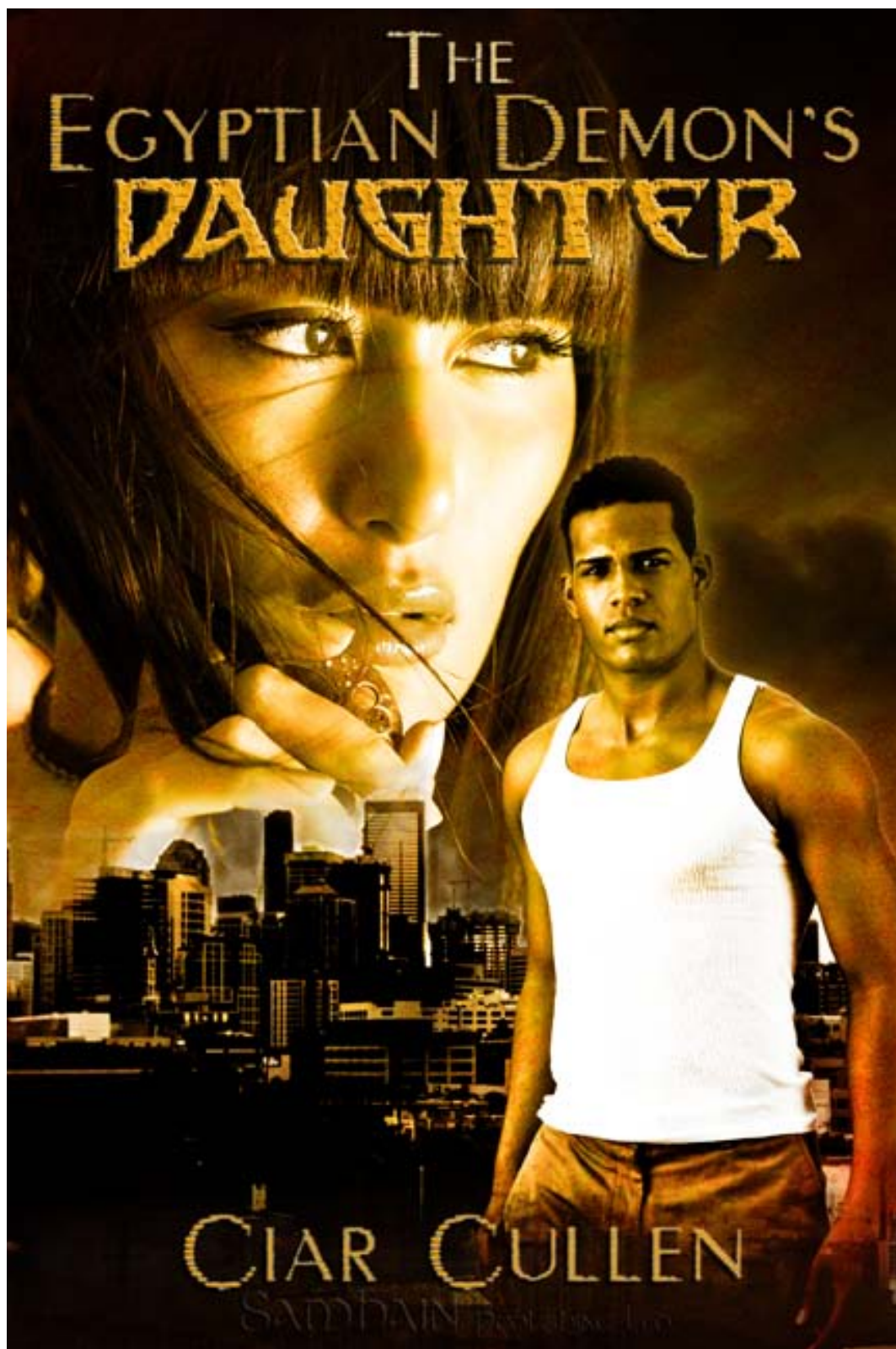


THE EGYPTIAN DEMON'S DAUGHTER



CIARA CULLEN

SADDAN

Guess who's coming to dinner—fangs and all?

Professor Nefertari Smith, daughter of the Fifth Satan, may have just met her match. And, evidently, he's a stalker.

Though she takes great pains to hide her immortal "condition", it didn't stop intensely handsome DNA researcher Jasper Grayson from finding his way to her door. If Mr. Tall-dark-and-handsome learns of her demon heritage, he may expose her family to notoriety they can't afford.

Jasper isn't looking for a test subject. He's looking for a life partner who can last more than a few paltry decades—an essential quality for a vampire's mate. Tari's genetic profile excites him in more ways than one. He just needs another sample of her DNA to be sure she is his match. And he knows a highly pleasurable way to get it.

One kiss, and suddenly the haze of lust makes it hard to remember the warning about vampires and other immortals. But soon the consequences of their union are all too clear. Tari's immortality is draining away—along with her life.

The only way to save her is to face her father with the truth...and pray the Fifth Satan is in a good mood.

Warning: This book best served with a bottle of red, dim lighting and a good sense of humor.

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Edited by Bethany Morgan
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The Egyptian Demon's Daughter

Ciar Cullen

Dedication

For Beth Morgan, who helps me remember I like to tell stories.

Chapter One

“Why are you hiding behind the Christmas tree?”

Tari shushed her partially inebriated friend and backed up another few inches, cursing under her breath as the ornaments clanked against one another.

“I’m not hiding. Please go away, Nancy. Get another cup of punch.”

Nancy shrugged and swaggered unsteadily on her four-inch heels to the buffet. Tari’s peace was short-lived as Professor Tippet spotted her.

“Nefertari! There you are.” He wedged himself between the tree and the wall, trapping her like a caged rat. *At least she was well out of view now*, she thought. And doing everything she could to stay alert as old Tippet droned on about his dreary Roman military history research. She nodded and smiled, as she had done in his classes.

“You don’t seem quite yourself tonight, Tari. You’re usually the life of the party. Under the weather?”

“Can’t fool you, Ben. Never could. Probably shouldn’t have gone to Philly with my students last night. Getting a little old for that.” *Not*. Masquerading as an adult was taking a toll, and despite the fact that she couldn’t get sick or die, she could get drunk and feel it the next day. Tari used Tippet as cover and risked a peek around the tree. She saw a flash of black leather sleeve as her stalker took a glass of champagne off a tray.

“Damn it, he’s still there. I can’t get an effing break.” There certainly wasn’t another faculty member who would wear a black leather jacket to the university president’s Christmas party. Except maybe her, but Nancy had convinced her to start dressing more like a faculty member than an undergrad.

“Excuse me?” Tippet’s cheeks flushed at her curse, and he edged away from her, gaping like a dying fish.

“Sorry, Ben.”

He nodded uncertainly and lifted his empty punch glass. “Refill,” he mumbled.

Just great. He’s on your tenure committee, jackass.

Tari ventured another peek. Wasn’t Grayson supposed to be in Europe during the holidays? That’s what his faculty web page had said. She wouldn’t have come to the party if there were a remote possibility of running into him. Had he set her up?

Now you’re really paranoid, Tari.

Nancy balanced a plate of bacon-wrapped scallops and a cup of punch in one hand as she tried to hoist her gold lame party dress up with her other. It wasn't a pretty sight, as a few scallops plopped on the floor, and a stream of punch rolled down her abundant cleavage. Her Tina Turner wig, as she called it, had slipped a bit rakishly, and whether or not she was now completely soused, she sure looked it.

"Psst, Nancy. Psst!"

Nancy scurried to Tari's side.

"Want some scallops?" She spun one on a toothpick a few inches from Tari's face.

Tari smiled at her friend, the brilliant woman who had brought audiences worldwide to tears with her poetry readings. And who had worn the same dress at the club the night before.

"No, thanks, hun. I need you to do me a favor."

"Need a drink? Hold this one."

"No, stay here. And talk softly. Tell me where Grayson is."

"Professor Hottie?" Nancy took a few unsteady steps to look his way, a few more scallops falling off her plate. "He's talking to the president. Damn, I wish they'd wrap him in bacon and lay him out on the buffet."

"I need you to go talk to him, Nance. Really get his attention, lure him to the kitchen or something. Can you pull that off? Here, I'll hold your stuff." Tari straightened Nancy's wig before taking her plate.

"My hair slipped? Don't think about drinking my punch. Why are you hiding from him? Are you crazy? Look, even the president's flirting with him."

"Never mind that now." *I'm hiding from him because somehow he knows about me. What I am. Damned science.*

Not that Grayson looked geeky. God, no. He had to be the standout heartthrob of scientists worldwide. How that brain and that body had come together was a billion-to-one shot. It was a joke amongst the female faculty members whether he would end up voted America's hottest bachelor or win a Nobel Prize for his DNA research first. Tari thought the odds were about even.

"What do I get if I do this for you?" Nancy asked.

"I won't tell anyone at the next faculty meeting what you did when we were in Vegas at the conference."

"You did it too. Hey, in fact, it was your idea. Pole dancing, at my age."

"We're the same age."

"But you're seventy-five pounds younger." Nancy winked, and as she hobbled into the center of the party, and Tari held her breath.

Come on, Nance, you can do this.

Grayson saw the rotund, sparkling figure approach and smiled inwardly, knowing she was headed his way, in cahoots with *his girl*, as he'd come to think of sample 14B. Or, as the university community knew her, assistant professor of ancient history, Dr. Nefertari Smith. He suppressed a laugh as the smiling woman wedged herself between him and President Munson with the subtlety of a Mack truck. The president turned to another of her guests with a shrug.

Grayson drew his gaze away from the congealing streak of fruit punch carving a path from her collarbone to the vast channel between her breasts. "Dr. Nancy Maynard, right? American literature?" And bestselling author of fine women's literature, a hot ticket on the lecture circuit.

"That's me." She drained the rest of her cup and handed it to him. "Still thirsty, though. Why don't you be a gentleman and get me a refill?"

"Of course. As soon as you tell me why Dr. Nefertari Smith is hiding behind the Christmas tree."

"Damn. She doesn't think you can see her."

"No?" He pointed to the corner, where the lovely back view of Professor Smith in a short scarlet evening dress was clearly visible in a mirror. He'd seen her in her outlandish clothing around campus, blending in with the undergrads with her trendy shoes and quirky hairstyles. He'd looked up her name, Nefertari, and decided it was perfection for her—"the most beautiful". But only in his waking dreams had she looked so adult, so provocative, in high heels, long legs sheathed in silky, sparkly stockings, a short dress with a low back... *How high do those stockings go?* He intended to find out. After pulling that frou-frou clip from her hair and letting the auburn waves fall to her smooth white shoulders...and the delicate pale skin stretched over her collarbone, accentuating her beautiful neck...

"I don't think you should watch her ass like this. You have a thing for her or something? She'd hiding from you, but I guess you figured that out already."

"You shouldn't play poker, Dr. Maynard."

She laughed. "Nor should you, Dr. Grayson. So, what's going on? Is this a normal guy kind of thing or a more creepy stalking kind of thing?"

"I'd say it's borderline. I've read Dr. Smith's research and would love a chance to chat with her about it. Would you excuse me for a moment? I'll get you that punch first if you like."

Nancy looked a trifle dejected and shook her head. "You're one smooth guy, aren't you? Would you at least tell her I tried? And remind her that what happened in Vegas stays there?"

"I'd like to hear about that some time." Grayson smiled and steeled himself for Tari's reaction as he plucked the mistletoe from the arch of the doorway. She'd ignored his emails, phone calls and notes tacked to her office door. He'd be damned if she was going to ignore him in person.

He watched her reflection as she bent farther to peer at Nancy's progress. The whole tree rattled a bit, and he thought it might come down in the center of the living room.

Tari squealed and swirled as he cleared his throat behind her, one hand steadied on the wall and the other grasping at ornaments. Grayson grabbed her by the hips to keep her from falling and held her far longer than necessary. Let her feel his hands, let her know what it might be like, he thought. *She needs a grown man, not one of those struggling lost soul cohorts.*

“Hey there,” she managed in a high, shrill voice.

“Having fun?” Grayson took in the front view of the dress, trying to decide who really had the upper hand. She’d been shocked by his sudden appearance, but he was shocked by his body’s reaction to her party best. Her eyes were smoky and sultry, some woman’s make-up trick, he supposed, but it worked. Her white skin literally sparkled against the dark fabric of her low-cut dress. *That must be make-up too*, he thought. At least she didn’t go in for the genetic alteration to blue or green skin that was all the rage since the process had been patented in 2020. He allowed himself a good look at her cleavage before staring into her stunning, brown eyes. Exotic, intriguing, intelligent—even if she weren’t his most precious research subject, he’d be tempted to follow her around the university.

