



The Vampire Oracle:

INNOCENCE

By

Lia Morgan

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Dedication

To my husband—the love of my life. We married when we were too young to know better. I have been a lot of things over the years, but I have never been bored. Thanks for the wild ride.

And to the rest of my family—you all have always supported me with anything I have ever wanted to do. This one is for you.

Chapter One

"Well, folks, that's it for another episode of Lansing Love Lines, relationship advice for the twenty-first century," Elizabeth said as she glanced at the paper in front of her. "As required, here is our lovely disclaimer. Advice given in this program is intended for entertainment purposes. Thoughts and opinions expressed are not the views of WKRT. The current time is 12:01 AM. The temperature is a balmy 39 degrees. The forecast for today is a high of 47 and mostly sunny. Well, Chip Logan is on his way in to carry you though to the morning show. Coming up next, the newest release from Coldplay. And remember, if you don't love yourself, you can't truly love anyone else."

Elizabeth stood up and stretched. She waved at Chip in the next broadcast booth then gathered up her papers and coffee cup. She walked out into the bullpen area where she shared a desk with one of the other DJ's. April, her production assistant, stood there waiting for her with a butter-won't-melt-in-my-mouth grin on her face.

"What do you want? Elizabeth asked.

"Nothing. What would make you think I want anything?"

"I don't know. That expression on your face?"

"Actually, I have something for you."

"What is it?" Her eyes narrowed. A surprise from April could be anything from a candy bar to a sex toy."

"You got...*fan mail*," April shouted, dancing around the room, holding a stack of envelopes above her head.

"Give. I am not going to chase you around like I'm four." Elizabeth

balled her hands to keep from reaching up to grab them. "Now, give them to me."

"You take all the fun out of things when you're too grown up to play. You're turning into a very dull person. Okay, fine." April pouted, handing the stack of envelopes to her.

She snatched them from April's hands, clutching them to her chest, then sat down and fanned them out on the desktop. She took one at random and opened it.

"Well," she said, looking up at April, "are you going to help, or are you just going to stand there and watch?"

April sat down at the other side of the desk. They started opening the envelopes and comparing the letters. They both looked up from letters at the same time.

"Are some—"

"Did you—" April stopped to let Elizabeth finish.

"Are some of your letters, like, normal fan letters, and others are bordering on obsessive or a bit delusional?"

"Yeah, Miss Psych Major, but I was going to say *weird*. Except this one. This one is just freaking nasty. He included a picture of himself...naked."

They sorted the letters into two stacks. Genuine fan letters went in one pile. People who would be suspects if anything ever happened to her went in the other.

April opened the last few envelopes while Elizabeth looked for a box for the weird letters. She picked up one of the final envelopes and held it up.

"Is this one for you? It's addressed to Inga Erickson."

Elizabeth covered her face and groaned. She peeked through her fingers. April smiled sweetly. A smile ruined by the mischievous light in her eyes.

"Okay, fine. My mother named me Inga. My great-grandmother was named Inga. It's an Erickson family name. It isn't her fault that now the only women named Inga are flight attendants for Finnish Air or porn stars."

"I can't imagine which one is actually worse, 'Would you like

peanuts or pretzels?' or 'Ohh, baby, that's it, harder, harder.'" April's voice dropped to a breathy moan with the last comment.

"You know..." Elizabeth shook her head and sighed, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling. "...you are *way* too good at that. Makes me wonder how much practice you've had."

"At least I get laid on a regular basis."

"That's because you're easy, sweetie."

Indignation flashed across April's face before she smiled. "I am easy, aren't I, *Inga*?"

Elizabeth choked on her coffee, nearly spewing it across her neatly organized stack of mail.

"Please, in the name of all that is holy, don't call me that. It's hard enough for me to get any respect. If people knew my name was Inga, it would be impossible."

"What's it worth to you?"

"If you do, I'll tell Chip you have the hots for him."

"You wouldn't."

"Oh, wouldn't I? I'll tell him your panties get wet every time he talks to you."

"Who said I was wearing panties?"

"Have you no shame?"

"Nope, not a bit."

"Okay, I won't spill your secret if you won't spill mine."

"Deal." April handed her the letter.

Elizabeth took the envelope. There on the front was her full name. It looked like a wedding invitation, with the thick envelope and the way her name was written on the front. She flipped it over, looking for the return address. There wasn't one. The back was completely blank. Maybe in the rush to get them out they'd forgotten to write the return address on the back.

She slipped a finger under the flap, carefully breaking the seal, then pulled out the contents. It wasn't a wedding invitation. It was a single tarot card. She met April's gaze across the top of the desk.

"Okay, that's weird. Who sent it?"

"There isn't a return address." Elizabeth flipped the envelope over

to the front. "It's post marked El Dorado Springs, Colorado 80025, but I don't know anyone in Colorado."

"Maybe you should put it in that pile," April said, indicating the stack of letters they would send to legal.

"It looks like something my sister would send. She'd put in a note to tell me what it's supposed to mean, usually. She can be pretty scattered sometimes. I'll call her tomorrow and ask her." She tucked the card and envelope in her bag. "I guess I should get home. I have an exam to proctor in the morning."

She stuck her real fan letters in her drawer, putting off answering them until tomorrow. Giving April a small wave, she walked out of the bullpen.

* * * * *

Joss reached out and changed the channel on the radio as Elizabeth signed off for the night. The soothing strains of classical music filled the interior of the car. He scanned the dark parking lot. A few cars sat clustered together under the sparse security lights.

His vantage point changed every night. What had started out as mere curiosity had deepened into an undeniable need. One that left him sitting in a deserted parking lot, waiting for midnight. Midnight, when she said, "Good night," to her listeners. And later, when she walked out into that empty parking lot, sometimes alone, but always in the dark.

It was a lie when he told himself he *wasn't* almost stalking her. The fact remained that he sat in a parked car waiting for her to walk outside. That waiting was the only liberty he allowed himself. He would never follow her. He only waited. When she drove off into the night, he did the same. He held no delusions about her, or him, or them together. *We can never have a relationship. Not even in my mind.*

This nighttime ritual felt as if it had been part of his life forever, but in reality, he had first heard her only a month ago. He had half fallen in love with her voice alone. Her throaty laugh sent shivers of desire down his spine. Heat pooled in his groin when she spoke. After that, he'd settled into a routine. He rose and fed early so he could wait here in an empty

parking lot or a deserted alleyway.

He brushed his hair back out of his eyes. The smell of varnish was strong on his hands, causing him to chuckle in the darkness. He could lay all the blame on varnish. Varnish that dripped off his hands onto the tuning dial of his radio. Varnish that had made it impossible to change the channel on the radio.

No one had ever affected him like this. He had not waited for a mere glimpse of a particular woman since he was an eighteen-year-old home from military school. He knew too well that life, and war in particular, changed a man. No longer was he the boy who had blithely marched off to fight for his country. Nor was he the man who limped home weary and full of grief, only to find more reasons to grieve. He was...something else.

Chapter Two

After waking to a power outage, arriving late to administer the exams, and then getting chewed out by her professor for the way she dressed, Elizabeth's day had turned to crap.

Now, she stood under the hot spray of the shower and let it beat down on her shoulders. She shampooed her hair. The scent of apricots filled the warm, steamy air, relaxing her. But then the hot water changed to cold. She turned the knob and pushed the curtain open to grab a towel.

"Damn it. What else is going to go to shit today?"

She wrapped a towel around herself, shivering in the cold, and pushed a soaking wet lock of hair out of her eyes.

Long before the end of the night, she had her answer to that question. Everything that could go to shit, did. Between technical problems and boring callers, the show was a complete nightmare.

Elizabeth walked out of the broadcast booth and straight to April's ever-present supply of chocolate. She grabbed a piece and ripped open the shiny wrapper.

"I hope I never have another day like today," she said, biting into the creamy confection. She closed her eyes, savoring the taste of the chocolate. She kept her eyes closed, enjoying her God-given right to chocolate, and didn't move until someone touched her on the shoulder.

"Hey, I'm going to leave unless you need something. I have a date tonight," April said, her jacket and purse already hanging from her arm.

"Well, I don't guess I could stop you if I wanted to, could I?"

"If you really need me, I can cancel, but we'll both have to drown

our sorrows with copious amounts of tequila.”

“I had an altogether rotten day,” Elizabeth said, wrinkling her nose and shaking her head. “I just want to go home and go to sleep so this day can be over. You have fun. Get some for me.”

“You can count on that,” April said. “Go home and sleep. Tomorrow is another day to deal with idiot professors and all the rest. See you tomorrow night.” She turned and walked toward the exit, pausing to give a wave that Elizabeth returned.

Elizabeth ate two more of the decadent truffles before she gathered her jacket and purse. The parking lot was deserted at this time of night, as it always was, and she walked toward her car while rummaging in her purse for her car keys. They weren’t in her purse. She reached for the door handle. It was locked. Peering through the glass, she could see her keys sitting on the passenger seat.

“Aw, fuck,” she said, kicking the front tire. “This is great. Just great.”

