

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Ghostly  
Awakening



Tricks  
and  
Treats

LACEY SAVAGE

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Ghostly Awakening

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# ***GHOSTLY AWAKENING***

**Lacey Savage**

## Chapter One

For the first time in over two decades, people strolled through the high double archways of the Bradley mansion. They poured into the main foyer on the hard soles of expensive shoes, their bright, elaborate costumes sending sharp flutters of color to bathe the neglected interior of the nineteenth-century manor.

Sebastian Bradley pressed his back against the far wall of the upper floor, watching over the wooden railing as guests surged into his home.

Only they weren't *his* guests. He hadn't invited any of them. He didn't know the woman wearing the Marie Antoinette wig that brushed the petals of the chandelier, nor the man with the wooden peg leg stroking his moustache in a blatantly suggestive manner as he leered at a Little Red Riding Hood half his age. Before tonight, Sebastian had never laid eyes on the chocolate-skinned socialite dressed as a zombie bride who stood in the center of the dining area and barked harsh orders at anyone unlucky enough to come within ten feet of her.

A flash of deep scarlet fabric caught Sebastian's eye and his heart gave a quick, tumbling lurch. He stifled a ragged sigh as a woman's curvy form came into view. She stumbled into the room on three-inch heels that mimicked the round-toed look of an athletic sneaker. A delicate ankle and impossibly long legs extended from the ridiculous platform shoe, drawing his gaze to a skirt that barely reached halfway up her thigh.

Sebastian swallowed hard. *Her* he knew. Celeste Winters was the reason strangers had stormed his home, invading his privacy, treating his family's property like their own personal playground.

"Listen up, everyone!" The zombie bride clapped her hands and the band playing a rough version of a classic rock song brought their music to a stuttering halt. "Thank you all for showing up to the most fabulous Halloween party in the entire country. Mine!"

She waited for the chuckles, which echoed somewhat belatedly. Frown lines appeared over the woman's upturned nose and her perfectly arched brows drew downward. "This night is very special to me. So drink, dance, enjoy yourselves. But don't you dare leave!" A hint of a threat lurked beneath the high-pitched warning.

Sebastian rolled his eyes as the band members picked up their tired song where they'd left off. He'd lost sight of Celeste. In an effort to find her again in the crowd, he risked moving away from the wall and crept closer to the balustrade. A few of the bolder guests had already thundered up the set of curved wooden stairs that led to the second floor, staking their claim to the perfect viewing area of the festivities in full swing below.

He carefully avoided the press of bodies, sliding sideways into an empty spot against the railing while attempting to take up as little room as possible. He curled his fingers around the old wood, his stomach clenching along with his hands.

Ah! There!

Celeste reached out and grabbed a flute of champagne from a waiter's tray as the man swept past her. She sipped at it once then seemed to decide that method was inefficient and gulped half the contents in one large quaff.

Sebastian smiled and shook his head. She was like no one he'd ever met in his life—before or after his transformation. For the past week he'd watched her as she'd tirelessly swept through his home, turning a dilapidated mansion ravaged by time and a neglectful owner into one of the most posh settings for a society shindig he'd ever seen.

Not that Sebastian had attended many of these gatherings in his youth. After his father's death, when he'd found himself with more money than he could spend in a lifetime and no idea what to do with it all, he'd wandered from bash to bender, always restless, endlessly seeking something he couldn't find.

And then, a week after he'd turned twenty-one, his life had come to a grinding halt because of one small, seemingly harmless error in judgment. What little hope he'd had

of making something of himself had gone up in smoke, along with everything that had made him who he was.

*Damn.* He'd blinked and lost her again. The woman was more slippery than an ice cube against heated skin.

His mouth curved again as a delicious image of Celeste, spread out beneath him, breasts heaving and nipples perking to tight little nubs, flared in his mind's eye. He could picture that tight little body of hers all wound up, writhing and trembling with barely contained arousal as he trailed a slowly melting ice cube in the valley between her full, lush breasts. He'd dip the fragment of ice into the hollow of her navel then glide it lower to trail across her mound. If she were really good, he might even smear some of the cool moisture across her heated labia. The pink, quivering flesh would flutter as he'd slide a finger into the smooth, wet slit and —

"There you are." Celeste's husky, sensual voice had a groan ripping from his throat. His cock twitched, arching upward to strain along his bare stomach. "Didn't anyone ever tell you it's not a good idea to let a woman wait?"

Something strange and powerful washed through Sebastian—a feeling so deeply unexpected that it knocked the air from his lungs. He barely had time to identify it as hope, lust and the thrill of anticipation all rolled into one before he spun around rapidly, took a step forward and collided with Celeste's lush curves.

Celeste frowned and shifted from one foot to the other, her perfectly shaped brows drawing together over her upturned nose. For a moment, he couldn't breathe. Her breasts, full and plump beneath the tight, belly-baring cheerleader's shirt, pressed against his chest. He could feel her firm nipples scrape his pectorals even through the fabric of her clothes. The contact sent electricity sparking against his skin.

God, he'd never been so aware of another person in his entire life. The heat of her flesh seared him to the bone, awakening sensations in his body that had lain dormant for much too long.

Then, as if she hadn't already taken him to the edge of his self-control, she looked up at him—*right* at him—and smiled. A brilliant, jaw-dropping smile that had his already rampant erection raging out of control.

Her limpid blue eyes crinkled at the corners. Purple-tipped mascara tilted her long lashes at an angle, giving her all-American, girl-next-door appearance an exotic flare.

A mass of blonde curls framed her heart-shaped face. Sebastian couldn't help but reach out and stroke her soft hair, lifting a strand and twirling it around his thumb.

She frowned again, tilted her head and swept her fingers through her curls, causing the stray tress to slip out of his grasp. "Jonathan! Really, how many times do I have to tell you that if you're going to show up to one of these things, you really should let me know in advance you're going to be coming?"

"Well, darlin', I can't start getting predictable on you now, can I?"

Reality came crashing upon Sebastian in waves of agony. His heart knocked wildly against his chest.

She wasn't smiling at him. She didn't even know he was here.

*Fuck!*

How could she have known when no one had been able to see or hear him in eighteen years? Oh, he was free to linger among people and eavesdrop on their conversations. He could watch them go about their lives and desperately wish he could partake in even the worst of their human experiences. But he couldn't. He was cursed.

Cursed to always be on the outside looking in.

Humans—and animals for that matter—could feel and smell him. Taste him too, he supposed, not that anyone would ever be tempted to try. And if all that wasn't excruciating enough, he was given three hours every Halloween to spend in his fully visible, corporeal body. Of all the suffering that came with his curse, those brief hours of normalcy were by far the worst.

Gulping down a breath of perfume-laden air, he moved out of Celeste's way a moment before she threw herself into another man's arms.

"Damn you, Jon! How long have you been in town?"

Sebastian stepped behind Celeste, assessing the other man over the top of her head. Jonathan was the same height as Sebastian, but his easy smile and twinkling green eyes made him look far more comfortable in social settings than Sebastian would have ever been.

Jonathan leaned forward and brushed his lips over Celeste's right temple. "Only a couple of hours. I tried to check in to the motel downtown but all their rooms are booked. So I came here instead. Maybe I can room with you tonight?"

A spear of jealousy found its way into Sebastian's gut. It slammed home with a potency he hadn't expected, forcing him to dig his fingernails into his palms to keep from doing something he'd regret.

Sure, he wanted these people out of his house, but he didn't think sending a man flying over the railing was the right way to go about it. Especially not since Celeste seemed genuinely pleased to see the guy.

She shifted forward, her blue eyes sparkling with mischievous excitement. "You and me and Wes? Oh my!" She fluttered her hand in front of her face like a fan. "You did bring Wes, right?"

Jonathan winked. "We've only been dating for a month. Do you really think I'd unleash you on him so quickly?"

Relief suffused Sebastian's limbs at Jonathan's revelation. He'd never been so happy to hear of another man's sexual preference in his entire life.

Celeste pouted, drawing Sebastian's attention to her sultry lower lip. The playful pose caused another jolting rush of heat to pool low in Sebastian's groin. Any more of this and he'd have to find a quiet corner to take himself in hand and relieve the aching pressure in his balls.



There were some advantages to being invisible, he supposed, though they were few and far between. In the past week since Celeste had invaded his quiet, orderly life, he'd sustained a practically permanent hard-on. He wouldn't be surprised if the constant erection came with a permanent strain injury too.

But, God, it had been worth it. He'd had an opportunity to observe her as she worked tenaciously to get the place into top shape before the party, and he'd been able to stretch out on the floor beside her bed every night while she slept.

Although he could have easily followed her into the shower, he drew the line at that kind of blatantly depraved behavior. He'd allowed her as much privacy as he could, though he'd once glimpsed a shred of white lace as she'd pulled on a pair of tight jeans over delicate panties.

