

The background of the cover is a dark, moody photograph. It shows a man and a woman in a close embrace. The man is on the right, shirtless, looking towards the camera with a serious expression. The woman is on the left, her face partially obscured by shadows, looking down. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, creating a sensual and mysterious atmosphere.

AWAKENING  
THE  
*Blood*  
TARA S. NICHOLS

Awakening the Blood  
*by Tara Nichols*

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## **Dedication**

To my loving husband for bouncing ideas around with me,  
and Eden T. Chase for all her support and knowledge

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## **Chapter One**

Meara immediately felt the chill of the autumn air the moment she ventured away from the warmth and light of the fire. With only her long, slender shadow for company, she picked her way among the headstones. The thin sliver of moon cast little light across the dark graveyard, but that just seemed fitting. It was Halloween, Meara's favorite holiday, but thanks to Sean, her recent ex, she was in no mood to party. She had drunk too much in an attempt to drown her sorrows. Now, her stomach lurched from all the alcohol she'd consumed. Her ridiculously skimpy witch costume offered very little protection against the season's elements, and every boisterous shout, every echoing laugh, grated on her nerves.

It wasn't just that though. Early that morning, she'd been jarred awake by a recurring nightmare. Whenever she found herself caught up in that terrible dream, she was left with a feeling of foreboding that just wouldn't go away. The dreams seemed to be coming far more often, but she figured it a response to the stress she'd been under lately.

The dream always started out the same, terrifying. Even now, with a slight breeze, she could still smell the acrid air burning her nose and stinging her eyes. She knew not where her dream took place, for it was like nowhere on Earth she had ever visited. She believed she was underground, passing through a narrow tunnel. She could see the walls were musty with mildew, and what little light there was, came from spiraling inscriptions engraved upon the crumbling stone

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walls. Whenever her hand brushed against them, they glowed with an eerie green light of their own.

It was here in the dream that a green mist appeared, and she felt herself pulled forward. With each step she took, her skin began to peel away. Searing pain radiated throughout her as layer upon layer disintegrated to the bone. She struggled, but there was nothing she could do to stop it. When her feet lifted off the ground, she began to tumble, but it only seemed to make it worse. It was then that she would hear her grandmother's voice, calling softly in the distance. The moment she focused on her reassuring words, the darkness melted away and the tunnel collapsed around her.

It was then she would wake, trembling and her heart full of longing for her grandmother. It was infuriating to break the connection at the point where hope returned, but she knew her grandmother had saved her, just like she did many times before. She also knew that, if her grandmother were still alive, she would tell her that it was just a dream, but a very important one to pay attention to. Her grandmother viewed dreams, and especially Meara's dreams, to be very real possibilities. Meara shuddered to think any nightmare so horrendous could exist in reality.

Shaking off the memory of the dream, she closed her mind to the fetid atmosphere and was grateful to be alone. She felt like sour apples wandering off like she did, but she far preferred the doom and gloom of the century-old cemetery than that of the obnoxiously perky party going on in the pit. A good, long sulk was exactly what she needed.

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If any of her friends knew where she was headed, they'd mock her for sure. To them, she would just be confirming what they already thought of her, a freak.

Glancing back to see how far she'd come she was taken aback by the eerie sight of the building that hosted their party. Backlit from the fire, the stark remains of the ruins loomed over the small crowd clustered far below. The ruins, a well-known hangout for occasions like the one she had just abandoned, offered shelter, seclusion, and a thrill. It was a prime location for all sorts of mischief and *the* place to be on Halloween.

She'd followed the others, easily scaled the chain link fence that had been erected to discourage riff raff, and then dropped down into what would have been the basement of the old cathedral. By the time they had the fire started, she'd already lost interest.

Her gaze settled on Sean. Even from that distance, she could easily pick his fair hair out in the crowd. His mouth was spread wide in a youthful grin. He had a beer in each hand, and Jennifer Goald perched on his lap. At least he was having a good time.

For two years, they'd dated, fooling themselves into thinking it would last beyond their years at school. A week ago, when he confessed he didn't see a future with them together, she thought he was wrong. It turned out that he was right. The relationship had been lukewarm to start with, and he was ready to move on. The fact that Jennifer Goald had her hands all over him confirmed it. The thought that he



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had rejected her still burned, and she'd far rather have been the dumper, not the dumpee.

Shutting her eyes against the painful image, she turned back to the shadows and thrust herself forward, determined not to let it get to her. She picked her way among the cemetery stones, stumbling more often than not. Her stomach rumbled and churned, and before she knew it, she doubled over and heaved with violent spasms until her stomach was empty. Righting herself, she wiped her mouth and was amazed at how much better she felt.

Spotting the familiar silhouette of the one she sought, she started forward again and came up behind the large statue carved from grey marble. An impressive span of half-unfurled bat wings protruded from his back, and he was poised in a crouching position, as though he were about to take flight but had been frozen in time.

Patting his muscular haunch like a tamed pet, she ducked beneath one wing and, coming around to peer up into his face, found comfort in his ferocious expression. His face was both terrifying and breathtakingly beautiful at the same time. His brow was creased with a deep furrow, and his lip curled up on the right side, high enough to reveal one extended fang. Her vampire, she thought with a dreamy sigh.

Ever since she'd attended her first party at the infamous ruins, she'd been coming to visit the statue. He was an urban legend, called the Winged Dude by the crass, and Dracula, by the romantic, but she believed his name was D'iamonte. Whether that was his name or not, she didn't know. It had

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come to her one day when she'd visited him, and it sort of stuck.

If her friends knew of her little intimacies with the statue they'd tease her mercilessly, or chalk it up to just another one of her idiosyncrasies. She'd never liked being the butt of jokes. Her unusual fashion sense and quirky way of viewing the world always seemed to attract trouble, but it was her Gypsy lineage that had given her the most grief. Because of it, she'd grown a thick skin and a quick tongue in order to deal with the bigots and the bullies.

Knowing she had a touch of the old Gypsy magic, her parents had told her horror stories of fear and flight, thievery and famine, and had warned her to keep her head down and her nose clean. They feared her unruly, midnight-black, curly hair and her dark complexion would subject her to the prejudices that were still very much alive. But her ability to tap into something divine compelled them to quell her the most. What they hadn't anticipated was the opposite reaction. Once forbidden, the pull of the gypsy lore had become enticing for her, and she'd delved into it with all her heart, wrapping herself up in it like a colorful patchwork blanket. By the time she had reached puberty, her curiosity had led her to search for her long-lost grandmother, a woman who taught her everything she knew of her ancestral family and the Gypsy lifestyle they had once led.

Armed with exotic tales and a mind full of wonder, she embraced all that was gypsy and paved a way for herself, becoming a trendsetter rather than just another restless teenager. But for as many answers as she found to her

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questions, more arose to take their place. Strange things happened around her, especially when her emotions were running high.

At first, it was little things, like her handy ability to know ahead of time when her mother was about to call on the telephone. But when her dreams started coming true, her grandmother claimed it was her fortune-telling genes coming to the surface. Then her grandmother died, and she had no one to talk to about it. She quickly became confused and isolated from her friends, and eventually hid her talents away for fear of being shunned, mocked, or persecuted.

A strong cool breeze slammed into her and brought her back to the present. The wind seemed to grow stronger, and she started to wonder if they were in for a storm. It would seem fitting, on a Halloween night, to have their last hurrah crashed by the forces that be. Shaking off the residual discomfort, Meara was, again, grateful to be alone.

She returned her dark eyes to the statue, and noticed a lock of hair that fell over his face. She marveled, not for the first time, at the detail the artist was able to capture in such a difficult medium as marble.

She loved her stone-man. He was always there for her when she needed him. Despite the fact that he was fashioned in stone, she felt comforted when she was in his presence. His broad, sinewy shoulders; his muscular arms; and the squared frame of his masculine hips, exuded strength, promising unbridled power and protection, and the robust phallus jutting straight out between his thighs wasn't too subtle either.

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A sly smile tugged at the corner of her lips. Usually, when it came to public works of art, male statues were often lacking in the endowment department. This was not the case. The statue's long, thick erection rose up to greet her and pointed right at the very place she longed to have it buried. Responded to the sight, her sex with heat and tingled with excitement.

Rumors abounded about this particular statue because of his endowments, none of which she expected to be true, but she cared not a whit for power, money, or fame. All she wanted was a little companionship, and he made for pretty fine company indeed. Reaching up to him like a familiar lover, she touched his cold stone cheek, and caressed the smooth surface with idle curiosity.

"I'll bet I'm not the only one to entertain certain inappropriate fantasies about you, am I?" Her finger traced the line of his high cheekbone down to his bottom lip. "I'm sorry about that, it's just, there's something about you, something I find hard to resist."

The pungent scent of rotting leaves filled her senses, and a strong breeze swirled around her, stirring up the leaves gathered at the foundation of the statue. A flood of emotions washed over her, and she steadied her wavering body with a tighter hold on the statue.

Whatever her connection to the statue was felt powerful. It took her by surprise every time. Her response to him was always immediate, overwhelming her senses, and filling her with imagination wild with fantasies of what she could do with a permanent erection.

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Already her panties were drenched with her desire. She smiled and pressed her cheek against his cold thigh. With her gaze level with his erection, she wondered if she could squeeze into the tight confines of his lap, straddle his thighs, and feel his marble cock buried deep inside of her. She might not even be able to take him all the way in.

Lost in the moment, she raised her hand tentatively and settled it over the bulbous head. *If only he were real*, she thought, admiring his fine features. She imagined he would be a better lover than Sean had been, not just bigger, but more skilled, too. He would be tender, yet rough when she wanted him to be, and eternally faithful.

A small tug on her clothing to the fact that her bodice had caught on one of his outstretched fingers, and she cast him a wry smile as though he'd done it on purpose.

"So, you want a piece of this?" She addressed the statue. "I don't mind." Her fingers traced the lace framing her bulging breasts. "In fact, I confess I've entertained a few fantasies about it myself," she added and swayed her hips seductively. "If I show you, do you promise to keep it a secret?"

The thought that her silent partner would expose her brought a smile to her lips. "Well, here goes," she said and took a deep breath. With a firm tug on the satin ribbon that held her bodice closed, she loosened her top and stripped away the layers of satin and cotton until her breasts were bare. Her dark red nipples instantly tightened in the cool air, and she couldn't help but utter a soft gasp.

"Oh? You liked that did you?" She returned her hand to his cock and rubbed it like she expected him to feel it. "So did I."

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Sparing her winged man a flitting glance, she thrust her chest out and dragged the stiff points of her nipples against his smooth palm. It felt so cold it burned, yet the stone's cold surface was no match for her hot flesh. She felt a surge of energy swirling in the pit of her belly, and she shuddered with delight. Moving slowly, with one hand pushing off his thigh and the other pulling down on his shoulder, she slid her nipples farther along his forearm. Just looking at his handsome face made her pussy throb with longing. An uncontrollable desire was building deep inside her, one she knew she would not be able to ignore.

She gazed hungrily at his erection and thought about the risk she was contemplating. Then, with an impulsive act, she brought her mouth over the head of his cock and spit. Using the end of her skirt, she polished it until it shined.

"That ought to do it," she said stepping back. Then, with a glance back to the party, she boldly slipped her panties off and climbed into his lap. She ground against the smooth marble and pressed her erect nipples along the curvature of his chest.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, she felt the hard pressure of his cock against her labia. His phallus was impressive, and she was just curious enough to try. She hesitated a moment when the cold tip of his large prick pressed against her hot inner lips. Angling her hips, she eased down onto his permanent erection, found the angle difficult but manageable, and eventually, pleasurable. His girth filled her, stretching her far beyond anything she'd ever felt before, and the cold unyielding surface pushed up, deeper and

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deeper. At first, it was all she could do just to have him inside her, but when the stone began to warm and his shaft had been coated with her arousal, she was able to shift her hips where it felt more comfortable. Even that small amount of movement felt amazing, and soon she was sliding up and down the length of his shaft with ease. Caught up in her excitement, it was an effort not to make any noise.

Instinctively, she lifted her face to his and kissed his stone-cold mouth. His lips were cool and lifeless, and again, she wished he were real. Still, it felt good, intimate despite his lack of response. She continued to kiss him while bobbing up and down his length, working her tongue into the little crevice of his lips, until she caught the edge of her lip on that one of his fangs. Electricity sparked between them, and she recoiled.

She felt her lips swell and tasted blood in her mouth. *So, he likes to play rough*, she thought with a smile and sucked her lip. *So do I*.

Mist and fog started to drift around them, and she was grateful for the cover. Leaning in, she began to move again, clamping her pussy down tight. It felt easier now, and his cock seemed warmer, yielding to her contours. She was able to fit him all the way in, yet, he felt thicker, if that were possible. Somehow, it started to feel even better. Everything had become intensely pleasurable. No other lover had been better, she decided, and she brought her mouth to his once again and felt their tongues entwined.

