

Red Sage Presents



Nathalie Gray
HEARTLESS



An eRedSage Publishing Publication

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By Nathalie Gray

TO MY READER:

I've always been interested by curses. Not the words (well...), but the power of a person's hate. I've always wondered, what if a curse took shape, followed its target everywhere it went. A tailor made hell. This is such a story. Gaius did a bad thing two millennia ago and is still living his punishment. When Anne-Marie stumbles into him, she can't resist trying to help this handsome stranger with the wounded eyes. But the curse isn't done with Gaius. Not by a long shot.

Heartless: Chapter 1

Summer 117 A.D., Alexandria, Aegyptus (Roman Empire)

Gaius could not move. He could not talk. Whatever the priestess had given him worked splendidly. He was lucid and awake, yet unable even to blink. Fear closed a cold, clammy fist on his innards.

Armed but naked save for jewels that glistened like liquid fire, she sat astride him as he lay supine on a stone surface. So cold. Through an aperture near the stone roof's apex, a blade of Egyptian sun stabbed at an acute angle and lit the burial chamber in all its glory. Lapis lazuli statuettes, obsidian scarabs, old-fashioned canopic jars of deep alabaster. Those would soon contain his viscera. But he was not dead. Not yet.

The priestess Mehnit—his *wife*—parted his gown over his otherwise naked body, traced down his chest and then lower, where she grabbed his member in a bejeweled fist. Her other hand, clutched over a dagger, rose high above her beautiful, proud head. On the weapon's wide, leaf-shaped blade, Roman symbols gleamed for a moment. How appropriate for him, a Roman praetor. One about to die a most horrible death.

She moved her hand up and down and managed to rouse him. How he could be hard at a time like this, Gaius could not understand.

An expression of bliss flashed on her chiseled face. Then she raised herself and sank down over his cock, took him deep into her. Their favorite position. Her kohl-lined gaze on his face, she worked her hips slowly.

"You have betrayed my trust," she murmured, rolling her pelvis. "You have lain with another woman."

He wished he could deny it and claim that he had never meant to hurt her, but it would have been a lie. He had not cared about her or anyone else but himself and his own pleasure. She had been a trophy on his dais.

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Just like the many other mistresses with whom he had cheated.

Had he always been so callous?

Ten long years in Egypt—and power, a lot of it—had exacerbated all the dark streaks in him to the point that he could hardly recognize the man living in his skin. The old lure. Coins, power and a handsome face could be perfect companions to a man's descent into the abyss. He should know. His own demise had begun two years before on a night of drunken debauchery. One, two, and then more women had come to pleasure him, to let him do to them what his wife refused him, to desecrate their flesh for his enjoyment. For Rome's champion, no desire went unsatisfied. And he had taken the women, the men, everything he wanted. Even a steady mistress, something he had seen his father do and had vowed never to emulate. The last thing he wanted was to become like that hateful man.

But Mehnit was presently going to save him from all that, was she not? Cure the patient by chopping off his head.

She continued writhing over him, bringing rapture as well as shame. Her essence glistened along his shaft. Jewelry clicked with the sweet music of minute bells. Hair blacker than night cascaded over her slender shoulder and obscured the face he had noticed on his arrival, one he had spent the first two years in Egypt admiring and caressing until lethargy and indolence had cooled the fire in his veins. Until ennui had made a fop of a soldier. As she had done on the night she had greeted him at her temple all those years ago, she took him deep into her sweet, moist sex. Despite his paralysis, Gaius felt the fire tingling in his testicles, precursors of a sordid and ill-timed climax.

“Have I not brought you pleasure?” she murmured between rolls of her hips. “Did I not make a home of my flesh for you?”

She had and she did. When had he become such a fool that he would treat a woman—his own wife—this way? Like father, like son.

Abruptly she pulled away, left him quivering with unspent release. His glans glistened with her nectar. Their gazes met. Oh, but he would

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suffer.

Present day, Montreal, Canada

The October rain was a degree away from turning to freezing drizzle. She could feel the sting on the exposed skin around her hood. After checking one last time down both ends of the gloomy alley—downtown Montreal was a byzantine knot of them—she used her knee to keep the cutters steady. The chain fell in a dull clang against the folding grille door. Hands steady, she pushed it aside just enough for her to squeeze through the aperture. In her profession, a gangly form and long, skinny hands paid well. Too bad her boyfriends never seemed to agree. Oh, well. Anne-Marie Valois, antiquities thief and unofficial expert on everything Egypt, didn't need anyone else's approval.

She padded down the narrow corridor and spotted the fake security camera in a corner. The owners hadn't even bothered to at least pretend the thing was on and let the wire dangle near the wall. A cursory glance would reveal nothing, but to her practiced eye, the thing was as fake as a knockoff pair of Louboutins to a shoe connoisseur. She passed a door to her left that opened into a tiny office in serious need of a makeover and some organization—one of her obsessions. Beyond was the darkened inheritance gallery itself. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath. The musty smell of old books and faded paintings, the subtle perfume from vintage clothes and hats. Who'd been these people behind the objects? What had been their story? Why had their family not kept these lovely things instead of selling them to this gallery?

A person could spend a day in here, going through the layers and epochs, and never touch the same thing twice. But she knew exactly what she wanted. She'd seen it earlier that day on a supposedly Rococo Revival parlor table which had probably come from the Bombay store and had been left outside a couple of days to gain a weathered look. But

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the item on the table had frozen her in mid-step. According to the ad in the paper, the private exhibition would last only one weekend before the special item would return to the family's vault.

Anne-Marie smiled as she stopped in the middle of the gallery, facing the door. There it was.

Her heart had skipped a beat that morning when she'd first seen the canopic jar in person. The ad didn't do it justice. A canopic jar, it had said. Well, this wasn't any ordinary funeral urn. It was *old*. The real deal. One for which she could find a dozen buyers within the hour. And just as it had that morning, her heart rate accelerated now that she stood alone with the treasure.

Egyptian, obviously, post-Ptolemaic and bearing no namesake cartouche, crafted from the deepest alabaster she'd ever seen. It was almost completely amber with rust-colored veins and a jackal head for stopper. The carving had lost both its ears, and coupled with its upper lip curled in a rictus, it gave the beast a mad, feral look. Faint streetlight caressed its polished surface through the window.

She remained in the shadow in case someone happened by on the sidewalk. Even at two in the morning. Montreal, the city that never really slept. Like Vegas, Sodom and Gomorrah all in one convenient location. And the food was unbeatable.

Anne-Marie shrugged her backpack off along one arm and set it on the floor in front of her. Meant for a laptop, its padded sides and bottom would be perfect for that night's job.

A stench suddenly filled her nose but was gone the next moment. Ew. God, something in this gallery could use a few days outside. And some bleach.

Squeezing by odds and ends and a collection of frilly parasols in a WWII artillery shell, she neared the canopic jar. The faint buzz of an insect forced an automatic swat response.

"Can't take a break even in October," she muttered, waving her hand over her head.

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Run.

Instincts kicked in. Anne-Marie had to bite down hard to stay immobile as every fiber of muscle in her body tensed. This urge to just turn and run caught her by surprise. What was that? She'd never had cold feet on the job before. Frissons tingled down her spine as she clenched and unclenched her fists. Sweat made her wool hood scratchy and too warm.

Just breathe.

She slowly leaned over the jar and eyeballed it to make sure she wouldn't damage it further. Black kid gloves would be good enough because she suspected the prior owners had probably handled it barehanded. And who knew how many before them. Damn, the thing deserved white linen gloves, a climate-controlled environment and a thief-proof security system. Not a cheap "wood" table with a crochet cover.

Pursing her lips, she carefully wrapped both hands around the jar and lifted it off the table.

Images swirled in her mind's eye. Flashes of light and of shadows. Haloes in brilliant hues. Then gone the next second.

"Holy shit," she breathed.

The next second, a deep sense of melancholy and sadness overwhelmed her. Then rage, an all-encompassing fury that made her want to break everything in sight and set fire to the remnants, destroy the shop to the last shred and speck that angry winds would disperse to the four corners of the world. It hit her so hard that she felt the jar start to slip in her hands. A snarl of pain left Anne-Marie and needle-sharp cramps tightened her chest. Rushing as best she could in the cluttered gallery, she backpedalled to her pack and hurriedly deposited the thing inside, smoothing the layer of bubble wrap over the head.

Her heart hammered. Sweat slicked her hands. She looked around, panic gnawing at her. Something was wrong. Something was horribly wrong.

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Anne-Marie coughed and blinked out the sweat. “What the hell was that?”

She didn’t take her time as she usually did. Not tonight. Had to get the hell out of here. Run. Hard and fast and no backward looks. She hastily zipped the pack up, slung it on, and then aimed for the back door.

Something stopped her cold. There in the reflection of a glass cabinet stood a tall form. Her heart beating like a war drum, Anne-Marie cut a quick glance at the gallery entrance. Outside in the rain, a man in a long coat stood not a foot from the window, looking inside. Looking at *her*.

Alexandria, Aegyptus

Still the dagger remained suspended over her head in her small, ocher-colored fist. Gaius had always loved her hands. Tiny, wicked tools. A glimmer traveled along the leaf-shaped blade. She looked down at his heaving chest. Then lower.

For the love of the gods.

Her dark gaze snapped back up to his face. In his head, he sobbed in relief.

“You are a heartless jackal.” Her smile was glacial.

She began to speak in a language he did not understand. Was this Egyptian? He did not know. He’d never taken the time to learn. Praetor Gaius Aelius Draco had not intended to fester ten years in Egypt, twiddling his thumbs while he yearned to fight for Rome, bored out of his mind and now about to be butchered. He hadn’t learned about Mehnit’s cult of the ancient gods and their rituals of old. No one believed in the afterlife anymore, not since the Ptolemies hundreds of years before. He hadn’t bothered with the language, and he hadn’t mastered the ways. The mistake would kill him. If he were lucky.

A tiny sound caught his ear. An insect.

The faint buzz spread and deepened, grew in an aural wave, amplified

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by the stone and marble surrounding, until it swelled to the roar of a swarm of insects. Gaius' breathing became arrhythmic. There, above Mehnit's head, a black mist blotted out the sun through the small opening. It undulated like a living entity before settling around the stone altar.

What vile, monstrous thing was this?

It formed a roiling mass behind her that even the pitiless Egyptian sun could not illuminate. Darkness incarnate. Like a collection of long black blades, it whipped the air in an eerie dance and then uncoiled upward to freeze behind his wife and hover around her upraised arm. It would add its support should her hand fail. The sheer malevolence of the entity made Gaius gag. He tried to cough or turn his head away from the malefic stench. Could do neither.

"You have dishonored me." The priestess's gaze bore into his. She hated him. He couldn't blame her. He hated himself, what he had become, what power and apathy had done to him.

The thing churned as it wrapped one of its bladelike appendages along her arm as would a bracelet of shadow. Almost beautiful. Her biceps twitched. Then the dagger plunged.

Blinding pain. Searing agony.

A voiceless scream ripped from his throat. Tears streamed from his eyes, gathered in his ears. Waves of nausea choked him. He wanted to push her off him, stop her arm from twisting and wrenching. Blackness clouded his vision. The buzz of insects intensified. The thing screeched and thrashed, extended two long, glistening limbs to encircle his wife's waist and slither over her breasts as would a lover's hands, then down her belly before curving up between her thighs. There, it took her. Thrust its nightmarish barbs into her flesh. The desecration repulsed him yet he could do nothing but watch. Like twin albino scarabs, her eyes rolled back in her head.

Just as the sinister entity took Mehnit, she stabbed into his chest again and again. Gaius howled in his head, knowing no sound would come out

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but unable to stop himself. Something rammed under his rib cage, searched inside him, centered on a spot, and yanked mercilessly.

Behind her, the blackness writhed with increasing tempo and force as it ravaged her sex, enough to lift her with its rhythmic thrusts.

“A jackal,” she moaned, bending over to place her cruel mouth against his ear. With a triumphant, orgasmic yell, she snapped up straight. Her bleeding fist was poised by her head, brandishing—

Gaius’ vision failed him. As did his sanity.

“Heartless,” she whispered.

Present day Montreal, Canada

Fear spread through her chest. Primal, absolute fear.

Anne-Marie sprinted to the back door and checked that the coast was clear even though she wanted to run as if the devil were after her. Maybe he was. The incongruous thought made her sob-giggle. Panic squeezed her throat, clamped a cold fist in her gut and pulled down. She closed the door, grabbed her cutters and ran. As fast as she could. She trained for this stuff and worked hard to prepare against every eventuality. She’d come close to being caught before. Why was tonight so different? Why this irrational fear of a lone man looking through a window? At least he wasn’t a cop. The owner maybe? Not the one she’d seen earlier that day, that was for sure, unless he’d grown a foot taller and gained forty pounds of shoulders.

She hadn’t taken ten steps when a dark shape flitted across the alley in front of her, left to right at about two meters off the slick ground. It never actually touched the pavement.

Skidding on the slippery cobblestones, Anne-Marie gripped the cutters harder, ready to swing as she ran past the spot where she’d seen the form disappear. Nothing but dumpsters, emergency ladders, and at the end of the alley like a beacon calling, her battered but beloved 3-

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series silver BMW parked facing out in case of a hasty retreat. She was cautious if nothing else.

Rain made everything look greasy and dangerous. Her breath rose in puffs as she dug in the pocket of her cargo pants, pulled out her keys. With a thumb on the automatic unlock button, she swerved left so she could squeeze between the brick wall and the driver's side door.

Everything happened fast.

A thud on the hood of her car. The sound of metal groaning. The rear window burst in milky-white spider web patterns. A shape of impossible proportions and nightmarish darkness rose over the roof of her car and towered in front of Anne-Marie as she skidded to a halt.

Like a loose knot of black ribbons coiling and whipping, a fist of roiling smoke, and a core of such abysmal depths that she felt sucked into the dark void. An overpowering stench made her gag. Then the sound of insects, swarms of them, filled the alley. Drowned even her thoughts. The thing didn't seem to have a front or back, yet she knew it faced her and was looking at her. It whipped forward one of its blade-like appendages as if feeling for her, wanting to touch her. Anne-Marie didn't know how it was possible for her not to start screaming and never stop. Her heart pounding hard, she took a step backward. Then another.

The thing moved up from the hood to the roof of her car, puncturing metal with its sharp limbs. Each perforation made Anne-Marie flinch. On a level deeper than consciousness, she knew it was female. She couldn't explain it, but that thing was—or had been—a she.

Still, she backed away, slowly, facing the...the thing. Never turning her back to it. Couldn't turn her back to it.

Like an angry storm cloud, it agitated lower and stabbed a feeler down into the trunk of her car, seemed to slice easily through the metal. And this was a 1989 BMW, from back when cars were made of actual steel. Anne-Marie yelped when one of the tires burst with a sharp hiss of air and the smell of old air and rubber. Her car collapsed on the back passenger side.

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To her shock, the sound of insects changed, modulated, and acquired a pattern. “*Heartlesssss.*” The hiss, more than anything else, shocked her out of her fear-induced paralysis.

She didn’t know why, but she flung the cutters at the thing. Then she ran.

Instincts kicked in. She couldn’t stay in the open but needed a barrier between that thing and her. Teeth gritted so hard her jaws hurt, Anne-Marie leaped up the closest emergency ladder and scaled it as fast as she could. Below, the thing had left her car and flung itself at the bottom rungs. Like whips, blades of darkness flogged upward. The ladder shuddered under the assault. A cry escaped her when something struck her boot. Her hands and feet working fast, she climbed up to the first balcony, kicked a leg over the railing and then ignored the door—no time to check it, that thing was closing in—as she charged up the narrow, circular stairwell leading to the second level. Rain turned each rusty grille step into a deathtrap. Below, the hellish thing thrashed upward.

Another level she climbed. Another, then another. Wind hit her square in the face as Anne-Marie crested the roof ledge. Around her, rooftops bristled with antennas and satellite dishes, sheds, vents and chimneys. Her stomach in a knot, she ran across the roof, her soft boxing boots crunching on gravel and tar, and reached the other side only to realize she wouldn’t be able to clear the gap to the next building. Not without a lucky jump.