That image alone had been enough to keep him from getting a good night's sleep. Not that falling asleep with her scent in his nostrils and the sound of her shallow breathing in his ears was ever an option. He hadn't had a woman in his home in almost two decades. After tomorrow morning, he never would again.

For the next ten hours he intended to remember what it was like to pursue someone as though she were the only woman on earth who mattered. Celeste didn't know it, but for him, she truly was.

"Celeste!"

Her name reached Sebastian's ears on another high-pitched, instantly recognizable shrill.

Celeste rolled her eyes. "Her majesty beckons."

"She's still planning on announcing her engagement tonight?"

Celeste gasped and pressed her index finger to Jonathan's lips. "Shush! It's her big surprise. If this gets out, I'll never work in Georgia again."

She leaned in to whisper something in Jonathan's ear and Sebastian followed, pressing as close to the two of them as he dared.

"Besides, it's not just her engagement she's announcing. She actually made me hire an Orthodox priest to marry them tonight. The poor man wasn't thrilled about performing such a holy union on the most unholy day of the year, but money talks in any circle, I guess."

"Celeste!" The woman's second bellow carried up the stairs, over the sound of the band and the chatter of the guests.

"Gotta go. Stick around, okay? I have to be out of here by eight tomorrow morning. We'll have breakfast and catch up."

Jonathan agreed and a minute later Celeste was flying down the winding staircase, teetering wildly on her heels. Sebastian was right behind her as she moved around the large room, seeking out the woman who'd put her up to this—Lakisha Pernice, daughter of Michael Pernice, governor of the great state of Georgia.

Lakisha had been born with a silver spoon in her mouth and obviously believed herself entitled to push people around simply because of her daddy's social status. Worse yet, Sebastian had gathered that she'd recently become engaged to a pro-football linebacker with a multimillion-dollar contract, which gave her all the more reason to lord her wealth and status over anyone who came within shouting distance.

"I heard you were looking for me," Celeste said, stopping a couple of feet away from Lakisha. To protect her hearing no doubt.

"This party is dull," Lakisha proclaimed, propping one hand on an outward-jutting hip. The tattered pieces of her "decayed" dress fluttered around her feet. "We need a little excitement."

Celeste's lips pulled tightly over her teeth in a sickeningly sweet smile. "You told me not to do anything that might compete with your big announcement. Remember?"

Lakisha snorted, a decisively unladylike sound. "Nothing could possibly come close to what I have planned. So what have you got for everyone?"

"Aside from all this?" Celeste swept an arm around her to indicate the mansion and the two hundred guests milling about. Many were dancing while others had gathered

around the lavishly decorated tables to enjoy the ample drinks and food provided by a topnotch catering crew. "Not much."

Lakisha's eyes narrowed. "I knew it was a mistake to hire you. You're nobody. An unknown in the event-planning world. And now my night...my *life* will be ruined because you couldn't pull off throwing a decent party!"

Sebastian's nails dug into his palms, carving another notch alongside the first. He knew better than anyone how hard Celeste had worked to make this party happen. Lakisha's expectations had been unreasonable from the very beginning, starting with the demand that the party should take place at the Bradley mansion.

Situated in the small town of Shady Dell, Georgia, the Bradley house had been voted the creepiest haunted house in the state. The mansion had earned its reputation through a series of eerie calamities, ranging from the sinister to the downright macabre. The property had belonged to Sebastian's family since the early 1800s, having been passed down through generations. Sebastian had even grown up in this home. As a child, he'd loved regaling his friends with creepy tales of his grandparents double murder or the story of his Uncle Phil, who some said still haunted the gardens where he'd been buried alive.

Somehow the Bradley family legacy seemed almost fitting in light of Sebastian's own misfortune while living in this house. Most people wouldn't have chosen to live in a place with such a disturbing history but Sebastian had always felt at home here.

Unconcerned with the outward appearance of the mansion, he'd made few changes to the place in the past decade. One important addition had been the state-of-the-art alarm. With the help of a brand-new computer he'd ordered through a mail catalogue, he'd been able to hire a local security firm to ensure trespassers and curious onlookers would be kept at bay. Sebastian guarded his privacy fiercely, needing no reminders of his inability to exist among the living.

Celeste however, had knocked down every one of his carefully crafted defenses simply by being stubborn and refusing to take no for an answer. When she'd first

approached him, she'd sent him letters – two dozen registered letters to be exact – all of which he'd ignored. When that didn't work, she'd set up a tent on his front lawn and had dared him to either have her forcibly removed or give her five minutes of his time.

He would have activated the alarm and summoned the authorities if she hadn't pressed her face to the front window and looked through with those damned blue eyes open wide, a quirky smile tilting one side of her mouth.

It had been clear to him then she'd seen something in the old Bradley mansion that no one else had. Not only had she been determined to turn the place into prime party property, but she'd shown no fear when night fell and she found herself all alone in the middle of nowhere, miles away from the nearest neighbor.

She'd surprised him then, just as she continued to do so now.

Celeste crossed her arms over her chest. "You want something big...something that will make this party the talk of the socialite circle for years to come? Aside from your magnificence of course," she added with a tinge of sarcasm.

If Lakisha noted Celeste's tone, she ignored it. "You're not capable of anything that wildly exciting. Face it. You just can't cut it in this business."

Sebastian watched as Celeste tilted her chin upward. Her spine stiffened and her shoulders came up a fraction of an inch as though she prepared to do battle. If it came to that, his money was on Celeste. He'd never met anyone more passionately determined.

"Give me an hour. I'll have a special guest make an appearance."

"Oh yeah?" Lakisha tapped her foot. "Who?"

Celeste's gaze darted to the edge of the staircase landing, resting on a narrow door with brass and copper trimming.

Sebastian groaned. He'd agreed to her insane proposal because he'd felt something stir in his soul when he looked at her, something that told him she might be the *one*.

The woman who could end his torment by feeling something more than indifference toward him.

And then, just as quickly as the absurd idea had manifested itself, he'd pushed it away. He'd been a phantom long enough to know there was no escaping his curse. Yet he still hadn't been able to push her away. So instead of even trying, he'd spelled out two rules in the contract he'd dropped off in front of her tent.

One, she and all the guests were to be out of the house by eight in the morning. And two, she could go anywhere in the mansion except for the north tower. That was his territory. He warned her he'd be observing the gathering in case the guests devised crazy ideas about torching the place or doing something else equally ill-advised.

Watching her now, he could pinpoint the exact second she'd made up her mind to disobey him. His blood ran cold.

Celeste blew out a deep breath. "I'll bring you Sebastian Bradley himself."

## **Chapter Two**

Celeste stood in front of the door to the north tower with her hands balled into fists, staring at a deep groove etched into the wood just above the antique door handle. People bumped into her as they passed through the narrow hallway on the way to the guest bathroom at the end of the corridor. As that was the only functional bathroom in the entire mansion, the lineup was horrendous, looping halfway around the building. She'd set up portable facilities in the backyard, but respectable citizens apparently wouldn't hear of squatting in a plastic bin.

Yet one more thing she'd done wrong in a never-ending list and all the more reason to get Sebastian Bradley out here. She only hoped he was as monstrous in person as the town gossips speculated.

It stood to reason that there had to be something severely wrong with the owner of the Bradley mansion. She'd seen a picture of Sebastian taken in his teens and he looked like a handsome, normal kid. So why as an adult would he choose to hide inside this unkempt, crumbling mansion? Rumor had it no one had seen him in almost two decades, though local business owners asserted they dealt with him on a regular basis.

Having been born and raised in Atlanta, Celeste didn't know much about small-town living, but that seemed like an awfully long time for a man to spend indoors just to avoid his neighbors.

Blowing a deep breath out between pursed lips, Celeste wrapped her fingers around the copper handle and pressed down. The door didn't budge.

She swallowed past the wave of nausea that rose in her throat. Pestering a man until he agreed to turn his home into a posh party hideaway was one thing. Trespassing into intimately private property when she knew she wasn't welcome was entirely different.

Wood splinters scraped the skin of her index finger as she trailed her palm upward along the door's surface. Swearing low under her breath, she clenched her hand into a fist again and rapped on the door with her knuckles.

No response. She waited for almost a minute then tried again, knocking harder this time so she could be heard above the music and the incessant squealing babble of society's finest blaring behind her.

Nothing. She couldn't hear as much as a vague scuffle on the other side of the door to indicate anyone had heard her. Not that she thought the mysterious Mr. Bradley would bother to respond even if she banged and kicked on the door all night long. He'd made it perfectly clear that the north tower was his and therefore off-limits to the guests. And to her.

"Fuck," she murmured under her breath. What on God's earth had possessed her to promise Lakisha she could make Sebastian Bradley show his face at her party?

She'd been pushed into a corner, sure, but she should have stood her ground and made it clear to her presumptuous boss that she'd done her best.

*Right. Like my best would ever be good enough for the likes of her.*

A surge of anger welled up in Celeste's chest. She pushed it down, determined to squelch it before the all-too-familiar self-doubt reared its ugly head.

