

Changeling Press

Mary Winter

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An old mansion. Carnal desire. Lust for blood.

When Portia Fenton inherits an antebellum mansion from her great aunt in Tennessee, she knows it will change her life. She doesn't realize how much until she meets Rody Aylor, Myrtlewood's hunky handyman. All she wants is a chance to get away from New York City and start a new life. She never imagined a man whose kisses take her breath away and whose touch leaves her hungry for more.

Rody Aylor expects Portia to be a dour old maid like Clara. He doesn't expect her to be the woman who can break his curse. A young woman to love him -- and perhaps to free him. With Portia he hungers, for her body and her blood. And in night after night of dizzying passion, he takes her. He hopes one day he can convince her he's been willed to her, and he's waiting for her to set him free.

Chapter One

Upstairs, his destiny paced. Floorboards creaked from the back and forth movement and listening, he could trace her steps across the large living room. Rain lashed the house. The wind howled, sending a shutter he hadn't yet had time to secure banging against the side of the antebellum home. Rody listened to the woman's anxious movements. Her arrival today couldn't have come at a better time. The storm took out the power to most of the homes in the county, leaving her very much in need of Myrtlewood's resident handyman. He grinned, eyes glowing red in the light of the camping lantern sitting on his desk. Lifting his gaze to the ceiling, he sniffed, drawing her honeysuckle scent down to him. He hadn't smelled anything so enticing since he tried to get Ashleigh James to walk with him before he'd left to join the Confederate Infantry, and that had happened well over a century ago.

Rody shook his head. Living in this house, being bound here, must have messed with his brain if he thought of Ashleigh and her yellow dresses. He listened to the woman's long strides a moment longer, wondering how long before she came downstairs to look at the fuse box. How long before her destiny and his intertwined?

If he were a gentleman, he'd go upstairs and put an end to her endless pacing. A kiss would silence her, maybe something more pleasurable to pass the time until the storm's fury abated. They'd been dancing around each since she arrived, never quite acknowledging the spark of desire that crackled anytime they were in the same room. His cock hardened, blood rushing south at an alarming rate. It reminded him he hadn't fed, and an almost painful longing for the coppery taste had him picking up the lantern and turning toward the door before he could stop himself.

Damn it, he'd been trapped in this home for the last hundred and thirty-three years. It was about time he freed himself. The woman pacing above his head was key.

Myrtlewood's new owner had a full mouth and generous lips that had him wondering how they'd look wrapped around his cock. Her breasts appeared ample, a good handful, and the flare of her hips made him think of skimming them with his hands.

His dick throbbed. He dragged air into his lungs, though he didn't need it, and tried to calm the fire in his blood. Whirling to face the mirror, he knew his fangs pressing against his lower lip and red eyes would scare her. He couldn't afford that, not now. "Damn you, Baird. Damn you to the hell you deserve." He cursed his sire and the cruel curse that had him trapped in this godforsaken house, where only love could set him free. His lips twisted into a caricature of a smile. He highly doubted he'd find love anytime soon.

He waited until his fangs retracted and the glow left his eyes before picking up the lantern and walking upstairs. The woman's anxious heartbeat echoed through the empty rooms, a siren song calling him closer. He hungered for her blood and for her body, but he knew he had to take it slow lest he scare Clara's grandniece away before she'd even settled in.

The lawyer told him of her dream to turn this place into an antique store. Clara showed him pictures of some of her finds in New York, and he had to admit she had a good eye. If anyone could reclaim Myrtlewood and its history, she had a good a chance.

He stepped onto the main floor and listened for a moment to her steps as they slowed. She muttered to herself about how silly it was to be afraid of the rain and storms, and he wished they were the only things here to fear. "Hello," he said loud enough to be heard over the rain. "Ms. Fenton? Are you all right?"

The pacing stopped.

"I'm in the main room." Her voice stumbled only a little, completely normal considering he figured he'd just scared years off her life.

Well, he came up here with good intentions, and he knew better than most that the road to hell was paved with them. "I'll be right there." His long strides carried him to where she stood in the main hall. He stopped in the doorway.

She stood framed by the large windows along the front of the house. With the drapes drawn back, vivid slashes of lightning illuminated the room as bright as daylight. She wore a pair of soft, faded jeans that hugged her long legs, and a thick, comfy sweater that no doubt kept her warm. A clasp held her chestnut tresses off her neck, and he longed to undo it and run his fingers through the silken strands. He couldn't see her eyes, but he knew they were the color of rich chocolate. She had one hand pressed between her breasts, the other hanging onto the handle of a camping lantern. "You startled me."

"I'm sorry." He crossed the space between them, setting his lantern down on a nearby table.

She nodded, looking relieved. "I'm sorry to disturb you." She frowned.

He steeled himself against the jolt of need that raced through his veins. He longed to kiss the pout from her full lower lip, to draw it into his mouth and suckle. "Not at all. I was checking the fuse box and thought I'd come upstairs and let you know not to worry. The power's out in most of the county. I'm sure they'll have it back on by morning."

She nodded, her breath shuddering from her lungs. "If you say so." She pressed her lips together and turned to look out the windows. "It's so quiet here. And the trees..." She shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself. "It's silly I guess, but in New York you heard nothing but the city. Sure, it would storm, but the city would still be there with the comforting hum of cars and people. Out here, there's nothing."

He reached for her, cupping her cool cheek in his hand and brushing his thumb across her lips. "There's me."

Her grin answered his.

"Nothing is going to happen to you here." And then, because he could no longer deny the need to taste her, brushed his lips across hers.

Fire sizzled through his blood. Heat radiated from her warm mouth, through his body, making him instantly hard. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her against him, letting her warmth seep through his skin. She tasted like fire, like the sun

he hadn't seen in over a century. A moan rumbled in his chest as she sighed and opened to him.

He slid his hand down her back, the sweater bulky beneath his touch. Cupping her ass, he ground her against his hardness. Her hand closed around his shoulder, the fingers of her other hand opening and dropping the lantern to the floor. It bounced, clattered, but didn't break.

"Portia," he breathed across her lips when she drew in a ragged breath.

Thunder boomed overhead.

She clutched at him, her fingers digging into his biceps.

Lightning struck nearby, hard on the heels of another peal of thunder. Beneath his feet, the floor vibrated. Damn, that one was close.

"Don't go," she said, the tremor in her voice exposing her fear.

Portia Fenton feared thunderstorms. He cupped the back of her head, drawing her face against his chest. "Let's go downstairs. You won't hear it as badly down there." With the heavy curtains he had over the windows, he knew the flashes of lightning wouldn't be visible, and with the floor joists and the entire building between them and the outdoors, it'd muffle the thunder somewhat.

"You probably think I'm silly," she said, even as she burrowed deeper into his embrace.

"No, never. My sister never liked storms either."

She looked up at him and smiled. "From the way you kissed me, I'd think you had more than protecting me on your mind." She flattened her palm against his chest. If she noticed his lack of a heartbeat, she said nothing. "I think, Mr. Aylor, you're trying to seduce me." She grinned impishly.

Thunder rumbled, a bit more distant now. "Is it working? I guarantee you won't think about the storm outside." He licked her lower lip, then drew it into his mouth to suckle. She moaned, arching against him so her breasts flattened against his chest. His fingers clenched her buttocks, lifting her against his erection, and she wrapped her legs

around his waist. Without taking his lips from hers, he turned and carried her out of the hall.

“Oh, yes,” she gasped as his long strides carried them down the hall to the basement stairs.

His enhanced vision allowed him to descend the dark stairs to his apartment. He stepped through the open door and laid her down on the bed, stretching out his long body above her. “Now where were we?”

He tugged her sweater up, revealing a strip of pale skin just above the waistband of her jeans. Leaning forward, he nuzzled her soft flesh. The need to taste her hummed in his veins, his fangs slipping free. Carefully, he licked her and stifled a moan. She tasted like ambrosia.

Portia’s fingers delved into his hair. She leaned back, her eyes closed, tiny whimpering cries making his blood burn hotter. Shoving up her sweater, he released the front catch on her bra and stared at the sheer perfection of her breasts. The round globes fit perfectly into the palms of his hands, and the wide, dark nipples begged for his touch. He longed to explore the texture of the dusky aureoles with his tongue, yet, he waited. Portia’s ragged breaths told him more than anything how much he aroused her, and for the woman who would be his destiny, he needed to make this moment perfect.

Reverently, he extended his fingers toward her. He stroked her breasts, circling his fingers around her nipple, not quite believing she was in his bed so soon. Beyond the confines of the basement, the storm raged, the distant peals of thunder reminiscent of why he’d brought her down here. In this room, they created a storm of their own.

“Please,” she whispered, reaching for him.

Her forward words tightened his cock to painful proportions behind the fly of his jeans. He’d nearly forgotten the directness with which modern women spoke, and damned if he didn’t like it. “As you wish,” he said, and then took her nipple into his mouth.