Shit.

“*Merde, de merde, de merde.*” She chanced a glance behind her. Nothing. No smell, no sound. Was it gone? Had it even existed? Was she going completely nuts?

She checked anyway but found no access ramp across the divide, and was considering turning back when the sound she’d come to associate with paralyzing fear and half-remembered nightmares swelled up over the ledge. One whipping blade of pure inky black and then another cleared the roof.

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For the first time in her life, Anne-Marie didn't calculate risks, didn't observe and take notes, and didn't study the situation for the best option available. She ran. Hard and without looking back. She had one chance.

She made sure her stronger leg hit the roof ledge last and swung her arms forward as she leaped between the two buildings. She put everything she had into it. But as soon as she rose in the air, she knew it wouldn't be enough. She was falling too early, too fast.

With a bone-jarring thud, she hit the other building brick shelf and clawed at the metal flashing nailed around the ridge to keep the rain out. Too slippery. Despite frantically scraping the wall with her boots, Anne-Marie slid back. From behind her came a hiss like water drops falling on a burning log. The thing was laughing?

Another centimeter. Her shoulders ached, as did her fingertips. Not much more flashing could slide away before she was in freefall. With the height, at least she wouldn't suffer.

Another centimeter, the final one. At the last possible second, two hands shot out over the crest of the roof ledge, grabbed her wrists in iron grips, and yanked her upward as though she weighed nothing. The hissing stopped, replaced with a cry like fingernails on a blackboard. She couldn't explain it, but she understood the thing was pissed. Then silence.

Anne-Marie pedaled furiously as she helped whoever had her by the wrists to hoist the dead weight she'd become. A head and a pair of thick shoulders were the first things she saw as she was pulled onto the safety of the flat roof identical to the one she'd left behind.

She rolled up to her knees and stood. The breathless "thanks" never made it past her lips.

Him! The man she'd caught looking through the window.

Anne-Marie leaped back a step, hands up in a guard. He didn't move a muscle and just stood there scowling.

Had she been in the mood, she would've thought he was sexy in a scary way with dark hair plastered to his head and eyes narrowed to

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murderous slits. Rain made rivulets on either side of a Roman nose that tended to the aquiline. He stood quite a bit taller than her five-nine, and he didn't look one bit happy. And when, from his long black coat, he pulled a long black gun, Anne-Marie only managed a squeak of fright.

Oh, mon dieu. She was going to die like this.

Arm extended, he fired.

Heartless: Chapter 2

When they said one's life flashed before one's eyes, they didn't know what they talked about. All Anne-Marie saw was a muzzle flash that burned bright little suns into her vision. Tiny flecks of something sprayed her face as if someone had taken a pepper mill to her. Thunder made her ears buzz and heat buffeted her even through the hood when the shot went right over her shoulder. He'd *missed*?

Behind her, a long fizzling sound made her hair stand up on her arms. Anne-Marie turned just in time to see the thing recoil from the roof like a broken marionette flopping madly, its long barbed appendages dancing like bacon in a too-hot pan. It had followed her after she'd jumped? It had been right there behind her. Had the man not fired at it—

A violent shiver rocked her. A gag reflex squeezed her throat. *Please, not here, not now.*

His face a mask of rage, he grabbed her by the sleeve and yanked her down. When her knees knocked against the granular tar, rain seeped into her pants. Her heart beat hard enough to worry her. Her saliva tasted sour.

“What the hell—”

“Shh,” he hissed.

Below, the monstrous thing continued to fizzle and hiss. Beneath the sounds, the clangs of metal and the uneven scrape against brick alerted Anne-Marie that the thing had reached the ground. The hiss deepened and diminished. Then nothing.

He'd hurt it? How could this thing be hurt?

As soon as the sound stopped, she pulled her sleeve from his grip and crab-walked to a safer distance. She kept him in front where she could see him.

Standing, he slid the monstrous gun back into his coat. Anne-Marie

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jumped back a step when he came for her. He might have shot that thing back, but that didn't mean he could invade her space. When she bounced on the balls of her feet, her hands loose at her sides, he seemed impressed neither by her speed nor her fighting stance. She might not be a martial arts expert, but she sure as hell could knee a man where it hurt.

But he lunged quicker than she'd ever seen anyone move. Despite her late but sound elbow block, he gripped her by the front of the jacket and hoisted her to his face. Only the tips of her boxing boots touched the ground.

"You could see it. How could you see it?" His voice sounded rusty from disuse. A trace of accent lifted certain syllables from the rest.

Anne-Marie had never believed in any sort of mojo, karma or anything more esoteric than the power of a good evil eye. Well, until that thing had crushed her car and chased her up a building, and then been shot back by a guy who could hold her aloft with a single hand.

But she couldn't deny the surge of emotions swelling inside her as soon as his hand touched her. The same she'd felt as when she'd retrieved the canopic jar. Great sadness and melancholy and then a rage that knew no bounds. In his eyes the color of green amber, she saw it all reflected, weariness like an old pain. She only noticed then how hollow his cheeks were and how tired he looked. So tired. This man had been broken, either in his heart or in his spirit. Something bad had happened to him. Very bad.

Out of some compassionate trait she didn't know she possessed—hadn't one of her boyfriends complained she never let anyone inside—Anne-Marie wanted to reach out to this stranger, soothe him, and ease the pain. With a shake of her head, she cleared the crazy impulse. What the hell was wrong with her?

"How could you see it?" he repeated, giving her a rough shake.

His treatment triggered her reflexes. She kicked him in the shins, grabbed his hands and tried to muscle her way out of his grip. Not a chance. He snarled a word in a language she couldn't understand

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because it was neither English nor French, but he didn't let go.

Great. She might have exchanged one threat for another. Although she'd take the big scary guy with the foot-long gun over the nightmarish thing any day of the week.

"What do you mean?" she retorted. Could she fight him off if it came down to that? She wasn't having much luck so far. "Can't *you*?"

His eyes flared. He released her right away and sent her floundering back a step. "You're a woman?"

Anne-Marie rearranged her jacket with a brusque tug. "Does that change anything?"

For a second he seemed lost. Then his eyes narrowed dangerously once more. "No. Now answer me."

"A ten-foot... *thing* made of—of darkness just crushed my car. That's hard to miss." Anne-Marie hoisted her pack higher. The man flinched as though she'd struck him. "What was that thing? Damn."

"It is."

"Huh?"

"Damned. It's a curse, to be exact. My curse."

Handsome as hell but missing a few screws. Too bad.

"What?" Anne-Marie hooked her thumb over her shoulder. She didn't even want to look back and check. Was it still there? Waiting? Had it even existed? "That thing back there, it's cursed?"

She must have fallen and hurt herself badly. In reality she was in the hospital, drugged out of her mind and being fed Jell-O through a straw. Yeah, had to be it. She couldn't be here. Couldn't be having this conversation.

"Not cursed, *a* curse."

That makes a difference?

"What the hell does it want with me? Why is it here?" A nervous giggle escaped her. Anne-Marie pinched the hood to scratch at a spot behind her ear. "I'm so not having this conversation. I'm dead. I'm in a hospital. Not here. Nope."

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“You’re not dead. But that can change.” He looked over her at the adjacent rooftops, shook his head. “No one has ever been able to see it. Except me. And it wants what you took.”

Anne-Marie swallowed hard. What she’d taken....

“This can’t be real. Any of it. I must be hallucinating. Unless I’m going nuts, which wouldn’t be so strange after all.” Bravado suited her much better than showing the terror that gnawed at her. Her nerves were unraveling like a badly knit sweater. One thread at a time. Denuding her.

A shadow of a smile rounded his hollow cheek. It was gone the next second and left her wondering if it had been there at all. He took a step closer. Despite her better judgment, she refused to let this big, scary man cow her into a retreat and instead stood her ground when he leaned over for a better look.

“You were lucky,” he murmured, his eyes searching.

Was he trying to see what she looked like under the hood? Would he think she was pretty, attractive, barely above *meh*? And why should it matter to her what this stranger thought? Her mind did an about-face when he leaned even closer. She could smell him. Peppermint.

Snap out of it!

“I’m, er, I’m not so sure now,” she replied. “Was I?”

“Do you think I would have helped you, only to hurt you afterward?”

“It happens all the time.” She tried for a deep breath but it caught in her throat. The guy was what her niece would call OMGHAWT. But he had a gun. And several layers of What-The-Fuck beneath the handsome veneer. As much as she loved men with layers, this one was just a bit too scary for her.

“So cynical for one so young,” he murmured.

City light, though faint, illuminated enough of him for Anne-Marie to appreciate the strong facial features and the way his hair had been cut short around his face. An old-world, Mediterranean air clung to him. He reminded her of those men on Roman coins—proud profile and intense gaze. Rain created a sheen on his bronzed skin.

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“I swear, whatever part of you touches me, you’re not getting back.” He sighed. They stood so close that their breaths rose and joined in fragile wisps. “Come on.”

“Nuh-uh. Not going anywhere with you.”

“The curse is gone for now but it will come back.”

“How do you know that?” Panic crept up her spine with the serpentine march of a centipede.

His dark smile resembled more a wolfish leer. “It always does.”

Anne-Marie shuddered.

He turned away and took a few steps. But he must have realized she hadn’t followed, because he stopped, waiting patiently with his hands at his sides. Wind picked up his coat and whipped the corners back from long legs that triggered feverish warmth to spread inside her. The small, tantalizing peek made her wonder about the rest hidden under the coat.

Oh, for god’s sake!

She cleared her throat. “I’m not going anywhere with you. I don’t know you.”

“I saved you from certain death. Twice. That should be sufficient for now.”

“It’s not. Sorry. But thanks, though.”

He closed his eyes briefly. “My name is Gaius. I am the only person who knows how to evade it. Unless you come with me, it will find you again. And next time...”

Anne-Marie couldn’t help her violent shiver. “Okay.” She leveled an index finger at him. “I’ll follow. For now, until I figure things out.”

“Very pragmatic of you.” Was he laughing at her?

No logical reason why she didn’t even try to make a run for it as soon as he turned his back on her and marched around a ventilation unit the size of her bedroom. Anne-Marie followed without a backward glance, the weight in her backpack the only tangible proof of what had happened earlier. No, that was a lie. Another thing felt real. The heat of animal magnetism, the tension coiling in her belly just looking at the guy. That

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was plenty real.

I am going nuts.

He stood waiting as she rounded the corner, holding the door for her with a long arm that must have made for a perfect embrace. Did he give good hugs, she wondered for a second before berating herself for allowing her hormones to call the shots. After adjusting her shoulder strap with a thumb, she stepped into a darkened doorway leading to concrete stairs that descended into darkness. She turned just in time to catch his intense gaze on her. A shiver tingled up her spine.

The door closed on her view of his nose. She'd always had a thing for a good nose. They gave character to people, and his was a fine one indeed.

Darkness replaced rain and night sky. She pressed a hand against the wall to steady herself. Movement to her right heralded contact. Heat and then a hand on her upper arm triggered a powerful shudder.

"Do I frighten you?" In the darkness, his voice felt like velvet against her cheek.

"No." She wouldn't convince even herself.

"One would think a thief would make a better liar."

A flush rushed up her cheeks. "Hey, because I owe you one doesn't mean you can insult me."

"Are you not a thief? Do you not carry a stolen item in your backpack? The curse knows and I know."

"That doesn't make me a liar. Just someone with flexible work ethics. Plus, that gallery didn't even know what they had."

"But you do?" His voice sounded much nearer than just a few seconds before. Anne-Marie swallowed hard. "You know what you have? How so?"

"It doesn't take a genius to figure it out. It's Egyptian, it's real alabaster and it's old. The rest doesn't matter."

"The rest?" He crowded her against the wall. "The rest used to be a person."

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“Used to be,” she replied through her teeth. “He or she is past caring. By at least two thousand years.”

“Two thousand years,” he whispered, as if tasting the words and finding them vile. “I would not be so sure. Some things transcend time, even death. Some things, even devoid of life, go on long after the last breath has been drawn, the last beat struck.”

What was that supposed to mean?

“Yeah, well, thanks for helping.” She tried to squeeze out from between the tall man and the equally hard wall. “I’ll be on my way now. Bye.”

“You cannot leave.”

Fear caused her breath to catch in her throat. “I knew it.”

She felt him shake his head. “You misunderstand me. I will not hurt you. I give you my word of honor, something I still have even if I possess nothing else. But if you leave, the curse will find you.”

“I’ll find a way out. I always do.” Bravado. Pure bravado. Neither of them believed a word of it.

“It will find you. It will kill you. Slowly. I have seen it too many times before to doubt its patience or its malice. And believe me, I have had a lot of time to study it.”

“What does it want?” she whispered. “Why is it after me?”

His hip pressed against hers in the most pleasant way. Trying to ignore her body’s response to his, Anne-Marie closed her eyes and angled her face away. The wool made her hood scratchy. Plus, with the serious body heat the guy emitted, she still would’ve been hot in a T-shirt.

“It wants the canopic jar.”

“Why? What’s a thing like that going to do with a canopic jar?” It made no sense. He made none either.

A long pause. Was he going to answer her?

“It has possessed the jar for a long time. Its clutches are sharp and its cunning vast, but sometimes, even it can lose focus, and when it does,

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the jar falls into others' hands. Such as the one who brought it here to Canada. The curse followed the trail of blood, as I did."

"Blood?" she managed to croak. His heat seeped into her clothes, her skin, and her brain. She moistened her lips and cleared her throat. A subtle shift of his pelvis sent her nerve endings into a frenzied dance. God, he was hard everywhere. His chest, his thighs.

"The curse was born in it, soaked in it for a hundred years before the first person took the canopic jar. Then for the last millennium and a half, it has caused much innocent blood to be spilled and wasted. Its trail is as red as a praetor's toga."

"A praetor's toga?"

"An old saying."

"So what now? We can't stay here all night. What are we going to do? My car is totaled."

"I can help with that."

"No, thanks."

Her heart skipped a beat when his hand travelled up her arm to her shoulder. He traced the edge of her hood until hot fingertips found the separation between fabrics. The heat of his skin against hers made Anne-Marie take a deep breath through her nose. She let it out slowly, fighting to keep her brain from melting out her ears. What was he doing to her? What was he doing, period?

"When I said I owe you one," she said. "I didn't mean *that*."

His hand froze. She felt him lean into her and closed her eyes even if she couldn't see a thing.

"I have never resorted to coercion to enjoy a woman," he murmured right against her ear. "Nor would I use gratitude as leverage for sex."

"Good to know," she pushed through her teeth. Liquid heat gathered in her sex. Her nipples hardened into painful points. The man had a way with words.

"But I *would* accept a gift freely offered."

And there it was. An invitation. She only wished she could be this

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straightforward. “Yeah, well, I’ll, er, I’ll keep that in mind. Let’s just focus on getting out of here, ’kay?”

A soft chuckle made her want to frame his face and kiss him. Or kick his ass. God, what the hell was going on with her tonight? Couldn’t she even control her own reactions anymore?

“So that thing, that curse, what does it do once it has the jar?”

Silence stretched for so long Anne-Marie thought he just wouldn’t answer.

“It wins.”

“Wins what?” she asked. Didn’t really want to hear an answer.

“Me.”

Her chest constricted painfully. Even though he’d told her this with the same tone of voice, the same low, rusty voice, she could detect the horror beneath the surface, the lassitude that impregnated every nuance in his timbre. In every word and every break in between, she detected the fear. As much as the curse had horrified her, the man’s words all but froze the blood in her veins.

“Why?” A whisper would have sounded like thunder compared to her question. “What did you do?”

“I committed a terrible crime and deserve—”

“Whoa, no one deserves this thing gnawing at their heels,” she cut in. “I don’t care what you did, no one deserves that.”

She heard him sigh, noted the tremor in his chest.

“Some do.”

“So that thing, that curse, how do you kill it? Please tell me it can die. That would *so* make my day.”

