent shaking wracked her body. "Dear God, what's happening?" She sounded panicky, and instantaneous fear filled her eyes.

All Lucius could do was hold her and try to ease the pain. As her body convulsed beneath his, she was beyond his touch.

"Tell her of your love," a misty voice whispered in his ears. The voice from last night, the invoked spirit that was to protect them.

Sitting up in bed, he cradled Tala in his arms, rocking her back and forth. This wasn't over yet, he realized, stroking her head, now drenched with sweat. This was the trial moment.

"Tala, love, fight for your life. Fight for us. I want to love you forever. Don't leave me to long for you alone like Damon longs for your sister. Stay with me."

Still, her body spasmed. She seemed out of reach as the curse coursed through her body, killing her before his eyes.

"If you leave me, I'll meet the sun and join you on the other side, Tala. I can't exist without you. I waited too long to love you." Anger at her obvious surrender to the power wracking her body and soul brimmed to the surface. "I refuse to let you go! Damn it, fight!"

Her body stilled and fell limp in his arms, as though she had lost all her strength.

Her heart ceased.

Lucius screamed in rage. He had lost her!

And for the first time, tears escaped his eyes, and the vampire cried over the body of his mate.

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* * *

Darkness engulfed her, surrounded her, and she couldn't move. She became vaguely aware of Lucius holding her. His pain echoed within the darkness, calling her back to him.

The call of the phantom pack in the distance, however, was drawing her to them. She could run with them and be a part of their group. She'd never be lonely again. Never want for company or...

Love?

No, she had left her mate behind. She couldn't leave him, her lover and friend. The other half to her entire being.

The pack again called to her, and she felt her body shift form. She loped up to the pack, and recognized one dark gray wolf—Telia.

The others, mainly males, nuzzled her body. Their ghostly forms sent tingles of odd sensations through her, unlike touching the coat of Lucius in his wolfish form.

Telia trotted forward with a bigger black wolf. They howled and called for Tala to follow. Running with the pack felt exhilarating, never had she felt to free...

Or did she?

In Lucius' arms, she had felt a certain freedom. Lucius. Her mate. She longed for him. How could she choose to run with the phantom pack and leave her love behind to suffer?

Telia and the black leader led the pack through a ghostly forest. No, this wasn't right. Tala didn't belong here. This wasn't her place.

Then abruptly, Telia stopped, and the entire pack halted. Telia padded over to her sister. "You're right. It's not time for you to join us. Go back to your lover, back to earth."

"How could you...have left Damon? Did you have a choice?"

"Damon suffers, but his destiny didn't lie with me." Telia turned her head toward the black wolf, then glanced back at Tala. "There is another for Damon. Tell him..." Telia paused. "Tell him to never lose hope. I will always be with him until he finds love once again."

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The pack now barked in excitement.

“Now, go back, sister. We will run together someday, but you have a destiny of eternal love yet to fulfill.”

Tala stood motionless as she watched the pack leader caress Telia. They led the pack into a shaft of light, then disappeared.

Lucius’ voice broke the silence surrounding her. “*Come back to me.*”

Her heart filled with love for her mate, and that power drew her through the darkness, back into her mortal form.

And back to Lucius.

She gasped a large breath.

His tears of joy greeted her as he rained kisses over her face. “Damn it, what took you so long?” he asked through his celebration.

“Didn’t you ever hear that patience is a virtue?”

“I have no patience, woman. Don’t *ever* scare me like that again.”

“There won’t be a need. I’ll never leave you again.”

* * *

That evening, Lucius and Tala visited the Devil’s Talon, where Monique and the others warmly greeted them.

“I see things worked out well,” Monique quipped.

“Thanks to you,” Tala said as she reached out to the other woman.

Monique squeezed the neophyte vampire’s hand. “No, it was your strength of love for each other that broke the curse.”

“I was afraid for a while that I had lost her.” Lucius looked disturbed to admit his weakness.

“So, what are you?” Leonardo asked Tala, trying to ignore the inner feeling of danger lurking nearby. *Something wasn’t right this night.* “A werewolf vampire?”

“I guess so.” Tala absolutely beamed with the glow of a woman in love.

Some vampires have all the luck, Leo thought. “Anyone see Titania tonight? She hasn’t been around these past two nights.”

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“Yeah, noticed that,” Raife said. “Any idea why?”

“Not sure. But I have a bad feeling about it.” Leo had a bond to her, having exchanged blood in the past. And they’d been lovers when he first came to New Orleans, so he knew her fairly well. Staying away from her friends was unlike her.

“So, Lucius, you going to change your ways because of love?” Alonso teased, obviously feeling bold enough to take on the love-struck vamp.

“Just as many changes as you went through when you met Jolie.” With a cocked blond brow, Lucius added, “Watch yourself, young one. I know all your deepest secrets to get you in trouble with your mate.”

“Oh, like you don’t have any?”

“All right, you two. Enough.” Jolie nipped playfully at Alonso’s neck.

“Oh, Christ, no!”

Titania’s voice ripped through Leo’s brain. Scared—no, petrified. Fearful of her very life.

Leo shot up and ignored the questioning looks from his friends. He rushed through the crowd and out the door. From there, he used his ethereal speed and followed her calls of pain and torture through the streets of New Orleans.

A sharp pain radiated through his chest, and he felt Titania give up to scorching pain.

What the hell was happening to her?

Down a dark, side alley of Bourbon Street, he found Titania, lying on the cold cobblestone. Over her stood a woman with long red hair and a fair complexion.

Then Leonardo saw it—a wooden stake protruding from Titania’s chest. This human woman had just murdered his friend.

A vampire slayer? Here?

The woman gazed up. Her emerald green eyes struck him, pinning him to the spot.

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Anger bubbled to the surface. He approached, cautiously noting she had another stake within her one hand.

“Who the hell *are* you?” he asked, rage spouting from his every pore.

“Your worst nightmare, vampire.”

MARIANNE LACROIX

Author Marianne LaCroix aka Shaylee O'Hara dreamed of becoming an author ever since her parents gave her a little typewriter as a child. Luckily, her parents supported all of her creative outlets, be it oil painting or creative writing. When it came time for college, she majored in English and took art classes on the side.

In 1994 Mari earned her BA in English, married and moved to Georgia from her childhood home in New Jersey. There she worked in an office for about two years before feeling restless. She made a dramatic move and quit the desk job, then returned to school for nursing. She earned a diploma in Practical Nursing then went to work in her local hospital, and eventually to a nursing home. Each night when she got home from caring for others, no matter how tired, she'd sit down and write tales of ghost pirates or roguish vampires.

When Mari got pregnant with twins, she said goodbye to nursing for a while. The twin girls were born in March, 2002, and Mari has been a stay-at-home mom ever since. When the girls would go to bed, Mari would get on the computer and write. She also worked hard on starting and establishing the review site, *LoveRomances*. Then in early 2003, she decided to write romance seriously, not just as a pastime. Her break came with *Lady Sheba*, closely followed by *Another Chance*. Both books have received glowing reviews, and *Lady Sheba* has been a *Road to Romance* Reviewer Choice and a selected group read for the Erotic Readers Haven Yahoo Group.

What can readers expect in the future? Marianne's erotic romances are filled with everlasting love and hot encounters, and Shaylee's romances are brimming with action, adventure and love. More tales of the paranormal with vampires, ghosts and fairies are on the way!

You can visit her website at: <http://www.mariannelacroix.com>

* * *

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