She cried out, arching into the heat of his mouth as he tongued her. She was sheer perfection beneath him, and he slid a thigh between hers to rub it against her mound. He scraped his teeth oh-so-gently across her nipple, and she shuddered. Gods, to taste her blood... that would be heaven. He couldn't though, not yet, and until then, he'd have to content himself with his lips on her body. He laved her nipple and grinned as she pushed her sweater out of the way.

How she'd gotten here in Rody's bed, beneath him, and during a thunderstorm, Portia didn't quite know. Oh, she knew the mechanics of it, after all, she was a consenting adult. He'd come upstairs to let her know the power was out across most of the county, and she'd jumped into his arms like a frightened schoolgirl. It didn't hurt that she'd thought he was sexy from the moment they met. She hated thunderstorms. Ever since she was little and lived in the attic room in her parent's house. Her stepbrother tormented her, made her think monsters lived there, and fool that she'd been it had taken years to get over her fear of the dark. Her fear of thunderstorms she'd never out grown.

Right now the wet heat of Rody's mouth made thunder the last thing on her mind. Electricity, yes, for she felt each pull of his lips down to her swollen and aching clit. She ground her hips against his hard thigh, wanting to feel his cock plowing into her. Make her forget, just for tonight. Yeah, it'd complicate things in the morning, but tonight all she wanted to do was drown in the sensations he evoked.

The soft waves of his hair caressed her skin, and she ran her fingers through them, holding his lips to her breast. The strong muscles beneath her searching fingers, his broad shoulders and strong back, Rody radiated masculinity. No sooner had she seen the idyllic countryside and the mansion she'd inherited from her Great Aunt Clara, she'd fallen in love with it. And like Rody's kiss, it couldn't have come at a better time.

Thoughts of her limp-wristed ex-boyfriend fled as Rody worshiped her body with his mouth. His tongue swirled patterns against her flesh, his hands pulling up her sweater to caress the skin beneath. He lifted his head just enough to pull the sweater

over her breasts, bunching the garment beneath her arms. She hadn't worn a bra, and the appreciative, male look in his eyes sent heat straight to her core.

She sat up enough to allow him to tug the garment from her arms and toss it to the floor beside his bed. She reached for his shirt, the material soft against the steel of muscle beneath. "My turn," she whispered, the need to see his bare chest sending her fingers to unbutton it. With each inch of skin revealed, her appreciation for his masculine beauty grew. Soft whorls of hair started at his neck, spreading across his flat pectorals, to arrow down over his navel and beneath the waistband of his jeans. As she dragged her gaze toward his face, she swore his eyes glowed. Her breath caught in his throat and she reached for him. She skimmed her fingertips over his cool flesh.

Outside, thunder rumbled. Portia shivered. "You're cold," she said, her hands reaching for her waistband. "Here, let me warm you up." She wriggled out of her jeans and lace panties, then snuggled under the covers.

She swore he growled. The rasp of a zipper filled the air. His jeans whooshed to the floor, revealing Rory in all his glory. Long, muscled legs, a thick cock, her mouth watered just looking at him. She reached from beneath the blanket and crooked her fingers at him. A bit presumptuous of her to crawl into his bed. The storm outside made her think of being buried under the blankets, hiding from the dark.

Rory leaned forward. He curled his fingers around the blankets and pulled them back. He stared at her lying in his bed, her skin pale against his dark wine-colored sheets. The mattress dipped beneath his weight as he pressed his knee against it. Leaning over, he reverently touched her. Fingers spanned across her skin, feather-light touches along her shoulder, over the slope of her breasts, and down, across her flat stomach.

Tiny fires flared along her skin. Restless, she moved her legs, parting them for him. Her panting breaths echoed in the room.

A rumble of thunder shook the house.

She shivered. She couldn't help it, and then he was there, his body warm and hard above her. Bracing his weight on his arms, shielding her from the storm outside.

His protective action ignited one deep inside her, and she longed to feel her nipples rasping against his hair-roughed chest. She threaded her fingers through his hair, combing the silken strands away from his face. Wrapping her legs around his hips, she buried her face against his chest and licked his salty skin.

His groan vibrated through her body like her best silver bullet. Her clit hummed. A scrape of her teeth demanded he take her, his cock against her slick folds telling her he was more than capable of doing it. She lifted her face and kissed him. Lips parted, she plunged her tongue into his mouth, a carnal mating of lips and flesh that stole the breath from her lungs.

She wanted to crawl inside him and never come out. Another rumble of thunder shook the house. Down here she heard less of the violent storm outside. Thick curtains kept the flashes of lightning from the windows. And yet she sensed it, a tang of ozone in the air, a hunkering down of man and beast, waiting for the storm to pass. Everywhere Rory touched he ignited a new storm, the kind that stole her breath and left her aching and needy in ways she'd never been before. No man, not the rich businessmen or bohemian artisans she'd dated in New York had left her like this. It thrilled her.

Her heels pressed into the backs of his thighs. His cock slid along her slick folds. She canted her hips, trying to urge his head inside her.

"Easy," he crooned. "We have all night."

"I want you now," she countered, the New York woman determined to get what she wanted coming to the fore. She inched her heels higher until they pressed into his ass, her thighs as open as they could be.

Rory skimmed his hand down her side to cup her hip. His fingers curled into the flesh of her ass and he stilled the pumping of her hips. Reaching behind him, he grabbed her wrist and pinned it on the pillow above her head. "You want fucked, we're doing it my way."

"Yes," she hissed as he lowered his mouth to nip her neck. Portia whimpered. Where had he come from, this handyman who worked at the mansion? The hell with

the house, she'd take the man holding her to the blanket. He shifted on her, the head of his cock probing her entrance. She started to lift her hips. His grip tightened and he stilled her.

"Wait," he ordered.

Portia mewled with frustration. She inched her heels higher, pressed them deeper into his hard gluteus muscles and managed to deepen the penetration. Just a little. Just enough to frustrate her and leave her panting with need and desire. Why wouldn't this man just fuck her?

He released her hip and grabbed her other wrist. Pulling it above her head, he transferred both of them into one hand. He reared off of her and looked down. Her hands secured above her head, held by his strong grip, her breasts rising and falling with each breath. Portia imagined what she looked like, a woman ready for a good tumble. She grinned. "Like what you see?"

"God, yeah." His husky admission sent shivers down her spine. His eyes flashed, nearly red in the dim light.

"Rory?" Suddenly uncertain, she lay limp in his grip. His cock barely filled her, a teasing hint of pleasures to come. And yet, for an instant, she thought he hadn't been a man at all, but something different, more. Better?

His lips descended on hers. Thoughts of his eyes, of what she might have seen, fled under the sensual onslaught of his kiss. He suckled her lower lip. Drawing it into his mouth, he nibbled on her like she was the finest gourmet candy he'd ever tasted. The slow seduction made her think of a death by a thousand bites. If he kept this up, she'd be gone after just a few.

His lips trailed over her chin, her neck, until he once more found the pulse point that beat so rapidly against her skin. He nipped.

Portia moaned. She arched against him, moving restlessly against his body. His cock still barely penetrated her, made her think of the long, slow screw he could give her. Or a hard, fast fucking. At this point, she didn't care. She only knew one thing could cure the relentless ache in her body. Rory.

He commanded her body. Flexing his hips, he sheathed himself inside her. A low groan issued from his throat, the sound rippling along every single nerve ending in Portia's body. He filled her, longer and thicker than any man she'd ever taken before. When he pulled out, she whimpered, the loss of him so acute she thought she might die from it.

His grip remained firm against her wrists. "Is this what you want?" he growled against her throat.

"God, yes," Portia moaned. She gave herself over to this man, to the surge and retreat of his cock inside her. Outside the raging storm paled in comparison with the lust driving through her veins. She arched beneath him, drawing him deeper inside her body. Only he could shelter her from the storm. Only he could sate the desire burning in her veins.

Teeth scraped against flesh. A slight sting and Rory suckled at her skin. Carnal fire exploded deep in her pussy. Her clit throbbed. She lost track of where he ended and she began. Her sun, her moon, her world, he became it, and she was drowning in the desire he invoked. Her panting breaths echoed around her. Whimpering cries and moans filled the air, and the heady smell of sex penetrated her nostrils.

She gasped for air. Her body contracted, tighter, deeper, begging for the head of his cock to brush that spot right there at the mouth of her womb -- yeah, that spot -- and she exploded with a scream. Her body shuddered out of control, riding the waves of her orgasm to bliss. She clung to him. Her nails dug into the muscles of his shoulders, and with a grunt, Rory pumped once more. He stiffened. His hot seed splashed into her, and Portia gave a contented sigh.

Rolling to the side, Rory tucked her beside him. Thunder rumbled outside, more distant now. Maybe the storm faded, or maybe Rory kept her safe. Either way, she smiled and tumbled off to sleep.

Chapter Two

A cold patter of rain slashed against the windows. A loose shutter banged against the side of the house. Standing in the center of what would have been a formal living room, a battery-powered camping lantern clutched tightly in her right hand, Portia stared at another room full of old furniture in a home full of even older wiring. A gust of wind shook the house. Portia stifled the shiver that darted down her spine. She refused to be scared in her own home.