Chapter Three

Joss couldn't see Elizabeth's car from where he'd parked that night. He got out and silently walked through the dark alley. Just before the parking lot came into sight, a scream sounded in front of him. He broke into a run and jerked to a stop beside Elizabeth's car. She stood over a dirty man writhing on the pavement in front of her. The man rubbed at his eyes and held his groin.

"Are you alright?" Joss asked.

She spun around to face him, holding a can of mace in her outstretched hand. He lifted his hands in the way that universally means *I am unarmed and mean you no harm*.

"Yeah, I'm okay."

The man on the ground took their distraction as an opportunity to pick himself up off the pavement and begin to run away. Joss let him take a few running steps before he followed him. He kept his speed down until they were out of Elizabeth's sight, and then he reached out and grabbed the man by the shirt collar. He lifted him up, the guy's feet rising above the pavement, continuing for a moment to pump through the air as though he were still running. Joss gave him a shake before pushing him up against a brick wall and spun him around so he could look at him.

The man raised his face to look at him. Joss lifted his upper lip to let his fangs flash in the moonlight and shook him. The man's eyes widened until the whites were visible all around the irises. He tightened his grip on the man's shirtfront and leaned in until his mouth was close to the man's ear. He inhaled, the smell of fear thick in his nose.

"Never come this way again. Never bother her or any other woman again. If you do, there is nowhere you can hide from me. I will hunt you down. I will drink the blood warm from your body. And then I will rip your still beating heart from your chest and shove it up your ass. Do you understand?"

Joss waited for the almost imperceptible nod before dropping him to the ground. He walked toward the mouth of the alleyway, paused, then glanced back over his shoulder. "You should run now."

Joss kept his speed to a human level as he jogged back to Elizabeth. She had her back to him as she bent to pick up her purse from the ground, cursing as she gathered items scattered across the pavement. He deliberately made enough noise to get her attention and waited until she looked up before he spoke.

"I'm sorry, but he got away."

"Well, at least you went after him," Elizabeth said with a shrug of her shoulders. "Even that is pretty rare these days."

"Are you sure you aren't hurt?" Joss pushed his hands deep into his pockets to keep from reaching out and touching her.

"I'm fine. Just pissed at myself for locking my keys in the car."

"Oh, that is rotten luck, I guess."

"No, this is the shitty ending of an even shittier day."

"I would offer you a ride home, but I don't think you would take it."

"You're right, I wouldn't take it. But I would appreciate you waiting with me until the locksmith gets here."

"I can do that."

Joss watched as she called the locksmith to pop the lock on her car. The sound of her voice set his heart pounding in his chest. Even something as simple as listening to her recite the address of the radio station and the make and model of her car.

"Oh, I guess we should introduce ourselves. I'm Elizabeth Erickson," she said as she stuck out her hand to shake his.

"Jossiah Bennett, but call me Joss." He did something that he hadn't done in over a hundred years; he told someone his real name. The first touch of her soft skin sent a tingle of electricity through him. The blood

coursing through his body found a target. His groin.

"So, the locksmith said that it wouldn't take long for someone to get over here. Are you sure you don't mind waiting with me?"

Elizabeth looked at him through her bangs. He shifted back and forth from one foot to the other, and pushed his hand back into the front pocket of his jeans, releasing some of the pressure from the denim, and took a step away from her.

"Would you be more comfortable if someone you know came out to wait with you?" He turned to look back at the station.

"The only people left at the station at this time of night are in the middle of their show. I could ask someone to come out, but they would have to put on a recording. The station manager tends to act stupid when we do that. Besides, if you weren't an upstanding guy, you would have just taken over where the other jackass left off."

"I guess that is one way to look at it. Are you sure you aren't hurt?" He turned back toward her and gave her a slow look up and down, searching for hidden injuries.

"I think he got the worst of it, not me. If I would have been wearing my boots, he would still be on the ground holding the family jewels," she said with a little chuckle. "So, not to be nosey or anything, but what are you doing out here at this time of night."

"I usually take a walk around this time."

"You take a walk at 1 a.m."

"I'm a bit of a night owl. Well, a little more than a bit. This is way closer to midday for me than midnight."

"I hope you have a very understanding employer."

"Oh, I do," he said with a nod. "I am a very understanding boss."

"I guess if you set your own hours, you can sleep when ever you want to."

"Yeah, that is just one of the advantages."

"So what do you do that lets you set your own hours?" Elizabeth dropped her purse on the hood of her car and leaned back against the fender.

"I make custom furniture. Mostly tables and sideboards, but I can do other things."

"Well, that's different. Very cool, but different. Honestly, I never thought about anyone still making furniture by hand. I'm totally a product of the digital age. That isn't just a line you'd use to impress a girl. I'm not saying I'm not impressed by the idea because actually I am. I can't make anything other than coffee, and I would really rather have Starbucks than my own."

"Umm, thanks. I think there might have been an actual compliment in there, somewhere." He chuckled. "My father taught me. It is one of the things that did manage to stay with me. He told me to love what I do, and to do what I love. So, were you just leaving work?"

"Yeah, locking my keys in the car and my run-in with that jackass was the culmination of a perfectly rotten day. It's suddenly looking up, however," she said, turning a smile on him.

Joss stared at her. Her eyes sparkled in the dim light. One side of her mouth turned upward just a little more than the other. There was a smudge of dirt on her cheek. He pushed his hands further down into the pockets of his jeans, resisting the impulse to wipe the smudge from her face.

Headlights lit up the parking lot as a truck pulled in. The driver pulled in next to Elizabeth's car, and a man got out and went to work popping the lock on her car. Joss waited until he was finished and she had paid him.

"Well, I guess I should let you get home. It was nice talking to you."

"Thanks for waiting with me. You really helped the time pass quickly. I do appreciate you trying to catch the guy."

"It was the least I could do. Have a good night, Elizabeth. And be careful."

He turned and took a couple of steps from her car. He stopped and turned when he didn't hear her making any effort to start the car.

"Wait, Joss." She took a few running steps toward him. "Would you like to meet me for coffee tomorrow?"

"Umm ..."

"Look, I don't normally do this, but I really would like to get to know you better." She wrote her phone number on the back of a business

card and thrust it toward him. "You can call me if you want to meet me. The radio station line is also on here. So if I'm at the station, just call the request line."

"I..." His fingers brushed over hers as he took the card. Electricity ran up his arm and down his spine as he touched her.

"It's just coffee. Nothing more, nothing less. We can see where we go after a cup of coffee."

"But..."

"I didn't think to ask if you are single. Is that the problem? I'm sorry. I wish there were a flashing neon sign that said *taken*. It's so hard to know anymore. So many couples live together. They don't even have a ring to give you a clue."

"I'm not. Taken, that is."

"So, how about a cup of coffee?"

"You aren't going to let me say no, are you?"

"If you can look at me and honestly tell me that you aren't the least bit interested in me, then I'll back off and accept no as the answer."

Joss stood there and looked at her. She had more life in her than most people had. She had been safe so far. He could control himself. He wasn't newly turned without any self-restraint.

"I'll call you tomorrow evening to arrange a time. Now start your car and go home. And be careful."

"Bye. I look forward to talking to you tomorrow."

Joss watched as she slid into the driver's seat. The engine turned over without incident. She waved at him as she pulled out of the parking lot onto the street, and he waited until she rounded the corner before moving.

Chapter Four

Joss stood in the shadows outside the coffee shop. He'd tried telling himself he was stupid. That she was just another girl. He'd had friendships through the years. When that didn't work, he tried to convince himself to cancel. She was safer if he never crossed her path again. He spent the last four hours trying to reason his way out of this predicament without any success. He could see her sitting there alone, waiting for him.

Closing his eyes, he tried to think. He turned away from the window and took two steps before turning back and walking to the door. His hand tightened on the handle as he drew in a deep, calming breath before opening the door and stepping into the bright interior.

Elizabeth raised her head from studying the menu when the bell over the door jingled. A smile curved her lips as he crossed the black and white tiled floor to the red vinyl booth where she sat. He stopped as he reached her, unsure if he would really be welcomed.

"I'm so glad you made it," she said, her smile reminded him of the sunrise, full of hope and promise of a new beginning.

"Sorry. I know I am late." He slid into the booth opposite her.

"Hey, I'm glad you came. Do you want a cup of coffee?"

"Yeah." Joss raised his hand to grab the waitress' attention.

After the waitress brought him a cup, they sat in silence. Joss didn't want to be the first one to talk.

Everything about Elizabeth screamed at him to run. He'd made a decision about how he would live his life, and he hadn't been tempted to break his own rules for over a hundred years. He'd never been tempted

this much. He should leave. For her safety and his own, he really needed to go.

"Joss." Elizabeth said his name quietly.

He jerked his head up to look at her and met her gaze across the stained white Formica tabletop. Her blue eyes stripped away his insecurities. He wanted to know her. He *needed* to.

"I don't normally let my hormones get the better of me, but I haven't been able to think about anything other than seeing you tonight."

"I really wanted to see you again, too," he admitted.

"Do you want anything other than coffee? I had dinner earlier, but if you want something, it won't bother me if you eat in front of me."