The connection she had always felt in his presence seemed stronger now, and she embraced it. Encouraged, she picked

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up momentum, and her nipples dragged against his chest, which created a pleasurable friction with each upward thrust. Every downward stroke along his cock felt like an eternity, until she was certain she could feel her hair and fingernails growing, her skin flaking away and healing, her blood soaring through her veins with a deafening roar. His hips rose up to meet her, and she matched his thrusts with renewed vigor. He met her halfway, pushed deeper into her, and their bodies seemed to meld together. She felt the thudding of her heart in her chest, and in the next moment, she could have sworn it was his.

She closed her eyes and heard the harsh whistle of the wind through the bare branches of the trees. It could almost have been mistaken for voices if one let her imagination wander, eerie voices, caught in death. In the back of her mind, she swore she could hear someone else call her name, someone familiar, but she dismissed it easily, deciding whoever it was, couldn't be that important.

Calling her attention back to him, her partner drove into her with persistent fervor,, and she lifted her gaze to his face. His dark eyes glittered with lust, and she felt she could get lost in his penetrating gaze, yet she never thought to question who it was that writhed beneath her. She'd handed all control over to her body's craving for him, had grown numb to any outside interference. For the moment, her whole world was D'iamonte. He brought her to a wondrous place, filled with wondrous sensations.

He brought his mouth down upon her breast, and she felt his tongue swirl around her nipple. She saw a flash of fangs,



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his teeth close in, and felt a momentary pain when he bit down hard. To her pleasant surprise, it felt euphoric.

The eerie whispers grew louder, and a dank loamy scent filled her senses, threatening to overwhelm her. It was almost enough to distract her but was no match for the seductive thrusts of her lover.

She felt herself lifted, his strong arms bearing her weight, and pulling her away from those annoying them. Determined, he drove his cock even deeper, sucked her breast even harder, until she was completely enraptured by his ever increasing tempo, and unable to hold off her orgasm any longer. She succumbed to her body's demands, and crested the peak of bliss. Echoes of her climax pulsated over her in waves, and she heard D'iamonte's joyous laughter rumble in his chest. It rose up out of his throat, and he tilted his head back against his shoulders, which sent forth a tidal wave inside of her with his release.

Her eyes widened at the sight of his terrible blood-stained teeth, and her scream stuck fast in her throat. Panicking, she gasped with fright and began to flail. Her fear threatened to seize her chest tight, and her mind reeled with logical solutions, but nothing made sense. Almost instantly, an imposing force engulfed her in darkness. An acrid smell stung her nose, and she struggled for a lungful of air. A shriek reverberated off the trees somewhere in the distance followed by other strange noises that sounded tinny and muted to her ears. She became aware of the bone-chilling temperature that threatened to numb her limbs, making her feel like she couldn't move. Something cold and clingy grappled at her

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skirt, and she struggled to gain her freedom. She felt icy hands upon her, saw frightening faces rising up around them, grabbing at her with nailed fingers, sharp as steel. Her breath started to catch in her lungs, ice, frightening images.

A soft, soothing voice came to her ears, and she couldn't help but feel calmer. She was aware that someone still held her, and she focused on that until light and warmth began to return. Opening her eyes, she met the feral gaze of her lover. The statue had come alive! His wings, black and glossy under the weak moonlight, stretched out to their full width. She looked down to see the hands that once belonged to the statue still gripping her thighs. His mouth lowered, and she expected it to graze her neck, puncture her and draw her lifeblood away. She braced herself for the agony of it, but to her surprise, his lips closed over her own, and she felt his tongue inside her mouth.

Someone shouted something incomprehensible, and she strained to hear it. It sounded closer now. Someone was coming to her rescue.

Despite her body's positive response to him, she broke free, fell to the ground and scrambled to get away. She didn't get far though before the statue was upon her. He towered over her with his cock slick and dripping. It was clear he was not finished with her yet.

She looked up at him with eyes wide with fear when his focus lowered to her open legs. He gazed upon her hot center, and his mouth pulled into a devious smile. She couldn't deny that a part of her, a strange, unexplainable part, wanted nothing more than to take him up on it, but a

loud commotion from the side of the ruins drew both of their gazes up.

Beams of light danced across the grass when the police rushed upon the scene, their flashlights bouncing as they ran. Before she could blink, the dark-winged man stretched his wings tight preparing to take flight, but he struggled to become airborne, and, seeing it was no use, soon gave up. Stunned, she watched him run across the grounds, his movements stiff, and strangely clumsy.

The cops rounded the corner just as he melded with the shadows, and she just managed to slap her knees closed before their beam of light landed directly between her legs. Pulling her costume tight across her breasts, she hugged her arms around herself and tried her best to maintain some of her dignity.

She saw the cop nearest to her roll his eyes. It was obvious what she'd been up to, and it didn't look good.

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## Chapter Two

What an agreeable awakening, D'iamonte thought as he stretched his unused muscles and shook the moss that had accumulated over the years from his hair.

His elbow thumped the wall, and his wingtips bent over at an uncomfortable angle. The small space, in which he huddled, didn't allow him much movement. It was some sort of small storage building, full of holes and leaning. It smelled too, but anything was better than perching on top of that pedestal again. He'd run far, feeling it had been necessary, and then crawled into the derelict shelter to give himself enough time to recuperate, just in case he needed to fight.

He hadn't anticipated not being able to fly. It was unnerving. Nevertheless, he'd have to stay where he was until the threat passed. Besides, he needed to shake off the blissful daze he found himself in. His encounter with that lovely mortal had energized and drained him at the same time.

He smiled, thinking about his narrow escape. At first, he couldn't place what was wrong. His head was fuzzy, his legs had gone soft, and his heart was full of unexplained joy. He felt inebriated, but he didn't know whether it was his body's reaction to freedom or something in the blood of his victim.

Some victim, he thought with a smile. He'd recognized those bottomless, dark irises anywhere. She was the beauty who had returned to his side, time and again. She'd sat at his side professing her fears and her heartache to what she

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thought was just a statue. Most of the time, her mood had been subdued, perhaps a little coy, but this time, she had advanced upon him, seduced him, and freely given herself up to him in the most carnal of acts. In all his experience, that had never happened before, and he had to confess that it had been a very pleasant surprise. She was everything he desired; young, slim, a little bit wild, determined, and very mortal.

And then there was the taste of her, he smiled, remembering it fondly. She had an exotic flavor. There was something else hidden within her veins, something ancient. Her blood had tingled upon his tongue, but she was mortal.

He purred with satisfaction, and it vibrated off the walls surrounding him. He preferred mortals. They were warm, and he loved the sound of their heart beating in their chests. While his existence was bleak and filled with bitterness, mortals' minds were most often pleasant and filled with hope. When he was with a mortal, the person's happiness became his, even if it was only for a few moments. Some called it a perversion. He considered it fair play. If he was going to take something from them, then they should get something back, and they most certainly did when he chose his victims carefully. Most of them never knew what he was or what he'd taken from them. All they felt was intense pleasure.

This mortal had known what he was, though. For the first time, a lover had advanced upon him. Even though she took advantage, the act was not entirely selfish. He'd heard her tender words, her sympathy, and her sorrow. He'd responded to her seduction like any mortal man would, and his release

had been even more agreeable than the taste of her blood on his lips.

Sliding the tip of his tongue along his teeth, he lingered on that thought. That was what had woken him, he was certain. Her blood was powerful, and for the first time, he wanted more. Once with her would not be enough, yet he feared it had little to do with hunger. She sent a thrill coursing through his veins, but it was not wise to return to the same victim time and time again. The risk of exposure was too great.

What did it matter? He was far too weak to do anything about it now anyway. Even though he'd taken blood from her it had not been enough, but perhaps after he found nourishment and rested a while, he'd go pay her a visit. He would just watch her for a while and see if he could figure out what was so special about her. It shouldn't be too difficult to find her. He'd recognize that intoxicating scent anywhere.

The wind howled through a gap in the decaying boards that surrounded him, and he sobered. He had to be careful not to get distracted for fear of alerting the one who'd imprisoned him in the first place.

He shuddered, thinking of the ethereal beauty who had once ruled his world, Dania, the leader of his clan. She may be beautiful, but it meant nothing once one witnessed her sharply honed cruelty. The vampire mistress would not be pleased to learn he had gained his freedom, but she was not upon him yet, and he decided she must not know. Although, he was confident she would by morning. Her sentries would report his absence, and she'd send half the coven out to round him up if she thought it was necessary.

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At least one thing was in his favor. She'd taught him everything he knew. For now, he would be able to turn her tricks against her and treat the world like his own private playground. When she did finally catch up to him, and he knew she would, he would pay dearly for avoiding her. But until then, he had some serious payback to deal out before she locked him away again.

He frowned at the unpleasant memories threatening to darken his mood. Many people had done him wrong while he stood in an awkward and immobile position, subject to many attacks, but now they were going to pay. Faces of staring visitors, pranksters, and preachers paraded through his mind. They'd taken advantage of his vulnerable situation. He'd heard the things they'd said, felt the things they'd done, just as he'd felt his overwhelming desire for his young lover.

Dania had known all of this when she'd imprisoned him. Having sex with a mortal was exactly what had gotten him in the trouble in the first place. She didn't care that he was naked, his erection prominent and permanent when she had frozen him to the spot. He rather thought she delighted in that fact. She was truly wicked, and if he ever got the chance, he was going to make her pay too.

His fangs began to tingle while he thought of acting on his revenge. It had been so long since he'd felt the bloodlust that he hoped he'd still be able to control it. Perhaps he'd rested long enough, after all.

Inhaling deeply, he lifted his nose to the air and picked up the scent of the man on the top of his hit list. The unsuspecting fool had taken a swing at his manhood with a

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fallen tree branch. Sure, he didn't think his violent prank would hurt anyone, but that was where he was wrong.

The branch had come down hard, but at least it still worked. He'd have to thank the beautiful mortal for testing it for him.

Leaving the grounds he'd known for so long, he set off for the city with vengeance on his mind.

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### **Chapter Three**

The police dropped Meara off at her apartment and waited outside until she waved at them from her apartment window. After two hours down at the precinct, sitting in the waiting room with a host of other delinquent freaks, they'd decided she wasn't worth the hassle, or the paperwork, and let her off with just a warning. Her pleas for sympathy had fallen flat. Hell, she knew how scandalous it had looked. It didn't help that one of the monks from the monastery had ratted on their little party either. To them, she was nothing more than a horny university student having a little tumble in a park at the edge of the city. Apparently, with it being Halloween, they'd heard enough cockamamie stories for one night.

Once she was back inside her apartment, she undressed and headed straight for the shower. Bone weary and cold, she felt a physical exhaustion that had nothing to do with her lack of sleep. Her groin felt tender, almost as if she'd endured four hours of labor from her adventures with her well-hung statue, and for some reason, she just couldn't seem to get warm. Her ears were ringing much like they would had she just returned from a loud rock concert, and her thoughts were all muddled together in a heap.

Her mind reeled, and she tried to make sense of inexplicable events. Had that truly happened? Was she just imagining he'd come to life, then tried to fly away like some shape shifting bird? Or was it just some overzealous freak, taking the spirit of Halloween too far? And where had her

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friends disappeared to? How come she was left all alone, half naked, scared out of her wits, and vulnerable? Some friends they were. Her fury burned when the realization sank in that they'd ditched her, left her on her own to deal with the police.

She relaxed a little under the spray of hot water. As the heat seeped into her muscles, she was reminded of the pleasure she had experienced earlier that evening. *He really wasn't a monster*, she thought, conjuring up his beautiful face. He was the statue she'd considered a companion through all her university years, and not once had she felt any animosity while in his presence. Not for the first time, she wondered if it had all been in her imagination.

What was she thinking? She gave her head a shake. There was no mistaking the dull ache she felt between her legs. Whatever she'd done, and whomever she'd done it with had been very real.

The soft undertone of what sounded like a whisper came to her ears, and she quickly glanced over her shoulder. Nothing was there, of course, but whatever she'd heard had sounded close enough to be in the shower along with her. It was absurd to think someone had followed her in to her apartment. She had been sure to lock the front door after herself. She gave her head a shake. *I've had a fright. I'm still worked up, and perhaps a little delusional, is all*. What could have been a fond memory of a wild night had turned into something of a nightmare. Well, not all of it had. The sex had been good, even if it was freaky, or all in her mind, she thought, blushing.

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She stepped out of the shower and caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror. There on her bottom lip was a bright red nick where she'd snagged it against one of the statue's fangs. She traced a finger lightly over the swollen lip. She'd been so caught up in the moment she'd gotten careless. It had felt so good, like time itself had slowed and only her pleasure existed. A warm rush swelled deep inside her when she remembered the intensity of the moment. Her body responded instantly, which made her thighs slick and her nipples stand at attention. Her gaze dropped lower to another red blemish. Four red marks circled her right nipple. The memory of the bite flashed through her mind, and she stumbled back. Here was indisputable evidence that her statue coming to life had been more than just her overactive imagination. She couldn't think of any other possible way she could have obtained a mark like that. An involuntary shudder rippled through her, and she covered up with a robe in a vain attempt to get warm.