“Fun? Yes, fun. Nice music—cheery stuff. Holly jolly and all that. I usually go in for more earthtechsteam club music, but this is...well, it’s seasonal at least? Good food, don’t you think? I’m a vegetarian, but Nancy says the scallops are great. Try the scallops? I mean, they’re engineered scallops, of course, what with the ban on fishing, but hey, you probably had something to do with cloning them. Right?”

“I think Dr. Maynard got most of the scallops. And I don’t do clones.”

She inched her way along the wall, trying to squeeze past him. He repositioned himself to keep her captive. She took a step. He took one.

“Hey look, we’re dancing. We should join the rest of the party.” Tari looked past him for help, but he shook his head in warning.

“I’m fine right here.”

“We really should join the others. I’m going to have to insist upon it, in fact.”

“I’m going to have to insist that you tell me why you haven’t responded to my calls and emails. It’s been a month since the last time I saw you. The Moore lecture.”

“Busy, busy, busy. You know how they work the young, untenured types. Exams to grade, and oh, my, the holidays. It’s been nuts. For you too, I bet. All busy with your genes and shopping and traveling...conferences. Don’t those conferences take it out of you, seriously? Shame about the airlines all going under. It seems like it takes a week just to get anywhere...” She took a step sideways and stumbled a bit. Something crunched under her foot, and he bent and picked up a demolished Wise Man.

“I think you just killed one of the president’s ornaments. Can never remember those three names, can you?”

“I think the black one is Melchior. I’m sure of it. Balthazar, Gazpacho and Melchior.”

“Gazpacho? You’re quite sure?”

“Yes, my family is quite religious, and we always have a Nativity scene at home.”

“Where is your family?”

Her hand shook a bit as she pushed her hair behind her ears. “Professor Grayson, I’m a little drunk, and you’re making me nervous. Hot guys do that to me. Oh hell, did I just call a tenured professor a hot guy?”

“I’ll get over it.” The woman became more of a wreck by the second, it was his fault, and he certainly was pushing her hard. He examined the mangled Wise Man, wood painted midnight black and decorated with the trappings of a Disney sheik rather than an African king.

“Put that down, please,” Tari whispered. “I can’t afford another scene in the president’s house.”

“Another scene? Do you come here often?”

“Before I nearly burnt the place down. Did you know it dates to the late seventeen hundreds?” She shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut, evidently reliving the nightmare.

“I certainly do.” *I remember this town when it was a carriage stop called Prince Town.*

“My mother knew President Munson when they were grad students together. When I first came to town, she did my mother a favor and let me stay here until I found my own place. I didn’t know you have to open a fireplace when you use it.”

“It’s called a flue.”

Tari steadied herself with one hand on his shoulder as she slipped her shoe back on. He captured her hand with his and she stared, pupils dilating, chest rising and falling with her rapid breaths. “So, you understand why I can’t afford another scene?”

“Oh, there’s going to be a scene.” Grayson pulled the mistletoe out of his pocket and held it over her head.

Panic. *This is a panic attack*, Tari thought in wonder. In twenty-four years, few things had terrified her like the presence of this one man. In fact, nothing had actually terrified her. Now, perspiration beaded on her lip, despite the lack of heat in the corner of the room.

A smirk pulled at Grayson’s full lips, his full perfect lips. *Not safe, don’t look at his lips.* Less safe was staring into his hazel brown eyes. His nose had been broken, she noted as if in a dream state. Slightly askew, it gave him a rugged, even dangerous look that made everything much, much worse. What could he want with her?

“Don’t you have a girlfriend?” She held her hand over her mouth. *So if he hasn’t already written you off as an imbecile...* Somehow, nothing she said had made a dent in his smooth demeanor. Smooth, like his deep liquid voice, his pale brown skin, his spicy cologne.

"She died. The one before her died too. They all did." He didn't look particularly sad at the pronouncement.

"That's terrible. That's some bad luck, I'm really sorry." Dear God, was the man a lunatic? A serial killer?

"If it weren't for bad luck..." He shrugged.

"You'd have none at all. I'm a fairly lucky person, I think. So far, anyway." Tari thought her legs would give out. Between the wine, the hunk and the fear that somehow he was going to out her, her head spun.

Oh yeah, thanks, Mom and Dad. "You have to get out there and live, live, live." Her mother's mantra—a family joke—wasn't so funny right now.

She'd have to move again, find a new career, change her name, and leave her only friend. Damn it, she loved Princeton and her job. It wasn't just a cover. She had actually earned the doctorate and was a fair teacher. But her real work—damn, she couldn't let this guy endanger it. Or worse, endanger her whole family if he learned the truth.

"I'll take that kiss." He indicated the mistletoe dangling above her hair.

"I really don't know you, and this certainly isn't the time or place." Her heart leapt as he leaned in and crushed his mouth to hers. He was sweet and spicy and hot, and she had to clutch at him to stop from stumbling again. He brushed her collarbone momentarily before reaching around to brace her neck for a deeper press of his lips. When she started to kiss back, he pulled away.

"That wasn't so terrible, was it?"

She opened her eyes to find him still close, eyes narrowed into slits of fiery lust. She couldn't speak. Maybe he didn't know about her. Maybe he was just a sex-craved professor in a rather staid town.

Grayson pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped her lipstick from his lips. He held it up for her to see then pulled a few strands of her hair from his jacket, and carefully folded them into the handkerchief before tucking it into his pocket.

"There are so many ways to collect DNA. That's my second favorite."

Still reeling from the kiss, she heard his words as if from far away. DNA. He was collecting DNA.

"What's your favorite? Wait, what? You did that without my permission."

"Would you have given your permission?"

"Hell freaking no. What are you, some kind of mad scientist? This is ridiculous."

"I'm not even a little bit pissed off, certainly not mad. What time would you like to go to dinner tomorrow?"

"What?"

"Dinner. Food. I was thinking I'd swing by at eight." He held up his hand to ward off her protest. "I won't have the test results by then, so don't get your hopes up."

“Are you blackmailing me into going on a date with you?”

“Blackmail? What could I possibly have on you, Dr. Smith?”

He leaned in and pressed his lips gently on hers. “That was for me, not for testing. See you at eight.”

Grayson offered his thanks to his hostess and exited the mansion into the unseasonably warm December air. The sparkle of Christmas lights on the upscale Princeton street cast an eerie glow in the fog. He resisted the urge to hide behind one of the ivy-covered columns leading onto campus and wait for Tari. Nah. That would be the creepy kind of stalking, as Nancy Maynard had said. He already felt a trifle guilty about making Tari uncomfortable. Actually, she looked terrified one moment, and ready to melt in his arms the next. She struck him as a teenager stuck in a grown woman’s body. How could this goofy girlish colleague be a brilliant professor, as well as an immortal? Perhaps he’d been carried away by wishing too hard, for too much. For someone with a lot of time on his hands—centuries—he knew he had an impatient streak.

Grayson had only met her two months earlier. He’d handled it poorly he had to admit. After processing her first DNA sample, he jumped the gun. In his shock and excitement he couldn’t contain himself, and approached her at a cocktail hour following a university lecture. Grayson had grabbed two glasses of white wine and approached her head on.

“I think we know one another.”

“Really?” She’d eyed him curiously, and finally arched a brow at his frank examination of her. “I think I’d remember you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” He raised his glass in a toast to hers, and she sipped and nodded. “Did you enjoy the lecture?”

“It was...fine. I’m not really as educated about theater as I’d like to pretend.”

Grayson extended his hand. “Jasper Grayson, Department of Genomics.”

“Ah, the DNA guy. You look more like art or literature. Heard about you, that your classes fill up with girls the first day of registration.”

“I keep my pocket protector in the lab.”

Tari flashed a bright smile that drilled to Grayson’s chest.

“Where do you think we met, Professor Grayson?”

All the sense he was born with failed him in one fateful moment. Why hadn’t he said “at the library, at the train station, at the grocery store”? No, he’d told the truth. “I shouldn’t have said met, exactly.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You were at the health center the day we asked for volunteers for random DNA testing. You graciously donated a cheek swab. That was for my research.”

“I don’t remember seeing you.”

He watched her already fair skin pale to ghostly white. She shook her head subtly, and her wine glass slipped from her hand and bounced on the carpet.

She lifted her chin and calmed herself with a deep breath. “Well, bully for me for being such a good citizen. Good luck at Princeton, Professor Grayson.” And she’d bolted. He resisted running after her, instead watching as she ran down the lecture hall steps while struggling to pull on her riotously colored jacket.

Grayson leaned down, picked up her wine glass, and slid it into his pocket. He was onto something, all right. Either the sequencing was off, or he’d found another person with the genetic marker for immortality.

Now, with a second sample and a date for dinner, he headed for the lab, whistling a holiday tune he’d learned in the eighteen hundreds. It had never lost its charm.

Chapter Two

“Kasey, I need you. Call me.” Tari thought of adding more to the message, but didn’t know how to describe her current predicament to her father in a minute. She pictured him rolling his eyes and telling Eliza that their little girl masquerading as a grown woman had done it again. In fact, Kasey loved to be needed and treasured any excuse to swoop in for a rescue. Tari was so much more like him—according to Eliza—logical on issues that didn’t much matter. A daredevil, in her case, with the emphasis on devil. It simply never made sense to father or daughter to worry about trouble, because they could, and often did, escape any harm.

She wasn’t in mortal danger. She never was, because she wasn’t mortal. Born to a fallen angel and a cambion mother, Tari’s lifespan was secure. Her integration into normal society, however, was not as certain.

One of Tari’s earliest memories was of her mother, Eliza, chanting blessings over her rather than telling her bedtime stories. Her father, Kasdeya, would cradle her in his arms and fly her to a distant land on her faintest whim. By the time she was ten, she could take herself anywhere with a thought, but she rarely did, craving Dad’s attention as all children do.

No, the total upheaval to her world had come on a Tuesday, a cold, rainy day of indoor play. The Smiths had one rule for their daughter—don’t talk about what you are, what you can do. Ever. And she didn’t. But when her best friend’s brother went missing on a chilly day, Tari closed her eyes, scanning the neighborhood and surrounding woods for his energy. In only moments, she had materialized at the pond where the boy hid, alone, shivering and crying. She’d brought him back in tow, nervous at the crowd surrounding her house.

Tari had simply forgotten. She’d been outed. In her determination to find the boy, she’d broken the rule, and disappeared into thin air in front of her girlfriend, a mortal. No one believed her friend, of course, but the whispers, strange looks and jibes came quickly and haunted her at school.

So the Smiths had done what the Smiths often did. They moved. A new house, a new school, new jobs for her parents—even though they were wealthy enough not to work—and loneliness for Tari. And worry. Would she be frozen forever at fifteen, with pimples, hopeless crushes and no driver’s license? By nineteen, still aging normally, she worried she’d be stuck in an endless loop of college classes and frat parties. But in her mid twenties, as her mother had predicted, she’d simply stopped changing.

It wasn't a terrible thing, forever young and in one's prime, born with a sense of purpose if not much common sense. But now her parents, her only real friends, were her apparent contemporaries to the outside world. Tari had masqueraded as her father's younger sister for a while. The resemblance made it believable, but when her brother Trevor came along, she knew her parents would make a move.

She'd cried for weeks when they finally kicked her out of the nest, insisting she needed to learn how to navigate amongst mortals without their help. Their concession had been to allow her to stay close and to visit when she liked. And they were ready to bail her out of whatever turmoil she'd put herself in.

Tari had grown proud of her newfound self-reliance, but it had suddenly come to a screeching halt in the form of Jasper Grayson. What did he know, and how did he know it? More importantly, what did he intend to do about it?

Tari changed into sweats and curled up on the couch with a bowl of ice cream, intending on drowning thoughts of Grayson in sugar. She stabbed at the chunks of chocolate.

"Why does he have to be gorgeous?" She turned to Makarios, her Egyptian Mau cat, who only blinked in boredom before nestling against her legs. "Why can't he be a normal guy, except maybe immortal? Why the hell does he have to be such a wacko?"

"Who's a wacko?"

Tari jumped at her father's voice before getting up and rushing into his strong, warm arms.

"Why can't you knock like a normal dad, Kasey?"

He let out a heavy sigh and held her at arm's length to examine her. "I repeat, who's a wacko and why do you need my help?"

"Where's Mom?"

"Your brother seems to have done something unspeakable to a rival high school's mascot. Eliza needed to meet with the principal."

Tari snorted out a laugh. "Maybe he'll be stuck at sixteen forever."