“So far, I’ve discovered that only light and loud noises can slow it. This is why I fired the gun at it. The bullet would not hurt it, but the gun itself can. But, yes, it can die, and someday perhaps it will.” His fingers traced the border of her hood at the back of her neck, touching the exposed skin with burning-hot fingertips. The man was good with his hands. And with his voice.

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Now that she focused on his voice alone—and it could do wonders to a woman’s libido—his accent deepened. “Where are you from? There’s an accent I can’t place.”

“I was born in *la Città Eterna*,” he murmured closer to her ear. “Rome.”

He had to be the biggest Italian man she’d ever seen.

“We should leave,” he went on. His voice softened to the point of a whisper. “Before it comes back.”

“You said you were the only one able to evade it.”

Fear replaced heat in her belly. She felt him stand back from her. “And I also thought no one but me could see it. Things have changed beyond what I knew to be true. I cannot explain it, but you are different. And it knows.”

A shiver tightened her nape and it had nothing to do with sexy guy’s effect on her.

Heartless: Chapter 3

If he did not move away from her right this instant, he never would. Already, he was hard for her, a woman whose face he had yet to see without a hood and mask.

And what a woman she was!

Gaius could not believe it. She had shown more strength of character, more bravery than any soldier with whom he had fought over the many, many years of his—not his life, but his existence. He would never call what stirred him life. He had lost that when he had lost his heart. Literally.

The old ache flared. Gaius ran a hand over his scarred chest even if he knew it would not alleviate the pain. Nothing could. No drug, liquor, or what little sleep he could find. The pain was part of the curse, keeping him on his feet, searching and hunting. Yet the moment he had met the reckless thief, the ever-present twinge had dulled. Not completely, but for a few blissful seconds he almost forgot. Almost. Surprising because nothing he tried had ever worked. For the first few decades of his living death, he had tried *everything* to take the edge off the pain.

As they emerged into the alley—a Tuscan sun after the pitch black of the emergency staircase—he turned back for the sheer thrill of trying to imagine her face underneath the ski mask. Those pale eyes of hers, the color of an iceberg. In the gloom, he thought he could see a strand of darkish hair sticking out over an eyebrow.

He held the door for her while she passed. A thin tendril of her feminine scent reached him, something sweet and fruity. Lotion perhaps. Whatever it was, it made him salivate. Emotions struggled to surface. He pushed them down into the murky depths once more. Where they belonged.

Out into the cold and wet night, a long shiver of apprehension shook

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him. What if the curse tried to take the thing from her? What if she did not relinquish it? What if she did?

Where was this emotional response coming from? It had been such a long time since he'd felt anything at all.

Gaius clenched a fist as he recalled the rage that had turned to horror then to shock when he realized the thief could not only see the curse but had managed to fight it off. Unprecedented. And such a waste. Because he knew what would happen. Just as it had with every other person the curse had lured to the canopic jar, it would tease Gaius with the hope that this time maybe he stood a chance, only to snuff that flame at the last moment and take the jar away.

Over and over.

Decades, centuries, almost two millennia had passed since the curse had been sent after him. Gaius had stopped counting those who had held in their hands the key to his freedom. Hope was something he had come to abhor and dread, even if he could not help it.

"Whoa," the woman exclaimed in that squeaky voice so incongruous to the rest of her. She was all long limbs and wiry strength yet had the voice of a squirrel. Now that he studied her lean frame, he berated himself for having mistaken her for a man. Lust knifed him, much to his frustration. Such an old hunger, one that had not plagued him in quite some time.

"I'm not getting into a car with you." She came to a full stop and crossed her arms.

They had neared his car, which he'd parked around the corner from the art gallery. His quest had taken him to every corner of the world, every majestic land and nascent state. He had followed the jar through German barbed wire and early American saloons, crowded Parisian cafés, Shanghai opium boudoirs, windswept tundra during the Napoleonic wars, Italian Renaissance palaces, on Conquistadors' ships filled with avarice and disease, in the putrid depths of medieval Russian gutters, and now to Montreal. All in all, a twenty-first-century alley was

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not so bad.

“You cannot leave my side. Not now, anyway.” Already, he could feel the curse drawing nearer. It feared the gun on him but not enough to leave. Never enough. The sound of insect wings, brittle but relentless, tightened his nape. The stench would follow. He was so sick of it. So sick of it all. His own personal hell. Convenient, portable. Eternal.

She faced him with her arms still crossed. “I’m not getting into a car with a stranger.”

“You are the one wearing a mask. I gave you my name and told you I would not hurt you.”

Hand quick and steady—he had seen her work—she pulled the hood from her head and faced him. “Hi, I’m Anne-Marie and I’m a PC. I smuggle Habbo points to my niece because her mom doesn’t want to buy them, and I also own—or did own—a silver BMW almost as old as I am that I keep in the garage and don’t drive when it rains unless I absolutely have to. See? No more a stranger. And I’m still not getting into a car with you. Plus, I have to get my own car out of here, so buh-bye.”

The torrent of words, most of which were meaningless to him, washed over him in a warm wave of exuberance and optimism. Such fire!

As she pulled her hood off, he could only watch in mute admiration. What had he expected? Long, blond hair to tumble in bouncy waves? Too clichéd for this peculiar woman. Hers was dark, short and stuck out in odd places because of the hood. It gave her quite an alluring and energetic look that he found hard to ignore. A perfect, narrow nose and a thin mouth that seemed made for smirking completed the woman. No artifice, no jewelry that he could see. Her ears had never been pierced. Gaius’ bottom lip tingled as he thought about nibbling on that lobe. Gods, he had not wanted a woman this hard in a very long time. If ever.

Was it his imagination or had he heard the curse’s hissing laugh? Oh, it would love to ruin that for him, would it not? Quash every last bud of hope and shred of humanity, a revenge he wholly deserved. But sometimes, he wished he could benefit from a reprieve. Just once, on

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those cold and empty nights, he would love to feel the warmth of another body close to his, if only to recapture the essence of the man he once was. But the man he once was had died a long time ago.

Gaius closed his eyes briefly. Just once....

“Not what you expected?” She cocked her head. Her eyes narrowed as she reached into her pants back pocket.

How could someone appear simultaneously cavalier and concerned? She wanted to know what he thought of her appearance, he could see it in her expressive eyes. Yet this was not a woman who needed someone else’s approval. And her self-knowledge, more than her good looks and fit body, thickened his desire for her. Such a contradiction.

“You are exactly as I expected.” And so much more. “And you will accompany me because you are a fighter and a survivor. If you stay here in the open, it will find you. It will take the jar and then kill you. Swiftly, if you are lucky.”

Her eyes narrowed as she considered her options. He could easily see himself admiring that expressive face all night long. She glanced down the street.

“You cannot outrun me,” he offered quietly.

She snapped her chin up, eyes defiant. “You mind letting me think for a second?”

“Neither can you call on the phone in your back pocket, nor out-fight me. You have no choice.”

She opened her mouth to speak but no sound came out. After a few seconds, she snapped her chin up. “I’ll let you know when I have no choice, ’kay? And where do you live? Conveniently close, I’ll wager.” She took her hand from her back pocket.

“Near the Mount, on Courcelette. Do you know where it is?”

She nodded. “Expensive tastes.”

Gaius could not help the grin. He had smiled twice in the same night when he had not smiled at all in the last century. How he wished he could have met this woman earlier. Much earlier. “I have had a long time

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to accumulate my riches.”

It was her turn to smile, a mocking lift to her lips he would love to taste. “Maybe I’ll trade you this for something in your house, eh?” She patted the bottom portion of her backpack.

Instead of the usual jab of dread every time someone touched his canopic jar—and what lay in it—Gaius experienced heat. A slow and pleasant warmth in a place where only cold and hurt had resided for longer than he cared to remember.

“Or perhaps you could use it as leverage for sex,” he said.

She let out a quite unladylike snort of laughter. He almost joined her. Gods, could it be? Had he found one who would free him?

But the price....

No. He refused to entertain the thought. He’d managed to find the jar again, on his own and through a lucky glimpse at the newspaper obituary section—all the jar’s owners ended up there eventually. Although he had not expected someone else might beat him to the jar. Still, as tough and cunning as the antiquities thief was, she would be no match for the curse. It would destroy her and take the jar. Better that Gaius take it first. Steal it by force if he had to. It would not be the first unpleasant thing he had had to do, and surely not the last.

Heartless: Chapter 4

Anne-Marie tried not to let her guard *completely* down around the strange Gaius. If that was even his name. Caution was difficult because all she wanted to do was throw questions at him, about himself, the jar in her pack and the curse after them. A feeling of great sadness emanated from him. She couldn't help the female gene that made her want to "fix it" for him. Stupid genes.

"Kay. I'll play along for now. But if you try anything, I swear I'll take a good chunk of meat with me when I go down." She shook her index finger.

"I will not try anything. We must go. Now."

She waited silently while he remote-unlocked the doors to his imported, shiny new Renault Mégane—she loved those commercials and their catchy song, "*I see you baby, shaking that ass*". With the backpack in the foot well, she fit neatly in the passenger seat.

As soon as he sat behind the wheel and closed the door, a feeling of intimacy settled in the interior. She knew she was blushing and couldn't help it. Good thing the streetlights wouldn't give her away. He turned to her, seemed about to say something. In his drawn face and tired eyes, a flash of passion flitted. Ephemeral. But then he faced the wheel. Had she imagined it at all?

Seat belt buckled, she squeezed her joined hands between her thighs and waited. Weird. Everything was just so weird.

Gaius started the engine and tore up the street, shifting in brusque tugs, tires squealing in protest despite the slick pavement. She believed at least one thing about him—he *was* Italian.

"Whoa! You want to kill us?"

He shook his head. "Coming from—"

A large black mass of uneven gait and flailing limbs suddenly

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thudded against the hood, rebounded and crashed into the windshield. Anne-Marie yelped, her arms in a cross flying up to shield her face.

Gaius snarled something she didn't understand. What language was that?

“Hold on!”

He veered sharply to the right, which dislodged the creature but sent the car climbing chaotically onto the sidewalk, only to steer the vehicle back onto the road with a violent jerk that made Anne-Marie's neck crack.

“Is this—”

“Get my gun. Hurry.” He slammed his palm on the horn and didn't let up. Through the shrill Renault horn, a wail of rage from outside stabbed right into her brain. It made her want to curl into a fetal position.

But she pushed the urge aside. Resisted the panic. Anne-Marie reached into the man's coat and pawed around on his chest until she felt the cool, smooth holster strapped to his side. After a few unsuccessful tries, she worked the Velcro closure holding the gun in place, pulled it out, pointed it away from anything vital.

“Up,” he snarled. He only took his hand off the horn to yell “Through the roof!”

Anne-Marie had fired a gun once in her life. It had been at her dad's hunting cottage on a particularly cold January day several years ago when her parents had first divorced. He'd let her fire the rifle at a tree. That weekend had convinced her—and her dad—she wasn't cut out for hunting. Two days of cold feet, runny nose, checking on the hare snares and unfortunately finding one of the poor beasts still alive. The blood on the cuffs of her ski jacket had never come off, and she'd never gone hunting again.

Thumps overhead pulled her back into the here and now. Anne-Marie pointed the gun skyward and closed her eyes as she squeezed the trigger. Thunder roared inside the car, momentarily drowning the horn and even the thing's wailing. A split second later, a screech like a banshee's

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drilled in her skull.

“I got it! Oh, my god!”

Through the ruined roof, she spotted the night sky glistening with sleet. It trickled into the cabin.

“Again!” Gaius abandoned the horn to take a hard and fast turn.

Anne-Marie pointed the gun upward again but never had time to fire. The thing splattered against her window, retracted one of its many glistening limbs and hit the glass. A tiny spider web appeared in the middle of the window. Anne-Marie’s yelp filled the car. Gaius fisted the horn again and again, but the thing hit a second time. One of the lines on the web zipped down to the corner of the rubber seal.

“Oh god!” She leaned closer to Gaius, angled the gun at her window, and pulled the trigger. Twice.

It exploded in a shower of cubic diamonds, some of which cascaded inside. Wind howled. So did the thing as it flailed back onto the roof.

“Hang on!”

Gaius slammed the brakes. Hard. Anne-Marie flew forward against the belt and dropped the gun, which thudded against her shin and fell into the foot well. With the deceleration, her insides felt as though they’d come out through her navel. With a dragon-like screech, the thing slipped from the roof and onto the hood, great black ribbons of darkness swishing in every direction. Anne-Marie couldn’t even look directly at it without wanting to cry. Teeth gritted, she bent over and retrieved the gun.

Gaius’ warning came a split second before a shower of broken windshield rained down on her. The thing cocked an appendage, but she snapped back against the seat just as it struck. How did she avoid the black javelin that pierced her backrest? Anne-Marie had no idea. All she knew was that she moved just at the right second to avoid having a blade the size of her arm impale her front to back. Instead, it perforated her seat with a dry ripping sound that reminded her of celery stalks breaking. And the stench! Like dead things. Very dead things.

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“The jar!” Gaius gunned the engine again, swerved left, right, and then spared a hand for a quick blast of horn. Slammed on the brakes a second time.

Rain and sleet hit Anne-Marie in the face. She squeezed her backpack between her feet. Aimed the gun directly into the middle of the thing trying to claw inside the car. Fired once. With the muzzle flash and the roar of gunshot, the thing’s appendage flew out of the seat, sliced her on the shoulder.

“Argh!”

Panic seized her. She fired. Again. Again.

“Stop!” Gaius roared. “Stop!”

But she couldn’t. Each bullet, each detonation, each flash pushed the thing farther back from her. And this was all that counted. Keep it away. When an impotent click answered her trigger-finger’s obsessive squeeze, she gasped. Oh, god, she’d wasted all the bullets. By her side, Gaius did his best to use demented driving to keep the thing from getting a better hold on the car. It flailed at the very end of the hood. A pair of barbed ribbons punched into the metal, and another pair whipping around like streamers in a windstorm.

“Gaiusss.”

Anne-Marie swore she heard a voice amidst the thing’s hissing and the man’s incessant honking. Visceral fear gripped her. And when the thing snapped one of its front limbs forward, curled around and under the dashboard and right between her knees, she couldn’t keep it in. She screamed in abject terror.

“The jar!” Gaius gave a violent tug to the steering wheel. Then another.

The passenger-side wheels hit the sidewalk. The lurch rocked her. She hit the passenger door. The thing sliced through her backpack as if it’d been a plastic grocery bag. It looped its limb into the shoulder straps. It was going to take it away. Fear paralyzing her, she watched as the thing brought the backpack out of the foot well. The canopic jar, clearly

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visible inside the long gash in the black nylon, gleamed the color of cinnamon. Such dark alabaster. Something happened during that split second of pure terror. Clarity. Understanding. She couldn't let that thing get a single claw on her canopic jar, no matter what. But on a long, triumphant screech, the thing curled its barbed tentacle into the backpack, right around the jar.

By her side, Gaius let out a long howl of pain, a hand flying to his chest to clutch a fistful of lapel.

Alexandria, Aegyptus

The Nubian's sex was so much darker than Mehnit's. He loved watching his mistress undulate over him, his cock sinking into her glistening flesh, her heavy breasts swaying and creating tantalizing shadows on her muscled belly. So unlike Mehnit, all wiry limbs and skin the color of sand. Gaius rocked his hips to meet his mistress's potent lovemaking. On a grunt, he pushed her off him, rolled her onto her belly. She knew what he wanted. She climbed to her elbows and knees, waiting, open for him. His thrust lifted her knees off the chaise. Her long moan of contentment spurred him on. Deeper. Harder.

Around them, the rest of the guests pleased themselves or one another. One of his fellow praetors had lain with two men, one of whom was a young recruit fresh from Rome. Gaius had never participated in the orgies his colleagues regularly organized. He'd never seen the point until a few months ago, when torpor and boredom had been too much. He wanted to *feel* again, wanted his blood to boil as it had when he served with the sword instead of the quill. Years ago. An eternity. A different man. A whorl of seething rage and decadence. Time lost its meaning, and he took it all, took them all.