“Even if I just inherited this monstrosity and I just slept with the handyman,” she muttered under her breath. Crawling from Rory’s bed where he slept like the dead to go back upstairs probably hadn’t been the smartest move she’d ever made. Not when the storm still raged outside, though the thunder and lightning seemed to have moved into the distance. The beam of light from the lantern proved sufficient for walking, but she knew she’d have to wait until the electricity returned to take a look at all the antiques. Portia blew a lock of hair out of her eyes. Rory told her the entire county had lost power. Nearly four hours later, it still hadn’t returned. That damned shutter rattled against the house again, and Portia vowed first thing in the morning to ask him to fix it.

Portia flashed the light around the room, confirming her suspicions. She’d have to wait to peruse the Victorian furniture and assorted bric-a-brac she knew lined the shelves. She sighed heavily, then sneezed at the plume of dust swirling around her. Back to her room, the one place she’d cleaned out. The wind gusted again, and Portia tried not to think of all the horror movies she’d seen. The hell with her own bed. She’d rather be curled up with Rory.

Portia scurried down the hall. A floorboard creaked, or was it a mouse? She reached the stairs and tried the switch. Click. Darkness. Sucking in a breath, Portia aimed the beam down the stairs.

She had to go down there. She'd inherited this house. If she freaked out every time the lights went out, she'd probably die of fright before she turned forty, which thankfully was a very long time away. She placed her foot on the first step, then the second, growing surprisingly more sure as she descended into the basement. Outside, a clap of thunder boomed. The stair creaked and then she stood on the landing. A long shelf-lined hallway led into darkness. She made her way back to the hallway and the room to which Rory had taken her.

Careful to keep the light from the bed, she stepped inside, only to find the bed where she and Rory had lain empty. She glanced back the way she'd come, certain she hadn't seen him. Frowning, she turned and retraced her path back up the stairs. She'd much rather be in his arms than walking this drafty, old house. As soon as she found him, then she'd make him help her forget all about the storm.

* * *

An hour later the storm outside had blown itself out. Rory wished the storm inside him could do the same. As soon as she had left, he'd slipped from the bed and walked up the stairs to the cellar door. He opened it and emerged in the world outside. Water sparkled on the greenery surrounding the house. A chill wind whipped through the trees, but even in his sweater, Rory didn't feel the cold. Not with the memory of Portia's lips on his.

He blended into the shadows, not wanting to be seen. Clara had spoken about her niece's child on many occasions, even telling him of her exploits in New York. There wasn't much Clara didn't know about this girl-child, though Portia knew nothing of Clara, or of him. "She will keep you from being lonely when I'm gone," Clara had said. "She may even be the one to break the curse." Her eyes had twinkled with hope that Rory couldn't share.

He sat down on the stone bench, head in hands. When Clara told him those words on her deathbed, he'd imagined an older woman. Someone to enjoy the antiques and spend her retired days in the flower gardens. Not the young, sexy whirlwind who'd come into this house. Closing his eyes, he turned his face to the sliver of moon

bared by the thinning clouds and wondered if the old woman hadn't been trying to play matchmaker with her next of kin.

* * *

The storm blew itself out and, unable to find Rory, Portia found her way to her first floor bedroom. Leaves from the magnolia tree outside brushed against her window. Swish. Rustle. Swish. A shutter rattled. Without electricity, she lay in the dark thinking of everything that could go bump in the night. Thoughts of Rory comforted her somewhat, even as she replayed his touch in her mind. Unable to sleep, she rose to wander the house once more.

Portia stood in the dining room, the chandelier a great, hulking shadow in the center of the ceiling and stared out the French doors leading to the patio. Urns once filled with flowers lay barren. Stone benches sat on the flagstone patio leading into a kitchen garden.

Rory sat on a bench. He straddled it, shoulders slumped, hands resting on the granite before him. She searched to keep track of his figure. Shadows moved, sucking his image along with them, and it seemed he shifted in and out of existence. A sliver of moonlight shone on his bare arms, his t-shirt tight against his skin. He looked cold.

Portia cupped her hands around the cup of cocoa in them and drank the warm brew. A gust of wind whooshed around the house, making up her mind for her. Before she could think about her actions, she went to the coffee pot full of hot water on the sideboard, poured a second cup of hot water and added an envelope of cocoa mix. She returned to the French doors, opening them, shivering at the sudden gust of cool air against her arms. For a moment she thought about grabbing her jacket, then decided against it. She didn't plan to be out there very long.

She strode across the patio, a bit disturbed at the shifting figure of Rory. He looked as if he might be only a figment of her imagination, so when he turned to look at her, his blue eyes blazing in the dark, she almost stumbled. She stopped beside the bench. "I brought you some cocoa."

"Thank you." Rory took the mug from her hand, sipping the warm liquid. He closed his eyes and sighed. "This is wonderful."

Portia straddled the bench and sat facing him. She drained the last of her mug and set it on the ground beside her, then curled her hands together to keep them warm.

Rory reached for her. "Here, let me." He wrapped his warmed hands over hers, rubbing gently. "There, much better. There's no need for you to be out here. It's freezing."

Portia slid closer to him on the bench. Rory moved his mug so she sat directly in front of him. Heat radiated from his body. For a moment she thought about curling into his warmth and wondered what he'd do. "You're out here," she said, then realized she sounded like a moonstruck school girl. "I just thought I'd bring you something warm to drink. We could go inside where it's warmer."

Rory lifted his face to the sky. The long column of his throat drew her gaze, so smooth without even the trace of a five o'clock shadow. "I like the night," he said. "The moon bathes me with her warm glow, and I can be alone with my thoughts." He lowered his gaze over her face, lingering on her lips, then down to her breasts, where his hungry look hardened her nipples into tiny points against her shirt. "Something tells me you're the same way."

"Yeah," She replied, finding her attention captured by his brilliant blue eyes. "I do. The one thing I hated about New York was the lights. Constant lights made it nearly impossible for me to see half the stars I bet I'll see out here."

He lifted their clasped hands to his lips, his breath warm against her knuckles. "The nights are beautiful. That is when a front doesn't rush through like it did tonight, but even that can be beautiful too." He grinned an instant before his lips closed around the side of her thumb, sucking gently as he opened her hands and pressed his mouth to the center of her palm. The pull of his open-mouthed kiss went straight to her pussy. Portia closed her eyes. Her head fell back, and for a moment, the moon caressed her upturned face. Rory swirled his tongue along her skin, then with a tug, pulled her to him.

His lips found hers. Portia clung to him, a hunger burning in her veins. She tasted him, warm and chocolate flavored. She melted, arms twining around his neck. Silken strands of his tousled hair slid through her fingers as he drank from her. His lips moved across hers, drinking, demanding, and then she opened beneath him like a blossoming flower, and he tasted her. The thrust of his tongue into her mouth stroked her and brought her burning to him. She tunneled her fingers through his hair, sliding forward until her breasts crushed against his chest. The thin shirts they wore did nothing to separate the heat of flesh against flesh. Her denim-clad thigh slid across his, and then his nimble fingers tugged on her shirt.

He splayed his hand across her abdomen. Unerringly, his caress moved north until he cupped her breast in his hand.

Portia moaned into his mouth as his thumb found the taut bead of her nipple. She rocked against him. Wind and darkness were forgotten as a fire kindled low in her body and moved outward. Heat engulfed her. She deepened the kiss, sucking on his tongue as it plunged into her mouth. The depth of her need rocked her and drove all rational thought from her mind. She shouldn't be this hot this soon, yet something about Rory's touch made her pulse quicken.

Rory used his other hand to haul her against his body. His rock hard cock pressed against the juncture of her thighs. She moved against it, tiny whimpers bubbling up from the back of her throat. He pulled his lips away. "I've got to be inside you, Portia."

His husky voice sent shivers darting down her spine.

Rory disentangled his legs from hers and rose from the bench long enough to yank his shirt over his head. Her swift inhalation at his bare chest only fanned the flames. He hungered. Not for her blood, though the telltale flutter of her pulse roared through his blood like an expensive aphrodisiac. He needed to feel her slick heat wrapped around him, milking his cock while he cried her name as he came.

Her hands shook as she pulled down jeans and panties. The separation lasted too long, though the chill wind did little to cool his ardor. He reached for her, loving the way his hands cupped her ribs as he pulled her over his lap. Her pussy settled against him, already damp and warm.

Heaven. He bent his head to nuzzle her neck, tantalizing himself with licks of his tongue across her vein. To taste her, that would be the height of ecstasy, but not now. Instead he contented himself with tiny licks as he trailed fingers over her breasts, her stomach, to slide through her warm curls. He stroked her outer lips, loving the tiny shudders darting through her body. Her breath caught, then held as he slid a finger into her wet folds.

She clung to him and pressed herself closer. Rolling her hips into his, she slid his fingers into her to the first knuckle. A twist of his wrist and he flicked her clit.