"No, I already had...something." At least his *dinner* tonight wasn't drunk or drugged, just down on his luck. He sent him home with a hundred dollars in his pocket and a renewed sense of purpose. Most people would consider it a fair trade.

"Then drink your coffee and let's go for a walk."

Joss pulled a few bills from his wallet and put them on the table by his full cup before he stood up and turned to Elizabeth, offering her his hand as she stood.

Her soft, warm hand sent a current through him. Her eyes were the color of the sky right as the sun rose. Blonde curls bounced around her shoulders. The ugly tabletop had concealed the tight, well-worn jeans that encased her slim legs. A burgundy V-neck sweater was visible under her leather jacket.

He pulled her hand up and placed it over his forearm, and then he led her out of the coffee shop and into the night air. They walked down the sidewalk arm in arm to the corner where they paused to allow the traffic to pass. She pulled her hand away, smiled, and zipped up her jacket.

"Are you sure you want to take a walk? This isn't exactly perfect weather for it."

"Why, are you cold?" she asked.

"No, are you?"

"Oh, please. I grew up here," she said, turning her sunny smile on him. "Any day that isn't snowing is warm enough for a walk. But your

accent is clearly not local. So, let me know if this is too much for you, and we can go inside and warm you up."

"I can handle it, if you can."

"Don't make a bet you can't keep." She stepped in front of him and turned, walking backward, a challenge in her voice.

"Oh, I can outlast you."

They walked down the street into a small park at the end, skirted the edge of the playground, and walked up the slope of a small footbridge which crossed a manmade pool. At the top, she stopped to look out over the water, resting her hands on the railing.

"I love the water. It is so...soothing," she said, turning to look at him. "Even when the wind is blowing and stirring up the surface. It's a constant. Do you know what I mean?"

He looked out over the water before turning toward her. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, sliding his hand over hers on the guard rail. "I know exactly what you mean. I grew up near the water. Sometimes it can be as smooth like glass, and other times the wind stirs it up so much, and there's so much chop and froth, it doesn't seem like it could ever be still. I still love to watch the tides come in. The water at night is so alive. Even when you think there isn't much light, the water reflects so many different colors."

Chapter Five

Elizabeth pulled her hair away from her face, clipped the blonde locks up, and smoothed her hands down over her wrap blouse, straightening the bow at her waist. Frowning at her reflection in the mirror, she pulled a few strands of hair loose over her forehead.

She walked out of the bathroom, slid her feet into her black boots, and tugged the zippers up. The heels added almost four inches to her five-foot-one inch frame. Now, at least, she would be taller than Joss' chin.

Tonight she was going to seduce him if she had to. Two weeks worth of dates. Two weeks worth of chaste kisses at the door. Two weeks worth of frustration. She grabbed her leather coat from the hall closet and pulled the door to her apartment closed behind her.

Standing in front of the movie theater, she glanced at her watch. The movie was scheduled to start in ten minutes. She looked up at the marquee to see when the next showing was when a pair of strong arms slid around her.

"If that isn't you, Joss, you should be prepared to kiss your nuts goodbye."

"It's me," Joss said as he chuckled in her ear.

She tipped her head back for a kiss and slid her hand between them, cupping him through his jeans, giving him a gentle squeeze. It was her turn to chuckle when his laugh turned to a groan. "Good. I'm glad you identified yourself. I would hate for anything to happen to these."

She leaned back into him, and he crossed his arms over her stomach, tightening his embrace. He buried his nose into her hair,

exhaling, his warm breath ruffling the hair.

"Come on," she said, pulling away from him. "We're going to miss the movie." She grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the ticket window.

"Are you sure you want to go to a movie?"

"No," she said, looking at him over her shoulder. "I would rather go back to your place and have my way with you."

His posture stiffened at her suggestion. She smiled, shook her head, and turned back to the ticket window.

"See, now isn't the movie a better idea as far as you're concerned? Come on. I hate to miss the trailers."

Joss bought their tickets. Elizabeth led him to the last row of seats in the theater. They settled into their seats as the lights dimmed and the previews began.

When the movie started, Joss watched the screen. His gaze never wavered. Elizabeth peeked over at him as the tension built on the screen. She reached for his hand, deciding it was time to build a little tension off screen as well.

After holding his hand resting on the armrest for a while, she eased her hand down onto his leg and slowly brushed her thumb along the seam on the inside of his thigh.

Halfway through the movie, she lifted the padded arm rest, moved closer to him, and turned her back toward him. He put his arms around her and pulled her closer. She leaned back against his chest and cuddled into his side. She loved the feel of his arms around her. The rest of the world seemed a little bit further away when she was tucked in the secure embrace of his arms. Tipping her head back, she rubbed her face along his neck then reached up to place tiny kisses along his jaw line.

He shifted his weight in the seat next to her, lifting his hand to brush the hair back behind her ear, then leaned down to whisper in her ear. "You aren't paying any attention to the movie."

"I'm paying attention to something much more important."

"But we paid good money to see this movie."

"I just wanted to get you all to myself in a dark room."

"There are almost two hundred people in here."

"They might as well be a million miles away when I am with you."

"Do you want to leave?" he asked, his voice sending a shiver down her spine.

"Yes, I want to go somewhere and talk."

"Okay."

Elizabeth folded her coat over her arms before following him out of the theater into the lobby.

He turned to look at her. "What's going on? Are you okay?"

"Joss, what I am is frustrated. I like you. I thought that you liked me. I'm just not used to a relationship going this way. I want to sit down and talk to you. Maybe if I understood why you're moving so slow, then I'll be able to deal with it better."

"Okay. We can go somewhere and talk. Where do you want to go? The coffee shop?"

"No. I would really rather there not be a bunch of people around while we talk."

"Ten people in the coffee shop is too much when there were two hundred in the theater?"

"That's different," she said, her face getting warm as she ducked her head.

"Why is it different?"

"Because it is."

"Why? Because the lights were out?"

"Now you're being mean on purpose."

"Come on. I guess now is as good a time as any to take you to my house."

Joss took her hand and led her out of the theater. They waited for traffic to clear before running across the street to the parking lot.

Joss stopped at Elizabeth's car. "Do you want to follow me over? Or we can come back and get my car later."

"Ride with me," Elizabeth said.

Joss gave directions in typical male fashion, directing her to park on the street in front of a red brick house with white and green trim. When she got out, he came around the car and took her hand, and they walked up the sidewalk. His pace got slower as they approached the house.

Elizabeth stopped and turned toward him, gathering both of his hands in hers. "What's wrong?"

"I've never brought anyone here before."

"You've never had anyone over?"

"No. I don't socialize that much."

"Or at all," she said with a small laugh. "Okay. One step at a time. You can hardly become a social butterfly overnight."

"I'm just... I like to keep my private life private."

"You have to share your life with someone. I'm glad to be the one you want to share it with. So, open the door and let's go inside."

Joss unlocked the door and pushed it open. She walked into the entryway and stopped to run her hands over the intricately carved moldings. She turned toward him, her eyes wide with wonder. He watched her looking at his work, and pride rose in his chest. He had worked so hard on the smallest details, never thinking about anyone else caring about his craftsmanship. It felt good to know she could appreciate the work he'd put into his home.

"Did you do all this yourself?"

He nodded. His heart hammered in his chest. It was so loud he was afraid she could hear it from where she stood. Bringing her into his home was a bigger step than she realized. This house wasn't just his home. It was where he worked. It was where he rested each day, safe from the world.

He had allowed people into his life before, with disastrous results. She had never lived with the kind of fear he did. She had never experienced being hated for what she was. She had never had anyone wish her dead simply because she was alive.

He knew he could trust her with parts of his life. He just wasn't sure how much of himself he could give her and still be safe. How much he could share and still keep her safe.

"This is incredible. I can't believe you did this all by yourself. How did you ever find time to do anything else?"

"I don't go out much."

"Yeah," Elizabeth said with stifled snort. "I just can't imagine that."

"Do you want to see my house or poke fun at me?" Joss smiled

before grabbing her hand and tugging her back toward the door.

"No, please, I want to see the house," Elizabeth pleaded, pulling her hand free of his grasp. "I can always tease you later," she said with a grin.

Joss led her in to the living room. Built-in bookshelves flanked a large fireplace, and Elizabeth released his hand to cross to it. She ran her fingers lightly over the intricate mantel. Below, a carved panel depicted a stag on a hillside, his antlers raised to the sky.

She knelt to get a better look, then turned back to look at him with unshed tears making her eyes sparkle. "Did you carve that?"

"It was one of the first things I did when I bought this house."

"Joss, this is one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen."

"Thank you."

"It is really remarkable."

"I used to hunt with my father. I remember one morning the sun coming up over a hill. There was just a hint of frost on the ground. The air held that crisp bite of fall. I looked up, and there was a buck standing there. He lifted his head just as the sun rose behind him. He stood there framed in the morning light. Then the wind changed, he caught our scent, and bolted away into the woods."

"Wow. You talk like it was just yesterday."

Joss pulled in a deep breath. If she only knew just how long ago it was. He shook his head and looked away from her.

"It was the last time we went hunting together. I left home not long after that. My father died before we had another chance to hunt together."

Elizabeth stood up, reached out for his hand, pulled him to her, and hugged him, laying her head against his shoulder.