Later, when Gaius stumbled back home, he circumvented the main entrance so he could take a dip in the fountain behind his palace. His

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body rang with exhaustion. His cock was still slick from the many lovers he'd tasted that night. Birds fluttered out of the plum trees when he dropped his belt and sandals and then, naked, entered the cool fountain. A shiver raced up his back as lotus flowers grazed his thighs.

"I can smell her on you," a woman's voice floated from the shadow between two pillars.

His wife padded on naked feet to the edge of the fountain. Her white linen tunic created a sharp contrast to her tanned skin. Black hair hung loose on her slim shoulders. She was beautiful, but even Mehnit's beauty and sharp wit could not fight the languor claiming him. He was dying inside. Drowning in his own lassitude, and no amount of inner rage could rouse him back again. He would give anything to return to Rome and fight once more for his motherland's glory.

Despite the gloom, the contempt in her eyes was like a dagger. She leaned over his face but did not kiss him. "I will kill her."

Gaius shrugged. Too drunk to formulate a reply, too angry to care. Angry that he'd been left to languish in this savage land where people worshipped underworld demons. Angry at the gods for the harsh poverty he witnessed everywhere he went. Angry at the sand that always found its way into everything. At the lack of shade, of proper food, of intellectual and physical challenges. Angry. So angry. He was sick of it.

"Leave me." He turned his head away. Naked feet slapped the flagstones as she left. Gaius closed his eyes. He was not drunk enough for the festering rage to be dulled.

Once, as a boy, he'd stumbled on a fox frantically gnawing off its own paw to escape a trap meant for a badger. Gaius had put it out of its misery with a merciful strike to the head and had brought the carcass home for the slaves to cook. But he could not forget the sight of that poor beast, willing to amputate one of its appendages to win its freedom. Perhaps he was doing the same now, years and *milia passuum* away, gnawing off parts of himself in the hopes to be free.

Or perhaps, despite his best effort, he was turning into his father after

all.

Present-day Montreal, Canada

Pain. An electrical wire jammed against his chest. Brilliant in its intensity, merciless in its progress, it flashed through him like a line of black powder set ablaze. His jaws about fused together when he gritted his teeth and groaned. By his side, Anne-Marie battled the curse tooth and nail. Literally.

She had one foot up on the dashboard as she fought for the jar, punching and pulling and kicking with her free leg. With a long ripping sound, the backpack split. Exposed, the jar slipped onto Anne-Marie's lap. With a triumphant hiss, the curse's barbed limb scratched the surface from stopper to base as it tried to hook it out of the cabin. When its claws touched the surface, brilliant pain flashed through Gaius anew. And the horrible sound. A long, jerky screech like fingernails on blackboard. White-hot agony slashed him across the chest. The steering wheel slipped from his hands. He even forgot to hit the horn. The car went veering out of control, clipped a traffic light post. A short distance behind them, a bus turned the corner on its night run and honked its horn in two angry blasts.

At the sound, the curse recoiled its appendage out of the cabin to slash at the metal hood. Gaius could feel its fury and frustration as it tried to locate the Renault's horn. Bright light and loud noises were its only weak spots—barely. Instincts kicked in. Gaius resumed slamming the heel of his hand against the steering column. The Mégane didn't create the sort of thunder the bus could, but it was all he had. The curse roiled away from the windshield, long black whips fluttering and slashing.

Despite the scorching agony still licking his chest like the devil's tongue, Gaius violently twisted the steering wheel. Once, twice. Left, right. The bus honked again.

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“Keep going!” Anne-Marie yelled. She stashed the jar back into the foot well and crossed her legs around it.

Driving like a maniac along rue Sherbrooke, Gaius kicked into fifth gear.

“You drive!” his passenger yelled as she leaned over and banged her fist on the horn.

Wind howled into the broken windshield and passenger window. One of the curse’s limbs shot out and latched on to the doorframe. It was trying to claw around the windshield, probably thinking to come at them from the back. There would not be anything he could do if the curse succeeded. Anne-Marie must have likewise understood the thing’s nefarious design because when it clawed at her door, she straightened in her seat and pulled on the handle.

“Brake!” she roared.

Smart woman.

Gaius slammed on the brakes as his passenger kicked her door opened wide. The curse was much too heavy to fight the deceleration and accumulating force. With a screech, it was ripped off the door, which bent all the way and slammed against the wheel well. Both curse and door tore off the car and went tumbling into the slippery street.

“Gun it!” Anne-Marie sat deeper in her seat, both legs once again wrapped protectively over the jar.

Gaius did not need the woman’s prompting. He slammed his foot on the accelerator. With a roar, the little car climbed to one-forty, well below the manufacturer’s boasts.

In the rearview mirror, both curse and car door rolled around on the pavement like a pair of dueling umbrellas.

He cut a glance at Anne-Marie, whose eyes were huge as she looked back at him.

She chuckled. He recognized the panic despite the brave fight she had put on. “I need to pee,” she declared. “Bad.”

Gaius could not help it. He fell for her.

Heartless: Chapter 5

Only after Gaius had turned onto a quieter street, half of Montreal later, did Anne-Marie notice the burn on her shoulder. Her sleeve was slit open as cleanly as though someone had used a knife. The thing had done this? Cut right through all three layers of fabric? She also noticed the soles of her boxing boots bore deep gashes from her kicking at the vile thing.

Gaius glanced at her. “Did it injure you?”

“Just a flesh wound,” she pushed through a fake grin. If she didn’t laugh, she’d start crying. And not just quiet tears but ugly-runny-nose crying. “Can it find us again? I mean, are we safe for a bit?”

He nodded. “It cannot move fast enough to overtake a car. And after a while, it will lose the scent. Plus, the sun is rising.”

Her right leg was cold, the pants stiff and wet from exposure to the elements. She leaned over to his side. “It can’t move around during daytime?”

“No. We will be safe in my home. For the rest of the day, anyway.”

“And then what?”

He didn’t answer and didn’t speak at all after that. Taking familiar roads, the drive to his home at the foot of Mount-Royal proved quick and eventless. She kept checking over her shoulder to see if the thing followed them. Atop the Mount-Royal, the hundred-foot-tall cross glowed white against a sky of inky black. Once a beacon to the faithful, it was now reduced to a tourist trap. Barely.

Drizzle congealed to slush as they left the grand old rue Sherbrooke, uncharacteristically deserted at this time of the night. Good thing because a car driving around with a missing door would’ve garnered too much attention. They’d been lucky so far, and she intended to keep it that way. The roads turned slippery but Gaius maneuvered the car with

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practiced ease. Not bad winter driving for an Italian used to sun and dry roads. A lot of things didn't add up with him.

At last, he turned on Avenue Courcelette, a narrow street bordered with large houses sitting deep behind oaks and maples still majestic despite the lack of leaves. Burlap-covered smaller trees and bushes were ready for winter. He drove to the very last house on the right, a stately affair all in stone, pulled into the driveway, and cut the engine. Just then she noticed he hadn't buckled his seat belt. The guy had a death wish. That thing could've caused a car crash.

When he turned to face her, Anne-Marie's heart thudded hard once and then settled into an arrhythmic tempo. No man had ever looked at her this way before, with a mix of lust and regret, grief and hope. She could lose herself in eyes like his.

"Do you want to know what is in it?" His gaze dropped to her feet and the jar between them.

"I'd rather not."

He arched an eyebrow. Sexy. "Why not?"

"Does it matter what's in that jar?" she replied, also twisting in her seat to face him. Big mistake. God, he was beautiful. She could hardly focus. Except for her shoulder. Now that took some of the fun out of the moment. "That's not part of my job, to look inside. I just deliver the goods."

"Don't you want to know what could have cost you your life?"

"They say curiosity killed the cat. Plus, canopic jars usually contain someone's insides, so I guess this one does too."

Gaius grimaced as if he'd tasted something sour. Massaging his chest, he said, "You have a very cavalier attitude toward something that once gave a man life."

"Er, yeah, 'kay, you have a point. That was cavalier." Plus, there was more to this jar than just a funeral urn. She could feel the rage and malice as the thing fought to get its claws on it. Plus, hadn't she just fought to her last shred of strength over that damned jar? That moment

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of clarity, she hadn't dreamed it. She'd needed to save the jar. Couldn't explain it. But it had been real.

Gaius shook his head. "No harm done."

Whatever it was, the curse wanted it and so did Gaius. He hadn't told her much, but she could add two and two. She suspected it was either his through a family tree, or what lay inside meant something. Maybe he was a fellow antiquities "acquirer". Oh, shit. He was a drug smuggler. Or diamonds, maybe. He'd stashed the loot in the jar, had lost it somehow, and now wanted it back.

Did that explain the monstrous thing? *Nope. Next theory, madame.*

"We'd better take care of this, or it will become infected."

She looked down at the slit in her sleeve. "They'd ask too many questions at the hospital."

"I have everything we will need in my home." His lips glistened after he moistened them.

A tingle of sexual awareness tightened Anne-Marie's belly and triggered needs that no amount of thigh squeezing would alleviate. She wanted him. She suspected he wanted her as well. And the timing? Could it be any worse?

Getting weirder by the minute.

Jesus, would she wake up already and just start running? Yet animal instincts, those that had led her to a lucrative but dangerous profession and had kept her safe so far, didn't so much as trigger a tiny bleep on her radar. Her libido, though, that was a whole other conversation. She should go see a shrink.

"That's a nice house you have," she murmured to break the spell. Failed. Taking her gaze from him had to be the hardest thing she'd ever done.

"I own a few properties outside of my home in Rome." He extended a long hand toward her and gently folded down the wrinkled corner of her jacket collar. "Anne-Marie."

She could hardly breathe after he said her name. Did she want to

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know what he had to say? Could she deal with what was happening in the darkened interior of a stranger's car? The adrenaline caused by the fear she'd experience still pumped her veins, still sluiced her brain with massive amounts of oxygen and hormones, still allowed her to see and experience things she probably wouldn't have noticed otherwise. Things she wouldn't have acknowledged, either, such as the attraction like a cord looped around both their necks and inexorably pulling them closer. As though time had no import and events no bearing on their lives. Nothing else mattered or even existed outside the damaged and crumpled car. A sliver of peace in a whirlwind, the eye of the storm.

She had saliva only for one word. "Yes?"

Gaius looked ahead at the stately house. Broke the spell. After a few seconds, he retrieved his gun from the foot well and slipped it inside his coat as he opened his door.

He walked around the car to her side with one hand extended to her. "Come."

Anne-Marie nodded. Her voice had failed her. A first, because she usually had something to say on any subject. Even those that didn't concern her. *Especially* those that didn't concern her.

She looked at the proffered hand. Could she? Should she?

"I don't trust you," she blurted. "I don't know you."

He crouched by the foot well, put a long hand on the corner of the wet seat. "Ask me anything. I will answer truthfully."

"And how would I know it's the truth?"

"Trust your instincts."

"I do," she retorted. "Always have."

"And what do they tell you about me?" Eyes the color of green amber never wavered as he stared at her.

"That you're not saying the whole thing, that you're keeping a couple of cards up your sleeves."

He nodded. "I am not, and I do. But nothing I am withholding is meant to hurt you or cause you to be hurt. Do you believe this?"

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She did. “How did you know it would be at the gallery? Why do you want that canopic jar? What’s in it for you?”

“I saw it in the newspaper. I knew it was in Montreal somewhere. Its former proprietor was an old acquaintance. And as for what I want—” He cleared his voice. “It’s a long story. I was once full of wants. I never denied myself anything out of hunger for every kind of pleasures life could give. What I wanted, I took.”

“What happened?”

“They say a man is not punished for his sins, but by them. And so I was.”

“I don’t believe in sins, karma good or bad, or natural justice. I believe in the human being. We’re dealt cards and we choose to play them. Or not. I always play mine.” She shrugged. “Plus, I don’t know much about you, but without your help, I would’ve died tonight. And for now, I guess that’s good enough for me.”

His mouth curved at one corner. “It’s the small victories that win wars.”

“You’ve fought in wars?”

His expressive eyes grew darker. “To my regret, I’ve loved far less than I’ve fought.”

She couldn’t help the mocking grin. “But isn’t that the Italian way? You guys love and fight all the time. Simultaneously.”

For a moment she knew she had reached the core of the man, could see beneath the façade at what moved him. He desperately wanted to say something, she could tell. But he stopped himself. Cleared his throat and looked away. “We Romans brought strife everywhere we went, even in our own beds.”

“Makes life more exciting that way.”

He pressed a long hand to his chest and winced. “You will never know just how much.”

Anne-Marie only realized after a few seconds that he’d referred to himself as a Roman. Did Italians born in Rome still called themselves

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that? She supposed they did. Still, the way he'd said "We Romans" betrayed no love or a sense of ethnocentrism. Clearly, he didn't think being a Roman was all that great.

With the dawn breaking through the clouds, she could see a storm brewed in his eyes. His gaze searched her face as if he were trying to peer into her very soul. He also looked worried and a bit sad, but she suspected this was a normal state for him. Whatever had happened to him, it had left a mark. Had anyone tried to fix it for him? Had he let them? Why would they?

"Do you trust me enough to come inside?" he suddenly asked.

She did. A strange man's house. What was happening to her, for god's sake!

Staying outside in the car or making a run for it didn't appeal to her in the least. Her arm burned like nobody's business. What if that thing caught up to her? She'd escaped it once. Maybe she could again.

Yeah, right.

His eyes never left her face as he waited for her answer. Patience seemed to be the man's strong suit. He wasn't like other people. He didn't look in a hurry for anything and didn't try to push in edgewise what he had to say as soon as she stopped talking. People usually did that, barely waited half a second after someone was done before they cut back in and said their piece. Gaius was different. And still he waited.

Anne-Marie had always believed actions spoke louder than words. She wedged the canopic jar under her arm, climbed out of the car, and was already waiting by the front door set deep in a vine-covered porch by the time he followed her. She noticed his hand shook when he fished a set of keys from the pocket of his coat.

"Do *you* trust me enough to invite me in?" she ventured gently.

He froze with the key inside the lock and the other hand on the ducktail brass handle. "I have never trusted anyone else." He closed his eyes, pushed the door open. "But I trust you."

Anne-Marie patted the bottom of the jar. "Let's deal with my arm and

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my car, and then we'll deal with this. Okay?"

"That would be good." He raised his eyes to the sky. "We have this day to 'deal with this,' as you said. Because by tonight, the curse will return."

A shiver raced up her spine.

He stepped aside to let her pass first. No showy gallantry. Just a man who'd been raised this way. A bit old-fashioned and wholly unexpected from a man who looked able—and willing—to do great violence. But one-hundred-percent sexy in her book. She loved men with layers. And this strange man had many.

Darkness owned the large foyer. Distant light from the street didn't reach inside the house. But the freezing drizzle did. He followed her, closed the door behind them.

Just as when they'd stood in the darkened stairwell, the lack of external stimuli except from him reduced her to a knot of nerve endings. He was all that her senses could hold, all her overactive psyche could process. His warmth, the faint sound of his breathing, his scent—manly, exotic and subtle. Damn, she couldn't see anything. Without her brain's sanction, Anne-Marie reached out to touch him on the arm. Expensive wool, still cold and wet.

"Anne-Marie," he breathed. A challenge. A plea.

"Light?"

A sigh preceded a soft golden light that spilled from a chandelier right above their heads. It was a thing of beauty and looked expensive. She could tell. And the rest of the house wasn't chopped liver either. Pulled right out of a Bombay store. And none of it was fake. Genuine *vieux monde* furniture, Persian rugs, travel memorabilia, decorative pieces. Etruscan, Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, Minoan. A brown dish containing a fistful of coins from all over glistened in the golden light. A thin coat of dust covered everything.

"Whoa."

A shadow of a smile rounded his hollow cheek. For a second, he

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didn't look so dead tired. Even more handsome this way. Especially with the golden light illuminating his gorgeous features and jet black hair closely cropped on his proud brow. He reminded her of a gladiator. Anne-Marie tried not to acknowledge the tension coiling between them. Hard to do when Gaius drew near enough for her to smell his cologne.

“You should take your coat off.”