She moaned, low and deep. "Please," she said, her lips pressed to his shoulder. Her hair fell over him like a curtain. "Rory, please." Her fingers tightened against his back.

He didn't need to thrall her. In fact, he feared falling under her spell as he cupped her hips and held her poised over his throbbing shaft. Patience. He needed a well of it to sheathe his cock within her, lowering her inch by inch. Dear God, her heat surrounded him. It wrapped around him and drew him deeper into her body. At last, she settled flush against him.

"Oh, yeah." Her husky sigh brought his balls tight against his body.

Rory clenched his teeth, afraid of spilling himself too soon. Reaching between their bodies, he rubbed his fingers against her clit, loving the slow way she lifted and lowered her body on his. With one hand under her right buttock he supported her -- would she notice the strength it took? -- and he drew himself out again, only to impale her again with his shaft.

She rode him, her sweet muscles milked his cock so tightly he felt the tiny flutters of her orgasm begin. Her cries filled the night air. Her breasts bounced

deliciously against his chest. Higher and higher, tighter and tighter, until it seemed the storm of their fucking surpassed the storm that had raged outside.

Portia threw her head back. Her body convulsed on a low, keening wail as she exploded.

Spasms of pleasure jolted through him. His balls clenched and then he shot into her. His body pulsed as he emptied his load inside her. The tiny tremors shaking her body wrung the last drop from his sated body. Limp, she lay against his shoulder, her breathing ragged.

She shivered, and he wrapped his arm around her, his cock limp in her body, and carried her inside. He'd let her figure out how she got there in the morning. And he'd go downstairs and try to tell himself he didn't want to curl up beside her. She couldn't know his secret. Not yet. Not until he convinced her he wasn't the monster she would think him to be.

His heart clenched and he hoped it would be a long time before he had to reveal his true nature to her.

* * *

If not for the soreness between her thighs, Portia might have dismissed memories of last night from her mind. Instead, she descended the stairs to the basement to ask the man in person. She wore her camisole and pajama pants with a pair of cartoon character slippers. Not the most alluring outfit she owned, she realized with a rueful grin.

The basement hallway branched in two. After glancing through the first door to see more space filled with boxes and sheet-covered furniture, Portia knew she had her work cut out for her. The second hallway opened into a small foyer, and through the open doorway she saw a small kitchenette. Rory's apartment.

She paused for a moment before crossing the threshold. A sense she was trespassing filled her, even though she owned the entire house and she'd been down here last night. Thoughts of what had transpired sent a heated flush to her cheeks.

She padded nearly silently through the small kitchenette, passing a bathroom and small sitting area. Dark draperies shrouded a doorway. Portia's heart hammered in her chest. Rory's bedroom. She strained to hear any noise and heard nothing.

She wanted to see him again. Her lips went dry at the thought. Behind her, light streamed through the partial windows. It shone on the heavy curtains like a spotlight. Portia reached out and ran her hands over the plush, burgundy velvet fabric, stroking it before wrapping her fingers around the edge of it. Her heart hammered in her chest loud enough to wake the dead.

Before she could lose her nerve, she opened the curtain. A huge king sized bed dominated the room, light slanting over the man sleeping beneath heavy blankets. Rory lay in the center, covers twisted around him as if he'd had a sleepless night. Now though, he slept deep, his chest rising and falling with even, measured breaths. One bare leg lay half out of the covers, and hungrily Portia let her gaze wander his perfect foot, up the muscled calves and thighs. Last night she'd felt the strength in his body, and her pussy contracted with the memory. Beams of light slanted across that bare leg.

His foot twitched. As she watched, his skin grew red. Rory started to pull his legs over his covers, then his body twisted. An expression akin to pain covered his face. His eyes opened and he stared at her, their depths no longer luminous blue, but turning blood-red. Between his parted lips, fangs emerged.

Portia watched, unable to tear her gaze away. Rory leapt from the bed, a flash of his naked body visible as he wrapped the blankets around himself like a cape, and stormed over to her. He wrenched the draperies from her and hauled them closed. "What are you trying to do? Kill me?" he growled.

His rough words startled Portia, shock giving way to horror. What kind of creature lived in her basement? The memory of his fangs and red-eyes filled her mind. She'd seen hints of them when they'd had sex. She'd dismissed them. After all, only monsters looked like that. Monsters and vampires. She shook her head and scurried away from him.

Her heel caught on the edge of the rug and she tumbled, falling onto her butt. She scuttled backwards until she bumped into the coffee-table. "I didn't know," she said. "Please don't hurt me." Grabbing the coffee table, she twisted herself upright. She stood in a shaft of sunlight, figuring if he didn't like the open curtains, he wouldn't follow her out here. She gave one last look at the curtains and fled.

* * *

All day Rory replayed the scene over and over in his mind, and every time it ended with Portia scurrying away in fear. He hated it. The last thing he'd wanted to do was scare her, yet the sunlight had torn into his flesh. Perhaps he ought to give thought to building up a tolerance to sunlight, but for so many years it hadn't been necessary. Trapped on the grounds by the curse meant he could retreat into the house during the day and walk the property by night. He should have boarded up the windows, but so many years living down there with people who knew and understood had allowed him to grow lax.

As soon as the sun dipped beneath the horizon he nailed the drapes to the window frame. Never again would sunlight stream into his home during his sleeping hours.

His home no longer, though he was trapped here by a vicious curse. He walked the dark hallways feeling Portia in her bedroom. She lay curled beneath the blankets, her body in a fetal position. Leaning on the doorjamb, he watched her watching him. "I'm sorry," he said, opening his hands in a gesture of peace. "I shouldn't have barked at you like that."

Portia blinked. Each moment of silence tore his heart anew. "What are you?" Her soft whisper easily carried to his enhanced hearing. "Who are you?"

He grinned. "I'm Rory, the handyman." Deep inside he knew he avoided her question.

"But what are you?"

Rory swallowed hard. "I'm a vampire," he said after long moments. He debated about telling her the whole truth, that the vampire who turned him, a mean bastard by

the name of Wiley M. Baird, cursed him to this house because he refused to drain the young mistress dry. "You will not claim this family for your own, so you will be forced to protect it, to live here in darkness and in misery until a member of the family falls in love with you." Baird cackled and hurried away. Every night since then, Rory had kept Baird and his vampiric children away from the property. And after they lost interest, Rory tried to leave, only to discover he couldn't walk any farther than the fence line.

"I'm not a monster." Rory shook his head. If Baird's curse taught him anything it was that. "I'm just a man."

"You're not *just* a man," Portia whispered. She tugged the covers to her chin, as if those few scraps of cloth could protect her. "How do you live here? I can't believe my great-aunt allowed you to live here." Closing her eyes, she shook her head. "Vampires don't exist."

Rory held his hands out to the sides, palm up, and walked toward the bed. "I assure you I'm quite real. I won't hurt you, Portia. The last thing I want to do is hurt you." When she didn't respond, he sat on the edge of the bed. She scooted away, but only a fraction.

"I -- we --" Words seemed to fail her as she expelled a heavy sigh. "Just tell me this isn't real. I didn't see your eyes go red this morning and fangs in your mouth. I didn't see that last night when we had sex. Tell me I'm going to wake up and this will be some hallucination caused by cleaning chemicals or something. Tell me I wasn't so desperate that I had sex with a vampire." Her weak chuckle only underscored her nervousness.

Reaching out, he brushed a strand of her auburn hair away from her face. It was so smooth, so touchable. It reminded him of silken gowns and the fall of lace across a petticoat from years gone by. A floral scent from her shampoo teased his nose and made him want to bury his face in her hair and inhale deeply. Instead, he leaned forward.

"You're not desperate, Portia. I don't know who told you that or how you came to that conclusion, but it's wrong. You're a beautiful, desirable woman."

She remained stiff, and Rory feared he might be moving too far, too fast. Yet, she filled his blood with energy, made it sing. He wanted her, all of her, wanted to ravish her body and taste the sweet nectar that would be her blood. She intoxicated him; something that hadn't happened in the nearly century and a half of his existence.

Rory brushed his lips across her forehead. A gentle kiss, it shot heat through his body. Touching her only made him want her more, and he forced himself to remain still. "I'm not a monster," he breathed against her skin. He rained tiny kisses along her cheek and chin. Then, gently, caressed her lips with his own. "I want you to believe that. You have nothing to fear from me, Portia."

Hesitantly she reached for him, skimming her fingertips down his face to his neck. "It's crazy, but I believe you." Her eyelids fluttered closed and she leaned into him.

His blood sang. She believed him, believed in him. Leaning forward, he kissed her.

Chapter Three

Desire overrode her fear. Portia knew it was crazy, yet when she flattened her hand on his chest, intending to shove him away, she curled her fingers into his shirt and pulled him closer. Somehow she couldn't get past the idea that he was a vampire. Instead of the cinematic images of Nosferatu, she saw the handsome vampires, the ones who protected humanity, just like Rory had protected her from the storm. She may have startled him this morning, but deep in her gut, where her hunches lived, she knew he wouldn't hurt her.