Her stomach growled, and she realized she was famished. She walked over to the little nook that was her kitchen to prepare herself something to eat and maybe warm up her frozen bones with a hot drink.

She stuck her head into the fridge and recoiled when a strong stench hit her. She was normally a meticulously clean person, but there was an unmistakably rank odor festering somewhere in the depths of that particular appliance. Sniffing the air, she made a sour face. It wasn't just her fridge either, she noted. It was her whole apartment. And the smell was

familiar, she decided. It reminded her of something she'd detected at the cemetery. Perhaps it followed her home.

She stuck her head back into the fridge to see if that truly was it, and again, she heard a whisper much like someone speaking in her ear. Jerking with fright, she bumped her head against the top shelf in her haste to pull her head out of the confined space. Her heart pounded hard in her chest, and she tried to reason with her runaway fear. It was just the effects of a strange evening. There was nothing to get all worked up about. All she needed was a little rest and some time to recover.

She reached for the box of tea bags and froze when a scratching sound came from somewhere in the living room. It sounded again, drawing her gaze to the easy chair in the corner. Frowning, she turned just in time to see something small skitter across the floor.

"Bloody hell," she groaned. After a night like she had had, she wasn't sure if she could handle it if the apartment had suddenly become inhabited by mice. If that were the case, she intended to complain to the superintendent right away.

Another thump sounded behind her, and she whirled around to see what it was. To her horror, she came face-to-face with the ugliest rodent she had ever seen. If she wasn't mistaken, it bore the face of a man. She shrieked.

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## **Chapter Four**

D'iamonte stood over his latest victim with a smug smile on his bloodstained lips. The middle-aged man had been a teenager the last time he'd seen him, and now he was nothing more than a limp sack of tissue and bones lying among a pile of rubbish in a park. The man wasn't dead. That wasn't D'iamonte's style, but he would wake up with one hell of a headache.

D'iamonte had put on quite a show when he'd first introduced himself to the offender, told him exactly why he'd been sought out, and just what was going to happen to him. Even when the man had atoned for his mistake and begged for forgiveness, he hadn't let him off the hook. He needed the nourishment, and that took precedence over people's concern that they were going to piss themselves with fear. Thankfully, he'd confiscated the man's pants before he soiled them.

Already he could feel some of his strength returning. He took a deep satisfied breath. In truth, it had tasted bland compared to the young woman's he'd sampled earlier, but he had to be careful and not let the bloodlust consume him. He looked to the clear, star-filled sky above him and wondered if he might even be strong enough to get off the ground now. It was a perfect night for it. He stretched his wings out and gave them a test swing. Yes, he decided, with a delightful smile. Ah, how he'd missed flying, and first thing he intended to do was seek out the young woman who'd enchanted him earlier that evening. His cock twitched and stirred just thinking about

her. As though showing the way, it began to slowly rise and point to the night sky. Oh how he'd missed the sensation of a cock full of blood and the surge of energy that went with it. A pair of dark eyes came to his mind, and he lifted his nostrils to the air and inhaled deeply. She was out there, somewhere not too far away.

He reached for the pants and slid them on. He pulled the metal fastener up over his erection with some difficulty. It pressed against his cock, which created just enough friction to feel good. He let out a low growl. *Now, to find my dark-eyed beauty*, he thought, with a sinful smile.

\* \* \* \*

Armed with a wooden spoon, Meara walked into the living room, feeling certain her place was overrun with vermin. Whatever it was had been too large to be a mouse, and she could have sworn it had a human face. Whatever it was, it was about to feel the wrath of her wooden spoon.

Hearing more scratching, she stalked over to the chair, and raising the spoon high, she cautiously peered over the edge. Sure enough, something was down there. The rat-thing turned around, looked up, and met her gaze, human eye to human eye. Similar to what she had witnessed before, it had a human face. She gasped and dropped the spoon, sending it clattering to the floor. The rat-thing uttered a rather inhuman shriek of its own, and scurried away.

Not sure what to do or what she had seen, Meara headed for the door, intending to flee her apartment, but another

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small grey body skittered in front of her, which sent her scrambling back in the other direction.

Blinking wildly, she surveyed her apartment from the safety of the kitchen counter, this time armed with a jar of peanut butter. At the next sign of movement, she hurled the heavy container. The jar crashed into the wall, making a terrible noise and an even worse mess. Selecting another heavy object Meara raised her arm ready to throw it, but by this time, she realized freaky looking creatures were everywhere, and growing in numbers.

Looking out from her vantage point, she scanned the room, wide-eyed and near hysterical as another strange beast appeared. This one was a glassy-eyed, toadlike thing. Blinking once, it let out a thunderous croak and flashed two razor-sharp rows of teeth, just before it leaped from its perch. It crossed the room with frightening speed in order to eat the first creature, which it gobbled whole. It settled into its new place and croaked contentedly. Whimpering with fright, she backed up and balanced precariously on her narrow perch.

Something with wings flapped past her head, and she let another jar fly, scattering the creatures in the jar's path. They made such a clatter of noise in protest, each one raising its voice to be heard over the other.

She scurried backward, and bumped into a warthog type creature that sported five human legs. Somehow, it had managed to join her on the counter. It snorted indignantly, and she kicked at it with her foot, sending it crashing to the floor. It pealed at her in protest, then stomped away, still chattering at her with disdain.

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Gaining some hope, she noticed that retaliating seemed to have some sort of an effect, and desperate to try anything, she growled like the wildest beast among them in hopes to send a warning that she meant business. The nearest mangy rat with a human face cocked its head at her, and it seemed to struggle to understand. It looked so innocent that she felt herself softening toward it only to discover it had set her up, and a loud belch from another creature behind her told her she was about to be surrounded. Feigning a warrior position, she leaped to her feet and prepared for the worst.

A loud knock at the door made her jump. In an instant, the cacophony abruptly stopped, and the creatures paused.

"Is everything all right in there?" The superintendent sounded alarmed even though his voice was muffled by the thick wooden door. Claws skittered across the hardwood with each creature scrambling for cover.

Relief flooded through her. "Oh, Mr. Griesen." She took a deep breath. "Please come in."

She could hear the sound of a key in the lock, and then the door swung open. The stooped figure of the super stepped in.

"The neighbors complained about a lot of noise coming from this suite."

His gaze dropped to the smashed jar of peanut butter on the floor and the rest of it smeared down the wall. He gave her apartment a tentative once over before his gaze came to rest on her. One burly white eyebrow arched quizzically as she stood there disheveled and out of breath. He looked at her with an expectancy only an authority figure could muster.



"What on earth is going on?" Disapproval dripped from his words.

There was no way he would believe it if she told him about the rat-man and his friends, but she didn't want him to leave. She had to think fast. "I think I saw a rat."

"A rat!" he sputtered. "That's impossible. We have this building exterminated for pests every year, just to be cautious." Stepping inside a little farther, he peered around the corner to look in her kitchen. "I heard some strange noises coming from this room just a moment ago. Are you certain you aren't trying to cover up for some reason of your own?"

"No, but..." Looking around, she could see he was coming to his own conclusions about her, and they weren't good. Her living room resembled a battlefield, and it looked like she was throwing a tantrum all by herself. Not one creature was in sight. If she tried to explain the freaky incident that had led up to the mess, he'd certainly label her crazy, or drug induced.

Mr. Griesen looked uncomfortable standing there in her apartment. "Do you have any idea what time it is, young lady?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't sleep with a ... a rat ... in my apartment."

"I'm sure it was just a figment of your imagination, but I'll ask around if anyone else has a Chinchilla on the loose."

She could see he was patronizing her and eager to get back to his bed. "Well, aside from the mess, everything seems to be in order."

Seeing he was about to leave her alone in an apartment that was haunted, she lunged forward and stopped his departure by grabbing his sleeve. "Oh, Mr. Griesen, please, can't you stay? I was just ... er..." She struggled to find a valid reason that would keep him there, and thereby keeping the creatures out. "It's been a really bad day, and I just don't want to be alone."

He cocked his head at her as though something relevant just dawned on him. He smiled kindly and blushed. "Look, I'm flattered, but if you're worried about being late on rent this month, it's okay. We can overlook it this once. I can't stay, and even if I could, my wife would kill me if she ever found out."

She realized he'd jumped to some sordid conclusion and had been forced to turn her down. "Oh no, Mr. Griesen, it's not like that. It's just..." He backed out of her space before she could correct him, and the door closed with a resounding click.

She turned around to see a roomful of blinking eyes. They were peering around furniture, their tiny fingers gripping the bookcase, slobbering on her stereo, and scratching at their furry bodies with their hind legs.

"Oh, just great!" She let her hands slap against her thighs. "Thanks to you my landlord thinks I'm desperate enough to sleep with him." One of the creatures let out a tiny giggle, and she stomped her foot down hard to send them running. To her dismay, they didn't go far. She could still see them poking their ugly little faces out around the furniture.

"Shoo, scat!" She tried waving her arms about. More giggling rose up from the shadows. "Ugh." She gritted her teeth.

At once, their strange noises started up again, a mixture of honks and gibberish, and they had started advancing. They crowded around the door, clearly intending to block her exit, and she wondered why they were afraid of Mr. Griesen, but not her.

Their behavior gave her an idea. Edging over toward the phone, she dialed Sean's number and was relieved that he picked it up on the second ring.

He sounded groggy, and she knew he had been sleeping. The thought made her angry. Why was he able to sleep while she was forced to exist in a living hell equipped with its own personal zoo?

"Can you come over?" she blurted out, skipping all the usual formalities.

"What? Meara, is that you?"

"Yes it is, you ninny. I need you to get your ass over to my place right now."

There was a long pause, and then she heard him give a soft chuckle. "Look, if this is some elaborate scheme, it's a pretty pathetic attempt to get me back. You know we can't do this back and forth thing. I'm all for ex sex, but it will only make it harder when I leave for Boston."

"Oh, God, not you too." She gripped the receiver hard and swung at a low flying creature of the bird variety. "Get over yourself, Sean. I'm not requesting sex. I need your help, and frankly, after ditching me at the ruins, you owe me."

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There was another pause, and then he sighed. "Oh, all right, I'll be right over."

Meara would have been relieved to know backup was coming, but she had been distracted by the unsettling sight that just arrived outside her apartment window. Even though it was dark and all she could make out was an expanse of wings, there was no mistaking the silhouette of the vampire that had just landed on the roof of the building across the street.

Without checking to see if Sean was still on the line, she hung up the phone and went over to the window to have a better look.

Her mouth fell open. It most certainly was him, D'iamonte, her beloved statue, in the flesh. His wings folded closed, and he walked to the edge of the roof. From that distance he looked like any ordinary man wearing a long black cape. Well, as ordinary as sexy could be. Looking at him brought up a bunch of different feelings. He frightened her. She couldn't deny that, but she also couldn't deny that she'd experienced the best sex of her life with him, and her body instinctively responded to him.

It was like a dream come true, only more frightening, considering what he was, a vampire. What was he doing, coming to her apartment? Had he returned to finish off what he'd started? A surge of hope warmed her cheeks. Would that be so bad? she wondered.

Nothing had happened to her the first time, but then again, they'd been interrupted. For all she knew, he might have been about to drain her of all her blood and leave her

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body for the crows. She remembered the look in his eyes when she had broken free of his grip and fallen to the ground. There had been an undeniable hunger burning there, but she doubted it had anything to do with killing her. The way he had gazed upon her open legs with lust made her suspect he wanted her very much alive.

She couldn't deny the crazy part of her that wanted to experience him again, to feel that massive cock driving into her, even his teeth against her throat. It felt crazy, but she craved it like she'd never craved sex before.

She traced her finger over her breast that still held the marks where his fangs had bit into her. There was no doubt in her mind that he was a vampire, a real, tangible, sexier-than-sexy vampire. The memory of his full cock hanging low between his legs sent a rush of blood between her own. Her labia throbbed with desire, and she had to resist with all her might to keep from touching herself. She caught herself licking her lip and forced herself to stop thinking about her mouth around his cock.

Toying with the buttons on her shirt, she rolled her neck to relieve the tension that was building there. Her attraction to him was strong, like a love potion coursing through her veins. She tingled from head to foot, and she responded like she didn't have any control over her own desire. Perhaps that was it. She must be under some sort of spell. She drew back, suddenly unsure of what she was doing. If she kept it up, she'd soon open her window and invite him in. She had to be out of her mind considering taking him on.

She stole a glance back to the roof top to see he was still there. He most certainly was. If his plan was to hang out there all night, she didn't know how long she could resist him, but she knew she had to.

Something bumped her thigh, and she turned to see the creatures had drawn close again. Some of them had clawed their way up to the windowsill to have a look outside for themselves.

A loud pounding sounded on her door, and it jarred her out of her blissful state. Giving her head a slight shake to clear it, she walked across the room and turned the knob. The door to her apartment swung open with a bang, and Sean arrived all in a fluster. He took one look at her and sneered.