He pinched the zipper of her jacket and peeled it down to her waist. She could hardly breathe. She held the canopic jar under an arm while he gently pulled her jacket back on one side then switched arms when he took it off altogether. His elbow brushed against her breast in the process. She doubted he noticed. But she did. Liquid heat gathered in her sex. She'd never been this turned-on. And fully clothed, no less!

Jacket draped over his arm, he led her deeper inside his beautiful home to the kitchen, which would've made her mother cry. A slate countertop, just like her mom wanted.

“You have a gorgeous house.”

“Thank you.”

Again, she had the feeling he didn't think his house was all that special. Maybe he'd been born rich. Or had grown blasé. She watched him operate around his kitchen, drape both their coats on the back of stools facing the breakfast counter, carefully move this and that, open and close doors with gentle hands, and she understood. Gaius was probably one of those people who didn't want to jinx their good luck by taking notice of it. So they went through life with low expectations and counted their blessings when something good happened.

He returned to her with the big brother of all first-aid kits. The white metal box contained an array of things she'd never seen before, some of which were pretty old, too.

“What's that for?” She pointed to a pair of what resembled minute tweezers, but in either brass or burnished gold.

“Circa 1700s. One of the very first hemostats. Here, roll up your sleeve.”

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She tried, but the narrow sleeve wouldn't roll up high enough. She'd have to take it off.

"Er."

"I could turn around if you wish."

"Nah, that's all right. I'm wearing another layer, anyway." She tried not to grin like an idiot.

His green gaze stayed on her face the entire time she removed her shirt. Her camisole rode up a bit when she pulled. *Great.*

Gaius pinched the edge of her camisole so she wouldn't pull the whole damn thing right off. Mumbling her thanks, she sat on the chair he pulled out for her and turned to face the doorway as he knelt by her side. The jar sat on the table by her elbow. It was even more breathtaking this way. Except for the jackal-headed stopper. The thing looked rabid with its curled lips and broken ears.

If she had to guess, she would venture Gaius had done this a lot. With precision and skill, he cleaned the ugly cut on her upper arm—it looked like frostbite with a slit down the middle, ugh—and dressed it nice and tight. But by the time he was done, Anne-Marie was in a sweat trying not to react every time his fingers touched her skin. And judging from the sheen of perspiration on his temples, he was having just as hard a time with his own reactions.

His hands shook when he put the stuff back in the box. He slipped the holster off and put it on the counter by his coat.

"Ah," Anne-Marie began. "My car?"

Gaius nodded. "Let me make a call."

"From here, right?"

He turned mocking eyes at her. "Still not trusting me?"

"Not one bit. Well, maybe *one* bit." She patted her arm. "Thanks for that."

Nodding, he picked a phone from a mural clip and dialed a long number. Had to be overseas. Why would he call overseas about her car right here in Montreal? He spoke only a few words. Now this language,

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she recognized even if she didn't speak it. Italian.

Gaius clipped the cordless phone back on its base near the stainless steel fridge. "It has been arranged. My contact will tow your car back here and into the garage."

Anne-Marie narrowed her eyes at him when he crouched by her leg. Her skin tingled even though he didn't touch her. Talk about sexual tension. Like electricity.

"I will not be able to disregard it for long," he murmured.

"That white elephant over in the corner? I know. Me neither."

She didn't meet his gaze when he turned to face her and knelt closer. He put a very hot, very nicely shaped hand on her knee. A working man's hand. "I don't usually react this way."

"Neither do I. I'm usually more, er, prudent."

When he stood again, she noticed the lump in the front of his expensive-looking, faded black jeans. He turned away from her. "Pardon my weakness."

"It's not weak to want something. Or someone."

He turned to face her. This time, his erection was hard to miss. Maybe he'd decided to hell with precautions? Maybe he was making it obvious so she could either take it for the offer it was or leave it and run like hell?

"What do you want, Anne-Marie?"

A hint of feral intensity poked through the tiredness. Oh, this man hadn't always been this way, drawn and looking exhausted by life. He drew near, towered over her. His chest spanned the width of her shoulders and then some. Yet with his height, he would still be considered slim.

"What do you *want*?" he repeated.

She couldn't speak. Only feel. No time to think. Her mind would ruin the moment and sever the fragile thread linking them like spider web in a breeze. Scintillating but so very fragile.

Hurriedly, she jumped to her feet and, with hands numb and cold,

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pawed upward until she reached his face. His eyes flared. The green amber darkened to bronze. Their mouths met in a collision more than a kiss, driven by urgency and relinquishment of control. As her mouth welcomed his, as her tongue and lips dueled with his, inhibitions and self-discipline melted. Evaporated in the burning need this man triggered. She wanted him. In her, moving, taking, and giving. She'd never wanted any other man with the same fire. She was burning. Couldn't think.

Gaius' mouth took hers, a conquest of the flesh, a claim she let him stake. Side to side, his mouth travelled over hers. In turns he nibbled and devoured her lips, tender then demanding. The counter dug into her back when Gaius pushed her against it so he could fill his hands with her hips. His pelvis pressed against hers, keeping her put.

Though he pinned her body with his great weight, her hands didn't remain idle. She raked them over his scalp and wet hair, forehead to nape, knowing he enjoyed it by the way he shivered every time her nails touched the skin on the back of his neck. By two fistfuls, she yanked his white cotton shirt from inside his jeans so she could snake her arms all the way up to those thick shoulders. They'd make the perfect place to anchor her knees.

As though someone had jerked him back, he abandoned her mouth and planted his hands on the counter at either side of her hips. His breath came hard and fast. "You must leave. Now. Leave the damned thing behind. Save yourself."

Didn't he know she'd rather stay? Couldn't he feel how much she wanted this, hungered to share herself with him?

"No. I'm staying." Anne-Marie slipped a hand back into his shirt, this time up the front so she could caress that glorious chest. Just developed enough, just hard enough but not freakishly so.

The move must have triggered something in him because he pushed away from her. "Leave," he snarled. "Don't look back. Run as hard as you can and try to forget."

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He stormed off into the room to her left. She heard the clinks of bottles then the sound of swallowing.

“What the hell are you doing?” She marched into the darkened room, some sort of office or study with a large desk and more books than her neighborhood library. She saw him there in the dark, silhouetted in the window, tilting his head back and emptying a wide tumbler.

He drained his glass and poured another. Quick movements. Desperation. “Trying to find courage in the bottom of a glass.” He had a mirthless laugh. “An old habit. Just *go*.”

When she joined him—to her shock, he recoiled into the very corner of the room with his back against the wall—a faint ribbon of something sweet caressed her nose. Caramel and something smoky.

“What are you doing?”

“I told you.”

“No, not this,” she replied gently, reaching for his glass and taking it. She sipped the last few drops and then put it on the desk behind her. Fire spread in her mouth and heightened her arousal even more. “There, with your back against the wall. What are you *doing*?”

“Do you believe in fortune?” His voice sounded tight, cold.

“No.” She didn’t believe in anything, truth be told. Liquid heat spread down her chest and out of her collar. Whew, what was that stuff?

“Why not?”

“Because I make my own.”

“So you can claim all the fame?” He sounded angry.

“No, so I don’t waste my time blaming other people.”

Another mirthless chuckle preceded Gaius crowding her against the bookshelf. Each shelf dug in her back. “Pragmatic. I achieved such level of pragmatism too late. I had already lost...”

“Lost what?”

“My heart.” His shadow blocked everything else as he leaned into her. “I want you, Anne-Marie. I have not wanted a woman with as much force, with as bright a flame in a very long time. Yet I fear touching you.

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What if I cannot stop? What if I cannot live without you?"

"Gaius—"

He crushed his mouth to hers.

Her breath caught. Her world vacillated. Anne-Marie fisted the lapels of his shirt and hoisted herself to him for a reciprocal kiss into which doubt and hesitation could never sink their claws. She wanted this.

Wanted him. He had to know. She had to show him.

It must have been all the permission he needed. His long hands curved over her shoulders and gripped her, pressed her into him harder and higher, molded her to his form as if he desperately wanted to mesh them both into one person. As if he'd run out of time.

The urgency of his kiss seeped into her as well. There was no time.

"Hurry," she murmured against his mouth. Succulent.

The canopic jar. Damn. She'd left it on the kitchen counter. What if the curse returned?

Anne-Marie consciously pushed the interruption away. If the man was a dream on legs, that curse thing was a nightmare. She wouldn't let anything sour this moment. It was theirs, two strangers seeking temporary shelter from the elements. It didn't matter if she knew nothing about him. She didn't need to.

The stitching on her camisole strap snapped when he hurriedly pulled it down before his hungry mouth. Anne-Marie twisted her neck to make more room, to let him work his magic on her body. God, he was good with his mouth. Her shoulders rolling, she managed to tug her camisole off one side. What were clothes but a barrier?

His shirt followed. For the sheer pleasure of feeling him move, she kept her hands on his shoulders as he worked the garment off. His muscles corded and played under the thin cotton. Skin hot and smooth rewarded her fingertips and made her palms tingle. Anticipation tightened her throat. She couldn't take it anymore and clamped her mouth to his pectoral for kisses and nips. A growl of frustration left her when he forced her chin away with a thumb. But she moaned in delight

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the next second when he dove for her exposed throat. Bit and licked, kissed and sucked.

“Take that off,” he growled against her ear. A brusque tug on her camisole drove his point home.

Anne-Marie raised her arms up high and let him do it. He didn’t seem to need a more inviting gesture and pulled her camisole up over her head. She heard the faint rustle when he tossed it back somewhere behind him.

“Mmm, your skin.” He kissed her shoulder. Bit it. Continually murmured in a language she recognized only after a good while. He’d snarled something in the car in that same language. Who the hell spoke Latin anymore?

He squeezed the closure of her bra. So he was a leftie. Her freed breasts tingled and positively burned when he wrapped his lips around a nipple and sucked with abandon. Anne-Marie arched back, and her nape thudded against the bookshelf. His mouth descended from her breasts to her belly. She felt him kneel. His hands worked the buttons and zipper on her pants, which fell loosely around her ankles. She kicked out of them, boots and all.

There was something poignantly symbolic about frenetic sex up against the wall of a lover’s house instead of in the bedroom. They were not quite *in* with each other yet, but definitely weren’t out, either. Had he ever let anyone inside his inner sanctum? Something she’d often been accused of not allowing.

“Anne-Marie,” he whispered, his fingers slipping inside the elastic waistband on her panties. “You’re perfection in the flesh, beautiful and strong. A man could spend his life looking for such a gem and never find anything but pale comparisons.”

She dug her nails in his scalp. “Shh.”

A yelp escaped her when he sharply tugged her panties down to her knees and then clamped his mouth to her sex. Soon her hips burned from pushing against his face so hard. Using the shelves as support, she

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stepped outward so he'd eat her more thoroughly. Consume her entirely. His mouth at times proprietary, almost dominating, he claimed her sex with his lips and tongue and long, hot fingers. Parting her, he slipped one finger inside while with his tongue he flicked her hard little pearl. She throbbled for him deep in her belly.

When he began to suck harder, she couldn't keep her voice down. *Ah. Ah. Ah.* Neither could he, it would seem, as his deep voice created a vibrato that passed across her tender flesh. Frissons tingled up her spine like spiders on heels. His tongue was like a whip. Anne-Marie closed her eyes. She was close now.

In a kaleidoscope of ambers and reds, of gold and white sparks, she came. For a split second nothing mattered except his tongue and finger on her, in her, the sound of his mouth as he pulled greedily, of his voice like velvet against her skin.

Gaius snapped back to his feet, grabbed her by the thighs and, displaying incredible strength, hoisted her to him. For once, her feet didn't drag to the floor as her lover carried her a few paces in search of a bare wall. He found one and crushed her against it. Air left her lungs in a great humph. The sound of a belt buckle titillated her senses. She would've helped but preferred to hold on to his strong neck instead, to sink her teeth in it, to lick the smooth skin hot enough to set fire to a woman's panties. Smoothly he pressed against her and parted her. Then with a buck, Gaius took her. Hard.

Both gasped when he introduced his searing flesh to hers. He pushed to the end of him and of her. Another thrust. Another shared gasp. Anne-Marie's shoulders knocked back against the wall. She didn't care. With Gaius helping, she crossed her ankles at his lower back and locked her hands at his nape.

She wasn't prepared for the sort of primal abandon with which he claimed her. Their bones knocked against walls and pieces of furniture. She realized they'd stumbled into a doorway, and then thumped and rolled along the wall as their coupling grew more intense. Fired by his

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stamina, she held on as tight as she could. Fire accompanied each of his thrusts. To their right, timid light from the street stabbed into a high-ceilinged living room.

A cool wall against her shoulder blades gave way to a woven rug before an explosive orgasm rocked her. They'd fallen to the floor with Gaius trying as best he could to use his body to deaden the impact. He landed under her, panting, growling as he kept working those potent hips. Anne-Marie rose so she could admire the best lover she'd ever had. A blade of light traversed the room and hit Gaius across the chest. She wanted to touch that skin, lick it. As she bent over, she spotted something.

What was that? Holy mother of god.

A terrible scar zigzagged from his left nipple to his navel. A long, serrated affair that conveyed a great and frenzied violence. What could have left such a ghastly mark yet not kill him? With her eyes closed against the sight of his ruined skin, Anne-Marie rolled her pelvis hard and fast, trying to replace the suffering to which his body had been subjected with her fevered lovemaking.

Gaius growled something. Latin again. Long hands gripped her on the thighs. Still she took him deep. Deeper. On his chest and shoulders, his loose muscles twitched like those of a horse prey to swarms of flies.

"Anne-Marie." He repeated her name over and over.

"Let it go," she whispered. Let the pain go.

On a groan, he overbalanced her, pushed and pulled and twisted until he knelt behind her. If she'd thought she'd tasted the man's limits, she hadn't come even close. His hands like anchors around her waist, Gaius pushed into her, a perfect fit. Made for each other. He retreated and then thrust back. Another wave rose, burning and all-consuming. Temporary blindness, deafness, numb to everything but Gaius. A series of arrhythmic bucks preceded one final penetration. Her voice filled the room as his release filled her womb.

They collapsed onto their sides, still nestled, still joined in their

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temporary solace. Gaius draped an arm over her shoulder and placed a light kiss on her nape. He sighed long and hard.

“You said we’d be safe for the day?”

“We will.”

“Then why the big sigh?”

She felt him shrug.

“Can’t you fight that thing? Make a stand?”

“For every stand I make, someone dies. I could never forgive myself if something happened to you.”

“So it’s just going to win again?”

“Yes.”

“When will it end?” She twisted to look at him. Such sadness filled his expression that it brought her to tears. “Why is it after you, Gaius? Why does it want that jar so badly?”

Pain then regret darkened his gaze. He looked away, at the window facing the street. Naked tree limbs created Chinese shadows beyond the wet panes.

“For control, for revenge, to make sure I suffer for what I’ve done. For a time, I denied even to myself the harm I caused to a woman I was supposed to protect and cherish. I thought that no one deserved such punishment. Feeling sorry for myself helped the pain, but only for a while. But now I realize that I caused the curse as much as she has, that I am responsible for it all. Even for those innocents who tried to help, as you would.”

“I’m no innocent, Gaius.” Anne-Marie tried too late to smooth the edge to her tone. She pressed her hand to his chest. He twitched as though she’d hurt him. “She did that.”

Not a question but an observation.

He knelt, offered her a stunning profile when he looked at the window again. A Roman nose. Definitely.

“When did it happen?” Anne-Marie knelt by his side and cocked her head to catch his gaze. “You don’t owe me anything. You saved me and

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I'm grateful. Very grateful."

A hint of good humor rounded his hollow cheek.

"But you can't go on like this, carrying all that baggage. That thing feeds on it."

"What would you know about curses?" he demanded. "About the depths of hell to which that thing can drag you? No one stabbed you with your own dagger. No one stole your heart and fed you to the abyss. You haven't lived for two—" Gaius abruptly stopped, took a long breath. Shook his head, climbed to his feet. A statue come to life. Lean muscles, sharp angles and pools of shadows. Perfect symmetry. He was so achingly beautiful. A Roman god.