His lips moved across hers, drinking from her, soothing her, until she softened beneath him. An ache began between her thighs, spreading outward. Her nipples hardened. To rub her breasts against his chest and feel his legs tangle with hers on the soft mattress seemed to be the ultimate goal. Who he was, what he was, didn't seem to matter. Not when he kissed her like this, blowing every single synapse in her brain until she thought only of making hot, delicious love to him all night long. Once she twined her body with his, he could thrust his cock into her and make her scream his name. Portia shuddered.

Rory deepened the kiss. His tongue stroked hers, one hand at the nape of her neck, holding her still, the other shoving covers aside and slipping beneath her nightshirt to skim along her side. With long caresses, he worked his way to her breast, then held the firm globe in his hand. He palmed it, then flicked his thumb across the nipple.

Pleasure bolted through Portia. Any worries she might have had about Rory fled as she moaned into his mouth. The need for air parted their kiss, then his lips were upon hers again. Portia tugged at his shirt. The need to feel, to explore like she hadn't last night, thrummed through her veins. His skin burned heat through his shirt. She

bunched her fingers in the soft cotton material and tugged. With his shirt free, she dove beneath it.

Her hands roamed over his chest, his shoulders, caressing a body honed with firm muscles. She stroked his chest, his hair springy against her fingers. Lightly, she caressed his male nipples, and this time Rory groaned. She touched him as if to brand him into her memory.

She stretched out her legs alongside Rory and pulled him down beside her. He went willingly. His legs tangled with hers, and Portia relished the sensation of pressing flush against his body. They were nearly the same height, which made it a perfect fit. A slim leg wrapped around his hips, pulling him into intimate contact with her. Even through her panties and his jeans, the ridge of his cock pressed into her. Portia moaned. Moist heat filled her pussy and it throbbed, wanting his long, thick shaft sliding into her.

At last she tugged his shirt over his head and sent it fluttering to the floor. Her nightshirt soon followed. Portia lay bare beside him except for a scrap of pink cotton covering her pussy. A quick tug and the material parted, leaving her naked. The impatient desire inherent in the movement only fanned the flames of her desire. Between them, heat burned, a scorching fire that threatened to consume her. It mattered little, really, whether she reached for Rory's jeans, or he did, for soon, he pulled away long enough to remove his jeans and underwear.

Portia trailed her hands over her chest. As she wrapped her fingers around Rory's cock, it jerked, yet he held himself still. His hands danced tiny steps across her skin, coaxing a moan here, a whispered sigh there. She felt as if she were a piano played by a virtuoso. Though she knew they lay on her bed, it seemed as if the world faded away, leaving only the two of them.

Rory trailed his fingers over her stomach, down through the neatly trimmed curls at the juncture of her thighs, and over her outer lips. Portia moaned. She parted her legs, wanting him to slide his fingers through her slick heat and stroke the heart of her. He obliged, a feather-light touch that had her bucking her hips with impatience.

Light strokes traced a path around her clit, down to tease the opening of her vagina, and then back up again.

"Please," Portia said, one hand fisted in the covers, the other wrapped tightly around Rory's cock. She stroked him, her hard, fast pumps mimicking what she'd do with her body. He groaned and wrapped his other hand around her wrist, holding her still.

"I want to watch you come, Portia."

His husky words brought her nearly to the edge.

Rory slid a finger into her channel, his thumb still working her clitoris. As he finger-fucked her pussy, he kissed and suckled her breasts.

Portia closed her eyes, awash in sensation. She writhed beneath him, imagining he was over her, fucking her. Her body tightened, and with a cry, she came. Like jumping off a cliff, she hovered in the air, feeling like she was flying. Ripples cascaded through her body. Her eyes flew open and Rory looked down at her, a hungry expression on his face.

It should have worried her. Instead, she drew her hand down his length, rubbing her thumb over the head of his cock to gather the drop of fluid and smear it on his flesh.

He moved over her. Settling himself between her legs, he claimed her lips for another mind-numbing kiss. When he pulled away, he stared into her eyes. The luminous blue depths called to her, sucking her into his gaze. "I would never hurt you, Portia. Never." He punctuated his words with another kiss.

One stroke of his cock against her wet folds, testing, teasing. Then he plunged into her.

Portia held her eyes open, afraid to look away. Being impaled on his cock, caught in the power of his gaze, was one of the most erotic things she'd ever experienced. Over and over, he plunged into her body. Each stroke drove her higher. She grabbed his ass, holding on as he fucked her.

Her body tightened. "Rory," she cried out. Then she came again, her orgasm slamming through her body. Rory saw it all, his intense eyes capturing every nuance,

every facial expression. He slammed home one more time, and then stiffened above her. She watched as his face tightened. The cords of his neck stood out as he came with a shout of triumph.

He remained poised above her like a statue of male satisfaction. Then, slowly, he settled himself beside her. Portia snuggled into him, a little nagging voice in the back of her mind reminding her he was a vampire.

* * *

Portia moved around the parlor with brisk efficiency. He admired her keen appraiser's eye, most likely honed as an art buyer in New York. The way she cataloged everything and sorted them into a keep, sell, and maybe column. She knelt on the floor as she cataloged the contents of an old steamer trunk. With her rounded ass in the air, she looked ready for him to walk up behind her and fuck her.

His cock hardened. Damn it, even covered in dust and showing his age with every passing comment, he wanted her. He traced the curve of her rear down to the long, supple legs that had felt oh-so-good wrapped around his waist. The long line of her back drew his attention. He imagined tracing tiny kisses down it.

Rory shook his head. "Focus on work, man," he muttered to himself.

Portia sat back on her heels and glanced over her shoulder. "Say something?" She flashed him a smile and made notations on her notebook. "You wouldn't believe what I've found in here. Most of it belongs in the sell column. I'm not going to wear these petticoats, but the embroidery is just beautiful."

An image of her in petticoats and a bustle came to mind, and he knew she'd look beautiful in historic garments. Her smile of discovery lit her face, and he knew her great-aunt had chosen well. "I'd love to see you try them on," he said, thinking that no woman could turn down a game of dress up. Down in his closet he had some carefully preserved outfits that would be the envy of any Civil War enthusiast. "I'm sure you'd look beautiful."

Portia gently caressed the fabric. Biting her lower lip, she looked up at him. "You think so?"

Rory nodded. "I think you'd be lovely. Dinner. Tonight." He knew exactly where Clara had kept the period plates, most of them original to Myrtlewood, and could call in a carry-out order to the family restaurant down the road. He often fetched food for Clara there after she became ill.

Portia stared at him with a hungry look in her eyes. She might be thinking dinner and he most certainly was on the menu. Eagerly, he followed the swipe of her tongue across her lower lip.

"Can you imagine trying to get into some of these things?" Portia held up one of the dresses. "I mean, it must have taken hours just to dress back then."

"Imagine trying to get a woman out of them." Rory replied, his voice husky. An image of Portia standing before him, her back bared by the row of pearl buttons left undone, filled his mind. With her skirts billowing around her, she looked like a vision of feminine loveliness, the bustle emphasizing the curve of her buttocks. Were they at a ball, only he would know what she looked like beneath her crinolines and corset. His cock hardened with the knowledge.

Portia shivered. "It was a slower time back then. Things were probably different. I mean, you went courting or something, right?" She turned away, a rosy flush across her cheeks.

"Do you want me to court you?" He stepped forward until his breath whispered across the back of her neck. "I still remember how things were back then. You're right, it was a different time." He brushed his lips across her nape. Drawing on his willpower, he kept his fangs sheathed, his body inches away from hers.

She bent down to pick up a small jewelry box sitting in the bottom of the trunk. The motion pushed her buttocks against his groin. Biting back a moan, he struggled to stifle his rapid erection. His cock pounded with the need to take her, right here, bent over this trunk of belongings from the original owners of Myrtlewood. She straightened, relieving the delicious pressure. He moved away before he could let his lust overrule his good sense.

Rory peered over Portia's shoulder, waiting for her reaction to the contents of the box. Opening it, she gasped at the array of pearls and gold filigree displayed in the velvet case. "I bet these are worth a small fortune," she said, tracing her finger over a large pearl teardrop.

Rory nodded. "Most likely." His mind flashed back to another time when ladies in fine dresses wore such things and called them baubles. "But don't let that stop you from wearing a piece or two tonight. They're so beautiful they don't deserve to be shut away from the light."

Portia stepped away from him. Turning, she stared at him, her gaze telling him that she knew all too well he spoke about more than the costume jewelry.

"I'm going to go downstairs for a while," he said. "Call me if you need me, all right?"

Portia nodded. "I will. Don't worry."

He nodded toward the trunk. "Good. Happy hunting." Turning on his heel, he strode from the room. It pained him to leave her, but he needed time to focus. Even after living these decades, he found it hard not to be impatient like everyone else. "She'll come around when she comes around," he said as he paused at the base of the stairs.