"That's not amusing. Now, what's troubling you, peanut?" They sat on the couch, and Kasey helped himself to her ice cream as Makarios curled in his lap.

"It's a guy at work. Another professor. At first, I wasn't sure about him. Thought maybe he was just a little odd—he's a scientist."

"Ah, a scientist. Unfortunate. This scientist has hurt you in some way. I will kill him immediately."

"I don't want you to kill him."

"Do you love him?"

"I barely know him. Would you just listen for a minute? I think he's learned about me somehow."

Kasey stopped the spoon an inch from his lips and looked into his daughter's eyes. "What did you do?"

“Nothing. I did nothing, I swear. He’s a geneticist—a biologist who does DNA stuff...and one day the campus center was just doing some random tests for the researchers to use. So I did a swab of my cheek. I didn’t think a thing of it—and don’t look at me that way. You wouldn’t have either. He’s followed me ever since, and when I saw him at the Christmas party...he swabbed me again.”

“He swabbed you at a Christmas party? Is that modern speech for...you know...”

“No. He got a sample of me. Oh, hell, he collected some more DNA. I’m a grown woman, and you make me feel like a child. It’s not comfortable discussing boys with your dad. Especially you.”

“Eliza tells me I’m a spectacular father.” He put the bowl down and folded his arms over his chest.

“For a demon. Come on. Lighten up. I only meant that you’re a little protective where my men are concerned.”

“Your men? How many men are we discussing here? Are you still cavorting around with Dr. Maynard? I’m not sure she’s the best influence on you, Nefertari. I admire and like the woman, but she is more capable of handling herself.”

“See. That’s exactly what I mean.”

“All right, all right. What makes you think this guy isn’t simply courting you? You’re quite the beauty, just like your mother.”

“I look exactly like you. I thought you’d gone back to working on that ego.”

“Your mother humbles me enough, thanks. Tell me about this man.”

“His name is Jasper Grayson.”

“He is not a moral man. That is a soap opera name.”

“Try not to speak for one minute. Jasper made a point of telling me that he collected my DNA—twice, three times if you count the party. He’s stalking me, Daddy. Emails, web calls, text messages. I thought he’d left town only to get cornered by him at the president’s Christmas party. For another um...sample. And an invitation to dinner.”

“Ah, he’s simply using the science as an excuse to meet you. If I weren’t going to kill him immediately, I’d admire him for his ingenuity. How old is this Jasper Grayson?”

“I don’t know, a little over thirty.” Tari winced at the look on her father’s face. “I’m twenty-five. There’s like a bazillion years between you and Mom. Wait, why am I talking about him like this? Kasey, listen to me. He’s a genius, the real deal. I’m afraid he’s found something in my DNA that will give me—the whole family—away.”

“Nonsense.”

“You’re old-fashioned. Very, very old...fashioned. You don’t understand the complexity of modern science. There could be a marker in our genetic code that betrays our immortality. They’ve unraveled just about every other bit of human mystery. In fact, they’ve taken out the mystery of being human. I’m afraid before long, no one will even sign up for my Egyptology lectures. And I’m *good*.”

“What can he do to you? He cannot kill you. We’ll simply vanish together and start somewhere new. I’m ready for a change.”

Tari’s heart dropped. How to tell the man you loved most in the world—the man you admired most, that his way of protecting his family had robbed her of so much? “I like my job. I like my life. I actually have a friend, a real live, human friend. I’m tired of running.”

“Then I’ll kill him.” Kasey smirked and ran his hand through his thick hair. “All right, I have an idea. Bring the fellow by the house, and your mother can sort out the truth of what he knows. Perhaps she can erase that knowledge from his brain. I’m sure she has a spell for this tucked away somewhere.”

“How do I get him to come by the house?”

Kasey arched a brow. “He’s following you everywhere and you don’t think he’ll accept an invitation to a holiday dinner? As much as it pains me to suggest it, use your feminine wiles on him.”

“I don’t know how to do that stuff! I’m like one of the guys. Besides, I don’t want to lead him on.”

“Darling, from the sparkle in your eyes, I have the sinking feeling that you won’t be leading him on. And I’m sure that if he heard you describe yourself as one of the guys, he’d be greatly amused.” Kasey kissed Tari on the forehead and stood to exit in a mortal fashion through the door. He hesitated and turned towards her. “He’s not immortal himself, is he?”

“Of course not. I don’t think so. I don’t get the willies around him.”

“Good. If he’s one of those wretched vampires or werewolves, he won’t make it to the table. Remember what I told you about them.”

Tari rolled her eyes. Her father was so old-fashioned. Vampires and werewolves indeed. In fact, she didn’t remember what he’d said about those mythical creatures, but it didn’t matter. Jasper Grayson did matter.

Chapter Three

Jasper didn't particularly care about blood types, despite his vocation and his nature. Blood was blood, a metallic-tasting brew he needed to survive. The rift in his family was over blood, and only he and his cousin had joined the "generation losers" as his grandfather had dubbed those who feasted on non-human blood and the occasional lobster bisque or bagel. All of the warnings of childhood—you'll die, you'll lose your fingers, you'll grow hair on your palms if you eat food or drink nonhuman blood—were all fairy tales designed to scare young vampires. Did they really *not* think the kids got out at all?

But for the first time in decades, he felt the pull to drink from a person. To feel a parallel ecstasy to sex, best if concurrent with sex. Nefertari Smith. The irony, of course, was that he suspected she was already immortal. He tapped his foot impatiently as he waited for the sample to run. The first two could have been errors, of course—false negatives for degenerative diseases of any sort, for death. He'd seen errors in his own family members' samples. He knew the statistical likelihood of such errors. But they'd never made his heart catch in his throat before.

Jasper's lab was world-renowned for identifying DNA markers for diseases, and he took that work seriously. If he could undo a thousandth of the damage his ancestors wreaked on innocent mortals, he'd be immensely satisfied. All his earlier careers had been self-absorbed ego boosts—pilot, model, painter, gigolo, pro athlete, novelist. And he'd burnt out each time with boredom, ready to plant a stake in the ground and impale himself on it. Until his sister Eve pointed out, in rather crude terms, that he had wasted centuries waiting for someone to love him, when he'd never given anyone a reason to.

In a twist that four hundred years of introspection hadn't prepared him for, as soon as he started working for the good of others, he stopped looking for their approval. Until he found sample 14B. He shouldn't have looked. No respectable researcher would have tracked down the anonymous participant. But she'd left the boxes blank that asked if she'd be willing to participate in further studies, and had actually signed the form and included her phone number.

Jasper's hands had shaken as he searched the database to learn if the donor of the sample had waived anonymity. When he saw it was another Princeton professor—he'd leaned back in his chair, stunned. Another immortal. Vampire? Were? Perhaps she was a distant relative of his? No, her complete DNA profile was too far from his own and that of his siblings.

So he'd stalked her for an opportunity to get another sample, backed her against a Christmas tree and stolen a kiss. But she'd stolen something from him as well, even though he wasn't quite sure what. Certainly his concentration was off since that kiss.

He checked on the progress of his sample run and logged off his computer, hoping to escape questions from his lab members, and bypass his faculty office and the groupies who often stalked *him* there at all hours. *No, Jasper Grayson needs some me time*, he thought. A chance to plan his next move.

As he took the path through the quiet campus, a silent howl, a chill that brushed his very soul, flitted by quickly. He stopped under a light and surveyed the misty vicinity in a complete circle. No, Tari Smith had messed with his mind. A hot shower and a cold beer made the most sense. He tapped his earpiece and dictated a reminder to make a dinner reservation for his date, praying that Tari hadn't skipped town, hadn't skipped out on him.

Chapter Four

“This one or this one?” Tari showed two dresses to Makarios, who brushed up against her favorite black dress. Fortunately, she’d adopted a cat genetically engineered not to shed. “Not too showy? Oh hell, I can’t believe I’m worried about what to wear.” She jumped at the knock on the door and glanced at the clock. Two hours early? It couldn’t be Grayson.

She pulled back the front curtain and squealed with happiness at the sight of Nancy.

“Damn, I could hear that scream outside. Please tone it down. I have a little party flu going on.”

Tari didn’t mention that, although the Tina wig was missing, Nancy wore the same party dress from the night before under a bulky faux fur coat. She’d replaced her heels with worn sneakers.

“How about a hair of the dog that bit you?”

“Thanks, but I had a dawg take me home from the party last night. A young dawg. A mere pup, actually.”

“Oh, my God, who? Nancy, not a student? We’ve talked about this.”

“And we’re finished talking about it. Please?” Nancy rubbed at her temples. “Just because you’re a nun doesn’t mean I have to be.”

Tari bit at the inside of her cheek.

“What? God, I’ve never seen that look. Oh. You. Did. Not! Professor Hottie?”

“No, I did not. But he’ll be here in two hours.” Tari scrambled to her bedroom and picked up the two dresses. “I know how cliché this is, but humor me.”

Nancy examined the dresses with one bleary eye. “The black says you’re desperate, the red says you haven’t been laid this decade. I’d go with the red.”

Tari sat on the couch and crunched up the dresses up in her lap. “What the hell am I thinking? I can’t go out with him. I can’t do this.”

“Oh, you’ll go out with him, if I have to throw you over my shoulder and shovel you into his car. And you will text copious play by plays to me all evening. I’m sick of your excuses about men.”

“It’s complicated, Nancy. Trust me. This isn’t your normal date.”

“You’re complicated, and some day, when you’re ready, you’ll let me know what you need to tell me. And I’ll write a Pulitzer winning novel about it. I’m praying for your sake it doesn’t involve prison time.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Try that on a younger, skinnier, dumber woman who doesn’t love you.”

"Right now my priority is what to wear. Help me."

"Jeans and a low-cut sweater. Very low-cut. And those very expensive ruby earrings I gave you last year you almost never wear."

"Yes, Mom. You still going home for Christmas? I wish you'd come to New York with me. Kasey and Eliza would love to see you again."

"No offense, dear, but as nice as your brother and his wife are, I'd rather be around people who don't deflect every question I ask." Nancy held up her hand to ward off any protest. "If I don't go, you can feel free to be the Addams Family."

"That's a little insulting, coming from my best friend."

"Some day you'll tell me. In the meantime, give that sexy *brother* of yours a big kiss for me." Nancy pulled her gigantic handbag onto her shoulder and started towards the door.

"Hey, why did you come over? Can't you stay a while?"

"No, just wanted to make sure you're okay. Professor Hottie called me to ask what kind of flowers and wine you'd like, and to confirm that you're a vegetarian. He's going to cook. Shut your mouth, sugar, or you'll swallow a fly."

Nancy slammed the door behind her, and Tari flopped on the couch, her stomach knotted, head spinning. Here? He was planning to cook for her in her apartment? Or take her back to his place? *Relax, you can escape anything with the blink of an eye, and no one can hurt you.* The soothing words of her father had never failed to calm her until now. Because she didn't think Jasper Grayson was trying to hurt her. He was trying to know her, and that was much, much worse.

She'd worn jeans. Jasper eyed her head to toe, annoyed that his heart raced at the sight of her in clingy white cashmere, more annoyed that it probably showed.

"Oh," she mouthed silently as she opened her apartment door.

"I overdressed. For once. The wrong time."

"You look...really good. Let me throw a dress on. I thought you were cooking for me. Isn't that what you told Nancy?"

"I worked late and ran out of time to shop. Why do women tell one another everything? And why can't I remember they do that?"

"You probably don't have sisters, do you?"

"I have several. They'd enjoy this immensely."

"Let me change."

"You look amazing. I'll kill the jacket and tie, and we can go to Charley's around the corner for beer and pizza. Mind walking?"

"Sounds great."

She didn't move from her guarded position holding the door open a foot.

"I see. I'll wait outside." He cringed at the petulance in his voice, wondering how desperate she must think him. Jasper sat on the cold bottom cold step and took a few deep breathes, watching the exhalations turn to ghostly puffs in the frigid evening air. He unlaced his tie and froze when his breaths didn't dissipate, but slowly coalesced into a single mass of mist.

"What the hell?" The mist swirled into the shape of a wretched face with blank eyes and a screaming countenance. And decidedly long incisors. He glanced over his shoulder to ensure Tari hadn't emerged from her sanctuary and stood to swat the image away. It slipped by him, and drifted up the stairs to Tari's door, hovering, as if it waited for her. He hurried up the stairs and banged on her door.

"Impatient guy, aren't you? Let me grab my purse..." She froze at the look on his face.

"Back inside, now." He ushered her in quickly and slammed the door behind them.