"Forgive me," he murmured, facing away. "I didn't mean to be curt. You have a life, and I intend that you live it. That's why you must leave what you stole. Leave and never look back."

Anne-Marie shook her head as she stood. Where had her orderly life gone? Spot genuine antiquities, acquire them, find a good home, and reap the rewards. Simple and relatively safe.

Then this curse had shown up with a complicated, enigmatic and sexy man on its heels, and everything had exploded. She doubted she could ever go back to her old life. Not without always wondering what happened to her strange savior.

"I can help. You know I can."

Gaius planted his gaze on her, unwavering, unyielding in its intensity. "And that's why you must leave. Because you *could* help, because you're the strongest, smartest and most incisive person I've ever met. Because if something happened to you...."

For no good reason at all, Anne-Marie felt like kicking something. Rage wasn't a sentiment with which she was intimate. She usually went through life with a practical but flexible attitude that allowed her to face challenges head-on yet without taking any serious injury. She'd risen from the slums of Montreal and a too-large family for her Roman Catholic parents' means. She'd carved herself a small but exclusive

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niche in the underworld of art and antiquities black market. She'd succeeded in her studies, owned her own house, and her car—well, that one would have to change.

“You can't protect someone from a distance.” Her fists on her hips, she returned his stare. “Don't they say to keep your friends close and your enemies closer?”

A sad smile stretched his luscious lips. “I can make sure you wouldn't follow. If you force me to, I will.”

“No, you won't.”

From sad, his grin turned feral. “If only I'd met you earlier, Anne-Marie.”

She closed the symbolic and physical distance to encircle him in a tight hug. His cock, slick with both their pleasures, found a warm home between her thighs. She resisted the urge to curl her hips and take him in. Her head on his chest, she held him, grinned when he returned the embrace.

“I'll cherish this moment with you,” he whispered in her ear. Kissed the lobe. “Always.”

A shiver tightened her thighs and belly. The solemn tone startled and concerned her. Why so serious? “Just live in the moment, okay? Don't let anything ruin this.”

“You're right. Here, lie down.” He spread a throw over one of the sofas and let her lay on it before joining her. Spooning? She loved it.

Gaius draped an arm over her hips, hand loosely hanging past her thigh. His breathing slowed and deepened.

He had *not* fallen asleep!

She turned to look back, just a bit, just to be sure. *Well, what do you know?*

Gaius' eyes were closed. He lay on his side, one arm bent under his head while the other rested down her side. A faint curve to his mouth gave him a boyish, rascally look. So different from the dour man she'd met on a downtown Montreal rooftop.

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With any other lover, she would've punched him on the shoulder. How rude to fall asleep this way. But Gaius looked so weary to the bone that Anne-Marie let him sleep. She turned back to face him and yawned. She was tired herself. After a few twitches, she felt sleep claiming her.

What a strange night. Maybe she'd wake and this bizarre encounter would all have been a dream. Her heart squeezed painfully. She didn't want this to be a dream, even if that meant she—they—would have to deal with the thing when it came back. She wanted this to be real. She felt good around this peculiar man. She felt safe.

As she sank deeper into sleep, an odd thought tugged at her consciousness. She had her forehead right against his scarred chest. But as much as she'd been looking for the rhythm to soothe her, she couldn't find it.

Gaius had no heartbeat.

Heartless: Chapter 6

Gaius woke to timid daylight spilling into his living room. Particles danced in serpentine patterns in the pale silver beams. Warmth suffused his body. Beside him on the couch lay Anne-Marie, her face tucked into his shoulder. He'd never woken with a lover nestled against him. In almost two millennia, it had never happened.

What a special woman she'd become to him.

He'd spoken the truth. He would have loved meeting the resilient—*stubborn*—woman before he'd lost his heart. His life would have been different. Gaius Aelius Draco, Rome's favorite praetor, would have become a better man. Even perhaps a good man. A long stretch for one who had lived on strife, women, political intrigues and excesses of every known kind. Yet he believed that Anne-Marie, with her ability to navigate the troubled waters of his temperament with uncanny skill and dynamism, would have made him a decent man.

He would never know. Because as he watched her sleeping by his side, her pointy chin digging in his shoulder, Gaius decided he would steal the canopic jar and run. Leave everything behind. Once again. This time, though, he would do it gladly. Because the alternative could simply not be entertained.

But as he started to roll over and gently pry his leg from between hers, she opened first one bright blue eye then the other. When her eyes focused on him, Anne-Marie beamed.

And that rocked his world.

He would have given anything to be gifted with such a woman's affection. That she would wake and find him there, weary and scarred and none-too-charming, yet smile at him, filled Gaius with gratitude and joy. What life he could have had with her!

She grabbed a cushion from the pile he had made on the floor and

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pressed the corner to shield her mouth. “What time is it?” she mumbled through the fabric.

Gaius checked his watch and winced. Mid-afternoon. They had slept longer than he intended. In fact, he hadn’t slept this soundly, for this long, in a long time. If ever. And woke just in time for—

When music suddenly blared out of speakers hidden throughout the house, Anne-Marie simultaneously yelped and jumped to her knees, cushion brandished. “What the hell is that?” she yelled over AC/DC Brian Johnson’s raw screech that he was *Back in Black*.

“Loud noise, remember?” Gaius smiled at the confusion slowing turning to incredulity and then mirth on Anne-Marie’s face.

“You call that loud?” She waved him away. “You ever heard Rammstein live?”

“I have not had the pleasure.”

She made a “yes-and-no” wave of her hand. “Pleasure? Meh. You mind if I invade your bathroom and have a shower?”

“Not at all. It’s up the stairs, first door to your right. The linen closet is in the bathroom.”

He watched her rise for the sheer pleasure of seeing her naked body slowly coming back to life. Small hairs like golden threads stood at attention all over her thighs. Her nipples puckered.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

She cupped her hand around her ear. “What?”

“Are you cold?”

She grinned sheepishly. “A little.”

“Here.” Gaius reached back over his head and pawed blindly for the throw. He gave it to her.

Her naked feet on the wooden floor made him smile as she backed from the room, the plaid blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She held up one finger and said something he couldn’t hear. Music thumped in his gut.

He lost his budding erection when he saw her go into the kitchen

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instead. He knew what she wanted.

Anne-Marie walked by the doorway shortly after, canopic jar under an arm, threw him a quick wink then rushed for the stairs.

His senses, sharpened by centuries on the hunt, caught something despite the radio blaring rock and roll at eleven on the proverbial ten-scale.

The stench hit first. As it always did. As he had come to expect. He rushed to the radio, tuned the volume down so he could hear. The sound of insects. A constant buzz to accompany the everlasting burn in his chest. As if someone had a hot iron pressed against it. Outside the living room, Anne-Marie froze with her foot on the first step.

“What’s going on?” she whispered.

It was near.

The sun had gone. Drizzle began to hit the glass panes. *Click-click-click*. “It found us. Dress.”

Gaius dialed the volume to maximum.

Cringing against the cacophony, Anne-Marie jogged back inside the room. “I thought you said it couldn’t deal with daylight!”

“It never could!” he yelled back. “I don’t understand the change.” He raked his hair back and rushed around the room for their strewn clothes, some of which he tossed at her.

He would not gamble with her life, even if for the first time in his long, cursed existence, he truly believed this woman might give him the jar. Freely and willingly, thus breaking the curse. He could not bring himself to take the chance. What if panic seized her and she changed her mind? What if the curse used her to get at him? She could see the creature, and that meant things were different now. Everything he knew counted for nothing with Anne-Marie. The curse clearly shared his view, with nefarious results. Moving in daylight? That had never happened before.

“I can’t think!” She looked lost in the middle of the room, fumbling for the right side into her clothes. “*Maudit*. How the hell—”

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“Just dress!” Fear for her drowned the good manners his parents had beaten into him so long ago. What a disappointment he had turned out to be. From favorite praetor to a mere shell of man, snapping at the woman who might save him.

He spoke in short sentences to drown the noise. “I cannot explain how. But it found us. We must move. Quickly.”

He retrieved his coat and gun from the kitchen, yanked it all back on. Hid the scent of her under layers of things that smelled like death and violence. He’d left the car keys in his pocket. If he hurried, he would reach the car first. Then he could drive away with the jar and not look back. She would be safe, if seething, but he would owe her nothing. His contact had probably already hidden her car in the garage.

Gaius followed her into the foyer and retrieved a fistful of bullets from the open box in the secretary desk. With shaking fingers, he loaded his gun and slipped it in the holster.

She watched his every move. Could she see the difference? Could she tell he was preparing for something? He would not hurt her any more than he absolutely had to. But he would do whatever it took to make sure she would not follow. And he would have one chance. The cunning thief would undoubtedly make the unpalatable affair even worse. He’d seen her work. She was fast and strong. But he was stronger. And desperate. Not a good combination.

Anne-Marie tried to put her boots on with only one hand as she clutched the jar under her other arm. Clearly, she wouldn’t let go of it. It broke his—well, it would have broken his heart had he possessed one. When she stumbled, Gaius saw his chance.

Pretending to steady her by the arm, he instead grabbed it and whirled her face-first against the wall. Hard. Not even AC/DC could drown her French swearing. With guilt like a physical thing choking him, Gaius seized the jar from her and then wrenched open the door. He’d already leaped off the porch and skidded around the car when she followed him outside. Gods, but she was just too tough for her own good!

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Do not look at her, do not look at her. He shoved a fist in his coat pocket. If he took the damned jar far and fast, the curse would follow him instead of her. It would mean another round of cruel cat and mouse between the thing and him. But at least Anne-Marie would be safe.

His fingers encountered no key. He checked his jeans pocket. Nothing.

“You think I wouldn’t see this one coming?” Anne-Marie slammed the door shut behind her and bounded down the steps two by two. Her jacket opened to reveal only her bra underneath and barely done-up pants. He would have loved a woman such as her. *Did* love this woman, in fact. She embodied his female ideal—femininity tempered in steely resolve. A lethal cocktail to his self-control. But she had come into his life two thousand years too late.

“Give me the keys!” he demanded, looking around. The curse was near. Music thumped against the windows of his house. Only the bass. *Whoomp-whoomp-whoomp.*

Down the street, a dog barked. Then another, closer. A slap of wind plastered his coat against his legs. He had never felt such rage from the curse. Something was different. It *hated* Anne-Marie. Almost as much as it hated him. Clouds massed to blot out what little daylight managed to poke through. In a matter of seconds, it was as dark as early evening in the dead of winter.

Anne-Marie produced the keys and let them dangle by the carabiner keychain. “Give me the jar then.”

“There is no time for this!”

“You’re thinking of creating a diversion?” she countered. “That’s it, eh? Throw yourself at the lions? *Maudit crisse*, I won’t take this sitting down! You hear me? We’re in this together now. *Ensemble, toi et moi!*”

“No, not you and I! Give me the damn keys and stay away. I will not say it again.” Already the crawling fear had reached his hollow chest and squeezed cold fingers into his soul. The things it would do to her if it caught up to them....

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He took what he hoped was a threatening step. Anne-Marie did not budge. With his keys in her fist, she indicated the gaping hole where the passenger side door should have been. The remote lock beeped when she activated. “Get in.”

“Not with you. It will kill you!”

“And you, too.” She opened the driver side door and sat behind the wheel.

“It cannot kill me because I’m not *alive!*”

His declaration did not seem to have any effect on her as she started the engine. No choice now. He had to follow. He could not lure the curse away on foot. Damn it all to the infernal fires of the underworld.

As Gaius was about to slide into the seat, he heard a sound he had come to associate with pain and horror. And death, usually of someone he had come to care about. He turned slowly because he tried his utmost to deny the sinking feeling invading him.

There, in the middle of the street glistening with freezing drizzle, stood the nightmare that had followed him for two millennia. Its blade-like appendages whipped about in a frenzy. Oh, it was *angry*. Darker than night, more malevolent than the vilest soul, it faced him, its core an abyss into which he had had countless occasions to stare. Slowly, it rolled forward, extinguishing the photosensitive streetlights that had come on with the sudden darkness, leaving only pitch black in its wake. Then faster it churned, its countless limbs propelling the thing forward. Faster still.

The crackling of insect wings modulated into something resembling speech. “*Gaiusss.*” The hiss made his skin crawl.

Gaius closed his eyes briefly. “It’s here,” he whispered. His chest burned, the pain so acute it radiated down even to his legs. “It’s too late.”

To her credit, Anne-Marie did not scream or panic, sob or plead. Most would. Had. No one could be expected to hang on to much decorum when faced with such a vile entity. He had seen weathered warriors

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dissolve in tearful supplications. But not her. She gripped the wheel two-handed with her chin set forward.

“Get in! We’ll lose it on the Mount!”

He sat because his legs would no longer support him. He had failed. Again. Not only had he ruined his one chance to be free—he now knew she would have surrendered the jar freely and broken the curse—but he had let his foolish and selfish needs of the flesh steal what little time they had. Making love to her, as much as it had proven to be the best thing in his long life, had just cost her her own. He did not want her death on his conscience. Such valiant light. *Please, not her.*

Behind them, the abomination hissed again. “*Heartlesssss.*”

“*Bon dieu*, can’t it shut up!” She shook her head as though to clear it. “I can’t think!”

Neither could he. The stench permeated everything. And the horrible “voice.” The stuff of nightmares.

Without a word, she stamped on the accelerator and sent the Mégane into a violent lurch that snapped him back against his seat. The engine roared in protest. While she roughly wrested the gearstick from reverse to first, Gaius twisted to look back, but he couldn’t see the curse. Surely it had followed.

“You man the horn!” She gripped the steering wheel with two hands. The tires spun on the slick pavement, fishtailing and coming *this* close to clipping a lamp post. Forcing the car to aim up the street, Anne-Marie leaned forward and gunned the engine.

While he leaned over to slam his palm on the horn, an idea struck him. Only bright light had ever been able to slow the curse down. Temporarily at least. Even more so than noise. Although here it was, in broad daylight.

There is no other option.

“The cross,” he growled. “The Mount-Royal Cross.”

“What about it?” She took the corner dangerously close to the curb. The car’s rear end slid to the right but she compensated perfectly to

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bring it back straight.

“It cannot approach something so bright. You’ll be safe there.”

“Like we were safe during daylight?”

He only had time to yell a warning.

A large black mass made of hell and hatred suddenly thudded against the ruined hood, rebounded and crashed into the street a couple of meters away. Anne-Marie yelped, a high-pitched keen that drilled right into his brain.

One of its flailing blades lanced back and caught the bumper. Latched on by a single tentacle, the curse managed to slow the car enough to climb on the roof again. The next second, it slashed against the driver side door. A screech of rage left the monster. It cocked a limb back then punched right through the driver side panel. With a diminishing wheeze, the horn died.

Anne-Marie veered sharply to the right, which dislodged the curse from the roof but sent the Renault climbing chaotically onto the sidewalk. All *déjà vu*. His life was one long string of *déjà vu* episodes. And they all ended the same way.

“*Maudit calvaire!*” she yelled, steering the vehicle back onto the road with a violent jerk that made Gaius’ neck crack. Damned crucible, indeed. The Québécois had a way with words.

He barely had time to yank her down by the jacket collar when the thing cocked a blade back and drove it into the cabin, shattering what bits of windshield still clung to the rubber seal. The appendage stabbed into the cabin, searching and slashing.

Gaius relinquished his hold on her to grab the thing by the blade. Gods, unbelievable cold seeped into his soul, so glacial it burned his skin. But it didn’t cut him. On a growl, he managed to kick the curse out of the broken windshield. Wind and sleet hit his face as he wrestled with the thing.

With a violent jolt, Anne-Marie aimed the roaring car off-road, amidst trees that whipped and slashed at the car, upward on a cycling

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path of crushed gravel. With Gaius still fighting off the curse's dangerous serrated limbs—he could hardly feel his arms and legs anymore—she drove right across a brick belvedere overlooking downtown Montreal. Even up here, everything was dark. He'd never seen the curse do this before, had never known it could be so powerful. Flashes of every color dotted the cityscape. Skyscraper windows, ads, streetlights. Nocturnal beauty he had come to abhor because the curse owned the night, and spoiled and desecrated every last sundown.