All Celeste had to do was pull off one party. One damned night could make or break her career. Everyone who was anyone in Georgia wanted what Lakisha had. If Celeste had to ride the woman's coattails to drum up business, well, so be it.

Abandoning the soft rap of the knuckles technique, she turned her hand and banged on the door with the side of her fist. The forceful slams shook the decayed frame but the door still refused to budge.

Gritting her teeth, she bent down and peered through the old-fashioned keyhole set just below the handle. Darkness infused the space with black shadows, but she couldn't make out a thing on the other side.

Then she heard it. A soft metallic click that was music to her ears. A shiver of excitement swept up her spine and her fingers trembled slightly when she gripped the handle. This time when she pressed down, the latch gave way easily. She pushed the door open and slipped through the narrow space without a second thought.

“Mr. Bradley?” she asked when she’d shut the door behind her. The darkness was absolute, without a sliver of light to help her make sense of her surroundings. Still, he’d let her in. That had to count for something.

She trailed her hands down the slightly slanted surface of the wood until she found the key and turned it in the lock, ensuring no one would follow her in here. Or worse, in a drunken stupor mistake this door for the one to the bathroom.

A tremor rippled across her skin as a light flared about ten feet away. She froze in place. Soft and golden, the light sent an ethereal mist to illuminate her passage. For the first time, Celeste realized she stood in another corridor, this one much narrower than the one outside the door.

She cleared her throat. “Mr. Bradley, I’m sorry to barge in like this but I need to speak to you for a minute. Do you mind if I come in?”

She waited for a response, hands clenched in front of her. When none came, she smoothed down her skirt and ventured forward.

The corridor stretching out before her ended in a stairwell that looped upward in a spiral. Judging by the look of the place, she’d expected a stale, musty smell. Instead, a spicy scent—like cinnamon and cloves—drifted down from the darkness above.

The bottom stair creaked loudly when Celeste stepped on it and peered upward. From her vantage point, she couldn’t make out anything more than vague shapes and more black shadows. Beside her head, an old-fashioned lantern hung from a metal hook. It had obviously been lit by someone, but if Sebastian Bradley had been there a moment earlier, he wasn’t there now.

Celeste took a deep breath and picked up the lantern. She debated with herself whether to continue acting like the heroine in one of those Gothic novels she used to



read in high school or turn back and convince Jonathan to come with her. After a moment's hesitation, she decided one trespasser was bad enough. Two would likely ensure Sebastian kicked everyone out before Lakisha's big announcement and then Celeste could definitely kiss her career goodbye.

Besides, she hadn't as much as caught a glimpse of the man in the past week. If he'd wanted to harm her, he'd had plenty of opportunity to do so. As odd as it seemed, she'd never felt the least bit threatened in this house.

She crept upward slowly, testing each step before committing her entire weight to it. The wood felt fragile and decrepit, as though threatening to collapse at any moment. The lantern sent hollow circles of light to pool at her feet, guiding her careful steps.

The scent intensified at the top of the stairs. It tickled her nostrils as she inhaled deeply, smelling cinnamon, cloves and musk. The heady blend seemed to wrap around her as fluid as a dream. Lust hazed the edges of her mind.

Shaking her head to clear it, Celeste gripped the balustrade before raising her lantern.

She'd expected to finally come face-to-face with the owner of Georgia's top haunted mansion, but he wasn't there. Instead, the light bounced off a low wooden table and more books than Celeste had ever seen gathered in one place. They were piled up everywhere—on the table, around it, on the matching chair and circling the neatly made bed pressed against the far corner of the room.

In fact, the bed was the only place that hadn't been taken over by books. Neatly made and lined with crisp white sheets, the piece of furniture looked inviting and cozy as it stood out like a beacon among the clutter. A small television set was perched atop a dresser across from the foot of the bed.

She shuffled forward, drawn by a dot of light on the table. It flared brightly, seeming to hover in midair. Too small to be another lantern and too bright to be a night light, it flickered from left to right a few inches and then bobbed up and down, leaving a phosphorescent arc in its wake.

Intrigued, Celeste moved to stand in front of the table and placed the lantern on top of a pile of books. It didn't take her long to realize what she was looking at. A firefly fluttered from one end of a closed jar to another, desperately banging into the glass walls of its prison.

Celeste's heart lurched. She never understood why people captured insects. It seemed unbearably cruel. Lifting the jar, she worked on unscrewing the lid to no avail. The top was firmly affixed to the glass and short of breaking the container altogether, there was no way she could free the firefly.

With a pang of regret, she cleared another space toward the front of the table beside the lit stick of incense that had to be responsible for the exotic scent permeating the air. She'd have a chat with Sebastian about the firefly too. If she ever found the guy.

As she set down the jar, she felt a hand graze her bare midriff.

The touch was so completely unexpected that she jerked her entire body backward, a scream catching in her throat. She'd grazed the side of the jar as she pulled back and now it teetered on its side, wobbling dangerously close to the edge.

As Celeste watched, the swaying container stopped moving. It hung on an angle for a fraction of a second then righted itself and came to rest on its base. The firefly resumed its restless flight.

"Oh shit." Celeste wrapped her arm around her midsection, protecting her bare skin.

Could a person hallucinate a touch? It had felt so real...

Warm skin had brushed her flesh. If this had happened under any other circumstances, she'd have described the touch as a gentle, sensual cress.

No, she hadn't been imagining things. She'd felt that touch as though someone else were in the room with her, but she knew she was alone.

The light from her lantern illuminated the small chamber at the top of the north tower in its entirety. Books were stacked two feet high in places, but the piles were narrow, certainly not wide enough to give a grown man a place to hide.

She took a deep breath then another. "There are no such things as ghosts."

Sure, it sounded stupid when she said it out loud, but it alleviated some of the fear roiling in her gut. Turning around slowly, she took another look at her surroundings and tried to calm her hammering heartbeat.

Sebastian Bradley had to be here somewhere. This was his place. His sanctuary. Someone had let her inside. And that same someone had lit a lamp for her, practically guiding her up here. If there was a secret room beyond this one, she didn't know how to access it. Still, it was only a matter of time until Sebastian returned.

Unwilling to go back to the party empty-handed, Celeste picked up one of the books and flipped it open only to realize it wasn't a book at all. A soft leather covering lovingly protected the yellowed pages of a journal. The paper looked old, but certainly not as aged as other things in the mansion. The handwriting looped slightly to the left but it was bold and legible.

Guilt sank sharp claws into her. She moved to close the journal but her gaze skimmed over the discolored page. Despite her best intentions, she read a few lines of the crooked script.

*Loneliness isn't as it's depicted in the movies. It's not melancholy and beautiful. It's harsh and cruel, leaving its mark on everything it touches.*

*The world is crumbling around me and I can't do a damn thing about it. Or maybe I'm the one who's crumbling. Trapped inside this place like a dragonfly in amber. Like that firefly over there. The two of us will grow old together. I'll die and it will continue to flutter in that jar forever because –*

A warm gust of air brushed across Celeste's lips and she jerked her head up. Heat flared in her cheeks. The warmth returned, imbuing the air with the scent of cinnamon and mint. That's when she realized it hadn't been a gust of wind at all but someone's *breath*.

Soft, warm breath. It made her own respiration catch in her throat. She froze, listening to her heartbeat pound incessantly against her rib cage. And then the warmth intensified, followed by the tender pressure of lips against her own.

The journal fell out of her hands. It dropped to the ground with a thud, but the mouth demanding hers never faltered. It brushed across her lips, back and forth, slowly yet with a determination that sent a jolt of heat to swirl low in her belly.

She blinked rapidly, trying to discern a shape, a sound—*anything*—that would tell her she wasn't alone. Everything she felt screamed that there was someone else in the room with her, but everything she saw argued otherwise.

Still, she couldn't ignore the prickly stubble of a man's beard as it scraped across her chin nor the moist tip of a tongue as it slipped between her parted lips. A sigh escaped her throat only to drown and fade before ever making the slightest sound.

Fear mingled with excitement and throbbed low in her pussy. The scent of incense and male musk filled her nostrils. What was in that stuff? Was it messing with her mind? Making her hallucinate things that couldn't possibly be happening?

The kiss intensified, leaving her breathless. She thought about resisting but the entire situation seemed so absurd that she felt foolish running away from it. She was being ravished by her own imagination—nothing more. It had been too long since she'd been with a man—a real, flesh-and-blood man.

But this...this was different than anything she'd ever experienced. The kiss wasn't filled with arrogance or self-assurance. Her fantasy lover wasn't forcing himself upon her like so many other men who took what they needed without a second thought as to what she craved.

Which only served to reinforce her belief that whatever was happening was born of her own desperate need and the mysterious, eerie atmosphere in the Bradley mansion.

A finger stroked from the curve of her chin down the column of her throat. Her eyes drifted closed. The lips released hers and glided across her jawline, down into the valley between her breasts, trailing featherlight kisses all the way.