Jasper wanted to pull her into his arms and protect her from the phantom he'd unleashed into her world. But then he'd have to tell her about it. And about himself. *What the hell was it? And why now?*

"Okay, I take it you'd rather stay in, then?"

"It's suddenly so cold out. How about if we order in? Do you have anything to drink?"

Tari folded her arms across her chest and glared.

"Not buying that, huh?" Jasper sat on her loveseat and rubbed his aching neck. "Can you give me a pass on this one? Trust me?"

She arched a brow.

"Right, I've really impressed you as a trustworthy guy. I saw someone I'd rather not meet on the street. An old girlfriend. Can we leave it at that?"

"Oh, what does she look like?" Before he could stop her, she strode to the window and pulled back the curtain. And cried out at the gigantic mist face pressing against the glass. To his utter amazement, she tapped on the glass and waved her hand for the phantom to go away. And it did.

Tari turned back to him, cheeks flushed and hand trembling as she covered her mouth.

"Did you see that?" she asked, sounding more nervous than accusatory.

So, now we come to it. She'll ask why you brought a phantom to her door, you'll tell her, and she'll run screaming into the night. And you'll need a new job, again. And damn, doesn't she look hot in that sweater. What a fucking shame.

"I know you have lots of questions. Maybe you should sit?" *I hate this part, I really do. It's never like the movies.*

She turned away without acknowledging his suggestion. "I said, Chinese or pizza?"

She picked up her phone and said "pizza" without waiting for his answer.

Chapter Five

Where to start? Not since rescuing Tina's little brother had Tari come face to face with a witness to her nature. So, the jig was up. The cat was out of the bag. The fat lady was done singing. And there sat Jasper Grayson, so odd, so handsome and sexy, and certainly waiting for an explanation.

What a shame. What a freaking waste of a date with a brilliant, hot guy.

Was there *any* chance she could brush it off, that he hadn't seen Sam?

"It does look like it might snow..." she tried softly.

Grayson's mouth twitched, like he wanted to speak but was paralyzed.

"Weird to see so much fog when it's that cold." Tari's voice rose an octave, but it was worth a shot.

He nodded and rubbed his neck again.

"I wish the neighbors would keep their dogs on a leash. That's the second time this week one's come up to my porch." Too far, she wondered? *Don't press your luck. The man knows the difference between a dog and a ghost.*

The ticking of the clock sounded like the toll of Big Ben as she waited for him to bolt, yell, accuse, do anything. He kept rubbing his neck, and finally pulled off his tie and jacket as if it were a hundred degrees in her townhouse.

"Professor Smith, come here." Grayson patted the spot next to him on the loveseat. "Please."

"Damn."

"Right. We both know that wasn't a dog at your window. Nor an ex-girlfriend of mine. I think I've put you in danger. And since I'd like to continue dating you...or start dating you...I'd like you to live a while longer."

"I think you're a little confused and unnecessarily worried." Tari sighed and plopped next to Grayson. "You'd like to date me? I thought this was about my DNA."

"I'm not much of a worrier, and I'm rarely confused, but I must say you seem to have pushed my boundaries on both."

Tari dared to look into his beautiful hazel eyes, which softened a bit when she did. "You know about the bet on campus? The female professors think you'll be voted sexiest man alive before you win a Nobel Prize. Isn't that funny? You're not laughing."

"Is that supposed to be flattering? I guess it is. What's your bet?"

“About even. Go ahead, what do you want to know? Oh, never mind, I’ll tell you. Her name is Samantha. I call her Sam.”

“Who?”

“The...thing.” Tari thumbed towards the window. “The thing that sent you running in here. Sam has been with me for as long as I can remember. You know how many children have imaginary friends? They say it’s a sign of intelligence, really. In my case...” *Are you sure? This means the end. Another move, another job. And no Grayson. You’ll just drift into the night, and he’ll never find you. What a shame, look at him.*

“It’s yours? I thought it was mine.” Now he really looked upset. “It had...well, you know, teeth.”

“I saw that. She takes on different looks, depending on what...she...” Icy fingers crawled up Tari’s back and gave her gooseflesh. *No. Ridiculous.*

“Go on.” He narrowed his eyes and leaned closer.

“Samantha warns me when she thinks I might be in danger. Sometimes she’ll take the form of the danger.”

“I’m not dangerous. Not to you.” He waved away the notion impatiently. “Not to anyone, at least not anymore. I haven’t...done that...in a long time.”

“Done what? Who *are* you?”

Grayson sniffed out a little laugh and laced his fingers in a strand of Tari’s hair, pulled it to his nose, and rubbed between his fingers. “You’re lovely, really beautiful. It would have been splendid, you know? I’m a fool. I understand now, why I was so insanely excited. It gets lonely sometimes.” He laughed again. “Wow, very manly of me on a first and last date. Talking about my poor psychological state.”

“What gets lonely?” *It does, I know. Oh. My. God.* “What you are? What are you?”

“You tell me.”

They locked gazes, and the earth shifted a bit. Lost deep in his eyes, ready to lean in and kiss him before he tore all hope apart, Tari jumped when he spoke.

“Say it. Say it out loud.” He winked.

“Oh, come on, Grayson. Really? That’s the best you can do? I haven’t seen that movie since I was fifteen. I had the mug, the poster, the sheets, T-shirt, necklace...you name it. But—and this is very important—I’m not fifteen anymore.”

“I’m relieved, because that would mean I’ve been stalking a minor.”

“I don’t believe in...them. I’m not supposed to use the word because I have the power to summon things.”

“Power or not, you’ve already done the summoning.” He smiled and revealed a rather impressive set of perfect white teeth, a few a bit longer than they should be, longer than they had been moments before.

Before she could react, he picked up her hand and held it to his lips. "May I? I won't do anything permanent."

Without waiting for her response, he nipped at the side of her wrist, drawing a single drop of blood. She watched, enthralled as he closed his eyes, moaned in what seemed like anguish, and brought his lips to her wrist. Tari was fairly certain she'd never seen a man look sexier with his clothes on.

A jolt of fire ran through her hand and raced up to her heart, like the flush of orgasm. He peered up from under his thick, long lashes. "I'm sorry if I hurt you. You'll never understand, but that will stay with me for many decades."

"Holy hell, you're a vampire. Are you telling me that you're a real vampire? You're evil, then."

"Don't be childish, I'm not evil. I'm simply different. Look, I don't have mist friends who come to warn me about danger. You have a little explaining to do yourself."

Tari stood and paced, trying desperately to remember what her parents had said about vampires. It was incredibly important, and she hadn't listened to a word. And there would be hell to pay if she had to ask them. Trevor, her brother, would remember. He loved the ancient lore.

She turned to Grayson. His hazel eyes were darker and misty, as if the pain of more than this one night tortured him. He propped his chin in his hand and smiled a bit. "Sorry. You don't owe me an explanation about yourself. Nothing can top what you just learned about me. I'll take my leave. May we make a mutually beneficial agreement?"

"You're leaving? What about dinner?"

He frowned and walked towards her, lifted one of her hands to his warm lips and brushed it with a kiss. "Dear Tari, I don't know exactly what's...wrong with you. Were you drinking before I got here?"

"One glass of chardonnay. To calm my nerves, you know?"

"You're obviously a bright woman. Now, read my lips. Repeat after me. Slowly, but with feeling. Vampire."

"Vampire. My father prefers to say Sekhmet worshippers. I've told him that I'm the ancient historian in the family—well, along with my mother, actually, but he's very stubborn about such things, and a little superstitious, as I said. He'd go on and on about vampires and werewolves when I was little. I'll tell you, when those movies came out, he had a fit and a half. Said that teens and stupid adults didn't know what they were getting into. You'll meet him."

Grayson stared at her incredulously, and she realized that she'd said far too much, as usual. Especially about meeting the folks.

"I just meant if you *should* meet him. He's really very nice."

"You aren't afraid of me. Not one bit." It was less a question than an observation, so Tari turned from him and went to her kitchen island to pull out two wine glasses. She opened her liquor cabinet and eyed her collection. "Is it tacky to ask a vampire if he'd prefer red wine?"

“I could kill you, right here, right now. Do you understand that?”

“Oh, I hardly think so. I guess we’re a little more alike than we previously thought. It’s very refreshing, actually. My best friend, Nancy—oh, of course, you know Dr. Maynard—I don’t get to chat about these things with her. You understand? It makes me a bit sad, because we share so much. I know she suspects there’s something a little off about my family, but even that Pulitzer Prize winning imagination of hers can’t get a handle on it. So, you never answered, red or white?”

Grayson rolled up his sleeves, brow furrowed, perspiration beading on his forehead. “Red,” he muttered. “Blood red.”

He watched Tari struggle with a corkscrew and pour their wine. She handed him a champagne flute full of a very expensive Italian red. He thought of telling her she’d used the wrong glasses, but settled on looking at her earnest appraisal of him.

“Want to sit near the fire?” She threw cushions in front of the fireplace and lay down on her side, head propped in one hand.

“Were you going to leave the house with the fire burning?” He settled in next to her and took a sip of wine to stop his head from aching.

“I’m not an idiot. That flue thing at President Munson’s house was an aberration.”

“No, no, you’re not. I’m the idiot. I suppose you’re not going to give my secret away?”

“Well then, you’d return the favor, wouldn’t you?”

“Tari, I don’t *know* your secret. You don’t seem to think I can hurt you, if you even believe I exist, and you haven’t told me a thing about yourself. I’m really baffled, and a trifle frightened. I hope I don’t appear less manly to you by saying so.”

In fact, Jasper’s worldview was shaken by this beautiful, young, quirky woman. In his formative years, he’d indulged in the destruction of others along with the rest of the Grayson family, leaving corpses and acquiring a few recruits in a wide swath across Europe. His branch of the family had settled in New Orleans and intermarried with vampiric voodoo practitioners after the War Between the States. In hundreds of years, he’d never encountered a woman, nor a man, who didn’t revile him, fear him, and go to great pains to expose him.

No, Nefertari Smith stared at him earnestly as she sipped her wine. “I’m an immortal. My parents are both immortal. That’s what you want to know?”

“How? How can that be? I know—feel—when I’m in the presence of another vampire.”

“I’m not a vampire. I’m mixed blood, no pun intended. My father is an angel. Well, *was* an angel. Not so much anymore, but he’s a good demon. My mom is a mage—well, really a mage is a man, but she likes the term better than witch. Her father was also a demon. Grandmom Schneider is completely mortal, as far

as we know. But we like to say she cooks like an angel.” Tari giggled and took another sip of wine. “I wonder where that pizza is?”

“I don’t think you actually ordered it. Your father is a demon? Your father is a demon.” *Is she nuts? She’s nuts.*

“You look so disappointed. I thought that being a vampire, you might be a bit more open-minded about divine lifestyles. And now you don’t have to run all those tests on me.”

“I’m not disappointed, *per se*. Perhaps a bit skeptical. Of course, there’s Samantha. That’s a new one.”

“I can find anyone, anything. It’s my special thing. I do a lot of work with the FBI, although only one agent really admits to believing in my powers. So go ahead, test me.”

“How?”

“Picture someone, very clearly. Someone I don’t know. I’ll tell you where they are, what they’re wearing, doing, whatever you like. I can bring them here if you want.”

“No. Don’t bring anyone here.”

“Just the two of us, right?” Tari’s smile bordered on seductive, and Jasper took in a quick breath. Perhaps she wasn’t such an innocent. “So, are you picturing someone?”

“What the hell.” Jasper closed his eyes and thought of his sister Eve as he had last seen her, draped in a long scarlet gown, angry at him, taking the grand staircase of their New Orleans ancestral home. His eyes shot open when he felt Tari’s forehead leaning against his, the scent of her perfume feeding his senses, her warm skin and silky hair touching his cheek. Too close not to take her mouth, take it and never let it go.

He angled to capture her lips and fell forward. She was gone.

And back in an instant, laughing that he fell. “She’s beautiful as well. Tightly braided hair, a lot of dark eye make-up, tall, thin, wearing a gold cross with emeralds. She was alone, at home, sitting on a green brocade couch. I’m fairly certain she was thinking about you, or that’s she’s very strongly connected to you. Ah, I have it. You’re twins, aren’t you?”

Tari polished her nails on her sweater in a victory.

“I’m impressed. I’m stunned. I never knew anyone like you existed.”

“We tend to lay low. I masquerade as a psychic if they need my help finding missing children. Mom’s a bit more flamboyant, and Dad, well...that’s a whole ’nother thing. He attracts attention by breathing. He’s so handsome. They’re not going to be thrilled I’ve told you all this, in fact.”