And now it claimed the day, too.

With English and French curses punctuating her maneuvers, Anne-Marie demolished a boarded-up ice cream cabin and crushed some garbage and recycling bins that resembled giant Lego blocks.

They were near their goal. If they could just reach the cross, they might survive. For now. Dead ahead atop a grassy slope, over forty meters of steel skeleton and fiber optics stabbing heavenward. And light. Glorious white light. The Mount-Royal Cross. Their last chance. Not even half a chance, really. But they had nothing else.

The fiend stopped fighting him and retracted one of its appendages while keeping its core latched on to the hood and front bumper. Gaius cursed. He knew what it intended to do. When the curse had to, it could move *fast*.

He moved faster.

Heartless: Chapter 7

Anne-Marie screamed when the thing cocked an “arm” back and stabbed the long dagger-shaped limb into the car, straight at her. She wouldn’t survive this. At the last possible second, Gaius crushed her against the car door.

As if in slow motion, she watched the blade transpierce him. It literally impaled him against the edge of her seat. After a growl of pain, his head lolled onto his chest.

Horror spread through her. Bile rose, choking her.

She lost control of the car, which hit one of the parking lot concrete posts. Forward momentum was replaced by lateral movement. Sky and earth switched places. With a moan like a wounded beast, the car rolled onto its side. With a last rev, the engine died.

Anne-Marie squealed in fright and pain as Gaius’ weight crushed her under him. Hanging on to the steering wheel, she pulled herself loose, slowly, laboriously. Her body hurt. Her head hurt. The smell of fuel drowned even the curse’s stench. A terrible hiss froze her.

The abomination, trapped underneath the wreckage, slashed and thudded its black members against the metal and underside. But it no longer pierced Gaius’ limp form.

God, he’s dead.

That thing had killed him. Terror mutated into rage. She yelled curses at it, the worst ones she could think of, though they could never be bad enough for what it had done or the gift it had stolen. That thing. That fucking *thing!*

She stretched an arm to her limits, until her muscles burned, and grabbed the canopic jar, which had rolled out of the foot well and become trapped between the seats. She clutched it as she climbed out over the passenger side. She didn’t look back at Gaius. Wanted to with

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every fiber in her body. But he was dead. No one could survive having a javelin stabbed through the chest.

Panting and cursing, Anne-Marie rolled off the car, careful not to come close to the thrashing thing pinned against the pavement.

“*Heartless*,” it hissed. “*Jackal*.”

“You want it?” She slipped the jar under her arm. “You come and get it!”

She charged for the cross.

Behind her, the sound of metal twisting and bending fired her legs even more. She never looked back. Climbed the wrought iron fence encircling the foot of the cross. Bright white light washed the immediate area. Like a halo. Tears welled in her eyes, spilled over. Her pants ripped when she swung a leg over the top.

Putrid like weeks-old summer garbage, the thing’s smell intensified. God, it had worked itself free from underneath the car? Anne-Marie sobbed and raged but still she climbed hand over hand. The jar came close to slipping out of her grasp at least ten times, but with her feet pedaling furiously, she scaled the metal framework with her eyes half closed against the pitiless light of fiber optics around the beams. She could hardly see a thing!

Below her, the hissing swelled to low roars. Something slammed against the base of the cross, the impact reaching her despite the height. It was *pissed*.

“Come and get it!” she yelled, eyes completely closed now. “Come on!”

She hooked an arm around a transversal beam and looked down. Like shredded black mist, the thing had demolished the fence and followed her up the cross. She could tell it was in pain, though, writhing and hissing every time it came near the fiber optics.

“*Heartless*,” it screeched.

“*Quoi?*” she taunted. “What? Can’t come any higher? Huh, you shit!”

“Anne-Marie!”

Heartless

Her heart skipped a beat. At least one.

She couldn't believe the joy his voice produced. Joy and horror. When she looked away from the thing and searched the parking lot, tears from the bright lights and from her broken heart blinding her, she spotted Gaius staggering toward the cross. His coat was gone and he was naked from the waist up except for his holster. No blood on him. Not a drop.

"Give it the jar! It's your only chance now!"

"And then what? It'll kill you!"

"It cannot kill me," he yelled back. "I'm already *dead*."

She refused to believe. Just refused. "No! I can't!"

"*Heartlesssss*," the thing hissed, almost gently. It reached upward, slowly, as though beseeching for her to relinquish the canopic jar. Charming. Cajoling. Everything would be good now. It would be all right. "*Sssafe. Gaiussss sssafe*."

Maybe it would leave him alone if she gave the jar back? She grabbed it by the stopper, one-handed, and brandished it high over her head. It would keep its word, right? It wouldn't hurt Gaius now. Not if she gave the jar away. Maybe....

"If I give it to you," she snarled, looking into the thing's core. It was like staring up into a starless sky. "You leave him alone."

"Give it the jar!" Gaius implored. He reached the ruined fence, grabbed it in his fists, and sank to his knees. He seemed too weak to even pull his gun from his holster. "Save yourself. Please."

The curse froze with its dagger for a hand pointing up, almost right by her boot. The stench was revolting, its dark core even worse. But she forced herself to face it. A split second. A flash. Knowledge imploded in her mind.

Everything. She knew it all.

He really *was* a Roman. From the apogee of the Empire. Almost two thousand years old. She also hadn't dreamed the female aura surrounding the curse. It was female in essence. And it wasn't done with him. Oh, no, not by a long shot. It still wanted him to suffer, to keep going without....

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Then she knew. Gaius' lack of heartbeat. The ghastly scar on his chest. The jar that seemed interwoven with his mood and health.

She also knew what to do and why. Especially why.

"You've hurt him for the last time," she snarled under her breath. "You *bitch*."

Anne-Marie pretended to reach down but instead cocked her arm as far back as she could. She lobbed the canopic jar down at Gaius. And effectively out of the curse's reach. The impromptu projectile arched almost gracefully. And her big brother said she threw like a girl. If only he could see her now.

The curse screeched and flailed upward by her legs. She felt the cold lacerate her calves. Cried out. Gaius had been walking around in this sort of agony for two thousand years? It was a wonder he hadn't gone mad from the pain alone.

Despite the thing clawing all around her like a loose cage of hatred, she spared a glance down at Gaius. He'd caught the jar in both hands, a look of shock and horror on his handsome face. Sleet turned his skin to glistening bronze. He looked up. Their gazes met.

On a loud screech, the thing raised two of its blades and aimed them right at her chest. For a split second, it stood still. Anne-Marie gritted her teeth. She wouldn't suffer long. The two blades plunged simultaneously.

Alexandria, Aegyptus

He woke to scorching, abrasive heat, the kind of heat that cooked one's skin. It was even worse than when he had to wear armor during summer campaigns.

Supine, he curled his fingers into the malleable and hot material on which he lay. Sand. A hot breeze dried the saliva off his lips as soon as he wet them. They tasted of salt and the remnants of a metallic tang he knew well. Blood.

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The last thing he remembered was his wife's fist dripping blood over his gaping chest. The triumph. The madness.

Gaius snapped up on a groan of horror. Around him were only sand and a sun like a gold disc set on lapis lazuli.

"Oh, Gods," he moaned. Instinctively, he ran his hand on his chest. Nothing out of the ordinary. He closed his eyes again as relief washed over him. What sort of nightmare had this been? Would Mehnit do such a horrible thing to him?

When a gust of wind flipped a strand of his hair into his face, Gaius was shocked to find it much, much longer than he had ever let it grow. It reached past his shoulders. His relief gave way to confusion then to dread. His fingernails were very long as well and were caked with rust-colored grime. As he looked down at himself, naked and quite grubby, his breathing accelerated. There on his chest—

A long, old, serrated scar.

"No," he breathed. "No, no, *no*."

Had it been real? Gaius looked around him. The desert stretched in eternal ochre waves. But when he turned to look behind him, he spotted a temple, partly covered in sand except for its carved stone pinnacle and a darkened doorway that would surely provide a cool respite. Gaius recognized the frieze above the entry. He remembered that place. Mehnit's cult. She'd drugged him and tricked him into following her there for what he had thought would be a naughty interlude, but she'd had other plans in mind.

He looked at his dirty fingernails again. How long had it been? The sun beat pitilessly on him. He shivered from the intense heat. That entry appeared so inviting. Perhaps he could find refuge there for a short time while he figured out what to do.

A sudden pang of pain twisted in his gut. He fell to his knees, his hand clutching a chest inexplicably numb. What was happening? Horror flashed through him when his palm encountered no steady rhythm. No heart. Nothing there. Yet how could he be alive? *Was* he alive?

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“Mehnit,” he whispered. “What have you done to me?”

Then a sound like insect wings caught his attention. It rose, modulated, and deepened into a hiss. From within the darkness, a word emerged like a ghost. It froze his blood.

“*Gaiuss.*”

He ran.

Present day Montreal, Canada

As Anne-Marie tossed him the jar, Gaius knew a horror he had not experienced since awakening in the desert and meeting his personal hell for the first time. But abject terror turned to triumph when he caught the expert throw. Both hands shaking, he gripped the canopic jar containing his heart and raised it high like a trophy. He had it! Someone had finally given it to him freely and willingly. The joy, the relief. He was *free*.

No longer would he walk the Earth in search of the damn thing, hunting after the curse, being hunted by it, and causing innocents their lives. No longer did the night hold him captive, the day ephemeral refuge from the relentless madness. No more.

In his chest beat a faint stirring of life.

“I am free,” he whispered, awed.

His selfish elation quickly died when he looked beyond the jackal-headed jar at Anne-Marie, still trapped thirty feet up the steel cross. She had sacrificed herself for him. She was willing to *die* for him. And that was enough to break the curse.

Or it should have been.

Why did the curse not disappear? Why was it still chasing his precious little antiquities thief? He was free. She had given him the damn jar! Had nothing changed?

A heartless jackal.

Mehnit’s parting words to her husband.

Heartless

Not just heartless, but a *jackal*. Someone who never did anything for anyone. A man who had shabbily manipulated a woman he'd vowed to cherish and protect, who had deceived her and lied to her. A man grown bored and resentful, angry and jaded, cynical and unkind. A jackal. He'd always been capable of inspiring love. So why should Anne-Marie's love break the curse? It wasn't enough to *be* loved, after all.

This would stop right here and right now.

Gaius knew what to do. As naturally as drawing breath, he knew what path lay in front of him. He tucked the jar under an arm and scaled the broken-down portion of fence the curse had destroyed on its way to its target. He circled the base of the giant cross, looking for the best holds. The bright white lights pierced his brain and caused his eyes to well. Silently, he climbed. Quick and determined.

No other innocent would pay for his mistakes.

Not Anne-Marie.

"Anne-Marie!" he yelled when he reached her height.

The curse had two of its blades poised, ready to strike. When his voice cleaved the sound of insect wings, both the woman and the curse turned to look at him. One had eyes like pure glaciers, the other without eyes and an abyss for face.

"*Heartlessss*," the thing screeched.

It flipped three serrated limbs up and swung around the cross to intercept him. He was quicker and climbed right into the cross's skeleton structure. With the hand holding the jar in front of him, he had cleared Anne-Marie's side of the crisscrossed beams when he was hit with pain like acid poured on his calf.

"Anne-Marie," he growled, thrusting the jar at her.

She would not take it.

"Take it. Save yourself."

She shook her head. Eyes wide in terror stared right into his soul.

Despite her valiant fight, her fear cut him across the soul. She would have done it. She would have died for him. Of all the sacrifices.... His

Heartless

heart went out to her. Symbolically, figuratively.

Physically.

The curse slashed at his leg. White-hot pain. Scorching heat. Biting cold. He cried out and pressed the jar against her chest. “Life would mean nothing with you gone.”

Anne-Marie pressed her palm against her side of the canopic jar. Each had a hand on it. One man. One woman. The same goal—saving the other. Their eyes met in a slow moment of perfect union. It wasn’t enough to *be* loved. He had to love, too.

The pain in his calf abruptly stopped. The dagger-like limbs whipping around the structure evaporated like black smoke in the wind. Gaius twisted on himself to look at the thing behind him. The curse itself shredded on a long, plaintive note to dissipate into the sleety afternoon. Even the terrible smell lifted, as did the artificial darkness.

The canopic jar which had contained his heart for the past two thousand years crumpled into dust. Both their hands connected in the middle.

Strength seemed to abandon her. She bent over the beam on which she had clung and squeezed her eyes shut. Tremors shook her shoulders.

Working himself free of the metal framework, he climbed just below her so he could grab her wrist, and overbalanced her so she would rest on his shoulder. Whispered sobs made him close his eyes. He had spoken the truth. Life without this woman would mean nothing.

Wind played with the collar of her jacket as he climbed down with her in a sturdy firemen’s carry. Once on the ground, he wrapped his coat around her shoulders before crouching against the broken fence. He made a comforting barrier of his arms. She raised her face to him. Such affection shone in her eyes that Gaius thought his soul would sing right out of him. He had never known such joy. Pure, elemental joy.

He really was free. Love had set him free. Mutual love, freely and willingly given and returned.

“Anne-Marie,” he whispered.

Heartless

He framed her face with his warm hands. She felt so cold, but that was only the residue of shock and battle. She clutched his fingers to keep the contact, keep his warmth. She never wanted to let him go. Could he sense this? Could he see her need?

Tears rimmed his eyes. He covered her face with kisses, her hair and ears. Hugged her fiercely. “You could have died.” He sounded half angry, half relieved. “Gods, you would have *died* to save me.”

Anne-Marie rested her forehead against his chest. The horrible scar glistened like a rained-on earthworm. She pressed her ear to his breast, waiting. Hoping.

And there it was.

His heartbeat.

Tears streamed down her cheeks once more.

She clung to him, lacing her fingers behind his nape so she could crush him to her. For shelter, for the sheer joy of having him be alive and with her. He responded with fiercer kisses. Desperation. Sensory overload. Anne-Marie couldn't let go, and didn't want to. When he rolled on top of her, still covering her face with kisses that created burning contrast to the cold drizzle seeping into her hair and clothes, she hooked her leg around the back of his knee. He had to know that she needed this. To make everything real. To seal the moment in her mind. In her heart.

Fingers fumbling with violent tremors, he snaked a hand between her legs and proceeded to rub through the pants until she thought she was going to melt. She could not talk, only feel. What was the mind but a vestibule to the heart?

She cupped him right through his jeans. He was hard. Primal and immediate. In her oversensitive state, everything became magnified and sharp. Sounds and scents, sensations and tastes. The zipper to his jeans clacked like a tiny machine gun. Anne-Marie squeezed a hand through the snug opening rendered even tighter by his erection pressing hard

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against the unforgiving fabric. Glorious heat. Rain made her palm wet and slick. She fisted him and brought him out.

As if she had breached a dam, Gaius was all over her. His hands, at times demanding, other times poignantly hesitant, made short work of her pants, which he pushed down to her knees. Cold rain made her shiver despite the incredible heat of his body crushed to hers. As if moved by forces beyond his control, he pinned her hips, slipped an arm under her waist, and arced her against him. Anne-Marie shook from anticipation. They needed to seal this. Right here and now. Not celebratory sex but triumphant union. They were together in spite of everything.

She looked up into his eyes. His skin glistened with rain. Jet-black hair plastered his proud brow.

Despite the knot of pants and panties and twisted clothes, the cold fall rain, the rocks digging under their palms and knees, and the two thousand years of horror and anguish, Gaius managed to curl close enough to rub his glans against her sex. Liquid fire rewarded them both. She heard fabric rip. Her panties' waistband, which dug painfully onto the sides of her thighs, gave. He took her.