"What is this all about, Meara?"

She glanced around to see that she was alone. The creatures had all vanished from sight. Relieved, she looked up to Sean, only to find him studying her, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"So is this how it's going to go, then?" He seemed strangely perturbed.

"What are you talking about?"

He waved his hand at her to indicate the way she was dressed. She glanced down to see that her top three buttons had come undone, and if she wasn't mistaken, her cheeks were flushed with color. She knew how it must look.

His glare would have extracted a confession out of the most hardened criminal. "I'm indebted to you, and you're going to use me or punish me however you see fit?"

"Sean," she countered, keeping her voice calm. "This actually has very little to do with you. You're a buffer, that's all."

"A buffer?"

"I've noticed less weird things happen when I have company around, that's all. But what I don't need is any more grief from the likes of you."

The anger faded from his eyes to be replaced with concern. "I can see you're not exactly pleased with me."

"Or the others for that matter either," she growled.

"I can explain."

"What is there to explain, Sean? We agreed to stay friends, but friends take care of each other. You left me alone in the middle of nowhere for the cops to pick me up, not to mention the freaky statue that came to life, or the fact that you were making out with Jennifer all night." Her voice had risen to a shout, and he winced.

"The cops?" He gasped.

"Yeah, jackass. I got to find out what it was like to watch the road through bars." It was an exaggeration, but she was glad to see it shocked him effectively.

"Oh damn. I'm so sorry. It was a gut instinct, you know?"

"That's it? That's all you've got? You abandon me in the clutches of some monster, and all you can tell me is that common sense made you do it?"

He opened his mouth, about to protest further when she held up her hand.

"No. Don't come looking for forgiveness. There's no going back on the fact that you left me there."

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"I said I'm sorry. I panicked, and when the others ran, I ran too."

She rolled her eyes. "My hero."

"You wouldn't respond, Meara. It was like you couldn't hear us or feel us pulling you away. I mean, I don't know what we saw, what happened, or even if it really did happen, but you wouldn't budge."

He glanced over his shoulder, and she could see that he, too, was scared. "I mean, it was Halloween," he continued. "I wouldn't be surprised if it was some overachiever dressed up and waiting for someone to scare. It's sick, playing a trick on us like that."

She'd thought the same thing, but he didn't know about the little rat-man and the fact that D'iamonte had shown up outside her apartment. Focusing on the present, she could see that Sean was trying to smooth it all away. That was his style, and she wasn't about to let it happen.

"No. There's no way that was just a man dressed up. When I first felt him—" She heard what she was about to admit to and stopped herself. Her cheeks heated with her embarrassment. "He was made of stone—and then he wasn't. He was flesh and blood, hot, and definitely hard."

Sean grimaced at her graphic comment. "Maybe someone tampered with our drinks. Bertram was there, after all, and you know how he is. I mean, come on, Meara, there's no way that actually happened. We were probably all tripping and—"

"Save it. This was no trip, or if it is a trip, I'm still on it, and that includes this impossible conversation."



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"Meara," he said, softening his tone. "You're all worked up." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Clearly it was a stressful evening, even more so than I'd realized. Maybe you should just go back to bed, take it easy, you know?"

She shrugged his hand off and took a step back. "Take it easy?" She was flabbergasted.

"There were at least a half-dozen reports of zombies breaking into movie theaters, or sightings of witches in front of the moon. Take it from me, this is the result of reading one too many paranormal novels. It's messing with your brain. There is no such thing as vampires, werewolves, or statues coming to life. What you saw was an award-winning Halloween costume and a pervert with no sense of boundaries." He said it with such finality she had a hard time coming up with an answer. "Look, if you're scared—"

She rounded on him. "You're damn right I'm scared, but I'm also living this nightmare, and it doesn't look like it's going away. Whatever this is has invaded my life, and I have to figure out a way to make it work so I can fix it. You're not the one who has sexy, shirtless vampires stalking their apartment."

"What?"

"The statue. He came back."

"Ugh." He grunted with impatience. "That again? If this is more of that gypsy crap."

Incensed by his cutting remark, she stood, ready for a fight. It had been a mistake to confide in him about her history and the strange dreams.

"Is that how you really feel?"

Sean's demeanor quickly changed.

"You're under a lot of stress. Exams are coming up, and—"

"This has nothing to do with exams. He was real, and I have proof." She went over to the window just in time to see her winged man drop down off the side of the building and float down to the street below. He folded his wings tight against his body again, allowing him to meld unnoticed onto the activity of the busy street.

"Ack! He's gone."

"Who's gone?" Sean joined her at the window and peered out into the darkness.

"My vampire."

He turned his face to look at her, his eyes wild with disbelief. "Nonsense."

"He was here, I swear, but he just flew off."

"What? You're trying to tell me he just took off like a flying squirrel?"

"Yes, well, actually it was more like a—damn it, Sean! A thing like that is pretty hard to fake. Can't you just give me the benefit of the doubt?"

"Not this time. The logical answer is that some trusted member of our group slipped something into our drinks, or perhaps into the snacks. Either way, we all took a trip where we saw something unusual, something out of our comfort zone."

"This had nothing to do with any pranks, believe me."

"How can you be so certain?"

"Because I am, mercy on me, it was—and still is—just too real for me."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'll prove it to you." She started looking around, prying up couch cushions and opening cupboard doors. "They're around here somewhere."

After a few minutes of watching her tear apart the furniture, he interrupted her. "Meara, stop, please. You're starting to freak me out, and there's no point in having both of us scared witless."

She could see his point. It was important one of them maintained their bravado in the face of who knew what.

He heaved a reluctant sigh. "I'll stay, but only because I'm worried about you."

She grimaced, not liking his attitude or being in his debt, but she didn't have any other choice. "Good enough." She nodded.

With one last glance to the window where her sexy winged man had been, she resigned herself that he had gone. It was oddly disappointing, she realized. Maybe it had been rash to invite Sean over.

She headed over to the bedroom, then crawled beneath the sheets. The instant she closed her eyes, the creatures returned, crowding all around her into her bed. Irritated, she hopped out again and walked over to the door to prop it open. Light spilled in, and she could see Sean trying to find a comfortable position on the couch. The creatures retreated to the farthest corners and were forced to huddle so as not to be seen. Satisfied, Meara crawled back between the sheets. A sharp squeak alerted her that she had unintentionally pinched one of them.

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"Get out of my bed." She flapped the sheets in a vain attempt to shake one off.

"Meara?" Sean sounded confused. "I'm in here. Who the hell are you talking to?"

She rolled her eyes. "Go to sleep, Sean."

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## Chapter Five

Street lights sparked and crackled when D'iamonte flew past. That always seemed to happen when he was angry. Seeing that poor excuse for a man alone with the young woman in her apartment had set him off. He was in a bad mood, and the only way to get over it was to go out and find someone to take it out on. He had plenty of names on his to-do list, but in reality, what he wanted was to return to her.

She had a strong hold on him, one he suspected she wasn't even aware of. The way she'd responded to him there at the window told him to be very careful. For once, he hadn't made a suggestion using the power of dreamscape and already she was taking her clothes off. Somehow, she was tapped in to him, connected in a way he didn't understand. He smiled at the image of her fingers working her buttons loose on the other side of that window. It was exactly what he'd wanted, to see her naked, those luscious breasts, and her ... He faltered when a gust of wind nearly knocked him from the sky. His cock throbbed with unfinished business, and if he weren't careful, there would be a whole new story to read in the morning's paper.

He needed to know what had gone on between them. Something else was at work, something potent and powerful. He couldn't risk exposing himself to the dreamscape and, in doing that, to his vampire mistress.

He inhaled deeply, seeking his next victim. She was out there, not too far away. Thinking of the other woman, he felt

his resentment begin to build. All at once, he was reminded of how he had been ridiculed, used, and mistreated. Focusing his anger, he let it carry him through the streets and across town until he located the politician working late at her desk. She'd been the one to take up the cause of indecent art around the city, targeting him and a few others in similar exposure.

He grimaced, his mood souring at the distasteful task ahead. She wouldn't take long, but he wasn't going to enjoy it.

Swooping over to the nearest rooftop, he leveled his gaze on her. She sat up in her chair and was running her fingers through her hair. She hadn't changed much in the few years that had gone by. She'd aged and grown plump, but he could still sense the overwhelming righteousness that radiated from her. She disgusted him, but everyone had weaknesses. What was hers, he wondered? The acrid smell of cigarette smoke came to his mind, so strong he could taste it. Yes, she was rank with it. This was going to be very easy indeed.

He envisioned her drawing a deep lungful of chemical-laced tar. Like a puppet, she stood and grabbed a coat from a wooden rack behind the door. In minutes, she was downstairs and outside. He watched the small fire from her fancy metal lighter flare and rise to the end of her favorite brand of cigarette. A wave of her instant satisfaction washed over him when she drew in a deep lungful. The thought of smoking disgusted him, but he'd sponge whatever pleasure she exuded from it.

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Unfortunately, she was still too safe standing so close to the door. He needed her farther away from the streetlight, from the traffic and the prying eyes. He needed another way to bait her. Reaching out to her once again, he joined with her thoughts. The image of a handsome man flashed through her thoughts. D'iamonte dismissed the image.

He noted something else about her though. Her muscles were stiff. No doubt she'd been sitting at her desk for hours, and she could use some exercise. If his suspicions were right, she had insecurities about the fact that she had put on weight, and that gave him some leverage over her.

Looking far below, he spotted the dark outline of a sparsely forested park. It was no more than one block away. Beyond that was the dark glistening water of the lake that gave the city its reputation as a tourist hot spot. It was well lit, but he could work around it.

After she took her last drag from her cigarette, she threw the butt to the ground and crushed it beneath her heel. D'iamonte took that opportunity to impress upon her that her foot looked fat within her shoe. Next, he strengthened her doubts about the way she fit inside her hip-hugging skirt and was rewarded with a sidelong glance to the very park he had mentally reminded her of. When she began walking, he followed from the air, intent on indulging himself until he'd erased all memories of the young woman from his mind.

\* \* \* \*

For nearly an hour, Meara lay on her mattress with her eyes wide open. The knowledge that hundreds of creatures

crowded around, beneath, and even above her bed made it impossible to sleep. To make matters worse, Sean was snoring louder than a chainsaw in the next room.

Gritting her teeth, she rolled over and slammed her pillow down over her head. Squinting her eyes shut she decided that if the creatures were going to be that persistent, then they'd better just damn well eat her and get it over with. When no flesh tearing from her bones commenced, she dared to take a peek around. They were still there, still staring and still ugly, but at least they weren't advancing on her. Satisfied that she'd be safe enough to sleep, she flipped them the finger and closed her eyes.

Sleep came immediately, but with it, the darkness and the whispering voices returned. Looking around she noticed the creatures were there with her, riding strange green air currents all around her, their faces alight with their glee. Intrigued, she reached out her hand and ran her fingers through the wispy mass. When no harm came, she smiled too, feeling light, giddy, even stupid, but surprisingly unafraid.

Whatever this place was, it seemed familiar, and she was reminded of her grandmother, of the stories she used to tell her of something called the dreamscape, a place where one's mind went when one dreamed or entered a dreamlike state. She had described it with such wonder and awe but had warned Meara that it reflected one's mood and could be fantasy or nightmare.

Despite the wind, the odor she'd noticed in her apartment earlier was strong. It filled her senses with its pungent decay.



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It was cold, too. Cold enough that she expected to see her breath. She stopped. That wasn't right. She drew in a deep breath. No wind passed into her lungs. There was no breathing here, she noted. How strange. The light was awash in the same greenish color, and everything flowed backward, even the dust particles. Frowning, she tried to see where it was that everything was draining, for that was how it felt. Like her, the creatures riding along the current next to her were drawn forward, but to where?

Panic rose in her and she glanced around to see all the creatures, but a select few had gone. The rat-man still lingered, although he seemed afraid. He cowered closer to her, and she realized he was hoping she'd protect him. Alarm started to settle in. What was it that lay ahead that they were so fearful of? A sharp pain on her wrist made her look to discover the first tear in her flesh. She tried to resist, only to discover that she couldn't. A haughty laugh echoed around them. It was a woman's voice, and when the doors flew open, it grew louder, her laughter nearly bowling them over. It was full of malicious intent and frightened Meara to the core.

She struggled harder, clawing fiercely at the carpeted wall, but it was no use. She found herself pulled, drawn by some unknown current toward the open door. The rat-man was dragged outside along with her, each of them frantic to find purchase in whatever they could.

Her fingers dug into the ground, and the feeling that she recognized the area grew stronger, yet she still couldn't place it. It had grown dark, darker than night. The only light emitted was from the phosphorescent current that flowed

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around them, casting objects under its eerie green glow, and giving them just enough light to see vague details, frightening images of a cold, barren landscape littered with rotting corpses. The ghastly silhouette of a dead tree loomed in the distance, and she aimed her body at it. When she grew close enough she clutched a limb and gripped it tight. Her worst fear came true when she uprooted it and carried it along with her to a destination unknown. A chill came over her as she slowly tumbled through the air.