Jasper leaned back and stared at the ceiling, let the warmth of the fire take the chill from his veins. Then it was true. Nefertari was immortal, she wasn’t frightened of him, and in fact, seemed to be somewhat taken with him. Now he felt a different fear. For himself. His love life was a string of losses. He’d outlived girlfriends, one wife and had outrun another vampire who’d had him in her clutches for a few decades.

Tari was a conundrum. Gorgeous, funny, intelligent, fearless—and immortal. Not someone for a dalliance, to fade from his life in mortal frailty. Not a woman he could easily impress, or overpower with his own nature. No, he had the sickening feeling, for the first time in his long lifetime, that Tari could be the death of him. He'd searched the world, and his lab, for a potential partner who could understand, and now that he was alone with her, he wasn't so sure it was what he wanted.

He sat up, and they gazed at one another. "I'm an investigator by nature, and you've finished my experiment. I'm at a loss."

"Really? You don't strike me as the sort of man who's ever at a loss."

"True. In the lab everything is rather straightforward. My mass spectrophotometer doesn't lie to me. At least not often. And it doesn't look like you, or kiss like you."

"I don't remember actually getting the chance to show you how I kiss."

The fire sputtered with his heart. There it was—the offer he thought would come, and was sure he wanted. What did he have to lose? He pushed away lingering doubt and the voice of his sister and her mantra—others are anathema, are prey, and must not steal your will to endure. Jasper pulled Tari down next to him and brushed his lips along her cheek.

Chapter Six

His lips and tongue fired her nerve endings. A vampire. Did it make him less desirable? Adolescent fantasies long buried in a psychological toy box came to life in her soul, years of desire for a dangerous man, one with power. Perhaps she couldn't be harmed, but the fantasy endured. Jasper Grayson did carry the cloak of a dark pain, of mystery and alluring otherness.

Hell, what *was* that warning about vampires? *Too late to call Trevor*, she thought as Jasper kissed her thoughts away. Tari ran her hands along his neatly shaved hair as he nibbled his way down her neck to her mouth and pressed his hands to her breasts. He smelled of exotic spices, of dark wonders. He slashed his tongue against hers, sucking her in and biting gently at her lips.

Jasper straddled her and unbuttoned her sweater, his hot hands brushing her breasts as he did, sliding his fingers under the lacy edges of her bra. He fell onto her, licking from her cleavage to her neck. Spirals of warmth curled to her womb and set her throbbing for more. He unbuttoned her bra and flung it into the fire.

"That was unnecessary," she chided him as her bra sparked and sizzled.

"I'll burn every bit of clothing you own to keep you here, naked, beneath me."

"Just not the cashmere."

"Deal."

He laughed and pinned her wrists over her head, a gleam flashing in his hazel eyes before he lunged to flick his tongue against her nipples. Tari cried out, begging for more, for consummation, as he sucked her nipples into hard peaks and rolled them between his lips. She struggled against his hands, dying to touch him, to run her hands along his chest and the bulge pressing heavy against her jeans.

"Please let me touch you. It's been a long time since I touched a man."

"God, you're charming. And beautiful." Jasper unbuttoned his shirt and cast it aside. It was Tari's turn to feast. Hairless, buff, brown, he was what she'd pictured, what she'd hoped. She pushed him to the ground, and they wrestled in a kiss playfully as she rubbed her palms across his chest and down his muscled torso. She licked her way from his neck to his navel, luxuriating at the feel of his velvety skin and his moans and breathless panting.

"May I?" She didn't wait for his answer, but he chuckled as she undid his belt and unzipped his slacks.

"For a while... Oh, God."

Tari took him greedily, speeding past preliminaries, and going for her prize. “You know, it’s true what they say about vampires.”

“That sounded racist... Oh, my God.”

He was a handful, two handfuls, in fact, and Tari took as much of his dark-veined, velvety length into her throat as she could as she toyed with his sac and delighted in his cries of pleasure.

“Holy hell, you’re good at that.”

“Really? You’re my first.”

He pushed her head away and held her by the shoulders. “Excuse me?”

“Does it matter? I assume you’ve been with a lot of women. I don’t care. Wait.” Tari braced her hands on his arms. “How *old* are you?”

“Thirty-one.”

“That’s in people years. How *old* are you, and how many women?”

“Very and many. When you said I’m your first, you meant, like, oral sex, right? Not sex in general.”

“Don’t be an ass. I meant my first vampire. I thought maybe there was something special I should do—you know, suck on your neck or something. But you seem to like me sucking on your cock, right?”

“You are one weird chick. How the hell did the universe throw us together?”

“Would it be forward to say I’m glad it did? You’re really wonderful.”

“Nefertari, you are beautiful in every way a woman can be beautiful.” He took a deep breath and sat up, brushing his hand along her collarbone. “I hate to break the mood and should have asked earlier, but I’m a scientist, and try to be an ethical one. Have you been inoculated for all viruses? I’m immune, but I can carry.”

“Me too. Immune but can carry. So, can I get back to what I was doing so very well?”

“Oh, yeah.” He fell back and pulled her down, caressing her hair as she brought him to the brink and released him, again and again until he writhed in pleasure and anticipation.

“No more,” he panted. “My way now.”

Tari’s heart skipped a beat. “Your way.”

“Does that offend you?” He rolled her onto her back and pulled her jeans off, then kneeled at her feet. He feasted his gaze over every inch of her, bringing pleasure without a touch.

“I’m not offended.” *Oh, God, I’ve been dying for a man stronger than me. One with a will, one with power, one I don’t need to run from. One who might want to stay. Does he want to stay the night? Maybe more than one night?*

Jasper mastered her senses, took away all thought with his lips and tongue as he worked his way over the landscape of her body. Tari’s skin came alive, her blood raced and her heart ached for him nearly as much as her womb with each of his touches. He feasted on her folds with his hot, wet tongue, building

tension with purposeful slowness. At the moment tension took hold and she called his name, she opened her eyes to find his hazel eyes narrowed, and his teeth prominent.

“Vampire,” she managed in a breathless pant. “Vampire is a very good thing.”

He chuckled and pushed her to the cushions. “This part is very normal mortal behavior.” He spread her legs, placed his hands beneath her ass and pressed his thick heavy erection against her folds.

“Don’t wait. Don’t wait, Jasper.”

He pushed deep, and Tari shuddered at the fullness and heat. His moan matched her own, lost in kisses and endearments.

Jasper held her gaze and began a steady rhythm, touching her deeply in body and soul. He claimed her with his pounding. She claimed him as she clutched at his shoulders with her nails, drawing faint red traces along his bronze skin.

“You’re mine, Tari. You’re mine, forever,” he whispered with his release.

Tari heard him as if from far, far away as the world shut down and she drifted in pleasure. She returned to earth, tingling, sated and listening to his rapid breathing and the crackling of the fireplace. She was his. And at least for a little while, he was hers.

Eve Grayson tapped her scarlet nail on the side of her wine glass in annoyance. Jasper was up to something, in dangerous territory. His energy thrummed through their antebellum home, yet he hadn’t visited in weeks. It shouldn’t be possible, but there was no denying the feeling.

First, he’d invited her to his Princeton home for the holidays, only to leave an abrupt message saying he needed to go out of town. That meant a woman, the first one in many, many decades to fray the bond of brother and sister. And because he didn’t want Eve along, it meant a woman who should be off limits somehow. Jasper always brought his women around.

Eve dialed his number again and went straight to his voicemail. “Don’t make me fly up there, Jasper.” She took in a calming breath and reached out to him, sorting through threads of energy until she found his. She would follow that thread through the frigid night air, through snow if she had to.

Chapter Seven

“This is a terrible idea. Really awful. I’m going to catch the train back.”

Jasper rested his head in his palms as Jersey City whizzed by, and they entered the black tube beneath the fill that was once the Hudson River. What the hell was wrong with him? Tari was nuts, asking him home after one date. He was nuts, going. To meet her parents, who were supposedly a fallen angel and a half demon, and a demonoid high schooler. What was he to say? “Hi, I just bonked your lovely daughter who I have a horrible fixation on. Oh, and by the way, I’m a vampire. Those little marks on her neck? They’re mine. What’s for dinner?”

“Relax, Grayson. Mom will be thrilled to meet you. You and Trevor can play laser tag in the back yard if you need to get out for a breather.”

“Laser tag? Darling, not once in hundreds of years have I ever had a desire to play laser tag.”

He groaned and looked out the window, only to turn back at a whimper that signaled disaster. Tari was about to cry.

“It’s me, then.” She sniveled and inched away from him. “I jumped the gun. You were after my DNA, not a trip to the altar.”

“Altar? Altar? Did we discuss that?”

“I distinctly remember you using the word forever.”

“That was in the middle of... you know, right at the free-pass time. You can’t take anything a man says at that moment seriously.” *Oh hell, I did say forever. And part of me meant it. Damned libido.*

Tari sat ramrod straight, determination and anger replacing the dreamy look she’d worn since they’d had sex. “That’s all good then, glad we cleared that up. Dad said he’d kill any vampires I brought home, so this works out for the best.”

“Excuse me?”

“Vampires. He doesn’t like them. So now we don’t have to pretend you’re mortal, yada yada. Makes it easier all around. You can just cross the tracks and get the southbound bullet—they run every fifteen minutes. Don’t actually cross the tracks, mind you. Use the tunnel underneath.”

“Yes, I know how to use train platforms. Tari, look at me.”

“Rather not if it’s all the same.”

"Then listen. I like you very, very much. I want to continue seeing you. I would love the honor of seeing you. You're beautiful and fun, brilliant, sexy, a little different...in a good way. I couldn't ask for more in a date. In a girlfriend." *In a life partner. God, what's happening to me?*

"I understand. You're not falling in love with me yet. Why would you be? We just met. I have a lot of living to do, as Mom always says. So this is for the best."

"You aren't in falling in love with me either. It's some leftover adolescent vampire crush."

Tari turned and stared squarely into his eyes, and his heart skipped a beat at what he saw in hers. "Don't you *dare* tell me what I feel."

The train came to a smooth stop, and the doors hissed open. Without a backward glance, Nefertari grabbed her satchel off the luggage shelf and exited the train. He watched her stride by on the platform without looking at him. He thought he saw Samantha drifting a few feet behind her.

From his first visit at the turn of the seventeenth century, Jasper always loved New York. He especially loved the city during the holidays, as tourists shopped and gawked, or since the crash of 2012, did more gawking than shopping. Today, he hated every square inch of the once-island.

Amidst the steel towers and moving sidewalks, Tari's parents had an old-fashioned townhouse. A brownstone, she'd said. She'd probably be crying in her mother's arms at this point, while he took a seat at the counter of the only coffee shop that held the flavor and aromas of a bygone era. The fine hairs on his arm tingled, and he looked up from his cup and laughed.

"Really, Jasper?" Eve sat next to him. "Chock full o' Nuts?"

He leaned over and kissed his sister's cheek, curious, but happy to see her.

"I'm sorry I bailed on you. I can't tell you how sorry. I've really screwed up."

She gasped and signaled for the waiter to bring her a cup. "That's not possible. Jasper Grayson, the good twin? Where does that leave me? What happened, baby, did you only publish twenty papers this year? Didn't save humanity by the deadline?"

"I broke a woman's heart. A really wonderful woman."

"Breaking news! Wait...you didn't actually break her heart, did you?"

"No, I mean emotionally. I'm still on the wagon. Or off the wagon—whichever it is, I can never remember."

"So you dumped a nice girl. What else? Because the alarms didn't go off in my soul over a romantic spat. I felt trouble with a capital T."

"Really? Well, thanks for coming. I'm not great company right now, but maybe we can grab a bite somewhere."

"You mean steak or fish, right?" Eve punched him in the arm. "Come on, baby, spill. You're not yourself. Tell Eve."

“She’s a professor at the university. I’d been running some samples, and her results popped out at me, so I tracked her down. She turned out to be rather stunning, and I developed a little crush on her. Maybe more than a little crush. Hell, she thought we were going to get engaged or something. What the hell is wrong with women?”

“And what led her to believe you might get engaged?”

“I have no clue. She’s a little naive, but I never expected her to go off the deep end over me.”

“The Grayson charm.”

“Yeah, she’s really taken with the whole...” He leaned in and made a V sign with his fingers.

“You told her? Wow. And she’s *into* it, huh? One of those wannabes who goes around in fangs and a cape? That’s so 2010.”

“No. She’s immortal herself. Evidently her parents are angels or demons or some mixture of the two. Seemed like a pretty good find, you know?”

“Come again?”

“Yeah, she actually disappeared and visited you—told me what you had on, stuff like that. I was properly impressed.”