"If I said that I understood how you felt, that would be a lie. Actually, I would be perfectly happy to never understand that. But if you ever want to talk about your family, I will be happy to listen."

He wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her off the floor as he hugged her. He turned in a circle before placing a kiss on the tip of her nose and letting her slide down his body until her feet reached the floor.

"See, that is just part of what I like about you," he said. "You're the

most open and understanding woman I think I have ever met.”

Elizabeth slid one of her hands up his chest and cupped his jaw before threading her fingers through his hair. She leaned away to look him in the eyes. “What else do you like about me?”

Her blue eyes were full of mischief as she looked up at him. Her position pushed her breasts against him, and she took a deep breath, lifting them even higher.

Joss sighed in surrender. He didn’t have the strength to resist her any longer. His efforts had been futile since the first moment he saw her standing over the body of her attacker with a can of mace in her hands, prepared to take him on as well.

He tightened his arms around her again, pulling her against him, then lowered his lips to hers, placing little kisses at each of the corners and center of her bottom lip. He nipped lightly at her plump lip before soothing it with his tongue. Then he slanted his mouth over hers, and his tongue breached her lips to twine itself around hers.

He slid one hand down to her butt, splaying his fingers over the round globe of her bottom before dropping lower to slid one arm down to lift her completely off the ground.

She parted her legs, and he lifted her higher. Feeling her warmth through the fabric of his jeans, he lifted one knee to rub against her with his denim-clad thigh. She wiggled in his arms, her mouth never leaving his, and lifted her legs and wrapped them around his waist.

She dragged her lips away from his to kiss along his jaw, her breath hot against his neck. He groaned as she caught his earlobe between her teeth.

He lifted her even higher and paused for a moment, his lips covering the steady pulse at her neck. Her intoxicating scent coupled with her hammering pulse beneath his lips was almost more than he could bear. His incisors lengthened against her skin, and he jerked his mouth away from her. Instead of biting her, he buried his face against her chest.

Pushing the neckline of her blouse to one side, he buried his face between her breasts, pressing his lips to the delicate curve. His tongue slid across her soft skin.

“Put me down. I’m too heavy to hold like this,” she said, pushing

away from his shoulders.

"I could hold you like this all night long, but if you want me to put you down, I will."

He loosened his grip on her, and she slid down the front of his body inch by heart stopping inch. His hands slid to her waist as her feet came to rest on the floor once more.

He lowered his head to kiss her again, slanting his mouth over hers. Pouring all the hunger he had into his kiss, he held her to him. Her hands slid back up to his shoulders then around his neck as she arched into him, molding her curves against him.

"I want you," she said when their lips broke apart for a breath of air. "You couldn't have missed that." She pressed against him, the warm softness of her stomach against his erection.

He nodded and searched her face for some sign that this was a mistake. He didn't find it. All he found was her waiting, anticipation alight in her eyes. He eased away from her until they were separated. Only by a hairsbreadth, but still not touching.

"And if I wanted to wait?"

"It wouldn't change how I feel, and I would be here when you were ready."

"You know, somehow, I knew you'd say that."

"I guess that means we're pretty compatible," she said, her gaze never leaving his.

He raised his hand to her face, brushing a loose tendril of hair away from her eyes. His thumb slid over her smooth jaw line before tracing her full bottom lip.

"Maybe...we are compatible in other ways."

She laughed. It was a tinkling sound that sent a hot dart of desire through him. He wanted her in his life. He wanted her love and laughter, her passion and excitement. He wanted her.

"Oh, what the hell," he muttered before covering her mouth with his again. Her lips parted under his onslaught, and he skimmed his hands over her body to her hips and pulled her against him, swallowing her moan as his erection pressed firmly into the softness of her stomach.

His arms slid around her, and he lifted her, cradling her against his

chest. She held on to his shoulders, and their lips remained sealed together as he made his way through the house to stairs. He paused with one foot on the bottom tread and pulled away from the kiss. Sucking a deep breath into his lungs, he took a moment to steady himself.

“I’m taking you upstairs to my bed. If you don’t want that, say something now.”

Chapter Six

Elizabeth buried her face against his neck and groaned. The way he acted, she would swear he was a virgin. Get real. A twenty-seven-year-old virgin, in this day and age? Certainly not one that looked like he did. She pulled her head back until she could look him in the eyes and got lost in the green depths for a moment. He shifted, breaking her from her reverie.

“If you don’t take me upstairs to your bed, I swear, I’ll fuck you right here on the stairs.”

His chest rumbled underneath her hands as he laughed. She loved that she could rattle his control, that her arms and her lips could loosen his grip on himself. She was jostled in his arms as he took the stairs two at a time. He never paused as he topped the stairs, continued down the hall with her in his arms, and pushed his bedroom door open with his foot.

He took three steps across the floor and stopped beside the large, four-poster bed in the middle of the room. Shifting her in his arms until he could free one arm, he pulled back the blankets. The sheets shone in the pale moonlight coming through the windows. He pushed the pillows away and laid her gently on the soft mattress, following her down. She adored the feel of his body against hers, his weight pressing her into the soft mattress.

He swept one hand down her side, stopping at her waist. His lips caressed her jaw, placing a small kiss right below her ear before moving away.

Lifting her hands, she threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled his head toward hers. Their lips met, tentative at first, then with

more passion. She pulled her mouth away from his to press her lips to his chin then rubbed her face along the line of his jaw, the slight stubble giving his face a rough texture. His chin was perfect, in her opinion, even when it was set with a stubborn expression. She lowered her head until she could press her mouth to the small patch of skin framed in the unbuttoned collar of his shirt.

Releasing his head, she slid her hands between them to the front of his shirt. She fumbled with the small button before unfastening the first, giving her access to another precious couple of inches of his chest. Soft hair tickled her fingertips. She ran her nails through the dark tuft before attacking the next button.

Joss braced his weight on his hands, slid his knee between hers, nudging her legs apart. Her skirt rode up higher on her thighs, and he lifted his knee as she slid further down in the bed against him. She worried the next button and clamped her thighs around his leg, trapping him in the fabric of her skirt. Lifting her hips, she arched up against him.

His breath was hot and moist on her neck, his lips caressing the tendon that ran up her neck. She shivered as his teeth grazed the spot his lips had touched.

"Wait..." he said.

Elizabeth groaned and pushed against his chest.

"No, I want to see you in the light."

She stopped moving beneath him and waited while he reached for the lamp on the nightstand. Soft light filled the room, and he shifted back over her, holding his weight up with one hand. The other slipped up to trace the collar of her shirt before slipping into the valley between her breasts.

"So beautiful," he whispered.

He cupped one of her breasts, molding his hand to her shape. Her nipple hardened, the lace of her bra rubbing against the sensitive peak. She moaned as anticipation rose, her stomach clenching with desire as she arched her back, pressing her breast firmly into his hand. He lifted himself away from her and pulled one end of the bow tied at her waist. The edges of her blouse parted, and he pushed aside the cloth.

Air rushed in to cool her heated skin. He lifted his hand to cover

her breast, his fingertips deftly seeking and finding her nipple through the lace. Heat raced through her, building in her pebbled nipples and shooting to her groin. She arched her back, a moan rising in her throat.

Joss lowered himself down, supporting himself with his elbows, and covered her breasts, cupped the firm mounds, lifting them up. Grazing the scalloped edge of her bra with his lips, he rolled her nipples between his fingers. The fabric of her bra was an almost unbearable addition to the work-roughened tips of his fingers.

She ran her hands down his arms to her breasts and pressed his hands with hers, increasing the pressure he used. She guided him to the clasp at the front of her bra, which came free under his nimble fingers, baring her to his gaze. He drew the aching tip into his mouth, laved her nipple with his tongue. With every flick, the flames of passion licked at her.

Pulling him closer to her, lifting one foot to hook around his thigh, she pressed her hips against him, needing to feel him against her. Then she slid her hands down his back, grabbing the hem of his shirt to pull it free of his jeans, reveling at the feel of his skin under her hands. She teased the bare skin she found above his waistband with her fingertips, and he groaned as she shoved her hand under his belt, down the back of his jeans, to cup his ass.

Unable to stand anymore, she nudged his shoulders, pushing his face away from her overly sensitive breasts. He looked up at her, his brow wrinkled. When he started to lower his mouth to hers, she pushed at his shoulders again.

“Roll over, I want to touch you,” she said.

He rolled over, taking her with him, so she sat astride his hips. Then she attacked his remaining buttons, making a triumphant sound in the back of her throat as she pushed his shirt aside. She traced the dark line of hair that divided his abdomen into two halves, swirling her fingers through the short curls.

Needing to feel his skin against hers, she tugged at her sleeves and slid her shirt free with her bra tangled in the fabric. She tossed the cloth across the room then lowered herself over him, stopping as her nipples grazed his chest hair, and placed a gentle kiss on his lips before sliding her

mouth across his angular jaw. She nipped the skin at the base of his neck and was rewarded with a groan. Moving lower, she closed her mouth over his flat nipple, her teeth raking across the tiny piece of flesh.