Broad palms slipped across her shoulders and down her arms. Fingers curled around hers, tugging her gently in the direction of the bed. She followed on an awkward stumble, her feet feeling weighed down with lead.

She collapsed upon the bed gratefully and rolled onto her back then held her breath as she waited for the fantasy to dissipate entirely. Reality had to come crashing back any moment now. There was no way she was making out with a ghost.

The bed dipped beside her, indicating another presence. Her eyes widened and she gazed into the empty space beside her. Despite everything her logical mind knew to be true, there was still no one there. She couldn't even hear the slightest sound aside from the fizzle of the lantern and the soft buzz of the firefly banging against the glass jar.

*This is insane. I'm going insane.*

As though to affirm that belief, something pinched her nipple. She groaned and glanced down where the tender bud had stiffened and tented the cotton cheerleader's shirt she wore. Teeth dug into her nipple, nipping at her, drawing the taut nub farther up.

As she watched, a stain began to darken the red material of her shirt. Her head spun with the implications. A broad palm cupped her cheek and a thumb traced the curve of her lower lip. She flicked her tongue out tentatively, sucking in a deep breath when she made contact with warm skin.

He tasted slightly salty yet not unpleasant. She tried to speak but the word came out as a hesitant croak instead.

She cleared her throat and tried again. "Sebastian?"

The lightest touch of a finger brushed against her clit through her silk panties. Her breathing quickened with anticipation and her voice broke when she uttered his name again...and again.

It had to be him. God, was he really dead? Had he haunted the mansion all this time? Had he watched her as she slept in one of the guest bedrooms? Followed her into the shower when she'd bathed?

A shiver arced through her. Fear and arousal gathered low in her belly and pulsed with a needy, growing throb.

None of this made any sense.

She clung to the only thing she knew – the jolt of pure ecstasy that had begun to build deep in her cunt. Cream seeped from between her folds. Warmth spread outward over her labia. Belatedly, she realized it wasn't her internal heat warming the fabric of her panties at all, but his moist breath as his mouth hovered just over her mound.

She swallowed hard and arched her hips. Her clit made contact with something firm. His jaw? She couldn't tell.

Rolling her head back on the pillow, Celeste squeezed her eyes shut and reached down between her thighs. Her fingers threaded in silky locks. She curled her fingertips and dug them into his scalp just as he pushed aside the fabric of her panties and wiggled the tip of his tongue into her slit.

A cry of delight built in the back of Celeste's throat. Waves of tingling warmth spread outward from her cunt. She trailed her palms downward, over his ears and along his stubbled jaw then down farther to a wall of solid muscle. She explored his shoulders, noting the broad width of them and the planes and valleys of his lean form. He wore no clothes she could discern as she wrapped her fingers around strong, firm biceps.

His tongue was as magical as the rest of him. It had to be supernatural because no one else had been able to have her writhing on the sheets within a few minutes of licking her pussy. She remembered the fumbling attempts of her previous lovers.

Nothing had prepared her for this. Sebastian stroked, nibbled and sucked on her labia with the same gentle intensity he'd used to kiss her, eliciting myriad sensations in her body.

Her nipples pebbled, hard and stiff against the fabric of her shirt. Her clit mirrored them, engorging and throbbing with pent-up need.

*This is wrong. So wrong.*

And yet it felt so right.

She fisted her hands in the bed sheets, arching her back so she could grind her mound against his mouth. She needed more. Her cunt ached with the desire to be filled, to know him as intimately as he knew her.

She felt him part her slick folds and held her breath as he eased two fingers into her moist passage. His mouth moved slowly, drawing his lips sensuously over the top of her mound, encasing her clit in intoxicating heat.

Tension built in her pussy as he thrust in and out of her tight channel. His tongue swirled around her engorged bud, drawing another desperate cry from her throat.

Her fingernails dug into her palms through the fabric of the bed sheets. Her hips thrust upward, matching his strokes.

She drifted on a cloud of euphoria, no longer caring that what she was experiencing should have been impossible. Somewhere in the back of her mind, a sliver of doubt continued to nag at her but she pushed it aside and lost herself in the erotic sensations spreading through her cunt.

Sebastian added a third finger to the two already inside her, stretching her inner muscles. The walls of her pussy tightened in response, pulsing around the thick intrusion.

Tremors began low in her belly. She drew her lower lip between her teeth to keep from screaming, knowing she wouldn't be able to hold back when her climax hit. As

though sensing she hovered on the edge of a precipice, Sebastian positioned his lips around her clit and sucked gently, drawing the tender nub into his mouth.

The sudden release rocked her body in an explosive ripple. Light burst behind her closed eyelids. A cry ripped from her throat, echoing through the room. She clung to the sheets for dear life as her pussy spasmed and shuddered beneath Sebastian's expert ministrations.

He'd released her clit but his tongue now swept through her folds, concentrating on the entrance to her channel where his fingers continued to pump. He lapped her cream, adding another toe-curling sensation to those already pouring through her.

Her chest heaved from exertion. She waited for the world to stop spinning while a ghost trailed soft kisses along the inside of her thigh.

*Impossible. No way this is happening.*

Cautiously, she cracked one eye open and peered between her legs, preparing to once again face the fact she'd gone insane.

Golden lamplight pooled along the crisp white sheets, darkened the pale skin of her legs and sent golden highlights to shimmer in Sebastian Bradley's deep brown tresses. She recognized him instantly from his picture. Far from being the monstrous creature rumors had made him out to be, he was absolutely gorgeous.

His hair curled at the ears and a lock fell over his forehead when he looked up at her. He grinned, a pleased, boyish grin that made a dimple appear in his right cheek. His dark eyes sparkled with mischief as he curled the fingers that had remained embedded deep in her pussy and nudged a particularly sensitive area deep in her cunt.

Faced with the sudden appearance of a fully corporeal phantom lover—a stranger who had his fingers buried to the hilt inside her—and no longer under the sensual spell of impending orgasm, Celeste did the only thing she could.

She let out a bloodcurdling scream.



### **Chapter Three**

For several heartbeats after Celeste's shriek had faded, Sebastian was unable to move. He simply sat there as her inner walls squeezed his fingers and gaped, openmouthed.

"You – you can see me?"

She scooted slightly back in an obvious effort to put some distance between them. He crept forward a fraction of an inch along with her, his fingers never budging from the moist heat of her body.

"Of course I can see you. I'm not blind," she snapped. The color returned to her cheeks, turning her skin a rosy hue. She lifted her chin a little, clearly trying to regain some measure of control over the situation. "And I'm not crazy."

Was she trying to assure him or herself?

God, he'd been a fool. He'd lost track of time. He'd planned to be here in his room, all alone when the clock struck midnight. He had three hours of full humanity and he intended to spend them as he'd had for the past decade – wrapped in the comfort of solitude.

Instead, he'd ended up lost in a sensual haze and had dropped his ethereal appearance at the most inopportune time. He cursed inwardly, knowing he must have scared her half to death.

He wouldn't know it to look at her though. Her almond-shaped blue eyes narrowed with suspicion and her full, sensual lips pursed in thought as she assessed him. Even though he clearly had the upper hand in this situation, her spunky, brazen personality quickly took over. One thing was clear – Celeste Winters definitely wasn't the kind of woman who allowed a man to think himself in control.

A smile quirked his lips. "So...if you knew I was here all along, why did you scream?"

Hesitation flickered across the limpid pools of her eyes. She drew her lower lip between her teeth, the only outward indication that she was as rattled by this as he was.

"You startled me that's all." Her rigid stance relaxed minutely and Celeste wiggled her hips. "It's a little hard to ignore you when you're doing *that*."

Okay, so she wouldn't call him on the fact he appeared out of nowhere for fear of looking like a nutcase. Good. He had no explanation for her anyway. At least, none he was willing to give.

"Oh yeah? How about when I do this?" He lowered his head again and splayed his mouth across the seam of her pussy, nudging her folds with the tip of his tongue.

She arched her back as a moan escaped her throat. "Sebastian."

He closed his eyes against the flood of emotion that poured through him at the sound of his name on her lips. In eighteen years, no one had addressed him by name. No one even really knew he still existed as anything more than a boogieman whose name scared children into behaving.

He pressed his lips to her warm cunt, tasting her musky flavor on his tongue. She was pure heaven. Even with his mouth exploring her most intimate part, he still couldn't quite believe she was real. She seemed more like a figment of his imagination, a dream he'd conjured to keep some of the oppressive loneliness he lived with at bay for a little while.

He feasted on her sweet, soft flesh until she was panting and writhing beneath him again. Heat scorched the air between them as he glanced up and took in the sensual curve of her throat, the way her nipples pebbled through her shirt, the slick sheen of sweat that beaded on her flat abdomen and trickled into her navel.