As soon as his searing flesh made a home in hers, a frisson of orgasm tingled low in her belly. Frantically, she pulled a booted foot out of her pants so she could hook it behind his waist. Rain dripped from the tip of his nose and chin, droplets she licked in feverish passes. Their tongues dueled while he stabbed between her hips, harder and deeper. The length of him rubbed her clitoris. Belly against belly, chest pressed and knees intertwined, Anne-Marie arced with a powerful climax. As if desperation had given way to defiance, Gaius rolled her up over him. She gasped when he snapped her bra open so he could seize her breasts and show her the rhythm he wanted. She took him in potent rolls when he urged her with pitiless thumbs and index fingers tight around her nipples. In slow undulation he cupped her breasts and elevated them like offerings. And then in fierce bucks when he pushed up deep inside her. His cum filled her with liquid heat. She froze to savor the moment. Their union, their

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victory. Above, the glowing cross illuminated the gray afternoon.

Gaius wrapped his arms around her shoulders and forced her down on him. She smiled against his scarred chest. She kissed the ugly mark and looked up into his eyes.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Reality came charging back in.

“What have I done?” she replied in kind. “God, what have I done?”

Between kisses to her face and neck, Gaius said, “You freed me. My dear, dear Anne-Marie, you have freed me.”

She nodded. “*Morte la bête, mort le venin.*”

“Dead is the beast,” Gaius echoed. “Dead is the venom.”

“You speak French?” She took a long, shuddering breath. “There’s so much I don’t know about you.”

“Time is no longer against us. I will answer every question you ask, even those that cast me in an unflattering light. I owe you everything. The truth most of all.”

“But you’re mortal again now. You could die.” She turned to look at the giant cross lit in hundreds of tiny white lights. The thing really was gone. Not a shred remained, not even the awful smell.

“No. Thanks to you, I am alive once more and not an empty shell of man. You have given me life. And perhaps more?”

No need to say it. They both knew what had moved her. Love.

She’d tossed him the jar because she loved him, because she knew that thing couldn’t be trusted and that it wanted Gaius to suffer for all eternity. Well, not if Anne-Marie had her say. So she’d given him the canopic jar, knowing in her logical mind that she’d played her only ace. She’d fully expected the curse to cut her in half. But then he’d given it back to her, even if he could’ve run away and be safe, he’d climbed up the cross and pushed it into her arms.

“Why didn’t you just go?” She shivered, nestled her arms between their bodies. They’d have to move. The rain was just too cold.

“I couldn’t leave you.” He helped her get off him, took his time

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buttoning her jacket up to her neck, and even flicked the collar up so rain wouldn't seep down her nape. He pulled his own coat on. "I could *never* leave you."

"So that's why it just...just evaporated like that? Because you stayed?"

Gaius cupped her chin, raised her face to his so he could kiss her. His lips tasted like heaven. And hope. "You freely and willingly gave me the jar instead of feeding it to the curse as all the others have done. You sacrificed yourself for me. Your courage lit a corner of me I had not known existed. I would have done anything to keep you safe, anything. And it made me realize that I had been the problem all along. I had kept the curse alive all along. Until you came."

"I couldn't stand the pain this thing was causing you." She sighed long and hard. More tears were coming. "I couldn't let it go on. It was just too—ugh."

"Regrets?" Those grave eyes held her in their green amber depths.

"No," she replied with aplomb. "But you know," she went on, trying for lighthearted while she wiped tears with the back of her hand. "Both our cars are totaled. We're gonna need a ride back downtown."

Gaius' wicked mouth stretched over stark white teeth. She'd never seen him smile this way. She realized she'd only glimpsed a fraction of the man so far. He had many more layers hidden under the handsome surface. And she was looking forward to exploring each and every one.

"Do you have your phone on you? I believe I have to call my contact again."

She chuckled as she passed him the smartphone. When his call had been made, he gave her back her phone, keeping his thumb on hers when their hands touched. The affection in his eyes was palpable.

With his long arm around her shoulders, she felt ready to take on the world. So what if she had to walk back down the mountain? Ha.

"I can't believe this is all happening," she murmured, awed. "It's all so much like a dream."

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“Believe it. You did this. You saved me, brought me back, gave me another chance. And I intend to make it count.”

“Do you have plans for today?” she asked, grinning through residual fear and shock. She was so getting a long, hot bath and half a bottle of Absolut vanilla vodka.

“Making love to you in a proper bed, after a proper meal and a long shower.”

“Sounds good.”

“If you wish, you can still claim something in exchange for the item you lost.” She noted the way he gauged her reaction even if he wasn’t looking directly at her.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Anne-Marie took Gaius’ hand in her own and squeezed hard. “Would that be a fair trade?”

“You never asked what was in the canopic jar.” Black hair plastered to his forehead accentuated his Roman features. He could’ve been pulled right out of a history book. Well, kind of *had*, in a sense.

“I know what was in it. That thing showed me.”

“It did *what*?” He froze, eyebrows arched.

“I can’t explain it. But when I looked into it, I knew. I knew you’d broken her heart and she’d taken yours in return.” Anne-Marie kissed his knuckles. “But damn, setting a thing like that on someone is way over the top. I decided you’d suffered enough already.”

Grave eyes stared at her for a long time. “I did hurt her, deeply. I will forever be sorry and ashamed of my actions. I deserved to be punished for that and quite a few other offenses, too.”

Anne-Marie rubbed the last vestiges of tears with the cuff of her jacket. “No one deserves that.” She cocked her head and squinted. “So, just how old are you?”

He didn’t reply as he shoved his hand in his pocket. The melancholy had returned in his expressive gaze. “I am old, Anne-Marie. Much older than you could ever imagine. I doubt you would accept my claim.”

“Judging by the jar and what little I’ve seen of it, I’d say two

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thousand years old, give or take a couple of decades.”

He cringed. “Blunt.”

“You’re Italian. I’m French. It’s going to get *lively* around here.”

They shared a tired grin.

Arm in arm, they began the long walk back to his house. And this time, nothing would come between her, a pair of slices of toast and a hot bath.

And nothing would come between their hearts, either.

About The Author:

After a twelve-year career in the Canadian military (army), where I learned English and the many uses of parachute cord and gun tape, I decided to recycle my skills and become a writer. Of erotic romance. What can I say? I'm a late bloomer. To know more about my books, my real-life adventures or my opinions about nothing important, visit me at www.nathaliegray.com.

Special Bonus Section

Ten Questions with Nathalie Gray

Nathalie's Poutine Recipe

Special Sneak Peek! "The Smiling Assassin"

More Great Stories from Nathalie Gray

Ten Questions With Nathalie Gray

1. So what's with the guns and explosions? What draws you to scifi settings and themes?

Nathalie Gray: Shiny metal. Phallic symbols. Loud BOOMS and the smell of jet fuel. What's not to like?!

No, seriously, I'm drawn to the "what if". My stories almost always start with a What If. Then I sit there and drool for a bit, coming up with characters to inhabit my What If World... Even if I enjoy the space setting, it's always all about the people. Then it's the gear. Ah, got to have cool gear for my characters, you know. And clothes, too. I'm a visual person and when I read, I must be able to picture the settings, the people. I write what I like to read.

2. Your heroes tend to be deeply damaged men who never lose their personal dignity or integrity. Is that a hard balance to achieve?

My heroes?! Deeply damaged?! But! But! I object! Ah, okay, okay, I guess assassins, soldiers-for-hire, tormented bodyguards and deserters can be considered damaged men. Mmm, what does that say about me?!

3. Your heroines are always strong, smart and brave. What draws you to this character type?

Oh boy, my pet peeve. I love me some strong female characters! Because I know a LOT more women like that than those improbably proportioned, creamy-skinned, doe-eyed dolls that populate too many books I've had the misfortune to read. I'd much rather complain that a heroine is too loud and rough than one who's a doormat. The women in

my life were and are feminine, strong, opinionated. They took care of large families when the men went to both World Wars (also Korea, Afghanistan and everything in between), survived recessions and sugar rations, housefuls of hungry teenagers, heartaches and unemployment. So when I read about some bee-stung lipped nymphette whose spine is made of Jell-O, I just can't relate to that. It's not in me.

4. Describe your super-secret plan for intergalactic domination.

Shhhh! *looking both ways and under the desk* It's not ready for full disclosure yet but will involve planetary subjugation in alphabetical order, silver gogo boots, a Scepter of Doooooom and a Throne of Doooooom. And legions of cabana boys.

5. How old were you when you first started writing?

I wish I could say I've always wanted to write, that I had a pen in my chubby three year old self's hand and told stories to regale my teddy bears. But nah, nothing so artistic. I started writing in my late twenties during maternity leave from the army. Before I knew it, I had this monstrous 600-page Thing. I figured, if I push it out the door, surely there's room for another. And another...

6. What do you like to read?

Stories with a lot of action. I get bored easily and have a short attention span, two things that preclude me from going on deep and psychoanalytical journeys transcending the metaphysical... Man, just joking about it bores me. If nothing has happened by page, say, 10, then I close the book and start another.

7. Did you ever think you would be doing what you do?

You mean write stories that include but aren't limited to exploding spaceships and wild monkey sex in zero-g environment? That? Never in a million years. I thought after my military career that I'd become a

translator since I had experience (learned English at 18 from army guys...yes, that's why). How wrong I was!

8. How many times were you rejected before you sold that first manuscript?

Let's put it this way: I have a two-inch binder full of rejection letters that I can organize by publishers, genres and/or years (from 2005 to 2008 and counting). That should give you an idea of the sheer magnitude of my stubbornness. Pitt Bull anyone?

9. What do you like to do when you are relaxing?

I travel. Well, not for relaxation that's for sure but for recharging my batteries. I've visited countries I can't even spell (thank goodness we have the Olympics' parade of flags eh?) all over Europe and North Africa. Next on my list are Asia and South America.

10. Any advice that you think would benefit newbie writers?

Unless the advice comes from the editor who will publish your manuscript, don't take any. Especially not from the likes of me.

Nathalie Gray's Poutine

You thought I was going to give you some fancy-pants French recipe like crème brûlée or something, eh?! Nah, mine starts and ends with fries.

Recipe for Poutine: or, How to Die Young but Happy

Ingredients:

Fries, about a cup (either frozen and cooked or the kind you get from takeout

1/2 cup poutine sauce (they come in cans, but hot chicken gravy is good too)

1/2 cheese curds (preferably gouda, but mozza is good too)

In a bowl, dump half the fries, half the cheese, then the sauce. Repeat until you get a mound. Me, I put mayo on top of that. Yes, sir, yes ma'am!

Special Sneak Peek!

“The Smiling Assassin” by Nathalie Gray

Available now at www.eRedSage.com!

He lived shrouded in the shadows of a world gone mad, a lone hunter, a predator, an assassin with an archangel's name. No hope, no regret.

Until a woman reaches into the darkness and offers him solace and a warm place to be—her heart.

“A fun and fast-paced read!”

~ Mrs. Giggles, www.mrsgiggles.com

“I loved Uriel, who came across as the ultimate dark, dangerously sexy, alpha anti-hero. I would love to get my hands on him and do some very bad things!”

~ T.S. Peters, Just Erotic Romance Reviews

Excerpt:

He wasn't callous enough to kill the man while she still watched. But as soon as the skinny brunette scrambled off the bed to retrieve the rest of her ruined clothes, Uriel fired a single, economical bullet in the would-be rapist's heart. A small target, yes, but he was a good shot. Usually, he pumped another round in his target just for good measure—he was careful if nothing else—but this time, with the woman's gasp of shock and pale face, Uriel just let it be a one-bullet deal. He figured the poor woman had had enough. He wondered who she was, what had brought her up to infamous Foley's apartment. Not pretty enough to be

an escort, she was no prostitute or junkie either, not that it made a stitch of difference. There was something in the way she moved, in the way she yanked her clothes on with her back against the wall and her eyes on him and the dead prick. Nervous, understandably afraid yet alert. Judging from the dark mark over Foley's nose and temple, she'd placed a few good ones too. Good woman.

"Here," he said, ripping the sheet off the bed and proffering it. "Wrap that around you. It'll be windy on the way down." There was blood on one corner.

She took the offering without glancing into his eyes, for which he was glad. He may be an assassin—the best—who'd just caught his latest target but the sight of a woman's pain or fear always tore at his soul. Rage bubbled to the surface. He pushed it down. Nothing came out of anger. Or any other emotion for that matter.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked in a small, tight voice. Her dark eyes looked too big for her narrow face.

He hated the dead prick even more. What kind of voice did she usually have? What change would her ordeal bring? What else on top of her dignity had this scumbag stolen?

Uriel turned his back on her so she could adjust herself in her clothes and drape the sheet around her. "Down below," he replied, surprised his voice came out strangled. What the hell was wrong with him? "You can call station security there." He'd be long gone by the time they'd arrive.

She nodded, held the sheet around her shaking frame while he pushed the remnants of the door aside so she could pass. He always made grand entrances. Either by busting through something or, if the occasion called for it, by showing up like a ghost ship, slowly, silently. Deadly. With his height, either way worked.

For this present contract, he would've chosen the latter method hadn't he heard the woman's calls for help. He could've chosen to wait for a clear shot and usually did. Waiting for that one split second of perfect clarity was what differentiated him from the rest of the wannabes out

there who thought owning a fancy gun and having a good eye entitled them to the title of assassin. But he hadn't waited. Couldn't have waited.

Uriel threw a leg over the matte black air pressure bike's seat, extended a hand to the woman, who took it. It was cold and bony but firm. For a split second, their gazes met. He'd never believed in any sort of link, mojo, karma or fate sort of crap. That stuff was for those who didn't have the guts of asking for what they wanted, or taking it when it was available. But when he looked into those brown eyes, he couldn't deny what he saw. There was something there. Something special. Strength tempered with wisdom. This was a woman who wouldn't bend under the weight of life.

She opened her mouth, looked about to say something. He didn't want to hear it. In case it wasn't what he wanted to hear. In case it was.

More Great Stories from Nathalie Gray!

Available Now at www.eRedSage.com!

“Compromised” by Nathalie Gray

Jojo Da Silva always gets her man.

She’s been an elite extraction team member long enough to know second-guessing can kill you. Get in, secure the target, then get out. Anything in the way is to be shot, blasted or destroyed. Especially those vicious Elfs, Exoskeletal Humanoid Life Forms with a mean streak that seems to grow wider in torture chambers during interrogations. No human has ever survived an Elf interrogation. Never.

Jojo knows this time she has to get her man before the Elfs discover his true identity and interrogate him. He’s been undercover on their trading station, so deep undercover that even she doesn’t know his identity. All she knows is the yellow dot on her wristband monitor that shows his location.

But when her target turns out to be her tough, daring, disappearing ex, a man as handsome as he was shrewd, one gifted with amazingly skilled hands and an even more wicked mouth, Jojo can’t seem to follow orders as usual. Abandon the compromised mission? No way! She has two hours, and Jojo won’t let Mathias die. He disappeared from her life, and she’s missed his loving ever since. She won’t let him slip away again.

Because Jojo always gets her man, and this time, it's personal.

“Unclaimed” by Nathalie Gray

Deep space is no place to spend the holiday season, but freighter captain Maxine Fields has no choice. She has to make a special delivery, the kind that pays as much for her silent discretion as for her on-time delivery record.

So with nobody but the penguins on her favorite flannel pajamas to keep her company, she sets a course, pours a mug of eggnog, and contemplates what’s left of the ragged tinsel tree taped to her console.

If only Santa would leave a little gift under that tree. No, a big gift -- a tall, rugged, ready-for-action gift. One who would heat up the holiday and show her just what kind of stocking stuffer a naughty girl should get.

When Max responds to a distress beacon, she gets her holiday wish, and then some. Edmond Cabanesty might just be at the top of Santa’s naughty list. With growing dread, she reads the crimes etched into the side of his exile pod. Defection. Genocide. Murder.

Oh, Santa, whatever will you deliver next...?

“Agent Provocateur” by Nathalie Gray

He has been trained to infiltrate the enemy and kill it from the inside, a breathing weapon, a super soldier with genetic enhancements that brand him a freak. He doesn’t care. He needs no one. But when he meets another like him, a woman as beautiful as she’s dangerous, a strange thing happens to him—he starts to hope.

Be sure to visit Nathalie's website at www.nathaliegray.com, "Home of Nathalie Gray: Author, Goof, Chocoholic, Future Empress of the Galaxy." In fact, you might want to visit frequently -- it's the best way to keep up with Nathalie's constant torrent of great news!

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