He slid his hands over her shoulders and tangled them tightly in her hair, fumbling with the clip that held back her curls until he pulled it free. It hit the floor with a quiet thud. Then he threaded his fingers through her hair, and she closed her eyes, reveling in the slight tug that sent tingling heat down her body to her core.

Sliding further down his legs, she reached the buckle of his belt, and sat back on her heels. "Oh, God," he said, almost choking on the words as she opened his belt, unbuttoned the pants, and slid down the zipper. She pulled at the front of his jeans and slid her hand down the front of them, cupping his length in her palm.

"That could have been very dangerous," she said, shaking her head at him. "You should never go commando with zip up jeans. Button fly is a much...safer option."

"I'm not sure the buttons would be strong enough around you. Hell, I'm surprised the zipper held."

Elizabeth's low, throaty laugh filled the room, and she shivered with the thought of giving him a zipper-straining erection. She pushed his jeans down until he was no longer in harm's way of the zipper's teeth then wrapped her fingers around the length of his cock, below the head. She slid further down his legs, her skirt riding higher with every movement, until her feet reached the end of the bed.

She lowered her head to taste him, and his musky scent filled her nose. Swirling her tongue around the head of his cock, she dipped into the slit at the end. He tasted like power and desire. She ran her tongue around the sensitive ring of flesh below the head then lowered her mouth over his silken flesh, sliding down until her lips met her fingers.

Joss tangled his hands in her hair. The motion that started to pull her away stopped and pushed her back down, while his hips arched off the bed. His groan sounded strangled, as if he'd forgotten in that moment how to breathe. Her mouth dipped down over him again as her hand slipped up his thigh to cup his balls.

As his cock grew even harder, his hands left her hair to pull at her

shoulders. She slid up his body, her breasts rubbing against his chest, the crisp hair teasing her nipples. When she reached his lips, he pulled her head down and slipped his tongue into her mouth.

"You," he said as he broke their kiss, his breathing coming in short bursts, "are still wearing too much clothing."

Sliding his hands down her back, he traced the line of her spine to the waistband of her skirt. He eased the zipper down and slid the fabric past her hips, over her ass, and down her legs. It flew across the room to land with the rest of their clothes. He gave her a quick kiss before he rolled her over off him onto the mattress.

Joss kicked off his shoes then stood and shoved his jeans down, kicking them away before he turned back to Elizabeth.

She had rolled toward him and lay on her side with her legs crossed at the ankles, wearing only a scrap of lace and her boots. For the longest moment he could only stare, etching every detail of her gorgeous body onto his mind, into his soul.

She shifted under his gaze and reached down to unzip her boots, but he stopped her. "I'm tempted to leave them."

"Well, that certainly says something about you," she said with a laugh.

"But I don't think that will be very comfortable."

He slid the zipper down and eased the boot off her foot. Then the other. He glided his hands up her shins, grazing her skin, slipping up and over her knees to her soft, supple thighs. He kneaded the flesh then pushed them apart with his elbows. She moaned and lifted her knees, planting her feet flat on the bed, giving him access to place a soft kiss on the inside of her knee.

He kissed a path to the top of her thigh and skimmed across the lace to kiss the other, slowly breathing in the spicy scent that was unique to her. Sliding his hand up, he hooked his thumbs under the elastic band of her panties. She lifted herself up from the bed so he could pull them down and off.

He nudged her legs further apart and settled himself between them, placing a kiss on the spot where her pelvic bone jutted out. Sliding his fingers through the dark blonde curls at the apex of her thighs, he

parted her labia and brushed the pad of his thumb over her clit. Her hips rocked against his hands as he circled that sensitive bit of flesh. Then he leaned closer and placed a light kiss above her clit, replacing his thumb with his tongue.

While tenderly exploring her with his fingers, he slid his tongue down and then back up. As he eased one fingertip into the moist heat of her vagina, she arched off the bed. A moan wrenched from her. Her hips lifted to meet the rhythm of his hand as a second finger joined the first inside her slick heat.

She gripped his shoulders, twined her fingers in his hair, held him to her as her hips rocketed off the bed. The waves of pleasure crested higher and higher until she cried out in release, and the walls of her vagina contracted around his fingers. He continued their wicked onslaught as she rocked against him until she tugged on his hair to get his attention.

He rose over her, his knees keeping her thighs splayed apart, and lowered his body over her while bracing his weight on his hands. She grabbed his ass, curved her hands around him, and urged him forward.

His tongue surged inside to meet hers, their tongues dancing together in a frenzy, mimicking the act they both desired more. She clenched her hands against his ass again, pulling him forward.

He jerked his mouth from hers and slid his lips along her jaw. "Is there something else you want?"

"You. I just want you," she said, lifting her hips against him.

He tipped his hips forward until he rested at the opening of her vagina. He stopped, wringing a moan from her throat, and rocked his hips forward a fraction of an inch. She groaned deep in her throat, the low, needy sound rumbling through her chest.

"Is this what you want?"

Her response became a litany of *yes, yes, yes* as he pushed forward. The pitch of her voice rose as he sank into her. He paused to catch his breath when he was completely enveloped in the wet heat of her cunt. Her hands moved in restless circles against his ass. He might have stayed right there, afraid that even that would break the perfection of the moment, but her hips lifted to push against him.

She met him thrust for thrust. Each of them retreating only to move forward again.

Elizabeth's cunt squeezed his cock as her orgasm began. Her head tipped back, and her back arched, baring her neck to him. He kissed her neck, her pulse pounding under his lips. His hips rocked forward as his fang extended against her silken skin. His teeth pierced her flesh. The first sip of her blood crossed his tongue, leaving a trail of fire as it slid down his throat. His throat bobbed as he swallowed. He dove forward once more and stiffened in her embrace as his orgasm rocketed through him.

His body dropped down, and he covered her with his full weight. His throat moved in reflex as he swallowed her sweet blood. He shuddered against her. Her hand glided up from his ass to his shoulder to pull him closer.

"Oh, my God."

Her breathless voice shattered his reverie, and he stiffened in her arms, pulling his mouth away from her neck. Two tiny beads of ruby red blood welled from the two perfect pinpricks on the side of her neck.

He scrambled off the bed and was halfway across the room before she had time to move. Snatching his jeans off the floor, he held them in front of him like a shield as he staggered backward to the door.

"What's wrong," Elizabeth asked as she sat up, pulling the sheet up over her bare breasts.

"You need to leave." He opened the door and stepped into the hallway.

"What?" Elizabeth shook her head. Some guys didn't like to cuddle in post coital bliss, but this was insane. "Why?"

"I have to go. You need to leave." His voice shook as he struggled to pull his jeans up.

"What's wrong with you?" She pulled at the sheet, trying to separate it from the blanket.

"Just leave, Elizabeth" Joss' voice rose as he continued to back away from her. "I'm leaving, and I don't want you here when I get back." He turned and fled down the hallway.

* * * * *

Joss waited in the shadows as she drove away from his home. This was a mistake. *She* was a mistake that he couldn't afford to make again. Her life was too precious to waste on a...*creature* like him.

His stomach churned with regret. He had made so many mistakes, all because he was scared. He'd been too scared to die when he should have. It wasn't wrong to give your life in defense of another. But it was wrong to cling to life by stealing it from others. He could've died with dignity, but he hadn't. He'd clung to life like a coward.

Chapter Seven

Elizabeth pushed the blankets off. The sheets were twisted around her, just one more piece of proof of her sleepless night. She yanked at the sheet where it had tangled around her legs and sat up on the edge of the bed. Her neck stung when she stretched it to the side.

Fantastic, I get a hickey and dumped all in the same night. Jeez, there were guys who never called back after sleeping with you, but practically getting thrown out of his house was a new one on me.

She stood up and trudged into the bathroom, giving her reflection a baleful glare in the mirror. She turned on the taps as she grabbed her toothbrush, then brushed with more force than normal, turning her head to look at her hickey after she spit the toothpaste. She stopped with the brush halfway back to her mouth.

What the hell? That is one hell of a hickey. She turned her head to get a closer look at the bruising on her neck. It bloomed outward from two small puncture marks. Easing back from the mirror, she stared at her reflection.

Irrational panic rose for an instant before she tamped it down. *There is no such thing.* She focused on a much more plausible and safer idea. *Doesn't he know how many bacteria lived in the human mouth? People bites are way worse than dog bites. Unbelievable that an animal that can lick his own dick has a cleaner mouth than your average man.*

She rinsed her mouth and spit out the rest of the toothpaste residue. Opening the medicine cabinet, she grabbed a bottle of alcohol and a couple of cotton balls. She soaked one and held it to her neck. Hissing

from the sting, she pressed the cotton ball harder and rubbed at the mark. Damned if she was going to have to go to the doctor to get antibiotics because of him.

She pushed back the shower curtain and turned on the water, cranking it up as hot as she could stand, before stepping under the spray. The water pounded down on her, easing the tension in her shoulders. She rolled her head from one side to the other, wetting her hair as she squeezed shampoo into her hand. *What was that old song? I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair.* She scrubbed harder at her scalp.