“I felt it.” Eve tapped her long nail on her cup, a habit that drove Jasper insane. “Weeeeell...at least you didn’t *sleep* together. Because, you know, the whole curse of *sleeping together* would kill her. You do remember that you can’t...”

“What? What. What do you mean, curse? Kill her?”

“Are you freaking kidding me, Jasper? Didn’t you listen to grandma’s lessons about angels and demons?”

“No. I thought they were fairy stories. Who the hell believes in angels and demons? Holy shit, you’re messing with me, Eve. Please tell me you’re messing with me.”

Eve linked her arm in his and rested her head on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Jasper. You really liked her, didn’t you?”

“Oh, God, I think I really did. Do. I have to find her.”

“To watch her die? She’s probably dead already. Come on, baby, let’s go home.”

“There has to be a way to fix this. Some spell her parents know, some...” He sat back, his heart racing. He may not be ready to commit to a life with Tari, but he wasn’t willing to lose her. “One thing might work. Do you think it would work, Eve? I’d have to get past her parents, who hate vampires.”

“Spectacular.”

Eliza ran to the front door to greet her daughter and her new young man, but Kasey and Trevor beat her to it. Her heart fell at the sight of her husband steadying her daughter in his arms. Kasey shot a look over his son’s shoulder to Eliza, eyes wide and terrified.

“What’s wrong with her? Nothing can be wrong with her. I demand to know.”

“Is she faking?” Trevor slapped at Tari’s cheek. “God, what’s wrong with her?”

Eliza rushed to Tari and brushed at her head. “Honey, are you okay?”

Tari’s eyes fluttered open. “Hi, Mom. I’m just a little tired from the trip. Maybe I’ll take a nap.”

“It’s the man,” Kasey bellowed. “By God, where is he?”

“He’s not coming, Dad. We never got together. Just the family this year. Call me for dinner, okay? I’ll be fine. I’m simply tired.”

When Tari heard her mother shut the bedroom door, she pulled the covers over her head. “Don’t tell me how I feel, Jasper Grayson.”

Chapter Eight

“This is ridiculous, given your girlfriend is dying. How long have we been standing here?” Eve pulled a cigarette out of her purse and waited for Jasper to light it, but he pulled it from her mouth and crushed it underfoot.

“You go up and knock. I want to see what kind of reception you get, so I can form a plan of attack.”

“Oh, swell. Throw your sister under the demon bus. Are you going to sneak around back while they’re ripping my guts out? Look, I’m freezing and hungry.”

Jasper closed his eyes and steeled himself to meet the Smiths, no matter the cost. He prayed he wasn’t too late.

A young man came onto the porch to retrieve a log for the fireplace. He resembled Tari, and Jasper assumed it was her younger brother Trevor. If Tari were dying or dead, no doubt the guy would at least look distressed. The young man eyed them curiously and stood still.

“Can I help you?”

Jasper walked up the stairs and extended his hand. “I’m a friend of Tari’s from Princeton, and this is my sister. Tari said if we were in town over the holidays, we should swing by.”

“Oh, cool. Come in. My mom loves company.” Trevor opened the door, and the aromas of pumpkin pie and pungent frankincense wafted onto the porch.

Jasper and Eve exchanged a quick glance as they took in the Smith residence. Eve murmured to Jasper. “Who’s their interior designer?”

Every square foot of the living room was covered with bright silk cushions, colorful blown glass lamps and bottles, brass bowls filled with flowers and sparkling gemstones, and exquisitely woven carpets. Trevor called out to his parents and flopped onto cushions on the floor to resume playing his holographic Final Fantasy 54 match.

“Hey, want a turn?” He offered the remote to Jasper, who waved him off.

“Thanks, we’re good.”

A lovely woman their own age came into the living room, one brow arched. “Trevor, you haven’t introduced me to our guests.”

“They’re friends of Tari’s from Princeton.”

“Kasdeya. We have company,” she called out, and Jasper felt his gut drop. The woman had a gift, all right, and had them pegged as more than a reason for two more seats at the dinner table.

"I'm Eliza Schneider-Smith, Tari's sister-in-law."

Jasper flinched at the electric shock that coursed through him when they shook hands, and he pulled Eve back from making the same error. Magic flowed through the woman's veins, and she'd no doubt sent a probing spell straight to his brain.

"I'm Jasper Grayson, and this is my sister Eve. Perhaps Tari mentioned us?"

"She did mention you might stop by, Professor Grayson. Why don't you both have a seat, and I'll be right back."

Jasper whispered to Eve, "She knows."

"Oh, yeah. And she's gone to get the big gun. Sister-in-law my ass."

"Hey, Trevor, where's your sister?" Jasper tried to sound casual.

"Up the stairs, first room on the right." Trevor never looked up from his game as he chopped a hideous creature with an electronically generated sword.

Jasper gestured to Eve to stay and stall as he took the stairs two at a time. He gently opened the door, to find Tari asleep, her breaths too rapid, her face too pale. Jasper knelt by the bed and stroked her cheek. "God, I do think I could love you."

She woke and sat up. Jasper groaned at the dark circles under her eyes. So, the curse was real. He prayed he had the cure.

"Nefertari, how do you feel?"

"What's happening to me? Is this what it is to be ill? I can't stand it. My head actually...hurts. This is what they mean when they say they have headaches, isn't it? Am I mortal? I don't understand this."

"It's my fault. Tari, listen carefully. You have a very important choice to make." Jasper choked back tears. "It's my fault you're sick, and I think I'm your only hope to get better."

"How could you make me sick?"

"Have your parents ever warned you about vampires? About becoming the mate of one?"

He saw his words take hold and more.

"Oh, God help me. I never believed, so I didn't pay much attention. There's a curse, isn't there? Jasper, tell me it's not real."

"I'm so sorry, Tari. You're in a bad predicament. I'm begging you to take it seriously." He clutched at her hand and kissed it.

"Has this happened to you before? Is that why you said all your girlfriends died? Please tell me you didn't know."

"No. I really want you to live. And live to be with me. I didn't believe in demons and angels..."

"And I didn't believe in vampires."

"We don't have much time. Your parents will come up, and they'll never ever let this happen. Listen carefully. I can keep you alive."

“Do it. Stop talking and do it.”

“No, Tari, listen. I can keep you alive by taking you, by changing you. You’ll be like me. We’ll be linked by an unbreakable bond. Perhaps not the kind of bond you’d wish for. And there are some nasty side effects.”

“A vampire? You can stop me from dying by changing me into a vampire?”

“I’m fairly certain. You *must* think carefully about this. It’s not an easy life.”

“Really? What’s hard about your life? You eat regular food, you’re up all hours of the day, and you’ve obviously had endless adventures, jobs and women.” Tari coughed and grabbed at her chest. “I think something is wrong with my lungs.”

“You’re dying, love. Think, quickly.”

“My parents will disown me. Kasey hates vampires.”

“He’d rather have you around, I’m sure.”

“Do it. Oh, God. Kiss me first, Jasper, and let me pretend that it worked for us. I don’t know why, but I feel like I’ve already been charmed by you.”

“I’m so stupid. Of course, that’s why you started falling for me so quickly. The curse robs you of control of your emotions as well as your immortality. My stupid ego blinded me.”

“Actually, I started falling for you before I slept with you.”

Jasper wiped a tear and kissed Tari with reverence. She’d hate him someday, perhaps soon. “I will drink, and then you will drink. You will fade, as if you are falling into a very deep sleep. Remember this, Nefertari. Are you listening? Remember that you are to awaken when I call your name. My call alone.”

“Can you kiss me again?”

Jasper turned off the light and wondered why her parents hadn’t come to stop him. He must act quickly. He undressed and pulled down the covers, pried away Tari’s clothing, and slid next to her. “This isn’t really necessary, but I want to be with you again. I’ve never wanted this more with anyone, but I swear, I didn’t trick you.”

She nodded and brushed away her tears as she nestled up against him. “Take me—all the ways you can take me. Do it.”

He climbed atop her and kissed her with a longing as old as he was, a longing he’d pushed away. For blood, for a bond. For love. He smothered her with kisses and slid against her soft skin. Tari turned her neck to one side, ready for him, ready for it all.

Please, let this work. For her. For me.

He nipped at her collarbone, softly at first, and as she moaned, pierced her skin and drank, drank deeply and drifted into darkness, enveloped in her warmth, in her blood. Fire poured through his veins and his heart ached for her. “Come back to me, Tari. I want you, I do. I want you with me, always.”

But she couldn't hear. She was pale, the last bloom gone from her cheeks. Quickly Jasper slashed at his palm and pressed it to her lips, held it there and begged her to drink. "Tari, drink. For us. Take life from me."

He slumped to his arms as he felt her pull from him, his energy flowing again in rapid loops of fire through his body. "Yes, take me. Remember, answer only to my call."

When she slumped in his arms, he held her tightly, rocking her and caressing her hair and face. *Sleep now.*

Eve sat at the table with Kasey and Eliza, sipping a cup of coffee and eating a slice of pound cake. "It's done. I sense that it's done."

Kasey nodded and brushed away a tear. "To think that I would be my own daughter's undoing."

Eliza stared at him in amazement.

"Remember when we first met, that I told you I'd done a number of things to bring about my fall? The curse of Sekmet is my doing. His blood drinking tendencies really rubbed me the wrong way..."

"Dear, I think we can leave that for another day when we don't have company. I only care right now that Tari has survived. I don't care if she's a vampire, werewolf or Batgirl. I want to see my baby."

Eve held up her hand in warning. "Wait. You must give Jasper time. He must be the one to awaken her. The one to bring her to life. It would be dangerous if she were to hear your voice or cries. Please, be patient."

"A vampire. My little girl." Kasey moaned.

Eve sniffed in annoyance. "For a family of witches, demons and angels, you certainly are close-minded."

Chapter Nine

Makarios meowed for attention as Tari ducked back and forth in front of her hallway mirror. As Jasper had predicted, her reflection had returned gradually within a week, along with her strength. With each exchange of blood with her mentor, she found an increase in mental clarity. Jasper had slipped a few times and called himself her master, but had quickly changed to the more politically correct term. Each evening, he tutored her in all things vampire over dinner and a bottle of wine. He put his foot down when she asked if they could watch a few vampire movies together.

Beyond feeling a bit sparkly without looking sparkly, Tari hadn't noticed a single negative about her situation. Her psychic abilities were intact. Samantha had even stopped by to check in on her. A ravishing man doted on her, she was still immortal and her parents were thrilled enough with Jasper's success to begrudgingly accept him into the family. Well, not quite, Tari corrected herself. It wasn't quite clear they were a romantic couple, despite their bond.

Jasper hadn't made a move since her transformation, beyond a demure kiss goodnight on his way out the door. The distance stung even more after exchanging the most personal of bodily fluids. Hurt, and afraid to broach the subject, afraid to hear his response, she wondered if she were now off limits in some way. Or perhaps her declarations of near-love had scared him off. He was just a guy, in a lot of ways.

What do you want, Nefertari? Her mom's question after her change caught her off guard. She'd confided her fears about being so closely tied to Jasper, to a man who had bonded her perhaps out of guilt, or simple decency. He was saddled with her, but she was also saddled with him. What *did* she want from Jasper?

And when had she lost the nerve to talk to a man? They usually couldn't get her to shut up, on any topic. She resolved to find out where she stood with Jasper. She'd simply ask him.

She dropped Makarios to answer her phone and switched to the visual view when she saw it was the vampire in question. He was on her porch, in a suit and tie, with a bouquet of blood-red roses. Tari suppressed a squeal and tried what she thought was a nonchalant smile.

"Going somewhere?" she asked.

"I am somewhere. I wanted to do this right. I haven't done it right yet. Are you free tonight?"

"You left an hour ago." *I know what I want, Mom. This is what I want.*

"Tari, I'm asking you if you'll go out with me. On a date."

Tari flipped the phone off and scurried to the door. She leaned against it for a moment and counted to four. "Well, hi there."

He looked amazing, like he always did, but amazing in a black suit with flowers and cologne had a special air about it.

"What's this about, Professor Grayson?"

He pushed the flowers into her hand and sat on her couch as she put them in water. "They're beautiful."

"So are you. You are so very beautiful. It may be my imagination, but I think you sparkle a little now. This is probably the only time I've ever said this to a woman, but we need to talk."

"I think so too. You first."

He patted the seat next to him as had become a habit in her townhouse over the past week, and she faced him, one leg curled underneath. "I feel terribly underdressed for this conversation."

"We seem to have that problem a lot."

"Go ahead, Grayson. I'm clear headed and all ears."

"I noticed that clarity. That's from the change as well. You'll find it pour over into your research and other relationships. And there I went and used the relationship word."