An abrupt snort sounded behind her and echoed loudly in what she hoped was still her dream. She hated to think what horrible creature could make such an ungodly sound, when a moan and another series of snorts followed. Bracing herself, she cried out for help, not knowing what else to do. As quickly as it started the snorting cut off. When the ground beneath her started to shake, she figured it was all over. All that was left was for the earth to split open and swallow her whole. Then, in the far distance, she heard someone calling her name, but this time, it wasn't her grandmother.

Slowly, reality seeped in, and she recognized Sean's voice. The swirling green currents lessened the more she concentrated on it, her focus distracted from the terrifying grip of her dream. Hope flared within her, and she put all her thought on Sean. Fighting against the pull of the current and the dying laughter, Meara called out to Sean. Her voice sounded tiny. Feeling weaker, she called out again and barely made a sound because she was so drained from the effort.

Just when she thought all hope was lost the darkness fell away, and in an instant, there was such an intense light that

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she was blinded by it. Her eyes flickered open, and she saw Sean's face hovering over her, his brows knitted with concern. He was shaking her and calling out her name. With a terrible effort, she struggled to sit up but discovered she couldn't. She was far too weak.

His lips were moving, and she realized he was talking to her.

"Bad dream?" His voice broke through the white noise that filled her ears. He still sounded tinny and far away.

She managed to nod. Her mouth was dry, and a sour taste upon her tongue. She took a deep breath grateful to do so. "Thank heavens you still snore." She managed to laugh.

His face pinched with concern, he sat down beside her, jostling her.

Already she felt better, stronger, and alert. The weakness faded enough for her to notice how disheveled she'd become while stuck in the dream. Her shirt twisted tight around her waist, stretching the thin material across her breasts. Sean's gaze flitted away. He was trying to be considerate. She appreciated the effort.

He lifted off the bed and made a move to go back to the couch. "If you're all right now, I think I'll go back—"

She clutched his arm and held him immobile. "Stay," she croaked.

He studied her with his soft brown eyes, and she could tell he was weighing the ramifications of crawling back in bed with a woman he once slept with regularly.

She didn't care. All she wanted was someone to shield her from whatever it was that had gripped her. "Please," she added for emphasis.

Begrudgingly, he nodded and then crawled in beside her. She was even grateful when he slid an arm around her, not because she wanted him, but because it felt good to know he still cared and that she wasn't alone. In fact, he might just have saved her life.

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## Chapter Six

The politician had left a bad taste in his mouth, and D'iamonte's mood hadn't improved like he'd hoped. Revenge just wasn't doing what it was supposed to. In fact, there had been nothing satisfying about it. He'd quit after a few minutes, letting the woman run off clutching her neck. There would be repercussions for that, he was certain, but at the moment he couldn't muster the enthusiasm to give a damn. What he wanted was to see the young woman again, to bite into her, and to make this burning rage go away. She'd been on his mind the whole time, and somehow, the overpowering scent of that politician's perfume had gone right up his nose, leaving him distracted to the point of failure.

He longed for the sweet, natural fragrance of the young woman, for her soft skin and lithe body. He wanted nothing more than to wrap himself up in her warmth and convince her she would be safe if she just gave him the chance to show her.

Shaking off the politician's memories and the tang of her fresh blood tainting his mood, he found his way back to the young woman's building. In no time, he'd located the window that looked into her bedroom, and drew close enough without alerting her to his presence. Perching on the narrow ledge outside, he peered in through the window and saw the outline of her sleeping form upon her bed, but upon further inspection, he realized she was not alone. There were two

bodies huddled close together upon that mattress, and both were asleep.

Reaching out with his mind, he assured himself it was the young man who had arrived at her apartment earlier. His anger threatened to boil over. Bloodlust rose quickly to the foremost of his thoughts, and he felt his fangs extend for the second time that night. He needed satisfaction. The temptation to draw the young man out burned at him, but with an effort, he resisted. Calming himself, he focused his thoughts on the atmosphere in the room beyond the window. At least he didn't detect sex in the air. He'd be able to identify that alluring scent miles away, and it wasn't mingled between the two of them. In fact, D'iamonte spared the sleeping woman a sly smile. She still smelled of him.

Calming down, he allowed himself one more small indulgence, and entered her dreams. To his surprise, her mind was fraught with turmoil. Fear and anger warred with a deep sorrow, one that he recognized from the memories he obtained in her blood. The images that flashed through her mind were almost incomprehensible because they flickered by so fast. Faces young and old, worried her young conscience, but it was always the same setting, a dark narrow passage and an expansive room swathed in red with polished wood trim. Where was this place, he wondered, and why did it distress her so?

Another frightening image made her whimper, and he had no doubt that she would still be haunted by nightmares unless he gave her something much more pleasant to think about. Stretching out with his mind, he focused on the night they

found each other and placed the image of her hand in his. Cautiously, he projected her hand moving against his chest.

Guiding her with practiced skill, he constructed the scene of them together, of him kissing her, caressing her skin, making her hum with vitality. It seemed his hunger for her was growing more passionate every time he was near her. He was very much aware of her, of her scent, of her warmth, of her aura, of her beating heart. Moments of her life flashed through his mind, and he embraced them. She had no idea what she had done when she straddled him and took her pleasure.

A bond had been created, a connection between two souls, one that walked in death, and the other very much alive. Had he not already fed once that night, he would have been tempted to attack her. He was struggling enough now, but he needed to tread more carefully if indeed he wanted more of her. All plans to seduce her had gone out the window. She wouldn't be very receptive to him after an experience like that. At least she was safe inside her apartment. Only after she had invited him in could he take advantage of her in that way.

His hand rose up and down level with his groin as he pictured her mouth on his cock, his mouth on her pussy. When she began to writhe on the bed, he quickened his tempo and smiled. To his pleasant surprise, she took the reins, pulling him down on to her, urging him to enter her in her imagination. He did so with pleasure, bucking his hips into her wet passage, feeling her move beneath him, drawing him in, until she reached her climax. Her mouth opened with a

silent cry. Spurred on by her release, D'iamonte followed soon after, his ejaculation jetting straight out only to fall onto the pavement below.

Satisfied, D'iamonte sighed. He was drained, but again he was impressed by the strength of their connection. It had felt so real.

At that moment, the young man had stirred and sighed, and his hand came to rest on her hip. D'iamonte clenched his fists into tight balls. It seemed he had a new name to add to his revenge list.

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## Chapter Seven

Meara couldn't ever remember feeling so good. She lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling, and still tingling with bliss.

The heavy weight of Sean's hand pressed down on her breast. Scowling, she jerked her hip into him. He lifted his head off the pillow, and smacked his lips. He looked groggy and irritable, and a crease from the pillow was pressed into his face. Finally, his eyes settled on her.

Her eyes narrowed. "Just what do you think you are doing?"

He frowned and looked around to see where he was. "You had a nightmare. You asked me to stay," he said, sounding defensive.

A vague recollection of something to that order returned to her thoughts. She inclined her head to indicate the hand still cupping her breast. "Does that mean you can take advantage of me then?"

He snatched his hand back. "Sorry, old habit."

"Well, get over it," she grumbled and nearly flipped him out of her bed.

He wobbled and then retreated to the living room. The rustling of clothes told her he was getting changed, and none too slow.

Her life had been turned upside down since that fateful Halloween night, and Sean was only trying to help. Still, he had left her at the mercy of some strange, winged sex god

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whom she couldn't seem to get out of her thoughts. It wasn't normal that she would find such a creature appealing.

She rubbed her eyes and looked around the room. Dozens of eyes blinked back at her. They were less in numbers, but they were very much present and staring at her expectantly.

She let her head fall back against the pillow. "I sure hope you aren't waiting for me to feed you. I mean, really! How many pets can a girl have?"

Her stomach rumbled at the thought of food. She realized it had been a long time since she had eaten.

Her limbs felt heavy when she swung her feet out of bed. For some strange reason, she glanced out the window and hoped to see a certain shadowy presence. When he wasn't there, she was disappointed, which confused her even more. Shouldn't she be terrified of him? For all she knew, he could be the one responsible for her strange dreams. He had been the star, after all.

A small chirp sounded behind her. She lifted her pillow to see a birdlike creature the size of a sparrow but with tail of an alligator and a distorted human face sneering at her.

"Oh great, you're still here." She sighed, not at all pleased to see it. The rest of them wouldn't be far behind, and sure enough, while she waited, they began to crawl out from under the bed, out of her sock drawer, her closet, and even her jewelry box.

"Give me a break," she moaned.

"Meara?" Sean called out from the other room. "Who are you talking to?"

"My minions," she said matter-of-fact. "They're back. Come here and see for yourself." She smiled smugly while watching them scramble to get out of sight.

Sean appeared around the corner. He took one look at her sitting hunched over on the side of her bed. "I don't see anything," he stated blandly, indicating she was wasting his time.

She shrugged thinking it was his loss.

"You're acting really strange, Meara. Frankly, it's frightening me."

She threw her head back and laughed. "*I'm* frightening *you*?" she sputtered with disbelief. "If you'd seen the things I've seen in the past twenty-four hours, then you wouldn't find me so freaky. Honestly, you're no help at all."

He raised his eyebrows, and she knew he thought she was delusional. "Well, at least you've got your spunk back." He heaved a weary sigh. "I'm not going to miss that when I'm in Boston." He picked his jacket up off the back of the easy chair and slid his arm into a sleeve.

She stood, her fear returning. "You're not leaving, are you?"

He gave her a level look. "You said it yourself, I'm no help. I've got to go to school, and for that matter, so do you." He quickly frowned as though he were reconsidering what he'd just said. "Although I don't think you're in any state to go anywhere, except maybe to see a doctor."

She was about to rebuke him when she stopped herself, and conceded with a nod. Perhaps that wasn't such a bad idea.

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## **Chapter Eight**

The minute the young man stepped outside the building, D'iamonte followed him. He had waited for hours for the young man to make an appearance, far longer than he should have. It was a partly clouded sky, which helped blunt of the sun's harsh rays, but nonetheless, D'iamonte struggled to see. His skin burned, and he knew his energy levels were low, but even after he attacked two deserving victims in the night, his anger toward his romantic rival hadn't dissipated.

Wearing sunglasses and a trench coat he'd pilfered from a misguided flasher, he kept to the shadows, but after two blocks, walking at a brisk pace, it became apparent that he was attracting attention. People on the street turned to look when he strode past. They edged away with fright, and openly stared as though they could see he was hiding something under his coat. In truth, he was. No matter how tight he held his wings to his body, they still protruded five inches above his shoulders, making him look like a badly constructed tent.

After five blocks, it became clear the young man he was tailing was on to him, too. The little snout-nose punk began to run, and it was all D'iamonte could do to chase after him. The guy was a gazelle, sprinting down the sidewalk and dodging any obstacle with impressive agility.

D'iamonte blamed his poor performance on his lack of energy. He'd gone the whole night without resting because of his jealousy, and now he was extra surly. He needed answers,

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and he decided this was the guy who was going to give them to him.

\* \* \* \*

It took forever to locate her phone. For the past fifteen minutes, its ring had been bouncing off every wall. Only when she got really frustrated and threatened to turn the vacuum on the creatures did they desist their little game of keep away and toss it back to her. She read the numbers displayed in the little window. Eight calls from Sean. That was unusual. She hit play. All but the last one were hang ups, but it was the message he'd left that scared her to the core. "Something weird happened. I think I just met your winged dude. I'm so sorry I doubted you."

After dialing Sean's number, she wasn't surprised to hear him pick up right away.

"What happened?" she demanded.

"I think he followed me from your place, and when I ran he chased after me, all the way into the west corridor."

She gasped.

"He caught me and threw me against the wall and said..."

"He said?" she prompted. "What did he say, Sean?"

"Stay away from her. She's mine."

A chill swept over her, and she had to sit down.

Despite the fact that she didn't like domineering boyfriends, she found it flattering nonetheless. She looked out the window expecting to see the winged man appear any second.

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"He looked like he was in bad shape, Meara. He was barely able to walk."

"But he was still able to catch up to you." That was saying something since Sean was on the cross-country running team and a star track sprinter.

"It was like he had inhuman speed, but whatever happened, he'd used up all his strength." There was a pause. "That's not all, Meara."

"What more could there be?"

"I think he's a vampire, Meara, a real, live, breathing, bloodsucking vampire. He had fangs. Believe me, I saw them."

"I told you."

"There have been attacks."

"Attacks?" She gripped the phone tighter. "What do you mean?"

"Two people were attacked last night, and both of them had puncture marks on their necks."

Meara's blood went cold, but she had to ask. "Are they dead?"

"No. Both are alive, but he fits their description."

Meara swallowed hard. "I think I know why he said, 'She's mine.' I mean, I did ... you know." They both knew what she'd done last night. Hell, by now everybody knew. She'd been so distracted with the strange things that had happened ever since that she never really processed how embarrassing her return to school would be.