She rinsed her hair and put the conditioner on then picked up the soap and washcloth. The nubby texture of the soapy cloth caused her nipples to harden, and she closed her eyes against the sensation. She moved it to the ache between her legs. It had been a while since she'd been with anyone, and the flesh there was still tender.

Her mind conjured a picture of Joss' hands on her body, snapping her eyes open. She stopped that train of thought before it went any further. Dropping the washcloth in a sodden pile on the edge of the tub, she ducked her head under the water and got out of the shower as fast as she could.

Elizabeth selected a turtleneck sweater to cover the mark on her neck. *The last thing in the world I need today is my boss speculating about my sex life.*

* * * * *

She made it through her day at school by rote. Habits built in the previous two years of grad school. Dr. Curin's attention was directed to his favorite teaching assistant, and he ignored Elizabeth's presence. On any other day, it would have annoyed her, but today it was fine with her.

Sneaking into the radio station, she sat at her desk, pretending to do paperwork. After sorting through another small stack of fan mail, she then took her laptop out of her backpack and tried to compose individual responses to the genuine fan letters.

"Hey, girl, how was the big date?" April asked as she stopped by Elizabeth's desk.

"It was fine," she said, but heat climbed up her neck and into her face.

"You got some last night, didn't you?"

"Yes...no...yes, but..." she stammered.

"Okay, either you had sex or you didn't."

"We did." She met April's gaze for an instant before looking away.

"Then it must have been awful. Was he a lousy lay?" April leaned back against the desktop, eager to hear all the juicy details.

"No, he was good." She closed her eyes. "I mean he *was good*."

"Were you awful?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Elizabeth lowered her head to her desktop, resting her forehead on her arm.

"Well, umm, did he..." April let her voice trail off.

"Uh, yeah," she muttered.

"Are you sure? Some guys can actually fake it."

She lifted her head and looked April in the eyes. "There is one thing you can't fake. Believe me, that was not the problem."

"Well, what *was* the problem?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "He practically threw me out."

"Some guys don't like overnights this early in the relationship." April laid a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"I know all about the commitment and space issues, but you usually get to catch your breath before they toss you out, though. I hadn't even moved when he jumps off the bed and runs out the door."

"He ran away?" April shook her head. "What kinda idiot is he?"

"Yeah, he ran away, but not before telling me to get out."

"Okay, so what did he have to say about it today?"

"I don't know."

Elizabeth looked down at the top of her desk as she answered. Her cheeks burned as a flush crept up them. She flipped through a stack of paperwork, wishing April would just go away.

"What do you mean, you don't know? Is he too much of a baby to take your phone calls?"

"I don't know. I haven't tried to call him."

"What? You haven't called and demanded an explanation."

"I thought I should give him some time. He was so upset last night. He needs time to understand his feelings and..."

"Elizabeth." April rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and blew her bangs up out of her face. "I know you believe all the psychobabble you spout off, but men don't always work that way. Honey, you've never dated a man that wasn't easy. I've watched you go through a couple of relationships. You always pick someone completely compatible with you. When it comes time for one of you to move on, you do it with no animosity. Have you *ever* broken up with someone and not been friends later?"

Elizabeth shook her head. She opened her mouth to say something, but April continued without giving her a chance to speak.

"I didn't think so. You want to know what I think? Well, I'm going to tell you even if you don't want to hear it. I think that this man is someone you have almost nothing in common with and you're still drawn to him. He doesn't fit into the safe little world that you built for yourself. Now you have to make your own decision. Is he worth fighting for or will he always be the one that might have been? Don't say anything. Just think about it."

April walked away, leaving her alone. She stared at the letters from people thanking her for her advice. She closed the lid of the laptop.

I am such a fraud, she thought. Me, giving other people advice, when I have never fought for anyone. When I have never loved anyone enough to bother to fight for them?

* * * * *

Elizabeth tugged at her jacket as she stood on the sidewalk in front of Joss' house. She took a few steps toward the house before she stopped and turned back toward the street. She closed her eyes. An image of Joss was there, behind her eyelids, smiling at her. She turned and walked up sidewalk, rang the bell, and waited. She rang it again and waited and waited. Stepping back, she looked at the windows. It didn't look like any lights were on.

She reached into her purse and pulled out a small notepad. There

was no way to relay the way she felt on that small sheet of paper.

Joss, I don't know what is wrong, but I love you. Please call me, Elizabeth.

She folded the sheet and tucked in between the weather stripping and the heavy oak of his front door. She kissed her palm and laid it over the paper then turned and walked back to her car.

* * * * *

"I was just going to leave this for you." Joss put an envelope and a small box in front of Elizabeth on the hood of her car. He backed away from her, stopping only when she spoke.

"You're just going to leave?"

"I'm sorry, but I didn't think you would be here. You were on the radio a few minutes ago."

"I recorded the program."

"I thought you couldn't do that."

"Well, this isn't exactly a something I do often. Nothing about the last few days has been normal for me."

"I'm sorry. I was just going to leave this for you."

"That's it? A note and a gift and goodbye?" She folded her arms across her chest and leaned back to look up at him.

"I think it would be best if I leave."

"Don't give me that bullshit. Best for whom? For you or for me?"

He opened his mouth to speak but closed it and took a step back.

Elizabeth took another step toward him and poked a finger against his chest. "Don't you dare to presume to think you know what's best for me. Now, you better start being honest with me. What is going on with you?"

He held up his hands in a motion of surrender and took another step back. "Elizabeth, I'm sorry. I never meant for it to go this far. It was a mistake. It was all my fault."

"Getting involved with me was a mistake?" She took a step toward him, her hands balled into fists.

"I am...not free to be in a relationship with you."

"What is that supposed to mean? Are you married, engaged, gay,

what?"

"No. It's not... No."

"Are you a felon? Do you beat puppies? Hate kids? Are you a serial killer?"

Joss looked down at the ground. He started to inch his way sideways past her.

She poked his chest again. "I guess you think that's funny? Making up some outrageous lie is not going to make me suddenly glad you're leaving."

"Who says I am lying?"

"Yeah, right. You're an evil, soulless killer. Just tell me the truth. Was I lousy in bed? You think because I slept with you that now I'm not good enough for you? You have commitment issues? What is it?"

"Truth. You want the truth? The truth is that you aren't safe around me. Maybe it's that I am not safe around you. Either way, I have to leave here."

"That is the most ridiculous copout I've ever heard. Just be a man and tell me the *truth*."

"Well, that is the crux of the matter, isn't it?" Joss said with a brittle laugh. "You want me to be something that I can't be."

"What are you talking about?"

"Me. I am talking about me. I am not a man. I am a vampire."

"That's ridiculous," Elizabeth said as her hand crept to her neck. She took a step back and shook her head.

"Is it?" he asked. "Is it really?"

He took a step toward her. She backed away from him.

"Have you ever seen me eat...anything? Have you every seen me before the sun went down?"

"But that isn't possible, is it?"

"Believe me, there are more things possible than you ever want to dream of."

"Okay, let's just say that I believe you. What does this all mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything at all to you. You walk out of here and go on about your life, and you pretend that none of this ever happened. You can vilify me to your friends. Make me out to be the worst thing

since...I don't know...the plague. Tell them I had commitment issues. Tell them that I was gay, that you were a last shot before I embraced the lifestyle completely. You can tell them anything you want."

"Anything but the truth."

"You can't tell them the truth. Normal people will think that you're a crackpot. The people that might believe you are dangerous to me...and to you."

"Do you honestly expect me to believe all of this?"

"That is entirely up to you." He turned away from her and took a step toward his car.

"Stop. Just wait a minute." She raked her hand through her hair then walked to him and placed a hand on his arm. He turned around, and she pulled back.

"I just need to think. Give me a few minutes to try to get a handle on this." She paced back and forth across an empty parking space between their cars. One hand poised to rake through her hair again, she stopped and stared at him for a moment.

"I don't know which is more insane, the fact that you believe *this* or the fact that I am starting to believe *you*."

"Your belief is irrelevant. I only came to say goodbye. I've done that." He paused with his hand on the handle of his car door but turned back to look at her. "I hope life turns out the way you want it to. You are a wonderful woman, and you deserve it."

"This is ridiculous. Why won't you just talk to me?"

"What do you want me to say? You needed to know the truth. You need to understand that there is more to this world than you think. It isn't safe out there. You need to be careful."

"Does vampirism cause paranoia? I'm not going to change the way I live my life for you or anyone else."

"Elizabeth, please just be careful at night. I'll be leaving in a couple of days, and I won't be able to watch out for you anymore."

"I don't want you to go. Just wait a few more days before you leave. Just give me a chance to understand. Meet me tomorrow night at my place."

She walked to him and placed a kiss on his lips.

“Please meet me tomorrow night. I don’t have to work, but I do have some things to take care of. I will be home by eleven.”

She recited her street address and pressed her fingers over his mouth to stop him from protesting. With one last look into his beautiful eyes, she turned and walked back to her car, picked up the box and envelope, and slid into her open car door. Watching him in the rearview mirror, she drove away.

* * * * *

The library doors closed behind Elizabeth as she walked out into the night air. The breeze held the hint of spring in the smell of wet earth and green shoots of new grass.