"Caught that."

It's difficult because it's important. Eve's words, from only twenty minutes earlier, circled in his brain and gained truth with each loop.

"You're no longer my experiment, Tari."

"Right."

"And your change is complete. You don't need me."

"I guess that's a good thing. Have I thanked you for saving my life?"

"About as many times as I've apologized for cursing you with death."

"Well, really, Dad is to blame, but that was a terribly long time ago."

"I'm not stalking you."

"I kind of liked the stalking, to a point. It never got icky."

He nodded and rubbed at his chin, wondering if he'd remembered to shave. He'd tried to make this perfect. Perhaps they'd been through too much to pretend they could start from scratch. He reached for her hand and pulled it to his lips, without the playful nip at her white flesh he'd come to enjoy.

"Do you like me, Jasper?"

Tari's eyes grew misty, and he squeezed her hand.

"Yes, I like you very much."

"Are you here to start over?"

“I was going to give it a go, but it seems a little silly now that I’m here. I wanted you to know you don’t need me, don’t owe me anything, that you’re fine on your own.”

“I got that the moment I saw you on the porch. I think I got it before then. Let me change and then we can go out to dinner. I’m starved.”

She got up, and he followed her into the bedroom and pulled her down onto the bed. “I don’t want to start over.”

“Would it be okay if I tell Nancy we’re dating? She’s my best friend, and she’s going to ask.”

“Absolutely.” His heart soared and relief poured through him. “Absolutely, please do. Tell everyone.”

He brushed his hand along Tari’s cheek, wondering at his luck. “Hey, now that we’re dating, will you tell me what you guys did in Vegas?”

“I think I’ll show you instead.”

About the Author

Ciar Cullen grew up in Baltimore, Maryland. After working as an archaeologist for a few decades, she settled in New Jersey, where she writes and works at a prominent college. Ciar is happily married, with one cat. To learn more about Ciar Cullen, please visit www.ciarcullen.com, where you can send an email to her, or visit her daily blog at <http://ciarcullen.wordpress.com>. Ciar can be found at odd moments on Twitter as well.

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Love—it's the real thing. And complicated as hell...

The Egyptian Demon's Keeper

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Archeologist Eliza Schneider assumes her meeting with an exotic stranger in the Egyptian desert was a heat-induced hallucination...until he materializes in New York. She has to give the tall, handsome Egyptian high marks for originality with his pick-up line: they're fated to save the world together. The master/servant thing goes a long way towards sweeping her off her feet, but it's easier to believe he's just another in her long line of poor romantic choices.

Kasdeya, the Fifth Satan, waited eons for his Keeper to find her way to his tomb amongst the ancient ruins. He only has a limited time to convince Eliza that her role is critical to help defeat the loathsome Deumos, a female demon who has laid her claim to bearing his child—a child that will bring down mortals.

Trouble is, Eliza doesn't even believe Kasdeya is real. If he can't convince her he isn't an illusion—and neither is their love—Deumos will win.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Egyptian Demon's Keeper:

Eliza opened one eye and gulped back a scream. If she was asleep, then the dream was astounding. She wiggled her toes to make sure she wasn't in sleep paralysis.

That man was humming. He was two feet away from her, staring at his palms as if a secret message were about to appear on his skin, and humming.

Okay, she thought, this is pretty bad. Unless the laws of physics had suddenly changed and rain could defy gravity, she *had* lost her mind, and this guy seemed a permanent part of her new psychosis. At least he was beautiful. Eliza hoped fervently that if she had to remain mad, he would continue to be part of her altered state.

“You hear about sunstroke killing people, you know, but you never hear about this stuff.”

He jumped to his feet and stared down at her, running his hand through his long, black locks. “I was meditating. You...”

“I frightened you?”

His cheeks reddened, and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Of course not. Mortals cannot frighten me.” He crossed his arms and puffed out his chest, as if the stance would somehow convince her that she hadn't startled him.

“Mortals? Did you say mortals? As opposed to...non-mortals?”

“Correct.” He tapped his foot in a very mortal gesture of impatience.

“This just gets better and better. Okie dokie then. I know I’m supposed to be your keeper or servant or something—isn’t that what you told me in Egypt? Excuse me, should that be ‘the land of pharaohs’?”

“Correct. You are my Keeper, my servant, and it is the land of pharaohs. I’m pleased you listened.”

“Great. I’m dying to please my own hallucination. Would my hallucination mind getting me some water?” *I have to try to pull it together. What if this is a real guy, and he drugged you? Come on, the door is close enough. Please, God, please let my legs work.*

He gestured to the ornate decanter and glass on the low table. The smirk pulling on his lips ticked her off. So, he knew she meant to make a break for it.

“I will pour for you, of course.”

He handed her a glass, and she pushed herself up so she could sip. Mind racing, coming up blank, she concentrated on clearing her head with the water. She stole glances at him, but his expression was impassive. What does a serial killer look like, anyway? Why couldn’t one look like a soap opera star? An Egyptian soap opera star? Did they have soap operas in Egypt? *I’m in real trouble, no matter how I look at this.*

“Look, if it’s money you’re after, you picked the wrong girl. Maybe the museum would belly up a few thousand for me... Did you drug me? That’s it, isn’t it? You got to my canteen in Egypt...”

“And then miraculously found you in New York, slipped unnoticed into your office or apartment, and put a poison potion in your glass?”

She shook her head uncertainly. It didn’t explain the raindrops, the change in his appearance from Dr. Kasey Smith to Kasdeya. Nothing was adding up.

“So, you don’t really know David, and you don’t really work for the museum in Boston.”

“What gave me away?” He smiled fully for the first time, his eyes coming to life and gentle creases appearing around them.

Eliza refilled her water glass in a half-hearted attempt to stall. No matter how hard she thought about it, she could only come to one conclusion. The Egyptian desert had robbed her of sanity. Perhaps she was already in an institution and didn’t know it?

“Where are we?” She glanced around the large room, what seemed like part of a larger suite. “Are we in New York?” The ornate furnishings smacked of something from an *Arabian Nights* tale, but with modern amenities. “It has that flying carpet thing going on.”

“Not that again.” His smile faded, and he rubbed at his temples.

“Sorry. I’m known to give people headaches. Do demons get headaches?”

Kasdeya took a deep breath and blew it out. Eliza knew that move. She’d watched her mother, David, and just about everyone else in her life do it many times.

“Is the room to your liking? I thought you would feel comfortable with these...things.” He gestured to the furniture uncertainly as if he had carved the intricate woodwork himself and was concerned for her

approval. The Fifth Satan was a complicated guy—big, buff, dangerous, easily startled and oddly ill at ease. Did he need something from her? Perhaps he didn't hold all the cards.

"You didn't answer my question. Are. We. In. New. York?"

"More or less. Would you like to be in New York?"

"Absolutely."

"Then we are."

A mild tremor rolled through the suite. An earthquake in New York?

"Did you do that?"

He cocked his head to one side and studied her. "I thought you said you wanted to be in New York. Well, we're here. Or there. You are a very confused woman, and you're beginning to confuse me."

"Why don't you tell me what the fuck is going on, Mr. Kasdeya? And if you tell me not to curse, I'll...I'll curse again."

"I will warn you that some of the answers you seek may come as a bit of a shock."

"As opposed to rain stopping in midair? Try me."

The last thing Eliza expected was for her captor to strip off his black T-shirt. "Dude, there's no need for that!" Surely he wasn't going to accost her? He shook his head subtly, as if he read her thought and wanted to ease her mind. "Look at me."

"I'm looking." She couldn't take her eyes off him if she tried. Like an artist had wrapped a masterpiece of sculpture with velvety skin and breathed life into it, Kasdeya was exquisite. He moved his arm to point at the band of golden script that circled one bicep, and his stomach rippled, down to the ridges of muscles framing his slender hips.

"When was the last time you saw a man without a shirt, Eliza? I'm pointing to my arm. Look at it." She glanced at his face instead. His smirk of satisfaction annoyed her.

"Oh, so big deal, you're gorgeous. Get over yourself. All right, let me see your damned arm. I noticed that in pharaoh land. Skip the mumbo jumbo and tell me what it says and why I should care."

"I don't know what it says. You're supposed to tell me. You're my Keeper."

"What the hell does that mean anyway? Like a zookeeper? When's your feeding time? Damn, my head is killing me again."

"You're probably hungry. Come, let us dine and we can discuss things casually."

"Oh, lovely, yes, let's have a nice little chat over dinner. A night out on the town? Perhaps drinks first?"

"That sarcasm does not suit you. You will want to freshen up, of course."

Born to protect women's hearts, her own beats longingly for a mortal. Oops...

Oh Goddess

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Ondina, one thousand years a goddess, doesn't think much of mortal men. Probably because her sole purpose in life is to protect the hearts of women who don't want to fall in love. And now one of those blasted men—Jack—has shattered her sacred chalice, trapping her in a mortal body.

Jackson Nichols, on the partner track at his law firm, is the first to admit he always follows his head. Never his heart. Dina is infuriating, messy, condescending, sexy, beautiful and...well, just about everything that doesn't fit into his meticulously planned life.

Neither expects to find many redeeming qualities in the other. But when push comes to love, which will Dina choose? Her newly human heart...or one thousand years of duty?

*All author and editor proceeds from the sale of *Oh Goddess* will be donated to the Coalition for Pulmonary Fibrosis. You can find out more about the foundation at www.coalitionforpf.org.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Oh Goddess:

“In you go, Goddess.”

The mortal held open the front door to his home and gestured her in. Ondina sauntered through the threshold, but not before glaring at him. She also held back the great desire to stick out her tongue at him.

Humans were strange creatures, especially the male ones. She did not much care for being thrust into his caretaking, though she saw the wisdom of it. Until she was able to return to her own realm, she needed a guide for this one. Males had their uses. Or so she hoped.

She appraised his living area—black and steel, sleek lines and little color but for a few pieces on the walls. She ran her finger over the divan made from the skin of an animal. She doubted he had killed it himself. He was more a scholar than a hunter, yet he seemed to maintain strong masculinity. She had no doubt he attracted a fair amount of female admirers. Once again, humans were strange creatures, after all.

Ondina wandered to the wall at which he had set up an altar consisting of a large screen and several lit up boxes. Apparently, he prayed to the Gods of Technology. She faulted him not, for she also very much liked the noises and pictures from those boxes. She surveyed the devices with keen interest. Perhaps he would instruct her on their use.

Just thinking of asking him for assistance made her snarl. He had barely spoken to her on their journey here; his jaw had been set as if cast in iron. She rolled her eyes. Obstinate male. And every time he called her “Dina” her fingers clenched like bird feet on a branch. It was worse when he called her

“Goddess” though. No reverence in his voice—in fact, the opposite. He may as well have been calling her “Nuisance”.

She opened her mouth to say something demeaning to him, just for fun, when a hideous noise emanated from her middle and she felt a sharp, gnawing pain. “Mortal! Quickly! There is something wrong.”

He looked unamused. “Yes, Your Highness?”

She shook her head and grabbed his hand, bringing it to her own middle. “Something growls. It hurts here.”

He laid his hand flat on her belly. “When was the last time you ate?”

“I have not. Are you insinuating that I ate a small, growling animal?”

He chuckled. “No. I am insinuating that you are hungry. What do goddesses like to eat? I’m afraid I’m all out of fresh peeled grapes.”

“So, the growling signals hunger?” She would remember that for next time. Besides, to eat would be such an adventure. She’d wanted to try flapjacks since she had saved a young woman’s heart on the Oregon Trail.

He led her to the kitchen and motioned for her to sit. “When you win the Oscar someday, I guess I will be glad I played along with this. You must be very popular with the drama club.”

She sat on a stool while he began meal preparations, accepting a goblet of what he told her was wine, but not before she smelled it for poison. She swirled it, enjoying the look of it in the glass.

Ondina studied him closely. His hair was black as night, but his eyes as blue as cornflowers. He moved about the kitchen with lazy grace, not lumbering like some fool men she had seen. She supposed he was handsome, therefore dangerous. She wondered why she had never been invoked by a woman wanting to protect herself from *him*. It would certainly necessitate a strong magic.

They didn’t speak while he cracked eggs into a bowl. He wasn’t snipping at her anymore, but it unsettled her more that he did not. She did not like to be ignored. She watched him a few minutes more.

“Tell me, mortal...” She stared at him thoughtfully. “If you do not believe I am here by way of magic, why are you preparing a meal for me? Why am I not on the grass of your lawn with a bruised tailbone for my troubles?”