As long as she wasn't asking questions he wasn't willing to answer, he could get lost in the miracle that had brought her to him. When he'd first been cursed, he spent the few hours of true humanity he'd been given interacting with others. He'd even gone

to the local pub and picked up a girl a time or two, thinking that an hour with someone's legs wrapped around his waist would remind him what it meant to be truly alive.

It always had the opposite effect. The women he'd been with left before his time was up, making it clear they wanted nothing more from him than a romp in the sack. Each time, he was reminded that his curse was all-encompassing. He was doomed to be inconsequential. Invisible – whether anyone could see him or not.

Celeste's inner walls trembled and pulsed around him as he stroked her deep inside. His tongue fluttered over her clit, matching the rhythm of his fingers' deep thrusts. He pleased her inside and out until she was grinding and shuddering, her hips pulsing slightly as she tumbled over the edge.

He held her, his lips fused to her cunt while her release flooded her limbs. He felt her orgasm explode and rode it with her, grinding his cock into the mattress to relieve some of the pressure that made his balls ache.

When her trembling subsided, he placed a soft kiss to the blonde curls atop her mound. "Your pussy is so soft, so perfect," he murmured against her skin.

She chuckled, a wry, delicate sound at odds with the strength of her character. It sounded almost like a strangled sob. "Thanks...I think."

Loath to remove his fingers from her body but knowing she could use a break to recover, he pulled out of her channel. She gasped, arching her spine as her empty pussy gaped open for a moment before the delicate folds closed around the entrance, hiding the pink opening that beckoned to him.

Sebastian splayed his fingers across her stomach. His ghost-white skin contrasted with her soft, healthy tan, reminding him they lived in different worlds. Squelching down a flash of anger, he slipped his hand beneath the fabric of her shirt and cupped her full breast in his palm.

"Why are you here?" he asked, not unkindly.

She blinked at him, her tongue flicking out between her lips and sending another rush of naughty images and visceral heat to slam into his overheated mind—and into his groin.

“I came to ask you for something.”

His heart hammered hard against his chest. The scent of her arousal mingled with the warm, natural aroma of her skin to form a heady, intoxicating perfume that seemed to mess with his brain and burrow deep into his cock.

“I think you know that whatever it is, the answer is yes.”

She raised herself up onto her elbows and watched him through narrowed eyelids. The purple slant of her long lashes made her blue eyes take on a sapphire hue. She reached out to him slowly and then hesitated with her fingertips half an inch away from his cheek, as though afraid he’d dissipate if she touched him.

Funny, he felt the same way about her, but that hadn’t kept him from tasting the sweetness of her pussy or bringing her to climax. Twice.

He leaned in to her caress. She jumped when her fingers made contact with his skin then seemed to think better of her apprehension and splayed her palm along his cheek and jaw.

Her caress was like water to a drowning man. He rubbed his cheek against her skin, suddenly unable to get enough.

“Those journals are all yours, aren’t they?”

He nodded, emotion constricting his throat. No one had ever seen his journals. He’d started keeping them a year into his curse. Since then, he’d used them as therapy, knowing that he had to get his thoughts down on paper or he’d go mad. It was bad enough he didn’t have anyone to talk to. At least writing things down made him feel as though he could share his most intimate thoughts with someone, even if it meant they wouldn’t be found until long after his death.

“I’m sorry I looked through one,” she whispered.

"That's all right. It's my fault for leaving them out in the open." He wanted to say more, to tell her that no one ever came up here, that he'd wanted her to see into the deepest part of his soul.

Only he was glad she hadn't read further. She wouldn't have liked what she found.

He swallowed hard and turned his head away, suddenly unable to face the curious probing in her gaze. A gentle pressure on his jaw made him tilt his face back toward her.

Their eyes met and for a moment it was as though a visible current of electricity slammed into him. It jolted his heart, his groin, reawakening feelings and sensations that had lain dormant for much too long.

Celeste rose to her knees. His gaze followed the lean lines of her legs, admiring the way her short skirt fell against her upper thighs, the slender curves of her calves, her delicate ankles. Even the ridiculous spiked heels that looked like faux sneakers only made her look sexier.

Leaving no doubt as to her intent, she slipped her fingertips down the length of his abdomen and cupped his rock-hard shaft in her hand.

"No one should be alone on Halloween," Celeste said as she stroked him from root to tip.

He nodded, too damn horny to do anything else. Knowing that whatever he uttered at that moment would be meaningless or imbecilic, he elected to keep his mouth shut. He didn't want to send her away. Not now. Not yet.

Not ever.

Except he didn't have a choice in the matter. She would go away. The clock was already ticking, quickly counting down to the time when he'd once again revert to being invisible.

He might have worried more about this night's inevitable conclusion if he could concentrate on anything but the way his cock stood stiff and erect only inches away

from her pussy. If not for the flap of her skirt, he wasn't sure he could hold himself back from pushing her down and plunging deep into her heated cunt.

She bent forward slightly, trailing soft kisses over the soft curls on his chest then lower until her nose nuzzled the coarse curls at his groin. His fingers trembled as he wrapped his hands in her long, blonde tresses.

Her mouth seemed to move in slow motion. She slipped her tongue out first, circling the head of his cock before taking the tip between her lips.

The sensation that slammed into him was so intense he ground his teeth and cried out, willing himself not to come with every ounce of willpower he possessed. As though sensing his desperate need, she held back and squeezed the root of his shaft, forcing down the onslaught of orgasm.

For a while she simply held him in her mouth, giving him time to adjust to the feel of her slick heat wrapped around his cock. He refused to open his eyes, knowing that just one look at her ass thrust high in the air would make him lose control.

Instead, he fisted his hands in her hair and trembled as she swirled her tongue around the head of his cock again and again, alternating between slow, excruciating swirls and fast, eager swipes. He held himself back from thrusting between her lips and fucking her mouth until he spilled his hot seed into the back of her throat.

He wanted her to take all of him, to accept him for who and what he was when no one else had. Even through the haze of lust that enshrouded his mind, he knew that was a ludicrous wish. She'd be gone tomorrow and it was better that way.

Celeste sucked him deep into her mouth, milking the last remnants of his self-control. He slid his hands out of her hair and grabbed her shoulders, pulling out of her mouth.

She looked up at him, her full lips parted and glistening wetly. Without a word, she climbed off the bed.

Sebastian's heart gave a sudden lurch in his chest. She was leaving. He'd be alone again, forced to jerk off until he spilled his seed in his hand and the warm fluid covered his belly and dripped onto the sheets.

Celeste smiled. She bent down and unhooked the straps of her shoes before tossing them aside. It took Sebastian a moment to realize she was staying, but the relief that suffused his body was nothing compared to the scorching heat that lit his veins.

He watched her as she removed her panties, pulling them down from beneath her skirt and letting them fall to the floor. She stepped out of them and he could only stare, entranced by the beauty of her body. Her skirt followed her panties to pool on the ground. She shed her shirt just as quickly until she stood naked before him.

For a moment Sebastian couldn't breathe. The need in his groin bordered on pain. With almost ferocious intensity, he lunged for her, drawing her close against him. Her body molded to his perfectly, her lush curves complementing his lean lines. As his erection pulsed against her belly, her nipples grazed his chest, causing a swirl of sensation to slide through his nerve endings.

"I've waited for you. My whole life, I think."

He didn't know where the words had come from. That was certainly not something he'd wanted to admit, yet there it was, hovering in the open between them. He didn't give her a chance to reply but lowered his mouth to claim hers.

Clinging to her tightly, he kissed her with the fierceness of desperation. His tongue slid between her lips and stroked hers. She tasted of him and the knowledge filled him with raw, hungry desire that threatened to make him spill his seed right there with his cock trapped between them.

He lifted her off her feet and she wrapped her legs around him, letting him carry her back to the bed. Bending down, he lowered her onto her back. Her thighs squeezed his middle as he burrowed himself between her parted legs.

His cock sought her hot channel of its own accord, positioning itself at the entrance. The need throbbing in his balls threatened to send him over the edge. Still Sebastian hesitated.

Gazing deep into her eyes, he placed a tender kiss on her forehead. "Are you ready for this?"

Celeste opened her mouth as though to speak but raised her hips and impaled herself on his cock instead.

"What do you think?" she answered breathlessly.

A chuckle tore from his throat, so raw and unexpected that it sent a jolt of surprise low into his belly. She'd made him laugh. God, she really had turned his entire world upside down in the span of just one week.

He remained motionless for a long moment but Celeste wasn't having any of it. She squirmed beneath him, setting the pace until he took over and lifted himself so he could better watch her face as he thrust inside her.

"Celeste."

She smiled at him, her blue eyes shining with something akin to genuine fondness. Something he couldn't remember ever seeing before from anyone.

"Sebastian."

He groaned and plunged in deeper, grinding against her mound as he sheathed himself to the hilt. Her channel pulsed around him, squeezing him, welcoming him. He filled her perfectly and she took all of him with such intensity that it knocked the air from his lungs.