Tilting his head toward the floor above, he listened to Portia moving around. It seemed almost unfair that Clara had willed her this place and pinned all Rory's hopes of freeing himself from his curse on her. For a moment he listened to the comforting sounds of life filling the old home once more. Clara had always bustled through the house, cleaning, setting things out, rearranging her copious antiques. When her illness left her bedridden, the house became sullen. Her absence weighed heavily until Portia had arrived to let light into the old mansion once more.

He paused at the back door, staring at the curtained window. Going outside in the sunlight would be deadly, but tonight, he longed to walk the grounds. Of course they'd get no farther than the fence, beyond which was the small cemetery in which Ashleigh was buried. Still, to be outside made his curse bearable.

Snarling, he turned away from the door. He'd wait until tonight. Then, he'd try to convince Portia she was the one for him.

* * *

Trying to dress in the antique clothing gave Portia the fits. She prided herself on being ready for a date in twenty minutes. A little black dress, high heels, and sheer nylons, and she could party all night. But after wriggling her way into a night rail, crinolines, hoop skirt, and corset, she had a newfound respect for historical women. The corset bones dug into her hips, though she hadn't laced it up very tightly. She needed a maid, or a man, to tighten the strings. Just thinking about Rory standing behind her, lacing her up, watching her breasts overflow their bindings, had her wet. Bending over to put on her low-heeled boots nearly caused a wardrobe malfunction. That Rory might have witnessed this made her breath hitch.

She debated for a moment between two dresses, finally shimmying into a light blue dress. Looking in the mirror, she studied the effect. With her hair swept back and a light hand on her makeup, she looked like a southern belle. Portia pressed her palm to her chest. Dear God, she could pass for any one of the women in those old photographs. Touching soft fingers to her coif, she couldn't believe the woman looking back at her. She would, she had no doubt, knock Rory's socks, and hopefully the rest of his clothing, off.

"Bring it on, vampire. See how I stack up compared to your genteel southern women." Laughing, Portia spun on her heel and sashayed her way to the dining room where she'd agreed to meet Rory.

She stopped just beyond the doorway, taking a moment to compose herself. The sound of a floorboard creaking told her Rory had already arrived. Perfect. Ready to make her grand entrance, she sucked in her stomach, lifted her head high, and floated into the dining hall.

Rory stopped. Dressed in what looked like authentic historical garb, he could have passed for a much, much sexier Rhett Butler. His hair had been slicked back, his blue eyes piercing as ever. A sensual smile curved his lips, his coat and tie fastened

securely up to his neck. She let her gaze wander across his broad chest, down to the waist coat and the tailored wool trousers that emphasized his long, muscled legs. Polished boots completed the effect. With a flourish, he bowed.

"Lady Fenton, I am honored." He straightened, a twinkle in his eyes. Striding forward, he held out his hand.

Portia offered him hers. Long, sure fingers curled around her digits, and with a gentle caress, he brought her hand to his mouth. He brushed a courtly kiss across the back, then he turned her palm over and kissed the center. A hint of his tongue brushed across her flesh, reminding her how it felt on her pussy.

"Thank you, but it is I who should be honored," she said, not surprised to find her voice a bit breathy. She eyed the table set with fancy looking dishes. Scents of ham and potatoes filled the air, and as if to protest her very lady-like garb, her stomach rumbled. Loudly. She flattened her hand, wishing she had a fan or something to play the coquette with. "Why, sir, I do believe I'm famished." She surprised herself with how easily she slipped into the Southern Belle role for which she was dressed.

"I shan't keep the lady waiting." With another half bow, Rory went to the table. He pulled out a chair. "If you would do me the honor of dining with me."

"I would, thank you." She sat down, letting him help move her closer to the table. The bustle in the back of her dress made sitting difficult. No more so than the corset, and she kept her back ramrod straight to keep the boning from pinching her. No wonder everyone looked so stern in their old photographs, if they were laced and tied up like this. She stared at the setting, certain it had to date back at least a century.

Rory sat and started heaping food on her plate while she mused. "This is authentic, isn't it?" she asked as he used a gravy boat to add what had to be completely fattening homemade gravy to her potatoes.

"It is. These are some of the original place settings. Clara claimed they dated back to the 1820s." Rory picked up a glass she hoped was filled with wine. "Enjoy."

Rory made no protests when she cut a bite of ham and ate. She moaned at the smoked honey flavor bursting on her tongue. Nothing, not even her favorite Italian take-out in New York, tasted this good.

"Delicious?" Rory asked, his eyes darkening. Tiny pinpoints of red glowed in their centers, and she realized with a flush she must have looked like a woman ready to be pleased with her closed eyes and appreciative noises she was making about the food.

"Very much so, yes." She tried to imagine Rory as he must have been back then. He had to be quite the charmer. The meal passed in silence, with Portia wavering between asking about his past and trying to remain ignorant of the fact that he was a much older man. He looked maybe in his late twenties to mid-thirties.

But ignoring the fact that he was a vampire and old enough to be her many-times great grandfather wouldn't make it go away. As she polished off the last of the meal, she breathed a sigh of relief, needing to know more about him, wanting to know more about him. "Would you like to walk outside?" she asked, knowing she'd chosen her low-heeled boots for such an occasion. After all, wasn't that what courting couples did? They courted.

"I'd love to." He glanced at the French doors then back at her. "Will you be warm enough?"

"I think so," she replied. "After all, I have you to keep me warm."

Quicker than she thought possible, Rory rose to his feet. He crossed to her, brushing his knuckles across her cheek before gently helping her from the table. "You are more alluring than any young woman I have ever met," he whispered. His lips hovered close to hers, and she rose into his kiss.

With one hand holding hers, the other on her waist, Rory pulled her to her feet. His mouth moved across hers, hungry, demanding. She clung to him, one hand creeping around the back of his neck to hold him to her. Her nipples hardened. Moisture soaked her folds, and she longed to be in modern day clothes. A thong would prove to be little barrier to him.

Against her lips, Rory groaned. He tore his lips from hers, eyes glowing red. His fangs showed. "I want to lean you back on the table and take you now." He grinned wryly. "Except clothing of my era wasn't made for that." He shook his head.

Portia bit back a mewl of need. "Later, I'll find out how you get a woman out of these things." She brushed a kiss across the corner of his mouth, suspecting both of them needed the walk in the chilly air.

Leaving the plates, Rory led her out the doors. For a moment, Portia wondered who would do dishes, then decided she didn't care. Not tonight.

The door clicked closed behind her. The moon shone in the nearly cloudless sky, providing just enough light for her to see the benches and large, stone urns. From the way Rory's hand on her elbow guided her, she suspected he saw a lot better than she.

"How did you become a vampire?" Portia asked once they passed the bench where they had coupled. A small part of her mind supposed she should be concerned about being out after dark with a vampire. Rory hadn't done anything to harm her. She trusted him. Walking beside him, even in this costume, felt as natural as breathing. He seemed... comfortable. She startled at the new sensation.

Rory stopped. He turned to her, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "Like most of the young men my age, I enlisted in the Confederate army. I made it through a couple of battles, but I was shot. I would have died, except for Wiley M. Baird -- a vampire as smooth as good Kentucky bourbon. He turned me. Like the proverbial mouse, while the men were away, he went to their homesteads to play."

Portia struggled to breathe. She tried to imagine Rory on the battlefields, facing certain death. Just thinking about his getting shot raised a lump in her throat. She released a shuddering breath. "Did you play?" She chose her words carefully, not certain she wanted to hear his answer.

"No." Rory clenched her fingers, then released them. "Baird wanted me to. The other young vampires did too. But I wouldn't. When I wouldn't feast upon the mistresses left here at Myrtlewood, Baird cursed me. He said I'd forever have to watch

over them and keep them safe from the likes of him. I can't leave the grounds until the curse is broken."

"How do you break the curse?" Behind him the wrought iron fence that marked the edge of the yard gleamed dully in the moonlight. Was that as far as he could go? Was he really confined to the house and grounds, and had been for over a century? Swaying, she flattened her palm on his chest to stay upright.

"A member of the family's bloodline has to fall in love with me," Rory admitted.

"The family you saved." Portia said, not quite believing his words. After her Aunt Clara there was only she, and she lacked any other relatives. "I'm the only one left. It has to be me." She stepped back, needing to put some distance between them. He overwhelmed her senses, his shoulders so broad and comforting. A hint of a masculine, woodsy scent teased her nose.

Pain flickered in his eyes as she tumbled back another step and another.

"Don't run from me, Portia. Please, don't go," Rory pleaded.

She went as far as the bench they'd passed, where she sank down. The hoop skirt billowed around her, the crinolines and bustle going every which way. Not caring about the costume, or propriety, she braced her elbows on her legs. The corset dug into her sides, and yet, that tiny pain paled in comparison to what Rory must have experienced. "I'm not running. I just had to sit. It's overwhelming," she hurried to reassure him. Looking up, she held out her hand, noticing how pale it looked under the moonlight. "Sit with me, Rory."