The sidewalk was deserted as she walked toward her apartment. She stepped over a patch of cracked, uneven pavement, her sneakers silent on the concrete. She glanced around, hoping to see anyone else out on the street with her. The moon played hide and seek with the clouds.

She stifled a yelp as the street light above her went dark with a sharp pop. She wished she’d driven to the library, but parking there was a nightmare and most of the time it took her longer to find some place to park than it did to just walk over. She glanced around one more time and walked faster, keeping her head up and watching for anyone approaching.

The toe of her shoe caught a piece of pavement, and she stumbled, going down to her knees. She threw out her hands to keep from falling forward on her face, which caused the concrete to tear the skin of her palms. She cursed at the pain and struggled to her feet, the weight of her backpack unbalancing her. She brushed at her hands, dislodging the bits of gravel and twigs, then pulled at the straps of her backpack and settled it back into place. With a quick glance around, she resumed her pace.

Left at the next corner and another block and she would be home. She dodged a fallen trashcan.

Muscled arms grabbed her from behind and lifted her off her feet. A hand clamped over her mouth, cutting off her scream. She kicked backward, her heel connecting with his shin. Jerking her head to one side,

she tried to get her mouth free to scream, but the man pushed her against the side of the building, pinning her with his weight, the side of her face and breasts pressed into the unyielding brick. She went still when the flash of a knife blade flickered in her peripheral vision.

The weight of her backpack fell away as he cut the straps, and it made a hollow thump against a metal garbage bin. He pressed her into the cold, hard bricks, ran his hand down her side to her waist, then pulled her against him. She could feel the hard press of his erection in her back.

"You and me is gonna have a good time, ain't we?" he slurred in her ear, the smell of alcohol on his breath.

He pulled her toward the back of the alley. Elizabeth twisted in his arms. The only piece of self defense advice that she could bring to mind was *never let them take you to a secondary scene*.

She bit down on his fingers, slammed her heel back into his shin again, and threw her head back and hit him in the face. She drove her elbow into his stomach. He pulled his hand away from her mouth, his arms loosened around her, and her feet landed back on the ground. She sucked in a big breath and screamed.

His weight slammed her back into the pavement. A sharp pain in her side was forgotten as the breath was knocked out of her. She twisted, getting her knees back under her, and wiggled out from under him. He grabbed her ankle and pulled her backward. She kicked out her free foot and connected with his face with a crunch.

She scrambled to her feet and ran to the opening of the alleyway, turning toward home. She lengthened her stride, cursing her short legs. She turned left at the corner. The pain in her side made it hard to breathe, but she kept going.

She burst through the entryway of her apartment building and stopped. Her keys were in her backpack. She leaned against the doorjamb and tried to breathe. Stumbling, she turned down the hall toward her apartment. She looked up and saw Joss leaning against her door. The next instant he was at her side, swinging her up into his arms.

He lifted and carried her to the door, which he busted open with a kick from his booted foot. He carried her through the apartment, straight to her bedroom, and eased her down on the bed.

"Elizabeth, what happened?"

"Man. Alley." She shook her head and clutched at his shoulders. "Sit up. Can't breath." He slid his arm behind her and helped her into a sitting position. She inhaled a shallow breath and coughed. Blood sprayed across her legs and the blankets on her bed. She lifted her eyes to his.

Joss pulled his arm from behind her. His hand was covered with blood. Her blood.

She put her own hand on her side. It came away sticky with blood.

"Joss?"

"Shh," he whispered. "It is going to be all right. Just let me get the phone. I'll call 911. They can take you to the hospital and get you fixed up."

He started to ease her down to the bed, but she clutched at his shoulders, shook her head, coughing. More blood sprayed across the bed.

"Let me go so I can call for someone to help you."

"No. Don't leave me."

"Elizabeth, I have to call for help. You have to let me get you some help."

"Phone was in...my backpack."

Joss cursed and glanced around her room. "Don't you have a landline?"

She shook her head.

He put his fingers against the pulse in her neck. "I have to go get you some help."

"You...help me."

"No. You don't know what you are asking for."

"I don't want to die."

"You aren't going to die. Just let me go so I can get you some help."

"Joss, I'm going to die."

The certainty in her voice was one Joss had heard before. Men on the battlefield knew. They could feel Death coming for them. He had felt it, too, one night when it was his life's blood running out.

He pressed his fingers back to her neck. Her pulse was slower, weaker than it was just a few moments before.

"Please."

He gathered her in his arms and scooted up in the bed until he could cradle her in his lap. Pressing his lips to hers, he stole the plea from her. She slid her hands up to caress his face, grazed his stubbled jaw line then threaded her fingers through the hair at the back of his head, holding him to her with what little strength she still possessed.

He broke their kiss and drew back to look her in the eyes. His unspoken question hung in the air between them, and she nodded once before dropping her head to the side to give him access to her neck.

He kissed her jaw, sliding along her silken skin until her pulse beat beneath his lips. Acutely aware of how precious little time she had left, he released the tight rein of control he'd held since she opened the door and he scented her blood in the air. His fangs extended in a blinding rush, their sharp points grazing her skin.

He dove forward, piercing her skin, swallowing that first drink of her blood, his lips moving against her neck. Instinct carried him as he drank deeply, taking more than he ever had before. Her pulse stuttered under his lips. Her skin lost its golden pink glow and took on an ashen tone. Her eyelids drifted close.

He withdrew his fangs from her tender skin and tore into his own wrist with his fangs. He held his bleeding wrist to her mouth, his blood trickling into her mouth. He waited for her to swallow, his murmurs of encouragement the only sounds in the room. Her throat bobbed once under his hand, and his shoulders sagged in relief.

Elizabeth swallowed down the mouthful of his blood. She swallowed again. Her hands slid up to his arm to hold him to her, and she drew his blood into herself. He let her drink until his own strength began to flag.

She made a wordless sound of protest when he pulled his wrist away from her. Brushing the hair back out of her eyes, he whispered assurances in her ear. She cuddled closer to him, and he held her in his arms for a few minutes. Satisfied that her heart rate and breathing were better, he sat her up straighter and pulled off her jacket. He lifted her sweater to see that the wound in her side no longer dripped blood.

He eased out from behind her and pulled a clean blanket from the foot of the bed to cover her. Then he bent and pressed his lips to her

forehead.

Joss cleaned up all traces of blood in the living room, then moved his car closer to the door of the apartment building. When he got back inside, Elizabeth was curled up on her side. Tucking the blanket around her, he gathered her up in his arms and moved her to the couch. He went back into the bedroom and striped her bed.

Once the cleanup was done, Joss picked Elizabeth up in his arms, cradled her against his chest, and slipped out the open door of her apartment. He tucked her into the backseat of his car and drove her to his house. Then he carried Elizabeth upstairs to bed. *To his bed.*

After closing the drapes and kissing her on the forehead, he moved toward the door. Leaning his head against the doorjamb, he shut his eyes and prayed. He prayed harder than he had ever done before in his life or death. If there was a God that would listen to a creature like him, then his sincerity and desire for her wellbeing would let Him save her. *Please, God, don't let her hate me or herself when she wakes up.*

* * * * *

Joss walked into the house a few hours later, his stomach full to the point of being uncomfortable. But Elizabeth would awaken hungry, and he had a responsibility to her. The smell of her blood hit him as he opened the bedroom door. The blankets that had been tucked around her were twisted and tangled. One foot still encased in a running shoe dangled off the side of the bed. She had a fistful of blanket clutched to her chest.

He tugged the cloth out of her hand to find her sweater and jeans stiff with her dried blood. Wrinkling his nose, he dropped the stained blanket on the floor. He turned on the water in the shower, then scooped her up and carried her into the bathroom.

Joss sat her on the counter and stripped off the ruined sweater. An angry red mark marred the skin on her side, but even that would soon fade away.

Elizabeth batted at his hands when he reached for the snap of her jeans. "Let me sleep," she murmured.

"Let's get you cleaned up, and then you can sleep all you want,

okay?"

"Mmhmm," she mumbled. She slipped her arms around his neck and slid off the counter to stand up.

Joss pushed her jeans down her legs help her walk to the shower. Her eyes snapped open as the hot water hit her back. She put her hand on her side and looked up at him.

"I'm still alive," she said, staring at him, her eyes wide with wonder."

Joss couldn't meet her eyes and backed away from her.

"Joss, I'm not dead," she almost shouted. "I'm still alive."

"After a fashion," he said, taking another step back.

She took a deep breath, lifted her hand, and placed it over her heart. The reassuring thump made her smile. She laughed and twirled around under the stream of hot water.

"Elizabeth, I made you a vampire." Joss' voice cut through her excitement like a blast of cold water.

"I wanted you to. You saved my life."

"Do you understand? I turned you into a vampire."

"You. Saved. My. Life. I'm not dead because of you. What else is there for me to understand?" She put her hands on her hips and stared at him.

"I made you a vampire like me." He raked his hand through his hair.

"And your point is what?"

"You have to drink blood. Sunlight can kill you." He shook his head, staring at her, his disbelief written on his face.

"Life is about compromise. And taking the hand you've been dealt and making the best of it. When life..."