Her breasts bounced with every thrust. He drank in the sight of her large, dark areolas and distended nipples, the swell of her breasts, committing to memory each subtle nuance of her body. At last, he lowered his head and bit down on a perfect nipple, drawing a strangled cry from her throat.



He fucked her slowly at first then faster as the insistent undulation of her hips urged him on. His mouth moved across the top of her breasts and over her jaw to claim her lips in another scorching kiss.

Thrusting his tongue into her mouth, he mimicked the movement of his cock plunging deep inside her. She met him thrust for thrust, her tongue curling around his, licking and exploring with every stroke.

She whimpered softly as her inner walls tightened against him. He could feel her orgasm build from the inside. The thrill of impending release swelled his cock, traveling through his shaft to lodge into his lower belly. It hung there, suspended, like a ball of pure pleasure about to erupt.

And then Celeste shattered around him, screaming his name. His self-control unraveled and the orgasm that had been gathering for so long finally exploded in an arc of heat. Her body rippled beneath him, causing a mirror effect that had him spilling himself in hot, sudden spurts.

Sebastian's voice echoed off the walls, melding with Celeste's in a crescendo of passion. With one last thrust, he wrapped his arms around her, keeping her close against his chest. His cock softened inside her pussy and still he held her as if he might never let her go.

Much too soon, Celeste cleared her throat, bringing him out of the comfortable shelter of their afterglow. "You're not really human, are you?"

## **Chapter Four**

Sebastian chuckled, although an undercurrent of anxiety traveled through the sound. He lifted some of his body weight off Celeste, aware he was crushing her beneath him, and propped himself on his elbows. Loath to slip his semierect cock from its comforting sheath, he held his hips pressed tightly against hers.

"You're asking because that was out of this world, right?"

Her brow furrowed. "This is going to sound stupid, but... Uh... Are you a ghost?"

He chuckled, hoping the sound came out more confident than he felt. "I'm willing to bet you haven't run into a lot of ghosts so let me educate you a little. They usually don't feel solid. And most of them can't talk."

She stroked her hand up and down the outside of his arm, sending shivers spiraling over his skin. "And you're the expert on paranormal phenomena around here?"

His smile faded. "Something like that."

"Professional interest or something else?"

Sebastian sighed. She was inching too close to topics that were off-limits, topics he had no intention of discussing, even with her. He averted his eyes, his gaze falling on the firefly bouncing in its jar. "Haven't you heard? My home is haunted. I've run into hundreds of the pesky critters. They get into everything."

She shook her head, clearly not buying his explanation. Smart girl. He wouldn't have bought it either.

"You wanted to ask me something," he reminded her, circling his hips so his cock settled deeper in her cunt. "That's why you're here, remember? So ask."

She frowned, wrinkling her nose in distaste. "There's a woman downstairs...Lakisha Pernice. She's the governor's daughter. Very influential. Anyway, she wants to meet you."

"Me?" He furrowed his brow, feigning surprise. "Why? I'm nobody to her."

"There are more rumors about you in the entire state of Georgia than there are about anyone else." She swallowed hard, suddenly not meeting his gaze. "Most aren't pleasant. I guess she wants to see for herself and show you off to the guests."

Sebastian shook his head. He'd encouraged those rumors and speculations since he'd taken over the mansion. It ensured he'd be left alone—for the most part. Oh, there were always thrill-seekers and rowdy teenagers who tried to trespass on his property, but the alarm system and a push of a button to summon the authorities usually got them off and kept them away.

Obviously it didn't always work. Persistent event planners who didn't take no for an answer weren't part of the security company's intrusion detection system.

"She'll be disappointed." Sebastian trailed his fingertips over the top of Celeste's breast, pausing to circle a nipple.

She trembled slightly, the quaking in her body traveling into his cock to stiffen it farther.

"I'm not," Celeste whispered.

Before he could react, she lifted her head and pressed her lips to his. The kiss was quick and abrupt, but it was filled with longing and acceptance. It sent a jolt of erotic energy into his groin.

He remembered the feel of her tongue in his mouth, the taste of her, and desperately needed to experience it again. Cupping her face in his hands, he tilted her jaw and ravaged her mouth, kissing her with passion, fierceness and near violence.

She responded to him with the same intense fury, raking her fingernails down his back, pulling her to him with more strength than he'd given her credit for. When the

kiss ended, they were both panting and his cock raged out of control inside her pussy. He could do this for hours.

Hell, he could do this all night. Only he didn't have all night. With no clock in the bedroom to show him the time, he didn't know how many hours of true humanity he had left. One? Two? Not nearly enough.

"More later," he promised, withdrawing from her tight channel. Her disappointed groan sent a spear of pain to lodge in his heart. "Your friends are waiting."

"Serves them right," she said, sitting up.

She propped her back against the wall and grabbed a pillow. Cradling it in her arms, she watched him as he moved to the dresser and opened it in search of a suitable outfit to wear.

He hadn't been out in public for years. These days, even the unbearable solitude was preferable to the chatter of people who wouldn't remember him the next day anyway.

Rummaging through one drawer after another, he found nothing appropriate for a costume party. The only clothes he'd kept were now old and faded, but they weren't interesting enough to pass for a believable guise. "You don't mind if I get a little creative with my costume, do you?"

When she didn't reply, he glanced over his shoulder. And froze.

She'd reached for the top journal stacked on a dozen others beside the bed. Black with a golden trim that ran all the way around the binding, it was the most recent. And she'd had it for at least five minutes. Maybe more.

"Put it down." His voice grated against his throat, sounding harsh and foreign to his own ears. "Please."

Celeste looked up, her eyes wide and questioning. "What is this?"

*Too late.*

She knew. Everything.

"Maybe I didn't pay enough attention to my high-school English class when we learned about the folly of hubris. Arrogance. Pride. They were my downfall." She read the words slowly with inflection. Each one stabbed like a dagger into his heart.

"Stop," he whispered.

She didn't. "There was something about summer that called to me. Sultry, hot nights filled with sticky air and the promise of more heat to come. Unlike other college guys who used those nights to pick up girls and fuck them senseless in the back of pickup trucks, I had a different hobby."

Sebastian closed his eyes and leaned against the dresser. *Stop.*

He didn't speak the plea this time. He knew it wouldn't have mattered.

"I trapped fireflies. Hundreds of them. I kept them in jars and used them to light my way in the dark. I placed them everywhere. Every week or two, they'd expire and I'd catch more. I thought they were beautiful. And insignificant. Until one night, I caught *her*."

He couldn't see her, but he knew Celeste was eyeing him. "Her?"

Sebastian nodded. "Nurielle."

Celeste returned her attention to the journal and continued reading. "I didn't know what she was at first. She looked like a larger version of the fireflies I was so enthralled with. About two inches tall, she glowed like them, but it wasn't until I returned home that I realized she appeared human. I should have let her go the moment I figured it out. I should have —"

"Apologized," Sebastian said hoarsely, cutting her off. He blinked his eyes open. "Repented. Done anything and everything in my power to return her to her natural habitat. I did none of those things."

Celeste pressed her lips together but said nothing. Her silence unnerved him more than her ire would have done.

Swallowing hard, he continued. "She begged me to release her. It should have never come to that, but it did. I refused. I had a fairy in a jar! Hell, I'd hoped she could grant wishes! What twenty-one-year-old in his right mind would let her go?"

"I would have," Celeste said softly, glancing at the firefly bobbing in its jar. "Then and now."

"If I could change things, I would. But I can't. Nurielle punished me. She decided that since I was so unconcerned with the fact that no one would miss the fireflies or her for that matter then no one would miss me either. She wanted me to understand how it felt to be inconsequential. Invisible."

Celeste shook her head. "Wait a minute. You're telling me a fairy cursed you? That's what you're saying?"

He scrubbed a hand over his face, realizing how ridiculous this entire thing must sound to someone who hadn't lived the life he'd been living for the past eighteen years. He forced a laugh to bubble from his throat. "Had you going there for a second, didn't I?"

She pulled her lower lip between her teeth and eyed him skeptically. "You made that up?"

"I'm a writer," he said with all the conviction he could muster. "We're eccentric folks, y'know. I make up stories. It's what I do."

"A writer," she repeated, clearly unconvinced.

"A bona fide wordsmith. A recluse. As outlandish and peculiar as the rumors make me out to be. Only not a ghost."

At least that last part was true, he thought with an inward grimace. God, he hated lying to her. But what other choice did he have? If she thought he believed what he was saying, she'd run out of there faster than he could say *firefly*. And he wasn't ready to let her go yet.

Celeste closed the journal and placed it back on top of the teetering stack then tossed the pillow aside and lowered her feet to the floor. He watched in silence as she pulled her panties on, the scrap of flimsy cloth barely covering the delicate pink folds and soft curls beneath.

"That's quite the story," she said as she buckled the strap of her shoes around her ankles.

"Isn't it though?" Sebastian pasted another fake smile onto his features. "It's my favorite."