He looked from her to the bench for long moments. Slowly, almost as if he believed she might chase him away, he sat. "I'm not forcing you into anything. You don't have to worry about it."

Portia turned to face him. Taking his hands in hers, she held them to her chest. "I'm not. It's all right." The urge to soothe him had her inching closer. Resting their clasped hands in her lap, she studied him beneath the light of the moon. "I'm glad you told me."

"Me too," Rory breathed, and for long moments they sat in silence.

Beside him, Portia wondered about the curse, and if she could be the woman to free him from it. Studying his profile, knowing the man -- vampire -- that he was, she knew there was a damn good chance she might be.

Chapter Four

The chill air drove them back inside. She declined Rory's offer to help her out of the period clothing. Not because she didn't want him, because she did. In light of his revelation, she needed to learn more about the contents of the house, and perhaps, the women who used to live there. The trunks and photographs she'd been looking at looked like the perfect place. Three hours after their dinner, the need to be with Rory drummed in Portia's blood. His words, the vulnerability she found there, touched her.

She sat cross-legged on the thick, woven rug in front of the fireplace going over some old photographs. A fire crackled merrily in the hearth, though she barely noticed it. The sepia toned pictures held her attention. Names scrawled on the back in a shaky hand held little meaning to her. She imagined Clara going through the photographs, identifying them for a grand-niece she'd never met. No letters, nothing to indicate how Clara had known about her, though Portia guessed her mother might have said something in passing. Just photographs. Envelope upon envelope of pictures detailing the history of a family she never knew.

Had one of them worn the dress she'd used this evening? She'd been careful when she disrobed, gingerly hanging the dress on a padded hanger once reserved for a designer gown. The crinolines and hoop skirt she put back where she'd found them, uncertain how to properly care for the delicate material. Nibbling on her lower lip, she traced the sour countenance of a woman in the photograph. It was dated 1867.

He rested his hand on her shoulder.

Portia gave an involuntary squeak.

"Didn't mean to startle you. I brought you a snack." He set a silver tray laden with mugs of hot apple cider and the package of frosted oatmeal cookies she'd left on

the counter on the floor in front of her. Though she'd eaten a scrumptious meal, she welcomed the snack. And the reprieve from history.

"Thanks," she said. "That looks great." She set the pictures down in the photo box by her right knee. Patting the rug next to her, she welcomed Rory to join her. With a feline grace, he sat.

The mantle clock chimed midnight. The vampire bringing her hot cider and cookies made her think of a picnic under a warm, summer sun. The grounds seemed perfect for it, with lots of lush, sprawling lawns. She smiled at Rory, imagining both of them sprawled on a blanket. The fact that Rory couldn't tolerate the sunlight didn't damper her fantasy, for she knew that's all it could be.

In an attempt to divert her thoughts, Portia picked up one of the cookies. She'd purchased them as an indulgent snack, their decadence dimmed by the vampire sitting next to her. Compared to the cookies he was a double chocolate hot fudge sundae made of Ben and Jerry's ice cream and Godiva chocolate. She popped the cookie in her mouth with a wicked grin.

She bit into the soft, chewy cookie and nearly moaned with delight. "I don't know which is more tempting, you or the cookie. They're wonderful," she said after swallowing. "Want to try?"

Rory shook his head. "I can't. Sorry. I can only drink liquids."

She flushed, feeling suddenly stupid for forgetting his vampiric nature. "I'm sorry. I didn't think." She picked up the mug and sipped the fragrant cider. The sweet, warm taste more than made up for her blunder, and she tried again. "At least you get to enjoy this wonderful cider, right?" She had slept with a vampire. Shoving the last of the cookie in her mouth, she wondered how she could have forgotten that simple, very important fact. Like that he had red eyes and big fangs. He could bite her.

She shivered at the thought of his fangs sinking into her flesh, sucking her blood, making her his. She'd never been a fan of horror movies, and yet, she sat in the living room of this house she'd inherited and had cookies and cider with a vampire. Un-fucking-believable!

He nodded. "It's all right. And yes, I can drink the cider." He picked up his own mug. "It never seems to be fall until I've had some warm cider. My family used to press their own apples. It was a tradition." His eyes held a far-away look, and she wondered if he thought about those he'd left behind.

When it came to living forever, Hollywood made it sound glamorous. Lifetimes to pile up wealth, possessions, everything anyone could ever want. And for most vampires, Portia suspected that probably was the truth. But to watch those you love grow old and die, knowing you'll never see them again. It had to be tough. She hadn't known about Clara until after her great-aunt's death, and yet, she mourned her loss. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?" Rory returned his cup to the tray.

"How do you go on? Everyone you know is dead. You're trapped in this house. I can't imagine what you've gone through." She reached across the space separating them and rested her hand on his knee. A wave of compassion rolled through her, and she blinked suddenly misty eyes. She'd thought she was strong. Living in New York made you strong. She wondered if she'd have the strength of will Rory had to endure what he'd seen.

"Hope. When I was human, I went to church. We were told if we were good, worked hard, obeyed our parents, we'd find Heaven. It's what kept us going in spite of lean years and hard, back breaking work. When the war broke out, we hoped, believed, we were making a difference for the better. When I became a vampire, I hoped I could do some good by protecting the inhabitants of this house. And after I became cursed, I hoped to be worthy enough of a woman's love." His gaze never wavered from hers, the intense blue eyes boring into her soul.

Cold shudders darted through Portia. He honestly thought she was the one. As in "the one," the person songs were sung about and movies ending on a swell of music for. Not that she didn't think that way. Rubbing the bridge of her nose, she realized she suddenly got in way too deep, way too fast. "You're not related to me are you?" she asked quickly, hoping to distract herself from her spiraling thoughts.

Rory chuckled. "Oh, no. My family grew up not far from here, but we're not related." He laughed, then leaned forward and caressed her arm. "You have nothing to worry about there."

"Thank goodness." Portia licked her lips, her stomach still doing crazy flips at the thought of actually falling in love with Rory. After the way he made love to her, oh crap there was that word again, she half believed she might be already there.

A question gnawed at her. She feared asking it, but had to know the answer. "Do you drink blood?" He was a vampire. Of course he had to drink blood, yet she'd never once seen him do it.

Rory set down his mug.

The serious look on his face made her stomach drop. She wished she could pull the question back and live in ignorance. She liked ice cream with peanut butter. Sure, it wasn't a life-ending fetish, but it certainly was odd. Maybe Rory's menu was something like that. Just a little bit different. She could deal. Couldn't she?

Every man had flaws. He wasn't perfect. No one was. If Rory drank human blood, it'd be a huge flaw. She doubted she could overlook something like that.

"I have to drink it to live, Portia. But you have nothing to fear from me. I don't drink human blood. Never could stomach it, really, unless it came from a willing donor. No, I use animal blood."

"Animal blood? A willing donor?" Portia shook her head, her stomach protesting violently. Swallowing hard, she pushed her mug of cider away from her and tried not to look at the oatmeal cookies. The one she had eaten sat heavy in her stomach.

"Let's just say Myrtlewood has never had a rodent problem. I don't need much blood to survive," Rory softly replied.

"Eww!" Portia exclaimed. "That's disgusting." Just thinking about Rory catching a rat and... no. She was not going there. Was. Not.

"I had to live." His words trailed off into silence, and Portia struggled not to hear the unspoken "for you" that hung between them. "It's intimate to exchange blood. It isn't something done lightly. Though I hear it's very pleasurable for the donor. I won't

lie to you, Portia. I've taken blood, but usually during sex, and believe me, the woman was always more than willing." His voice dropped a notch to a husky caress.

A bolt of jealousy filled her. Portia refused to think of Rory with other women. In the back of her mind she knew he most likely wasn't celibate, but damn it, she wanted him all to herself. And what did that say about her? He must have seen her frown, for he chuckled.

"Don't worry, you've been the only one in a long time."

Portia grabbed another cookie so she wouldn't have to admit to being jealous. She followed it up with a generous drink of cider. "How long?" she asked, when her curiosity got the better of her.

Rory smiled. "Let's just say a few years."

Portia shivered. She didn't want to decide whether it was a few short years or long ones. Either way, she had this man all to herself. Leaning forward, she swiped her thumb across his lower lip. "Well, I'm glad."

Reaching out, he clasped the back of her neck, holding her in place. "Me, too." He lowered his lips and kissed her.

Rory tasted like warm apple cider. His supple lips moved across hers. Tiny licks of his tongue captured a drop of cider and pulled it into his mouth. With parted lips, Portia leaned into him. She sighed, feeling his hand cup the back of her neck. He buried his fingers in the thick pony tail, holding her still. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, a bold motion that conjured images of his cock penetrating her body. He pulled away long enough to set aside the tray, then drew her down to the plush rug. Willingly, she pressed her body against his.

"It doesn't bother you? What I am and what I have to do to survive?" Rory asked.

Desire singing in her veins, Portia really just wanted to ignore the whole issue and let him make love to her once more. "It does, a little," she admitted.