"I know, I know. I wish I couldn't remember." Sean cemented her worst fears. "I told myself it wasn't real, but this, this ... now I can't pretend anymore."

Smugness replaced the embarrassment she had been feeling. The perfect "I told you so" hovered on the tip of her tongue. She found it amusing that he was taking it seriously now that it was personal.

"For some reason, he has taken an interest in you," Sean continued. "You've got to protect yourself. And no offense, but I don't want to hang around with you for a while, okay? I thought he was going to eat me. I don't think he'd take to it kindly a second time."

She already knew she wouldn't find a hero in Sean, but she couldn't blame him either. Images of those sharp eyeteeth flashed through her mind, and she found it strange that she wasn't scared of them. She was too enraptured to have felt anything but pleasure. In fact, she thought they were kind of erotic. Whatever passed had between them had been pure bliss, but apparently, that wasn't the case for everyone that came in to contact with him.

Sean's advice echoed back to her. If this vampire had taken an interest in her, she had to protect herself. Everything she knew about vampires was from B movies and the occasional paranormal romance, but there had to be more to it than garlic and wooden stakes.

If she was ever going to go out into the world again, now that it hosted a vampire who had her in his sights, she wanted to be prepared.



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One of the bird-type creatures had started pecking at her cell phone, and she snatched it away. The way she looked at it, she was haunted no matter where she went. That in itself was good incentive to be among people.

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## Chapter Nine

Brother Charles hated going out on the grounds after Halloween. It was always in rough shape, with garbage littered about, headstones knocked over, and condoms on the walking paths. The ruins bore the brunt of it, though. Graffiti marred the ancient limestone walls, cans and bottles from parties gone before littered the graveled floor. As a member of the monastery, he looked upon his assigned grounds-keeping tasks with pride, but it was on days like this that he truly hated humanity.

Ever since the ruins had been declared a tourist site, it had opened the area up to folks who just didn't respect the sanctity of leading a pure lifestyle. Despite the many garbage cans, picking up litter had become his biggest duty.

He frowned and scanned the landscape for any more damage. When his gaze roved over the horizon, he realized something was missing. Could it be? He hurried over to discover if it was true and found that it was. A statue was missing. But not just any statue—the demon, or angel, or whatever it represented, it was gone.

He touched the dark spot where the statue had sat for all the years he'd been a member of the monastery. No rubble had been left behind, no tool marks had marred the foundation, and there were no bolt holes to fasten it down. It seemed implausible. It was strange and a bad omen if he ever saw one. A shiver ran through his body. There was one possible answer.

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Swallowing hard he turned to look upon the stone crypt perched like a vulture on a rise in the background. It wasn't above him to believe that whatever lurked inside that house of the dead could be responsible. Whatever the reason, he didn't want to wait around for an answer, and he scurried off to go tell his superiors.

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## Chapter Ten

Pointing her car in the direction of the ruins, Meara decided the only way to get to the bottom of things was to go back to where it all started. The weather had deteriorated overnight, and a cool rain had been drizzling all morning, soaking everything in sight. In contrast, the weather was much more appropriate for the Halloween mood.

Steeling herself for what she was about to do, she pulled into the parking lot, parked the car, and killed the engine. She was surprised to see she wasn't the only visitor there. In fact, the lot was crowded with cars, vans, and vehicles of all makes, including what appeared to be a news broadcast team. Peering out through rain slick windows she let her gaze settle upon the new monastery built to replace the one that had burned down. The new building was far more modern, yet offered the same seclusion the old one had.

It seemed unlikely that the monks were throwing a small celebration. The thought brought a slight smile to her lips.

Ducking beneath the low hanging branches to avoid getting any wetter than she had to, she took the path that led past the ruins. Looking to the burned down wreckage, she decided the ruins seemed less imposing in the daylight, yet there was a spookier feel lingering in the air.

Not knowing what she expected to find, she was startled to see a completely different and chaotic scene than she had anticipated.

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The police were there, working alongside a camera crew, and a small crowd that had gathered where the statue had previously been. Her heart nearly stopped in her chest.

A police officer who had been searching the ground in the bushes nearby stepped up to her, startling her out of her wits. The radio on his hip crackled, and he held up one finger signifying she should wait. If she hadn't already been spotted, she would have hightailed it out of there so fast she lit the grass on fire, but that was not to be the case.

The officer finished speaking on his radio and beckoned her over. She approached cautiously, recognizing the man instantly. Just her luck, it was the same police officer who had picked her up no more than ten hours earlier.

He turned his suspicious gaze on her. "You again?"

She swallowed and fidgeted.

"They say the guilty party often returns to the scene of the crime. I hope you have a good reason for being back so soon."

"I—" She floundered, suddenly lost for words. How was she supposed to explain that she'd come to see for herself that her vampire had once been the statue? "Not really. I just had to, you know. Strange things happened here last night and now ... it's..." She stepped forward, her eyes on the empty pedestal where the statue once stood. The police officer held an arm out stopping her from going too far.

"It's really not there," she finished.

The police officer frowned. "Do you know something about that, miss?"

"No," she answered a little too quickly.

"It was only reported missing this morning, by that man."

The officer pointed to a short man dressed in a dull brown robe. His poor taste in fashion made him an excellent candidate for the monastery. The monk stood a ways back from the crowd wringing his hands. A fretful expression worried his face. He seemed agitated, even afraid. She followed his gaze out across the cemetery to see a woman dressed in a long black cloak that fluttered in the wind. Tendrils of long red hair flowed out from under an oversized hood, and she held her hand stretched out toward them.

A small gasp escaped the monk, and he bolted for the monastery. Meara returned her eyes to the woman, just in time to see her walk over to the crypt and disappear around the other side.

Meara turned her head back to the policeman, her mouth open in shock. She looked back to the cemetery, and nothing, except the missing statue, seemed unusual.

"Miss?" he followed her gaze. "Are you all right?" He squinted, trying to understand.

Ignoring his concern, she asked a question of her own. "What just happened?"

The police officer seemed taken aback. "I'll ask the questions."

She clamped her mouth shut.

"Do you know why anyone would want to take it?"

"Me? No, why would I know that?"

"I don't know. You just seem to have a vested interest in the place."

"No, I mean, not until last night, when—"

"When?" he prompted, looking at her like she was his prime suspect.

She had to think fast. All her alibis had bailed. "I think I was drugged," she finally blurted out.

The cop's demeanor changed drastically. Dropping the stern expression, he softened his expression with concern. "What makes you say that?"

"I went out with a group of friends, but I didn't know all of them. We came here, and it got rowdy. We were drinking, and then strange things started happening. I didn't know what to think. My friends tripped out too, and it had to do with this statue. I saw it stand up, you know?" She was impressed with her own ability to lie under stress.

The cop's brow furrowed, and he struggled to follow what she was saying. "No, I don't know, but I want you to start from the beginning, and don't leave out a thing." He took her by the arm and led her toward the nearest police car. "And I'll need the names and addresses of those friends of yours."

She nodded and started to list off the names of her so-called friends.

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## Chapter Eleven

Meara rubbed her brow with the heel of her hand. The cop had been relentless. He'd refused to take a break, even after she threatened to call the cops on *him* for being anal. If that balding doughnut-eater had his way, he would have gone over her statement for the fourth time. He'd said he was just trying to get it straight, but she knew he was just trying to catch her up in a lie. In fact, he had seemed frustrated that she had told it the same way all three times and finally had to let her go.

Now, standing alone beside her car, she hesitated to leave. Her gaze fixed on the large building just beyond the cemetery grounds. The ominous presence she had felt in her dream was stronger here, and her heightened awareness of it made her jump at every little sound. The presence closed around her mind, zoomed in on her, and she could swear she heard a faint laugh echoing in the woods. She scanned the grounds, half expecting to see the terrifying images of her nightmare rise up out of a mist.

What she needed was an expert, and who better understood the need for purification than a priest or, in this case, an abbot?

With a nervous glance back to the police officer, she hurried up the path to the great wooden doors of the monastery and knocked loudly. It seemed like forever until someone finally answered. A middle-aged man with a small build and wearing the dull brown garb of a monk stood in the



doorway looking at her, an expression of mild surprise on his face.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I think I need your help," she stammered.

His brows knitted together. "Has your car broken down?" He peered out around the door, no doubt checking to see if there was a car with smoke rising from its engine.

"No, this is about the statue that went missing."

His eyes went wide, but he didn't move.

"Can I come in? I need to speak to someone who can tell me more about it."

He frowned again. "Well, that would be the abbot, Brother Gerard." He seemed to hesitate, but then stepped back.

"Come this way."

She was brought to a small, sparsely furnished waiting room, with a crackling fire in the hearth. Even though the fire was soothing and warmed her unusually chilly bones, she couldn't sit still. She fidgeted her hands in her lap, and she had chewed her lip raw with worry.

When the small monk returned with an older man, she knew it had to be Brother Gerard.

"Edward here tells me you are in distress and in search of answers regarding our absent stone-faced friend." His eyes lifted to the window overlooking the cemetery. Following his gaze, she saw the spot just beyond the ruins where she'd performed a most outrageous act. She shuddered to think they could have seen everything.

"Such a tragedy, that was." He tsked and gave his old head a slow shake.

For some reason, she doubted his regret about the statue was genuine.

He held a gnarled hand out to her. "If you will come with me to my office, I'll listen to all you have to say."

She stood without his assistance, preferring not to get too chummy. She assumed that the minute she told them she was the one responsible for the statue going missing, they wouldn't be so amicable. In fact, their relationship might plummet beyond repair when she explained *how* the statue went missing.

Once inside the abbot's office, she was offered tea, which she accepted happily. It was brought in almost immediately by yet another monk. She held the steaming mug tightly in both hands, clinging to any source of external heat she could find.

The abbot heaved a heavy sigh and folded his fingers together on top of the desk. "I'm going to get right down to it and be blunt. You are here to tell us that you are responsible for the statue's disappearance, correct?" It wasn't a question so much as it was a statement, one she was forced to nod her head to.

He tipped back in his chair and addressed the other monk standing just behind him with a satisfied smile. "See, Brother Charles? I told you to have faith. A guilty conscience is a greater punishment than any arrest."

The other monk gave a reluctant nod, although he still stared at her like he was trying to learn something from her telepathically. She gave him another hard look and realized she recognized him too. He was the monk from the cemetery.

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Pulling her gaze off the familiar man and forcing confidence into her voice, she addressed the abbot. "I'm not a criminal, sir." She struggled for a word in which to address him. "I didn't actually take the statue."

"Someone coerced you then, or perhaps forced you to?"

"No. I—"

He brought his chair back to its upright position and smiled at her with kind patience. "It's all right, dear. We aren't going to have you arrested. We just want this resolved."

Again, she doubted his word. "I just don't know how to explain it, is all." She swallowed hard and decided to just dive in. "Something happened, something strange."

"Strange? Like what?" Tension strained his voice.

"I ... I woke the statue up." She waited for the scoff or laugh. When it didn't come she continued. "I don't know how I woke him up, but I watched him walk away."

The old monk frowned, and she could see that what she had said had started to sink in, and he was now trying to decide whether she was a lunatic or a practical joker.

"I know that sounds crazy, but I swear it's true. All my friends saw it too, although getting them to confess to that might be a bit of a challenge."

He cleared his throat. "All right then, we'll play it your way. How exactly did you go about 'waking him up'?"

She blushed. Her ears burned. "I'd rather not say."

The abbot opened his mouth about to speak but thought better of it and immediately closed it again. Clearly, he was flabbergasted.

"I came here because I need your help. Your statue is actually a vampire, and he's after me."

The look of surprise fell from his wizened features, and he smiled patiently.

It was also obvious her time there was coming to a close. She needed to get to the point before he tossed her back outside. "I just need to know what I should do to ward him off. I can't tell if I'm possessed or acting on my own accord. I mean, I think I actually like the guy. Sure he's a vampire and all, but does that mean he's dangerous? And does the wooden stake thing really work? I read about running water and garlic and holy water—"

"Miss..." the abbot cut in.

She recognized her cue. "Rochelle."

"Miss Rochelle, have you experienced something traumatic in your life recently, a death in the family, perhaps?"

She realized she must not be the first whack job to appear before him half-cocked with some far-reaching story.

"No, just the statue coming to life in the cemetery, I swear. What I felt was real. One moment he was stone, and the next he was flesh and blood, breathing in my face. I felt his touch."

She quivered, distracted by the intensity of the erotic memory. The fact that her body yearned for him didn't help either. Thoughts about what she might find waiting for her when she returned home flooded her mind, and her cheeks heated. She was just grateful the abbot couldn't read minds.

She straightened in her chair and steered her mind out of the gutter. "There is proof of his activities in the paper.