He turned back to the dresser and yanked on the bottom drawer, opening it to reveal a stack of neatly folded bed sheets and pillowcases. After a second's deliberation, he chose a white sheet, which he quickly wrapped around his body and tied over one shoulder.

Celeste straightened her clothes and ran her fingers through her curls, smoothing her hair back from her face. God, she was stunning, he thought as her eyes widened and she met his gaze. A jolt of electricity slammed into him. That...*connection*, whatever it was, threatened to knock him off his feet.

"What..." She paused to assess him from the top of his disheveled head to the tips of his wiggling bare toes. "Are you wearing?"

He swept his right hand up and down in front of his torso. "You like it? I made it myself."

"Uhh...I can see that." She raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"Ah! That's the beauty of this costume. It's whatever you want it to be. To one person, I might be a Roman senator in a toga. To another, I could be a ghost."

Celeste grimaced and suddenly he wondered if he'd gone too far. Something told him his lie hadn't been as convincing as he'd hoped.

He stalked toward her and captured her wrists in his right hand then forced her hands up over her head. She glanced at him, startled, her blue eyes filled with questions that had nothing to do with his outfit.

Questions he couldn't – wouldn't – answer.

"Forget about me," he murmured. "I want to know about you."

The tip of Celeste's tongue darted out to moisten her full lips. He was certain she'd intended the gesture to be innocent, but it looked delightfully wicked. "What do you want to know?"

"For starters... Don't you ever do what you're told?" He whispered the question in her ear before grabbing her earlobe and nipping it between his teeth. "I asked you to put down the journal but you refused."

A self-conscious giggle bubbled up from inside her. "Do I look like the kind of girl who obeys orders? That strategy didn't get me off your lawn. And it won't keep me from poking into places that aren't any of my business either."

"Mmm...do you know what happens to women who stick their noses where they don't belong?"

She shook her head, sending loose strands of blonde hair to brush against his face. He inhaled her scent, committing the citrus aroma of her shampoo to memory.

"They're punished."

"P-Punished?"

The word turned into a whimper in Celeste's throat as Sebastian spun her around and cleared the table of journals with his arm before pushing her over it. Her bare belly scraped against the edge of the table. The wood bit into her skin but she barely felt it. The only sensation sliding through her veins was arousal.

Deep, overwhelming, mind-blowing arousal.

Truth be told, it scared the hell out of her.



She wasn't afraid of Sebastian, even when he folded her skirt over her waist and traced the fleshy cheeks of her ass with the flat of his palm. Or when he pushed the waistband of her panties over her hips and slid the fabric down to her thighs.

What she felt for him however, terrified her to the core. In a few hours he'd turned her world upside down. It had been years since she'd allowed herself to feel something more than superficial attraction for a man. Oh, she liked men well enough. But they were entertainment. A way to pass the time.

Sebastian was much more than that. He was unlike anyone she'd ever met. Funny, self-deprecating, shy, he came across as someone who barely possessed social skills. And yet there were moments when he showed fierce possessiveness and a rugged strength that caused cream to drip from her overheated cunt.

Like now.

His hand slid over her exposed bottom. "Good girls get to join their friends at the party and pretend nothing happened up here. Bad girls get spanked. Which are you?"

The stroke of his fingers against the crease of her ass sent a groan to lodge in her throat. "B-Bad. Bad girl."

"Good answer."

Before she could even consider feeling ashamed of what she'd said, the first smack landed against her ass. It stung but the prickle of awareness that fluttered over her skin was pure ecstasy.

She hadn't felt guilty for reading the journal. He'd told her it was his fault for leaving his inner thoughts out in the open and she'd believed him. Now however, she was thrilled she'd decided to take another peek. There was more to his explanation of being a writer than he was letting on. Sure, his reasons seemed plausible enough. Writers were an eccentric lot. But that didn't explain why she'd been alone in the room one minute and surrounded by pure masculine temptation the next.

And the punishment... *Oh God.*

She wiggled against his hand, arching her back when his palm came down to deliver another smack and another. Heat flooded her core, drenching her pussy. If she'd been wearing panties, the fabric would have been soaked through. As it was, liquid heat trickled between her legs, dripping over the inside of her thigh.

"You like this."

It wasn't a question, but she answered it anyway. "Yes."

"I'd give anything to be able to explore this side of your personality with you."

Sebastian's voice sounded wistful and sad. Before she could contemplate what that meant, another smack landed squarely on her right cheek, making her gasp aloud.

He thrust two fingers inside her, punctuating the strokes with deliberate, careful blows. She squirmed as fire traveled from her exposed cheeks into her cunt where his fingers slid in and out of her channel.

Her breathing came in quick pants as her body trembled with the spiraling heat that quickly blossomed out of control. It culminated in her clit, which throbbed and pulsed with every open-palmed slap against her skin.

Lost in the sweet flashes of pain and pleasure, she barely had time to react when the orgasm crashed into her body. It knocked the breath from her lungs as the pleasure soared and crashed, drenching her in raw, rapturous delight.

She didn't know how long she lay there, drifting in a fog of euphoria. She was vaguely aware of Sebastian bending between her legs and licking his way up her inner thigh, cleaning her cream.

He kissed each cheek, soothing the pain with soft, pliant lips and kind caresses. At last, he pulled up her panties and helped her to her feet.

*Oh...fuck.* He really was unlike anyone she'd ever met. He'd seemed to know exactly what she craved even when she hadn't been aware of it herself.

"Let's go," he said, taking her hand.

She folded her fingers around his, blissfully grounded by his presence. "All right. But after we're done with them, you're mine."

The fragile smile that curved Sebastian's lips made her heart flip-flop. He didn't reply, but she feared his silence was answer enough.

"We're not finished here," she insisted, squelching the nagging doubt that flittered through her mind, telling her he really didn't want her. "Not by a long shot."

## **Chapter Five**

The wedding was in full swing by the time Celeste and Sebastian slipped through the north tower door to join the other guests. Lakisha stood beside her fiancé at one end of the room, facing the crowd. Not one to miss a photo opportunity, she'd elected to make the priest turn his back to those assembled.

Holding tight to Sebastian's hand, Celeste slipped through the throng unnoticed. The crowd's eyes were on the happy couple as they said their vows, which they'd clearly elected to write themselves.

"As this night extends its dark tendrils into daylight, so my love reaches out for your touch," Lakisha bellowed as loud as her voice would carry.

Sebastian chuckled as they slid into an empty spot against a buffet table. "Is she always this melodramatic?"

"I wouldn't know," Celeste whispered. "I'd only met her once before she hired me. She said she needed a fresh take on Halloween parties. She was looking for someone who was far removed from the flourishes of high society. Come to think of it, I probably should have been insulted."

Sebastian reached up and smoothed a strand of hair behind her ear. She leaned in to his touch, relishing the heat of his flesh against her skin.

"If you ask me, that's a compliment. You're not like anyone here, Celeste. You're..."

Someone shushed him loudly from behind. Sebastian smiled at Celeste, lifting a shoulder in silent apology.

She brought her hand to her chest in an effort to calm the hammering pulse that beat wildly at the base of her throat. What had he been about to say? She wasn't the type of woman who fell all over herself at the sound of a few pretty words, but she

knew Sebastian's statement would have been genuine. She was eager to learn what he thought of her. Was he as intrigued by her as she was by him?

Turning back to the ceremony, she forced herself to focus on the vows being exchanged but her mind kept spiraling back to the hours she'd spent in Sebastian's arms. She'd intended to bring him downstairs as quickly as possible and alleviate Lakisha's concerns. Instead, she'd lost herself in the heat of his body, in the sultry ecstasy of his touch, in the planes and valleys of his beautifully sculpted body.

No. That wasn't true. She hadn't lost herself in the north tower.

Somewhere between the passionate lovemaking and the rampant energy that flowed between them, she'd *found* herself. And now, squeezing his hand, she knew she never wanted to let go of the discovery she'd made—or of the man who'd awakened a part of herself she hadn't even been aware.

Before tonight, Celeste would have never considered making love to a stranger. Or reveling in the feel of his palm landing across the exposed curve of her ass. Yet somehow with Sebastian there'd been no embarrassment. No humiliation. No shame.

Only a sense of belonging, coupled with a wild, unmistakable need to get to know him better. She craved to know everything about him—what kinds of stories he wrote, why he chose to live like a hermit, whether he had anyone to confide in.

The exchange of vows seemed to take forever. Lakisha's overdone sentiments grew more elaborate and dramatic with each minute that passed until even her poor fiancé looked at a loss for words. Broad-shouldered with dusky skin and close-cropped hair, Jim Boden looked every bit the football player he was. He'd even elected to wear his jersey and tight pants to the party. Not the most creative of costumes but it certainly complemented his muscular physique.