"I'll do my best to make sure it doesn't," he whispered, before claiming her mouth once more. Somehow through the kisses and caresses, Portia lost her pajama top

and bottoms. She lay naked on the rug, the fire crackling behind her in the hearth. Above her, Rory nuzzled her neck, laving a path from earlobe to shoulder. He licked and suckled her, his clothes gone in between the caresses. Portia curled her fingers into his muscled back. He rested his weight on her, his cock pressing into her stomach. She moved against it with an urgency that defied the worries still floating in her mind.

He curled his lips around a peak, and suddenly, the worries were gone. Spearing her fingers through his hair, she thought of nothing except his hands and mouth on her skin. Rory traced a path with his fingers between her breasts. He cupped her left one, testing its weight in his palm. When the nipple pressed against his hand, he pulled his head away from one to give its twin a long, slow lick.

"Rory," Portia moaned. She threaded her fingers through his hair, holding his mouth to her. "Yes."

He rose over her, giving her an opportunity to skim her fingers over his chest. She caressed his nipples, then lower.

Rory held his breath as her fingers traced every ridge along his abdomen, dipping into his navel. His cock twitched and an impatient growl rose in his throat. Beneath his touch, her muscles fluttered.

"You test my patience," he whispered, before dipping his head to her once more. He devoured her, spreading open-mouthed kisses across her flesh. He drew a tight nipple into his mouth and sucked hard. She cried out and clutched at his head, her exploration of his body forgotten. Her legs wrapped around his hips, her heels digging into the backs of his thighs.

Desire roared in her veins. Portia clung to him, feeling as if Rory were her only anchor from the maelstrom rolling inside her. His talented, nimble tongue licked her nipples, alternately sucking and scraping his teeth until the pleasure-pain had her rocking her hips against him. Her pussy clenched. In the hearth, the fire cracked and popped. The scent of wood smoke added an earthy tinge to the air, combined with Rory's own, subtle scent. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, never wanting to forget the combination.

“Please, Rory. Please.” Words tumbled from her lips. A heavy beat pulsed in her blood.

Raising his head, Rory scraped the pulse point in her neck with his teeth. Portia shuddered as fire shot through her. Oh, yes, she wanted to feel his cock sliding into her warm, slick heat. Then, he could slide his teeth into her neck and drink.

Her eyes flew open. Dear God, what was she thinking? She started to shake her head, then stopped as he trailed his lips over her skin again, past the valley between her breasts and over her stomach. He worshipped the skin across her flat stomach like a cat licking cream, then he buried his face between her legs. With a long, hard stroke, he licked her outer lips.

Portia moaned. Having his cock inside her would make her world explode. Even now, her body tightened, the walls of her vagina clamping down on the imaginary thrust of Rory’s shaft. She caressed his back. Her fingers traced the long sinew of muscle beneath skin, and she clenched her fingers against him as his tongue delved into her pussy.

A shock of desire bowed her back off the rug. She cried out, and her voice echoed in the room. Over and over Rory speared her, pausing only to swirl his tongue around the nub of her clit, and then back down again. With lips and tongue he devoured her, until she cried out his name as her orgasm washed through her body. He lay there between her thighs with a satisfied smile on his face. Then, slowly, he crawled over her body to kiss her mouth.

Portia tasted herself on him, a heady mixture of her own juices and spicy cider. “Please,” she whispered when she drew her lips away to breathe. “I need you inside me.” She clenched her fingers around the firm globes of his ass and pulled him closer.

He entered her on a smooth stroke. Bracing his weight on his arms, he looked into her eyes, and when she looked away, he pulled her gaze back to him. “I love being buried in your tight pussy.” He pulled out again, then drove into her body.

Portia met him stroke for stroke. His words fanned the flames of her arousal and made her think of things she shouldn’t. She wanted Rory now, and forever. In just a few

days he insinuated himself into her life as easily as he drove into her body. She wrapped her arms around him. Her breathy cries and moans filled the room along with the wet sounds of bodies coming together.

Rory thrust harder, faster. She felt his orgasm coming as surely as her own. Clenching her inner muscles around him, she drew him deeper into her body. She wanted all of him. Body and soul.

He bit and nipped her throat, sucking deeply. Portia arched her neck, no longer afraid of his vampire nature. At last, he teased her pulse point with his tongue.

“Drink me,” she gasped. “Take me.”

“Portia.” His husky moan filled her ears. Moments later, his fangs plunged into her neck. The twin penetration sent her over the edge. Her orgasm pounded through her body, leaving her screaming his name in pleasure. Her body convulsed around him. Stars flashed before her eyes. And still, he fucked her.

Again, and again, she came, the suction of his lips on her neck, his cock deep in her body sending her over the edge. Rory stiffened. A guttural cry tore his lips from her body, and with a moan that sounded like absolution, he came. Warm seed splashed inside her, igniting yet another release. She lay sated, trapped between his body and the floor, and slowly, so slowly she thought she dreamt it, he lowered his forehead to hers.

“I love you, Portia,” he whispered, then rolled to the side, taking her with him.

Boneless, she went willingly into his arms. Eyes closed, she buried her face against his chest, not quite ready for the words she knew he wanted to hear. She loved him. Offering him her blood had been the test, and his cherishing the gift she gave him, the answer. In her heart, she knew Rory wouldn't do anything to harm her. Now or ever. And she feared, deep in her heart, that she loved him.

* * *

A camping lantern dangled from Portia's fingers. Clouds scuttled across the moon. Shadows came and went with the rustling of leaves. Deep in her heart, Portia knew she should be scared. She wasn't. Not when she had thoughts of Rory to push away the fear.

She fingered the twin pinpricks on her neck. When she looked in the mirror, she didn't know what to expect, but the twin red dots weren't it. She thought she might see a bruise, an ugly welt like a hickey gone wrong. Instead, just two tiny signs to mark Rory's possession and a slight tiredness that could have more to do with making love into the wee hours of the morning instead of blood loss.

Ahead, moonlight bathed the Civil War era cemetery in a warm glow. The wrought-iron gate hung open far enough to admit a person. Bleached white headstones like old bones sat at odd angles. There, just outside the gate, knelt Rory.

The curse. He couldn't leave the grounds, and apparently, this old cemetery was considered off Myrtlewood's grounds. Oh, God. Rory had been bound in the house for over a century and had been unable to enter this cemetery. When she'd looked out the window and saw him kneeling here, a mantle of grief surrounding him, she'd felt drawn to him. Now, she knew why.

It was time.

Portia paused. Even at this distance, sorrow surrounded him. Looking at him, with his head bowed, she wondered whether she should disturb him or not. She walked up to the partially open gate, doused the lantern's flame, and stood next to Rory.

"You can't enter, can you?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Who's buried here?" She glanced at the white headstones, but in the darkness saw no names, nothing that would indicate identities.

"The past residents of Myrtlewood, and my brother."

Portia gasped. She knelt beside him, taking one of his cold hands in her own. Warming them between her palms, she looked again at the graves. "Your brother?"

"He married one of the younger daughters after he returned from the war. They had no children. He was, except for me, the last of my family's line." Rory expelled a puff of breath. "Once, just once I'd like to touch his grave, tell him..." His eyelids fluttered closed.

"Tell him what?" Portia whispered.

Rory gave a pained groan. "Tell him that I don't regret that it was I, and not him, who was wounded in that battle. Tell him I don't regret dying so he could come home and live."

A sob bubbled from Portia's throat. "Oh, Rory!" Love, pure and clean, welled along with the tears in her eyes. "You can tell him." Rising to her feet, she pulled him with her.

He stepped forward and frowned. "But the curse."

"Walk with me," she said, knowing, though she hadn't said the words that she loved this man with her heart and soul.

Rory stared at their joined hands. "Do you know how long it's been since I've stepped beyond this fence?"

"Too long," Portia replied. Without waiting for an answer, she stepped forward.

Rory followed. One step, two, until he moved beyond the fence that had so defined his life for the last hundred years or more. Glancing over at him, she looked at the tear tracing its path slowly down his cheek. He was free of his curse.

"I love you, Rory. It happened so fast, and I don't know how or why, but I love you. I can't imagine Myrtlewood, my life, without you. I'm so glad you were here." She threw her arms around him.

He pulled her into his embrace. Strong arms wrapped around her. "I love you, too." Rory tilted her face up and brushed his thumb along her lower lip. "And I've always been yours. Bet you had no idea you'd inherit me, along with a house." He chuckled softly.

"No, I didn't. But, I'm glad you were here. Willed and waiting." Standing on tip-toe she pressed her lips to his, and showed him exactly how willing she would be.

Mary Winter

Mary commutes between her dream home near the Mark Twain National Forest in Missouri, and her current residence in Iowa. She lives with a menagerie of animals including an opinionated horse and a cat who was a dog in past life. When not writing spicy tales of erotic romance, she enjoys writing science fiction and fantasy, spending time with her horse, and enjoying the outdoors. Lucky for her, her partner (hero) shares these same passions, and usually both of them can be found in their respective dens writing.

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