He was stirring the mixture over the heat. “I suppose I’m wondering what you’re really about. My sister certainly believes you, and she is generally trustworthy.” He plated the eggs and set one plate in front of her as he came around to take the stool next to hers. “I just don’t believe in conjuring and goddesses and magic bottles.”

She regarded her eggs carefully and then took a bite. “I am enjoying the eating. I should like to try a bubble bath next. Do you possess the potions to make it bubbular?”

“Bubbular?” he repeated, and then shook his head. “I suppose I could make your bathwater *bubbular*.”

They ate the rest of the meal in silence.

He poured them more wine and gestured to the living room. “Ondina?”

“Yes, mortal?”

He sighed. “I have a name you know.”

“How pleasant for you.”

She shrieked a bit when the goblet he thrust at her dribbled onto her hand.

He sat next to her. “Tell me why Rachel turned to spells and witchcraft.”

He looked perplexed, and her heart pinged. Just a little. It would take some getting used to, this human heart.

“Rachel is very intelligent. She is also very dedicated to her studies. She will be a fine healer someday.”

“I know that. Tell me the part I’m missing.”

Ondina sighed. “Men. Boys. Neanderthals.” His face was not yet registering understanding, so she gulped the rest of her wine and stood. “Love.” She paced the room. The subject always agitated her. “She was falling in love. She was falling *hopelessly* in love with one of your kind.”

“Is he a bad guy or something?”

“He is a *he*.” Imbecile. What more was necessary to make him a “bad guy”?

Jack stood up and blocked her path. “I’m all for Rachel finishing school before rushing into any serious relationships, but being male doesn’t equate him with being evil.”

“Does it not? Are you so sure?” She folded her arms and looked him square in the eye.

“Dina, it sounds to me like you had a really bad relationship, and you’re trying to scare my sister off men.” A subtle change came over his face as an epiphany dawned across his features. “You’re an angry lesbian, aren’t you?”

She shoved him out of her way. “Do you even know what eviscerate means?”

Ondina stomped back into the kitchen, poured the last two drops of wine into the glass and growled with frustration. She opened the door of the cold storage and removed another bottle. She stared at its closure while eyeing the opener on the counter. How in the worlds would *that* open *this*? It made no sense, surely they could have come up with an easier way to open a bottle. Maybe she should throw *his* chalice into a wall and see how well he liked it.

The mortal followed her into the kitchen and held out his hand for the bottle. She snorted and handed it to him. Condescending ingrate. How frustrating. Especially when he opened the bottle with ease and poured them each another glass.

“Sorry about the whole lesbian thing.” He handed her a glass. “It was very tactless of me. You seem to bring that out in me for some reason. Why don’t you tell me why you hate men.”

She pursed her lips and cocked her head. “I do not hate men. Why ever would you think that?”

Jack blinked at her. “Just a hunch. The word eviscerate comes to mind.”

“My purpose is to protect the heart of a woman, not to hate men.” She wrinkled her nose. “I just happen to find most of them to be daft.”

“You have a point. I must be daft. I just made scrambled eggs for a crazy woman who thinks she is a goddess, I’m getting ready to run her a bubbular bath, and it looks as though I’ll be putting her up for the night.” He shook his head. “Until a few short hours ago I led a very well-ordered life, you know.”

The clock is ticking...

Midnight Savior

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The Watchers, Book 4

The phrase “home sweet home” means nothing to Marie DeVeux. Her parents never understood her ongoing relationship with her dead grandmother. Plus, she’s plagued with dreams of a man being tortured. Dreams so real, the burden strips away every vestige of normal life. At rock bottom, she hears her grandmother’s voice telling her that the man exists, and she’s the only one who can save him.

Kern, a Watcher, should have been more careful when he wished for a little more excitement in his life. Kidnapping wouldn’t have been his choice. Torture, solitary confinement and starvation have left his soul consumed by a burning rage and inner demons that push him to lash out at the first face he’s seen in eight long months. Marie.

Is this woman his knight in shining armor, or just another experiment? Kern must sift through the chaos of his mind for the truth that lies hidden in his heart. And make a decision before time runs out—for them both.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Midnight Savior:

A man walked through the laboratory door wearing an expensive business suit. His eyes were cold. Kern glared at the man with murderous intent. Suddenly, the man pulled a gun from his coat and fired. Kern slid to the floor, blood staining his shirt—spreading, darkening.

Marie heard screams, and as Kern shook her, she realized they were her own. Tears welled in her eyes, and she wiped them away with shaky hands. Her mind foggy from sleep, she looked around, momentarily confused as to where she was.

“It’s alright. You were dreaming.”

Marie continued her perusal of the room. Kern had made a pallet on the floor in one of the rooms, and she had fallen asleep in his arms.

Now fully awake, the dream would not let her be. It continued to play through her head. Marie’s chest tightened. She felt as though she was having a panic attack. An uneasy sensation settled in the pit of her stomach. This was no ordinary dream, she told herself. This was something she needed to listen to. *They* needed to listen to.

Marie rose from the pallet, ran to the lab and grabbed their clothes. She threw Kern’s at him and hopped around the room on one leg while trying to pull on her jeans.

“Hurry, Kern. We’ve got to get out of here. He’s coming.”

When Kern made no move, Marie stopped and looked at him.

“What are you talking about?”

Marie tried not to go off in hysterics. Her dream was clear as day. She had to get Kern to understand they needed to leave—now.

“The man from the recording is coming, and he’s going to kill you. We need to get out of here. Kern, you have to believe me. I saw it.”

Kern stood slowly and began to dress. “I’m not leaving.”

Marie had had a feeling he was going to say that, but she had hoped she was wrong. “You can’t stay here. Look, I know you can get the door open, and I know you want to wait for the doctor and make him pay for what he has done to you, but you can’t do this. He’s going to *kill* you.”

Kern dressed with jerky motions. Marie tried to ignore him as she quickly pulled on her clothes. She could feel his anger—at her.

He walked out of the room without saying a word. Marie made a beeline for the small room where Kern had been chained and retrieved her backpack, then sat on the cot to put on her shoes and socks. When she sprinted into the lab, Kern was not there.

“Kern?”

Marie found him in the kitchen, rummaging through the refrigerator. He grabbed a beer and popped the top.

“What are you doing? We’ve got to go.”

Kern’s eyes were again the cold, dark pools she had seen when he had attacked her. Instinctively, she took a step back.

“I said, I’m not going. Why do you want me to leave? So I don’t kill him? Is that it? Did you know all along when he was coming?”

Marie’s heart shrank in her chest. She shook her head, unable to believe what she was hearing. How could he think such a thing?

“No. I’ve told you the truth. I…”

“You dreamed it, right? Or did your dead grandmother tell you?”

What was wrong with him? Marie wanted to scream. She wanted to throw something or slap some sense into him.

“For eight long months I’ve wanted to kill the son of a bitch, and now I’m going to get the chance since you’ve finally told me when he is going to return.”

Marie could feel tears stinging her eyes. She was at a loss for words. Turning on her heels, she returned to the small room and sank on to the cot to think. One thought floating through her mind was to walk out the door and forget about him. She had done her job, right? But she couldn’t. She was caught up

in this, and after the doctor killed Kern, she would be next. The doctor would not want any witnesses to what he had done.

Marie's mind screamed she could not let this happen. She closed her eyes and sought calm. There was only one way to stop what she feared would happen, but it was not going to be easy. In fact, it was going to be the hardest thing she had ever done. Kern was determined to face this man, but he was going to die if she didn't get him out of here.

Marie continued to sit on the cot, hugging her backpack to her chest. She felt numb. Her life was still spiraling out of control. When would the chaos end?

Kern entered the room, but she didn't look at him. She couldn't after what he had said to her, and she figured he was here to fling more accusations. He sat on the cot, but not directly beside her. The gesture didn't go unnoticed. Marie closed her eyes for a moment and held her breath. It was now or never for what she had to do.

Marie turned and shoved her backpack into Kern's chest, sending him falling off the cot. She was up and out the door in a flash. After swinging the door closed, she locked it before Kern could reach her.

Kern rushed the door, slamming into it with his fists and shoulder. The door trembled under his assault. He growled, roared and hissed in a rage. "So, this was the plan all along, huh? To keep an eye on me until the doctor returned. Let me say you did a *wonderful* job being the distraction."

Marie vehemently shook her head. Hearing his harsh, hateful words sent knives of pain through her chest. She needed to make Kern see he was in danger, and she was only trying to save him. The man who put together this lab needed to be stopped, but not at the price of Kern's life.

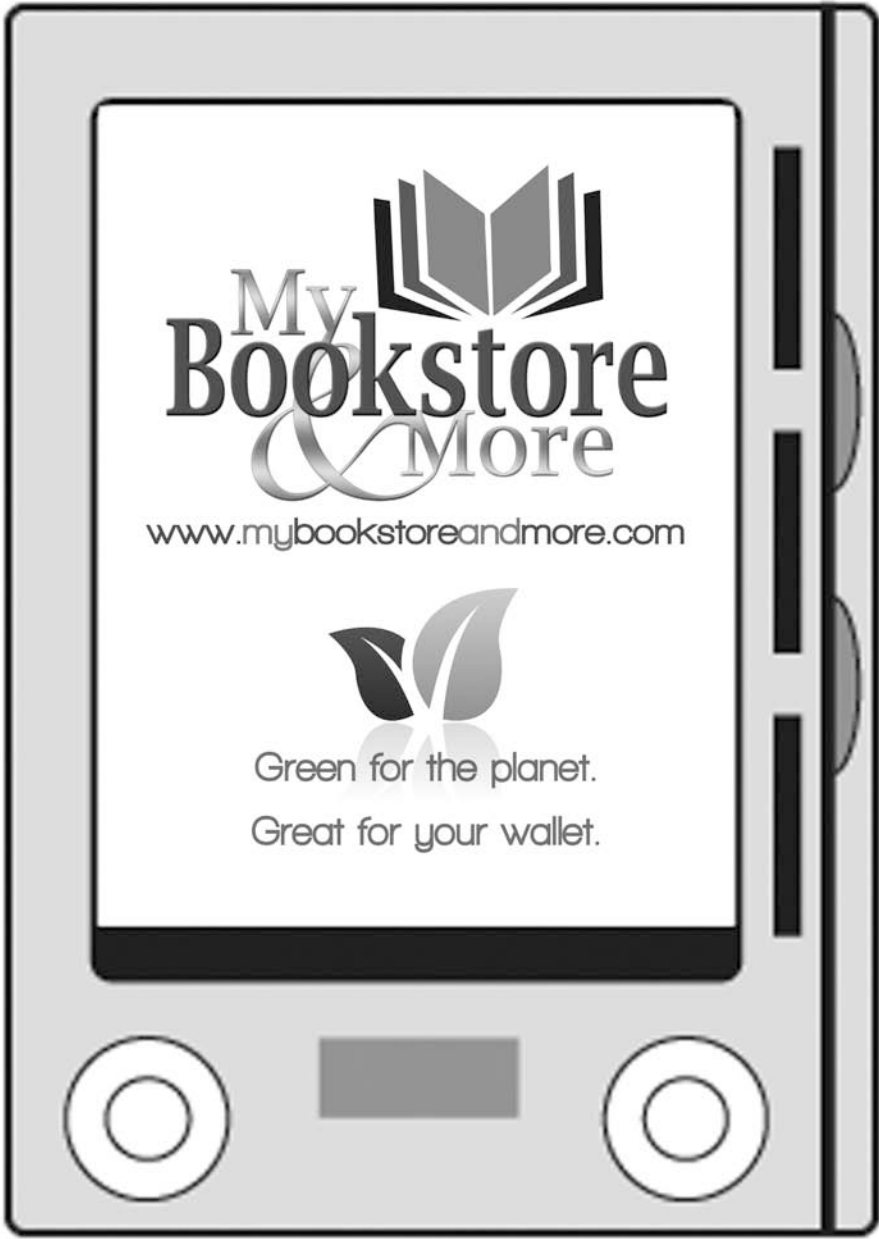
"Kern, I'm *so* sorry. I need you to understand the man will be here soon. You can't fight him because he will win. *Please*. You have to believe me."

Hot tears streamed down her face. She hated to see the anguish in his eyes at being locked in the room once again.

"I'm going to find someone to help us. Maybe someone from the clinic. Perhaps a security guard. I don't know what else to do to save you. Please, you have got to trust me."

Marie had spoken loudly in hopes Kern could hear her words over his tirade, but she could tell from the look in his eyes and on his face he was too far gone to listen to anything she had to say. He was caught up in his anger at the belief she had betrayed him.

It was all too clear. If she returned, Kern would kill her as soon as he was free of the room. The intent was written on his face and blazed in his eyes.



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