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Attacks have been occurring on citizens in this city. Each attack has born the mark of a vampire." The moment it was out of her mouth, she regretted it. She had told the truth, but it felt like a lie, or perhaps she felt she'd betrayed her winged man. Sure, he was showing up unexpectedly like some ethereal stalker, but so far he'd never really done her any harm. He'd bitten her, twice, but the last time she'd invited him to. "I mean, no one has died..." She trailed off, no longer sure what she was there for. She was scared and wanted someone to give her an answer, to tell her whether or not she was crazy, or that she could trust her own judgment any more.

The abbot rubbed his forehead, and then said after some time, "Perhaps if you brought him in to me, you know, to see with *my* own eyes."

*Is he joking?* She nearly laughed out loud. *Bring a vampire in?* "Pardon me, but that seems strange coming from a man who bases his entire belief system and lifestyle on the intangible."

A tolerant smile flashed across his withered features again. "Yes, I suppose, but surely you can see how this is different."

Meara couldn't see how.

"Can't you just perform some sort of ritual, purify or bless me? Make me smell bad to vampires or something?"

A hint of amusement crinkled the corners of his eyes.

"We're monks. We don't do those sorts of things. I must admit you are the first to come to us with this request, and alas, I hate to send you on your way without at least trying to

help." He took a deep breath. "My advice is for you to pray and ask for forgiveness."

"Pray! I'm not even religious. I feel like I can't trust myself. I find I'm thinking things that aren't right, safe, or normal."

The abbot nodded, which just infuriated her even more.

The other monk had started to grow agitated as well. Each time she spoke, he leaned forward, and she felt his need to interrupt. Something was on his mind.

"I think I'd better just go." She stood and was relieved when they didn't try to retain her.

The abbot instructed the nervous monk to see her to the door.

But to Meara's surprise, the monk pulled her aside once they were away from the abbot. Holding a finger to his lips, he led her along a quiet corridor and into a darkened area that she could only assume was some sort of archives. Books filled the entire room.

"I believe you," he confessed in a hushed tone. "And I know you've seen her."

"Seen who?"

"The dark lady."

Meara's skin prickled. "You mean that woman in the long dark cloak out on the lawn?"

He nodded.

"Who is she?"

"I'm not certain, but after I saw her the first time, many years ago, I assumed she was a ghost. You see she had vanished right before my eyes. After that, I went to the

archives and went through many of the monk's diaries who have long since passed. Only one of them ever mentions her, but he mentions your statue too."

He selected it from a shelf and blew the dust off it. Flipping through a few pages, he found the one he was looking for. "That statue you mentioned arrived in the middle of the night. See here, June sixteenth, and it was placed in a location that was at an odd angle from all the other grave markers. There was no name, and no message explaining who that man, or beast was, so they left it alone, believing no real harm was done, except of course the nature of the statue's predicament."

She knew exactly what predicament that was, intimately.

"Some have tried to cover it up, but by morning, whatever they constructed around it, threw over top of it, or tried to damage it with was gone. And every time an attempt was made, that dark lady would appear, standing by the crypt, much like she did today."

"The crypt?"

"That large stone positioned between this building and the ruins, the one with the door in to it."

"He's a vampire," she blurted out.

The monk nodded.

"So, she must be one too."

"I've come to that same conclusion, but you won't get any warm responses from any of the others here. I tend those grounds out there. I have an intimate knowledge of every headstone and flower planted, but you won't catch me bad

mouthed that which I know watches me while I work, or did, until you came along."

She shivered, remembering the reason the statue was missing. Meara nodded, not liking where he was going with this.

"Be aware then," was all he said. Plucking the diary from her fingers, he closed it and placed it back where it belonged. "Holy water and those other gimmicks won't help you now."

\* \* \* \*

Some time had passed since the young lady was to have taken her leave, the abbot mused, watching her brisk walk back to the car. Just before she climbed into her car to drive off, she turned back to look at the monastery and met his eye.

His eyes bored down on to her as though he could extract a confession out of her from that great a distance, but what could she tell him that she hadn't already hastily blurted. It was hogwash, but what else could he expect from a gypsy?

"Brother Edward," the abbot called out to the man standing just outside the office door. True to nature, Brother Edward came in solemn and obedient. "Do you think it would be possible to get your hands on a paper for me?"

"A newspaper?"

"Yes, that young lady has me intrigued."

"Right away then." The other man bowed solemnly and left the abbot alone with his nagging doubts.

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## Chapter Twelve

The sun dipped below the horizon, and D'iamonte stepped out of the narrow gap beneath the underpass. Despite the fact that cars had driven overhead all day long, he'd still managed to get a restful sleep. Perched on a steel girder, he stretched his aching limbs and wings to get the blood to return to them.

It had been a foolish thing to approach and threaten that useless twerp, D'iamonte scolded himself. Not only had it been in broad daylight, but he had also risked everything going out in his weakened condition. There were those that preyed upon weak, foolish vampires, and he knew that well. He'd barely managed to reach the high structure, but when he did, he resolved not to leave it again until his strength had returned. It was hell on his body when he didn't take the time to find a comfortable resting place to spend his few precious hours recuperating, but after such a long time being immobile, he really couldn't complain. He loved the feeling of his strength returning, and he could barely wait to be reunited with his dark-eyed girl. Now that he was feeling so much better, he planned to show his lovely mortal how good he really was.

He smiled, thinking of the young woman. She was striking, and not in the usual way. Her big saucer-shaped eyes had a way of making him weak in the knees.

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Closing his eyes, he lifted his nose to the wind and inhaled. When he picked up her scent, he opened his mind to her surroundings.

A grand building, that flaunted a tarnished copper dome, ornate stone scrollwork, and a lavish set of gold gilded door handles, appeared before his eyes. He picked out the lettering on the gold plaque next to the front door. Public Library, he read with a smile. The library was free game, and she was inside. He needed no invitation to visit her there.

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## Chapter Thirteen

The sun had already begun its slow decent in the sky by the time she pulled into the public library parking lot, and it was a struggle to keep her eyes open. She'd had a total of three hours sleep in the past twenty-four hours, and it was taking its toll. She knew better than to expect to sleep if she went home. Whatever it was that inhabited her apartment probably still lurked there. Her little visit to the abbot had been a waste of time, and if she ever hoped to get her life back on track, she needed more information.

The library seemed like a good place to start. After heading straight to the front desk, she requested a book on the cemetery where all the trouble started. She was directed to a section in the far corner and was told to look under C.

The book led her to a quiet little nook in the back of the library. When she had pulled the title off the shelf, a hardbound text, she doubted it had ever been requested before, and found a little table nearby. Sitting down, she cracked the spine confirming her suspicions of its newness. She hadn't gotten into the book more than the index when she felt that familiar cold chill sweep over her. She turned to see a flash of movement just before it eased back into the shadows. Someone had been standing there watching her, she was certain.

Fear gripped her heart, and she struggled to remain calm. Maybe it was unwise to go out after all. Her foolish pride certainly had gotten her into trouble before. She was spooked

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and desperate for answers, and she could have done the research from home.

Deciding that would be best, she slid the old, battered text back in its rightful place, which created a cloud of dust and book mold that wafted around her head and stung her eyes. Blinking wildly, she struggled to clear her vision. When she opened them, again, she found herself looking straight into the dreamy eyes of her vampire.

\* \* \* \*

Standing outside the library, D'iamonte experienced an unusual hesitation in his actions. In fact, he'd debated going in at all. For some reason he was hesitant to push her too fast. It was becoming increasingly clear to him that she meant much more to him than just a night of passion. She filled his thoughts, was the source of all his longings. He wanted her like no other, making him irritable and his fangs constantly ache. Eventually he went in far enough so he would be able to watch her without her knowing.

He'd studied her, admiring her slight build, her slender fingers, and the way her long eyelashes swept across her cheek when her eyes were looking down. She wore her hair wild and loose, and he liked the way it framed her exotic face. One dark curl strayed from the rest and dangled over her nose like a coiled spring. His heart lifted seeing how she scowled when she concentrated, and how her cheeks flushed with a hint of pink that betrayed her. He knew, without entering her mind, that she entertained amorous thoughts of him. Beneath that delicate exterior lurked a soul straining

with erotic sensuality, and he longed to tap into it and then lose himself within her.

He'd kept his distance until he couldn't stand it any longer. In one bold move, he'd stepped into view.

A soft gasp escaped her lips, and she pressed her back against the bookshelf. "What do you want with me?" she asked, and he could see that she was trembling.

"I thought it was obvious," he said, keeping his tone light, and he was rewarded when she cast a hasty glance to the bulge at his groin. "Do you know how long it had been since I'd experienced anything like the performance you put on for me?"

She gave her head a slight shake.

"Too long," he said before she could answer. "And now I seem to be unable to stay away from you."

"What exactly are you?"

"Cursed," he said and walked a short distance away. "But you can call me D'iamonte."

Her eyes seemed to grow wide upon her hearing his name, but he doubted it was from fear. Her shoulders came down the tiniest bit, and her eyes were now full of wonder.

"Have you put me under some spell?" she asked seemingly out of the blue.

"I feel it is you who have put me under." He laughed softly but sobered when he saw the depth of her concern etched across her worried features. "No, why?"

She fussed with the bottom button on her shirt. "Then these feelings I have, they are real, all of my own making?"

He smiled slightly. "And what feelings are those?"

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"I should be afraid of you, yet I'm not, well, not anymore."

"I have no intention of doing you harm."

She nodded. "A normal person would run if they saw a man with great big bat wings coming after them."

"But instead you find yourself attracted to me?" He stepped forward ever so slightly.

She didn't say anything.

"I shouldn't want you, and yet, I do."

He advanced a considerable distance this time until he was no more than two feet in front her. "In what way do you want me?"

"All ways," she confessed, and her cheeks flushed a deep pink.

He reached a hand up to caress her cheek and felt her shiver again. He pulled her to him and pressed her tight against his chest. When she did not resist further, he kissed her, long and deep. She responded with equal passion, leaning into him when he expected her to recoil.

D'iamonte pulled back from the kiss to gaze upon her face. To his delight, she met his eyes and flashed him a bashful smile. His heart warmed at the sight, he felt his own mouth pull into a wide smile, and again he was reminded of what a stunning creature she was.

She had grown bold now. "Ever since I first saw you in the cemetery, even in the form of a statue, I wanted this very thing to happen."

"And what thing would that be?"

She blushed, and he grinned.

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He ground his erection into her hip and uttered a lusty growl. "You're all I've thought about since we parted, let me assure you. I crave you. Every time I close my eyes, I see your dark eyes shining bright, filled with the same passion I saw when you climbed on top of me. You have me acting like a fool, returning to your side when I should be long away from here, but I can't seem to leave."

She had stopped trembling and now seemed comfortable enough to bring her hands away from where they'd been clutching her chest.

"Do you know what I am?"

Her eyes made a sweep the full length of him, starting at the dark tips of his wings showing above his shoulders, and ending at the leathery points that dragged along the floor. To another looking at him standing there, he might appear to be dressed in a long black cape or some elaborate costume, but he could see that she had accepted him for what he was. She just wasn't certain whether he was a threat or a promise.

She nodded, and to prove her point, she tipped her head back and exposed her throat.

His breath caught fast, and a thrill rippled through him. Never had he met such an unpredictable woman. Even knowing what he was, she offered herself up to him. The urge to taste her clawed at him, made him act rashly, and he knew the bloodlust was starting to take over, becoming something of an obsession. She evoked such longing within him that he could not help but lower his mouth to her neck, and he inhaled her intoxicating scent.

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She stiffened, but he could tell she was still intrigued, turned on even. She angled her hips toward him, offering up that part of herself as well. His cock throbbed in response. In a daring move he slid his hand between the juncture at her thighs and located the hard little bud nestled between her lips. It throbbed with the same tempo pulsing in her neck, and he let a little anguished groan slip past his lips.

To his delight, she echoed the sentiment, and thrust her hips forward, encouraged his exploring fingers to delve a little deeper. The thin material of her leggings was damp with her arousal, and his cock twitched in response. Oh God, how he'd missed touching a woman. He wanted nothing more than to sink his aching fangs deep into her flesh, followed shortly by his yearning cock.

He drew his tongue along her skin and located the vein coursing within. He wanted to bite her so bad it disturbed him. He'd never felt so consumed by his cravings before, but Meara was different somehow.

"Is this truly what you want?" he dared to ask, hoping with all his might her answer would be yes.

"I'm not afraid," she whispered. "I know I should be but—"

Her words cut off when he brought the sharp points to her flesh. Seconds passed, a moment he took great pleasure in, when he felt the closest connection to his victim. His fangs burned with need, but he prolonged the moment, hovered over the vein, savored the pulse against the tip of his tongue. He could feel her heart beat quicken, but she did not protest. She was waiting, he reminded himself, and he sank his teeth in quick. He felt her jump and her arms stiffen. The warm,



salty taste of blood swept across his mouth, and his cock surged. It felt euphoric.

He drank deeply, and her blood tingled down his throat. The moment he tasted her, he knew he'd found his satisfaction. As expected, he felt her relax when the pleasure took over, and her rigid muscles softened. He quickened his tempo upon the bud, swollen with her excitement, and circled it with his fingertips. His cock strained against the fabric holding it in place, and he longed to feel it thrusting deep in to her. If it weren't such a public location, and he could be certain she would be all right after, he'd succumb to his desire and take her right there, pressed against the bookshelves.