Joss reached out and grabbed her shoulders, giving her a shake. He put his hands on either side of her face. His fingers lifted her lips away from her new fangs.

"If you say 'you make lemonade,' I... I... Elizabeth, these are fangs," he said pushing the pads of his thumbs against the sharp points. "You are going to use them to drink other people's blood."

"I don't have to kill them, do I?"

"No, but..."

"There are no buts to it. I'm alive. I'm happy that I'm alive. Aren't you happy that I am alive?"

He nodded and raked his hand over his face and stepped away from her again.

She waited until he looked back at her before she said, "I am going to finish taking a shower, and then you and I are going to have a long talk. An honest one this time. And don't you dare chicken out on me."

Not waiting for his answer, she pulled the shower curtain closed and ducked her head under the water. She reached for his soap and washed all the dried blood off.

Wrapped in a towel, she walked out of the bathroom. Joss stood beside the freshly made bed.

Joss handed her a sweatshirt then turned his back to her. "I'm sorry. I forgot to get you any clothes."

She slipped the sweatshirt over her head and let the towel drop to the floor. She crossed to the bed and sat down, tucking her bare feet under her. "Joss, it's time for you to talk to me."

"What do you want me to say?" he asked as he turned to look at her.

"Let's try the beginning, and you can fast-forward if we need to."

"I was born in 1842. I fought in the Civil War. I came home from the war and found my family dead and my fiancée married. I left and took a job on a ship. I haven't been back to Savannah since."

"Tell me how you feel about that."

With a shrug, he sat down on the edge of the bed. He stared down at his feet for a few minutes then looked up at her and shook his head. "How is anyone supposed to feel about something like that? My whole family was gone, and I was off fighting for a cause I didn't believe in anymore. The woman I thought loved me, didn't. She didn't even wait for it to be over. I had been fighting for my life for four years. The only thing that kept me going was knowing that my family and Carolina were waiting for me."

"Okay, what happened after? How did you become a vampire?" She leaned toward him, reaching out her hand to cover his."

"We were in Canada. We had just unloaded a shipment. I was walking down the docks when I heard a woman scream." He scooted farther onto the bed. "I saw a man on top of a woman in an alleyway. I pulled him off of her and punched him. He went down, but he came up with a knife. I just remember lying there looking at the handle of his knife sticking out of my stomach. I could smell my blood, the tang of the ocean, and rotting garbage. I remember thinking that I didn't want to die. After all that had happened, I didn't want to die. A man came out of the shadows. He said that he could help me, but that my life would never be the same."

He raked a hand through his hair and closed his eyes, leaned back against one of the heavy corner posts of the bed. She gave his hand a squeeze, and he opened his eyes. She nodded at him to continue.

He took a deep breath. "I didn't believe it at first when I woke up. I didn't think it was possible, but I was young. I learned to deal with things."

"What happened? Something changed you. You aren't the man you're describing." She reached out to place her other hand over his. "I need to know now more than I ever did...before, I..."

"You can say it. Before I made you a vampire. I'll tell you because I don't want you to make my mistakes. I met a young widow. We loved one another. I nearly killed her one night, almost drained her dry while making love to her. I couldn't change her. She had children. I couldn't take their mother away from them. She recovered and sent a lynch mob after me. Except, instead of lynching me, they were going to stake me and set me on fire. They killed her just to be on the safe side. They didn't want her to rise from her grave and drink the blood of their children."

An icy finger of fear slithered down her spine. She closed her eyes and fought against the wave of panic. People were still judgmental bigots, and bigots often worked in groups.

"If I'd had the courage to accept death, then everything would have been different. My father died protecting my sister and mother from Yankee soldiers. He met his death bravely. Life given in the defense of another is never lost. A brave man accepts his fate. He doesn't seek to escape death."

Elizabeth pulled her hands away from him and balled them up on her thighs. Her nails dug into her palms. "I am alive today, because of you. If you hadn't made the choices that you had, I would be dead right now. I think that it takes more courage to live, to fight for what you believe in. The real courageous part is in the struggle. The will to get up each day and do more than simply wait for the day to be over, just to do it all over again.

"So if you think that I am a coward, so be it. If you think I should have just laid down and died, then tell me what I need to know about being a vampire or point me in the direction of someone who can." She slid off the bed and walked to the door, but turned back to look at him. "But let me just tell you one thing. For a man that thinks he should have died, you sure have lived a long time. I think that death would have found you a long time ago if you'd really wanted it to."

She tugged the sweatshirt down to her thighs as she stomped down the stairs. *Damn it, I can't go out half naked and without shoes.* She wandered around downstairs, going from room to room, then stopped with her hand on the door to the refrigerator, cursing under her breath.

"What's wrong?"

She turned to see Joss standing in the doorway. His forehead wrinkled with concern as he waited for her response. She shrugged her shoulders and tried to brush past him, but he grabbed her shoulders and turned her back to face him.

"Elizabeth, you were right. I have always blamed myself for Abigail's death. There is no way that I can change what happened, but I can learn from past mistakes. I have felt guilty about getting the chance to see another day when so many people I have cared about didn't get to avoid death even temporarily."

"Okay."

"Look, I'm not saying that I can change every backward way of thinking that I have, but I want try. And I want you to be there while I do."

Elizabeth pushed away from him and paced back and forth, up and down the hallway.

He reached out and stopped her pacing. "Are you going to say

something or are you going to wear a hole in the floor?"

"I'm glad you've realized that there are some things worth living for. The true victory goes to those who survive." She placed a hand over his heart. "They are always here with you, but there's room in there for other people, too."

Elizabeth felt his heart thump under her hand. She ducked her head and clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle the strange sensation. She turned away from him only to find herself spun right back around.

"What's wrong? What is it?"

She dropped her hand and opened it to reveal the long, pointy incisors. Joss started to laugh.

She narrowed her. "It's not funny." Her voice was different as she tried to talk around the fangs."

"Yes, it is."

"No, it isn't," she lisped.

"You'll learn how to control them."

She closed her eyes and concentrated on her teeth. Instead, she heard Joss' heart beating and his blood moving through his veins. Her eyes popped open.

"What?"

"Apparently, I am hungry."

Joss pulled her into his arms and kissed her. His warm hands moved over her back, pulling her closer to him. She rose up on her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck and tried to slide her tongue along his lips, only to find her new teeth in the way.

He slid his hands over her back to her ass then lifted her against him. She wrapped her legs around his waist, her head swimming with all the newfound sensations. Everything was different. She could hear the traffic outside on the street and see at a distance she never could before. Lowering one hand between them, she reached to unfasten his pants. The button popped off in her hand. The sound of fabric tearing was loud in her ears.

"Be careful," he said with a chuckle. "You don't know your own strength right now."

"How strong am I now?"

"You can't bench press a car or anything, but you could certainly hold your own in a fight with one or two unarmed men, no matter how big they are."

Joss carried her up the stairs, every step making her nipples rub against his chest. She arched her back, adding more pressure.

He set her on the bed, and she grabbed the hem of her sweatshirt to whip it over her head, then she grabbed at the waistband of his pants. The cloth tore away in her hands. He pulled his shirt over his head, probably to save it from her destructive fingers. Then she grabbed his hand and pulled him down to the bed.

Using her new vampire strength, she rolled him over onto his back and straddled his hips. His cock was warm and hard against her ass, and she wiggled, brushing across him. She lifted her hips up and moved backward, sinking down on his cock.

It felt as if every nerve ending in her body tingled. She stilled for a moment, savoring the sensations with her heightened senses. His hands gripped her hips. Neither of them moved.

Steadying herself with her hands on his chest, she tightened the muscles in her cunt, and Joss bucked underneath her. She shifted over him, lifting away from him before slamming her hips back down. Her movements were frantic. The intensified sensations flooded her system. Everything seemed magnified. She closed her eyes and listened to the blood rush through Joss' body. The tension in her muscles increased.

She covered the pulse in his throat with her lips as she pushed her hips down over his, her orgasm tearing through her. She drove her fangs into his neck. The rich, spicy, sweet blood filled her mouth. The spasms in her cunt matched her convulsive swallows. Fast and forceful, then slowing. Joss held her tight, his hand tangled in her hair, pressing her mouth against his neck.

She took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of his skin and the tang of his blood. Sorry," she muttered against his neck when she pulled her fangs from him.

"For what?"

"Because I couldn't wait."

"Elizabeth, we have a lot of time to get everything right. As many

years as you want."

Lifting up, she looked at him and smiled, fingering his nipples. "So, can I turn into bat?"

Joss laughed. He grabbed her hips and flipped her onto her back, holding his weight on his hands.

"I guess we need some lessons. No, you can't turn into a bat," he said, flexing his hips against her. "Lesson number two. Take your time and savor...*everything*."

The End

Author Bio

Lia Morgan has been an avid reader all her life. She was afraid that she might one day run out of books to read so she decided to write her own. What began as an escape from the dreaded, but much loved, day job, has grown into an all-consuming beast.

Her love of all things supernatural and sci-fi is something she comes by honestly. It is all her mother's fault. Not many kids can say they were weaned on episodes of Dark Shadows and Star Trek, but Lia can. She would love you to stop by her home online at www.liamorgan.com