Letting her gaze roam over the heads of those assembled, Celeste caught sight of Jonathan standing toward the front of the room. As if feeling the weight of her stare on the back of his head, he turned and met her eyes. His gaze immediately darted to Sebastian and his eyes widened. The questions she saw written across his face would

have to wait, but the way he wiggled his eyebrows told her she had a lot of explaining to do.

Celeste's feet ached. She transferred her weight from one foot to the other, hoping to relieve some of the pressure that thrummed in her soles. If Lakisha hadn't been holding Celeste's career in the palm of her well-manicured hand, she'd march right back up to the north tower and let the happy bride handle her own damn party.

After what seemed to Celeste like an eternity, the wedding finally came to an end. She and Sebastian stood off to the side as the new Mr. and Mrs. Boden made their way through the throng of bodies that parted for them. As soon as Lakisha noticed her, she released her husband's hand and stalked over to Celeste, stopping only a few inches in front of her.

"Well?" she demanded, her high-heeled shoe tapping restlessly on the ground. "Where is he?"

Celeste forced a smile onto her features. "Lakisha Pern—err...Boden, meet Sebastian Bradley. He owns the mansion and was kind enough to allow us to use it for the purposes of the party. And your lovely wedding of course."

Lakisha rolled her eyes, looking bored. Off to the side, her small wedding party had already begun to organize themselves in a receiving line. "Fine. Bring him over here."

Celeste's thumb made a small circle against the back of Sebastian's hand, hoping to soothe the anger she could feel rolling through him. She'd known Lakisha had expected someone with a monstrous appearance, but there was no need to be rude.

Fighting to keep her temper under control, she turned to Sebastian. "He's—"

The words died in her throat. She still held on to his hand. She could feel every small nuance of his body's response to Lakisha's presence yet she couldn't see him.

No one could.

The only thing left of Sebastian Bradley was a rumpled white sheet, bunched in a heap on the hardwood floor.

Celeste swallowed hard. "He's...coming."

Lakisha's eyes narrowed. "Why you lying little bitch. You ruined my wedding! I told all these people they were going to meet the elusive Sebastian Bradley, and now what? I'll look like a fool!"

Her loud shrieking had already brought a crowd to gather around them. Creeping up behind Lakisha, Jim looked apologetic as he wrapped an arm around his wife's waist in an attempt to pull her away.

"I'm sorry," Celeste's voice wavered as anxiety welled up in her throat. "I'll tell them. It's my fault. I—"

Lakisha wouldn't have any of it. Her bellowing cries intensified and her name-calling grew even more creative than her wedding vows.

"I should have guessed you'd never be able to pull this off! What possessed me to hire an unknown, a silly little twit who couldn't plan her way out of a paper bag, I'll never know!"

Sebastian slid his hand out of hers. Celeste tried to cling to him, needing the reassurance of his presence even if no one else knew he was there but he broke the contact and moved away, leaving her standing alone to face Lakisha's wrath.

Celeste's cheeks heated. She didn't turn away from confrontation but the snickers and finger-pointing from those assembled made the situation a thousand times worse. So much for her one big break. She'd never get another event-planning job in Atlanta again.

The lights dimmed, flickered and then grew bright again, sending up a confused murmur from the crowd. Even Lakisha looked momentarily thrown off her stride. When she opened her mouth to continue her tirade, the lights flickered again, this time dying out completely.

"What the hell? Turn those back on!"

"Sebastian," Celeste whispered.

A hand clamped on her shoulder while another crept up the back of her thigh to caress the curve of her ass where the heated imprint of his palm still lingered like a permanent brand. She trembled, but not with fear. Her pussy heated with the memory of his touch and she allowed him to lead her up the stairs.

He opened a doorway and pushed her inside. By the familiar scent of incense, she guessed she was once again inside the corridor to the north tower.

A moment later he was gone.

The screams that erupted from below traveled upward, making her cringe. She heard glass crash and shatter along with platters of food being overturned.

Anxiety lodged in Celeste's throat. Feeling her way with her outstretched hands in the darkness, she left the safety of the corridor and moved forward to the balustrade overlooking the main room. She arrived just in time to see candles being lit in a wide, flaming arc. No one guided the blazing matchstick.

The lick of flame swept over Lakisha's head and she shrieked, her face going as pale as her unconventional wedding dress in the golden glow of the fire. She backed away into her husband's arms only to see a champagne bottle rising to float suspended in midair only inches away from her face.

She screamed again as the cork popped, narrowly missing her head. The contents of the bottle gushed out in a foamy flow, drenching her.

With another harrowing wail, Lakisha pulled her husband in front of her and used him as a human shield against any additional flying objects. Then, leaving a wild litany of curses about haunted houses and bad party planners in her wake, she stormed toward the door, pushing guests out of the way to reach the exit first. The priest bellowed out what sounded like an exorcism prayer but he too bolted.

The rest of the crowd followed, stepping over each other in an effort to escape the haunted mansion. Headlights poured through the front door to illuminate the now-empty hall and tires screeched on the gravel road that led up to the house.



Celeste collapsed to the floor, folding her legs beneath her and resting her back against the balustrade. She was finished. Done. The career she'd worked so hard for had just gone up in smoke.

She should have been devastated. Instead, a smile curved her lips as she recalled the look on Lakisha's face when that champagne bottle erupted.

A giggle bubbled up from her throat.

"Celeste? You in here, hon?"

*Jonathan.*

"I'm fine, Jon. Give me a few minutes...please?"

His footsteps rang out from below. She could picture him hesitating, his concern for her keeping him from leaving with the rest of the crowd.

"You're sure?"

She smiled, though she knew he couldn't see her. "I am."

Waiting until she heard him leave, she rose unsteadily to her feet. A breeze wafted over her legs, sending a shiver to travel across her skin.

"Sebastian," she murmured, knowing he was there. She could feel the heat of his skin. She had only to touch him and —

Ah. *There.* She ran the flat of her palms across his chest and up higher to frame his face. To all the world it would look as though she held nothing but air.

"Thank you," she said, knowing that didn't even come close to expressing the gratitude she felt toward him.

He cupped her breasts in his broad hands, running the tips of his thumbs across her nipples. The buds tightened painfully and a sharp jolt of moisture flooded her pussy.

"That story wasn't just something you made up, was it?"

He didn't answer, but she could feel him shaking his head. The stubble on his cheek scraped her palm.

A shiver traveled across her skin. "Let me help you. Let me..."

*Love you.*

It was too much too soon. She couldn't make her mouth form the words, but the feelings were there, rolling beneath the surface of her soul.

Hating to break contact with him but driven to do the only thing she could, she reached beneath her skirt and pulled down her panties. The skirt itself followed a moment later. After pulling off her shirt, she stood naked except for the three-inch heels.

Taking a deep breath, she turned toward the railing and curved her fingers around the old wood. She pushed her ass back and made contact with his groin.

Sebastian's erection throbbed against her skin. She rocked her hips, swaying her ass back and forth to rub along his cock. Seconds later, his massive shaft plunged inside her slick pussy, filling her with a blast of hot pleasure that bordered on pain.

A gasp caught in her throat. She pushed back against him, impaling herself on his cock until he was buried in her to the hilt. He cupped her breasts, pinching her nipples as he pumped wildly. With savage thrusts, he fucked her desperately.

Her phantom lover. The ghost who'd awakened her to the pleasure she'd been denying herself.

"Damn you, Sebastian. You're mine," she ground out between clenched teeth as her clit pulsed and her cunt stretched to accommodate him. "Mine. I'll take you in any way I can have you."

A roar echoed through the room, loud enough to shake the wooden planks of the balcony. It startled her, drawing a cry from her throat.

His cock spasmed, sending a flurry of concentrated pulses deep into her core as he pumped his seed. Tears filled her eyes and dripped over the lower line of her lashes. Her pussy responded to his release with a throbbing vibration that seemed to peak in her clit, sending a shiver of pure sensation to stream along her nerve endings.

She turned her head slowly as her orgasm subsided, fearing the cavernous emptiness of the space stretching out behind her.

Instead of the void she'd dreaded, she found a pair of dark eyes watching her with possessive fervor. Sebastian's brows were drawn downward, not in a frown, but in a look of abject astonishment.

Celeste grinned and slipped his cock out of her pussy. Turning around, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him to her. "I told you we weren't finished."

"Thank God, for women who don't know how to mind their own business," he whispered against her mouth before bringing his lips down to hers.

Lost in the kiss, her eyelids drifting closed, Celeste almost didn't notice the bright pinpoint of light that fluttered above their heads. Her eyes snapped open as she followed the firefly's path.

It soared undeterred toward the front door.

## **About the Author**

Award-winning author Lacey Savage loves to write about her dreams—or more specifically, she loves to breathe life into her steamy fantasies (and she's got plenty!). She pens erotic tales of true love and mythical destiny, peopled with strong alpha heroes and feisty heroines. A hopeless romantic, Lacey loves writing about the intimate, sensual side of relationships. She currently resides in Ottawa, Canada, with her loving husband and the mischievous cat.

Lacey welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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