She moaned with pleasure and ground her hips against his probing fingers. Hell, he might enter her anyway, he thought, feeling the ache grow between his legs. He wanted her bad enough to risk it.

The sound of someone clearing her throat came behind him, and D'iamonte halted. Without turning around to know that it was the librarian, he raised his mouth from her throat and met his lover's eyes.

Now, staring into her dark riveting gaze with the taste of her on his lips, he hated to leave, wasn't even sure if he could leave. His heart hammered in his chest as he struggled to master himself, regain control, and not let the vampire in him make a mess of an intimate situation. Forcing himself to calm, he reigned himself in, took a measured breath, and smiled.

"I must leave you now, but before I go, will you tell me your name?"

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She was trembling, but he suspected it was from excitement rather than fear. "Meara," she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper.

He smiled, pleased. "I intend to return to you tonight."

She blew him a kiss, and he swore he felt it straight to his heart. And with that, he tore himself away from her side and strode out through the front doors.

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## Chapter Fourteen

Meara fell back against the wall of books, heaved a sigh of relief, and watched his handsome profile stride away. He moved on feet that seemed to glide across the floor.

She had surprised herself, responding to him like she did, and her reaction puzzled her. She knew she should have run, screamed, or at least not allowed him to bite her, but she'd wanted him to. Memories of the dream still set her skin ablaze. It had felt so real, accepting his advances today didn't seem unacceptable to her.

She had told him the truth. She wasn't afraid of him. He pulled on her in a way no other man had, with his charismatic charm, fiery gaze, and sinfully delicious body. Ever since that night in the cemetery, when she climbed into his lap, she'd longed for him. Nothing about her had been normal after that, but she didn't care. She trusted her heart, and her heart was telling her to trust him. He had never harmed her. She'd been driven by lust rather than by fear, lust that had been interrupted and still raged inside of her.

He did promise to return though, she thought, hope blossoming again, and then she caught herself. Was she really looking forward to going another round with a man who owned his own set of wings? What about the nightmares, and the creatures in her apartment? Was she willing to embrace a life that included that?

She took a deep breath to steady her nerves. How was it that he terrified her out of her wits, yet she craved his touch?

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Her heart was beating wild, and she became aware of the librarian's angry presence.

Raising a hand to her neck, she faced the disapproving glare of the librarian.

"Sorry," she said smiling sheepishly, but the librarian continued to frown.

"I don't suppose I can take that book home now?"

When the other woman turned on one heel in disgust, Meara had her answer.

It didn't matter. What she sought could not be found in any book. Who in their right mind knew anything of what had just happened to her? Her body tingled with delight, yet she now bore holes in her neck. Whoever her dark suitor was, he was a master in seduction, and for her to be looking forward to his next visit, she was certain she was spellbound.

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## Chapter Fifteen

Thanks to Meara, D'iamonte's body thrummed with vitality. His body had never felt so strong, so wonderful, invincible, and giddy.

Meara. He said her name over again. It was lovely. She was lovely. Hell, she was downright addictive. He had never felt so good, and he couldn't wait to return to her side. It wasn't just to taste her again, either, he realized. If his heart actually beat within his chest, he'd happily give it to her. He sobered thinking about that. It was a dire reminder of exactly why mortals and his kind were not supposed to mix. He could want her, he could even love her, but someday she would die, and he would go on.

Still, he thought, feeling irritated by his own doubts, he could be happy, even for a short while. And then there was the hope that she was special. From the depths of his conscious he'd felt she was different from the others. She had him acting irrational, and he had no idea why. It was almost as though he were drawn to her by a magnetic force, one so strong even he couldn't deny its pull. If he didn't know better, he'd suspect his mistress had a hand in all of it. But unless she'd learned a few new tricks while he was incapacitated, she couldn't. Besides, he'd have felt her presence if she'd come above ground. His mistress had an effect on all things ghoulish, himself included. Whatever it was he was feeling for this extraordinary mortal, it was his own doing.

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Thinking of Meara and her seductive gaze again, lifted his mood. For her he could find the strength to take flight, do what he had to and return to her. He just hoped she'd still be receptive like she was when he found her in the library.

Before he could indulge in anything quite so pleasurable, he had revenge to extract, but for some reason it just didn't feel important anymore.

D'iamonte found the old man already asleep in his bed. This was another task he would not savor, but he was certain, if he was to find peace of mind, it had to be done.

Calling the man out, he swooped down into the backyard, and closed the door on one more score to settle.

No sooner had he started a faint cry of distress interrupted his thoughts, and nearly made him choke. With his teeth embedded deep in the old man's neck, he had to struggle to focus. It was Meara he'd heard. There was no doubt in his mind. She was in danger and needed him.

Abandoning his prey where he'd lured him out in the backyard, D'iamonte launched himself into the sky.

\* \* \* \*

Stepping out of the library, she was surprised to see how late it had become. The sky was deep lavender, and the streetlights were already lit. A shiver rippled across her shoulders, and for some reason, she felt that familiar chill return.

Glancing over her shoulder, she hurried to her car and jumped inside. Something wasn't right. She could feel it.

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She drove home faster than she should have, and parked her car in the designated lot across the street. The ominous presence she associated with her dreams was stronger now, and it was all she could do to keep from running through traffic to the front door.

Her hands shook, and she fumbled with her keys, nearly dropping them in her haste. A fierce snarl brought her head up sharp. Two large grey canines approached her from the side. Seeing their fierce expressions, their ribs showing beneath their thin skin, and their bared fangs, she froze, and this time, the keys fell from her trembling fingers. These weren't ordinary stray dogs. They were too similar in appearance to be natural or a coincidence. Not only that, but their eyes glowed with the same inner hellfire that she had seen emanating from the eyes of the creatures in her apartment. Like the creatures, these dogs from hell, seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, and their sole focus seemed to be on her.

Uttering a blood curdling shriek she glanced about for anything to save her. She doubted she'd be able to outrun them, but if she could find something to climb, it might be her only hope. Seeing them advance, she backed up slowly, until she bumped into the white picket fence of the property next door. An alley opened up to her right, and she could see the fire escape at the far end.

Turning, she edged her way down the narrow passage, struggling to keep her wits about her. Seeing their target backing away, they advanced, stalking her like prey. They moved together, like a mirror image of one another, and their

growls increased, echoing off the brick wall. Halfway down, she saw them crouch low, preparing to spring. Just when she anticipated their impact, a rush of wind sounded above her, and she heard someone land on the concrete behind her.

"Down, Oicesa. Down, Zorya." A deep male voice sounded close by her ear. It wasn't D'iamonte's voice. "She's mine," he said with finality, and at once, she felt her shoulders gripped by firm hands. She gasped and struggled to turn around, but her assailant was too strong.

"You're a fool to step into the shadows, my girl," he said with a laugh, and she felt herself bend back. She cried out at the awkward angle, and her captor's hand clamped down over her mouth. "But no one will ever know." His voice dripped with menace, and she didn't like the sound of what he was implying. Whoever this stranger was, he intended her harm. She had to fight if she was going to survive.

Drawing on her knowledge from her self-defense courses, she raised her knee and brought her foot back hard on the man's knee. He cried out in pain but did not loosen his grip. Instead, he bent her over farther, to the point where she caught a glimpse of his face. The sight of his razor-sharp teeth nearly stopped her heart.

Her attacker was a vampire, she realized with a shudder.

This vampire had blond hair, and his dark eyes held a greenish tinge. He slid the pad of his thumb over the small wound D'iamonte had made, and she cringed. "I see I am not the first to have sampled you, but it was a fool who let you get away."



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He leaned closer, his mouth inches from her throat. He smelled of leaf rot, a scent she'd come to associate with those who walked in the world of death. His hot breath blew against her skin, and she could feel the pin pricks of his fangs. Just when she anticipated the pain of his bite, a dark form dropped from the sky, and landed just in front of them.

"de Giacomo." She recognized D'iamonte's voice. "Let her go," he said sharply.

Meara felt relief wash over her at D'iamonte's arrival, and she nearly sobbed out loud.

"So D'iamonte has broken the mold, has he?" The vampire named de Giacomo just laughed. "I take it you are the one responsible for her weakened state?"

She felt his wet tongue slide across her neck.

"I said let her go." D'iamonte's hands curled into fists.

"You have no claim on her. She was roaming freely when I found her."

Meara struggled, but the vampire held her fast.

"Besides, in case you haven't noticed, this one is a real prize. If you think I'm just going to hand her over so you can reap the benefit, that's where you're wrong."

"Then I suppose I'll just have to make you." D'iamonte didn't bother to hide the menace in his voice, and he lunged forward so fast Meara wasn't ready for it. One moment, she was under de Giacomo's control, and the next, she had landed in a heap on the ground. Now she was able to see the other vampire more clearly. He looked very different from D'iamonte, more modern and vile, and he didn't have any wings.

They didn't stand still long, though. Clutching one another's shoulders, they danced back and forth to gain control over the other. Meara huddled against the wall, feeling very much out of her element. She wasn't used to letting someone fight her battles for her, but this situation was different. She didn't have fangs, wings, super strength, or immortality in her favor. It was all she could do to stay out of the way of their feet.

With one mighty shove, D'iamonte got the upper hand. He hurled de Giacomo backward, but the other vampire recovered quickly and sprang to his feet.

"So it's true. You are stronger then," de Giacomo said with a sneer. "In that case..." He snapped his fingers and made a motion to his hellhounds. In an instant, they were on guard, their focus directed now on D'iamonte.

"Even so, you'll be no match against them."

"de Giacomo, you disgrace your kin," D'iamonte snarled, and then he turned to address Meara. "Are you afraid of heights?" he asked not taking his eyes off the dogs.

She shook her head and then remembered he couldn't see her. "No."

"Good then," he said and gathered her into his arms. With a mad flap of his wings, he rose into the air with impressive speed. Seeing they intended to escape, de Giacomo made a daring lunge, his fingers scrabbling to gain hold of the narrow brickwork that made up the wall of the building next to him. She watched with wide eyes as he managed to climb all the way to the rooftop before he was forced to give up. D'iamonte

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rose up higher, out of reach, and only the sound of the dogs' infuriated howls followed them.

The tops of houses raced past far below, and Meara gasped. When he asked her if she was afraid of heights, she had never expected she'd be flying over the city cradled in his arms. She clung to him, not quite trusting that he had a hold of her. At first, she shut her eyes against the terrifying height, but soon they left the city lights behind them, and the distance below them was obscured in the darkness. She felt reassured by his strength and, trusting he knew what he was doing, allowed herself to relax.

She had so many questions she wanted to ask him, the first being where was he taking her, but the wind blew so strong she found she could not speak.

A cliff face loomed over them, and she figured that was where D'iamonte headed. They soared gracefully for the last mile, and Meara couldn't help shut her eyes as they neared the imposing mountain of rock. She only opened them again when his feet landed on solid ground. She looked around to see where he brought her, a small, square plateau with a wall of rock surrounding them on three sides. It sheltered them from the wind but remained open to the last dregs of daylight. She looked to the red earth below her dangling feet and noted D'iamonte seemed hesitant to set her down.

She looked up into his face, and admired the way the wind blew his hair up off the nape of his neck. No man had ever looked more beautiful to her, nor had one evoked so many doubts. He was a vampire, an ethereal being much like the one who had just attacked her, yet that was where the

similarities ended. Thinking of her close encounter with the other vampire, de Giacomo, sent a chill across her. It had tainted things, and she needed answers. She wriggled in his arms until he had no choice but to set her back on her feet. Once her feet touched the ground, she put some physical distance between them. It pained her to do it. After all, he had just saved her, but from what?

She turned back to find him watching her. His eyes were ravenous, yet discriminating. She suspected he was delving deep into her thoughts when a crooked smile crossed his fine features.

"What just happened?" she asked, preferring the straight forward method.

His smile faded. "With de Giacomo you mean?"

She nodded, her mouth a firm line.

"I don't understand it myself." He turned to look out over the glowing city landscape. "Because of me, you were weak, vulnerable, and smelled of blood. Vampires like de Giacomo prey upon those who cannot defend themselves."

She was about to argue that she had tried to defend herself, that she was no weakling who could be cornered like a hare down some alley, but that was exactly what had happened, and she was there talking to D'iamonte only because he had come to her rescue. Humbled, she straightened her back. "He said some things..." She let her words trail off.

D'iamonte's shoulders sagged. "Yes, I know."

"What was he referring to?"

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He was silent for a long while before he spoke in a grave tone. "I honestly don't know, but he suggested there was something special about you. I confess I have felt it myself."

She looked to the ground, thinking about how she had already known his name. "I'm not your average girl, never have been. My grandmother said my ancestors would be proud of me because of the talent I display, but I am starting to agree with my parents. This gypsy blood coursing through my veins feels more like a curse."

"Gypsy blood." He cocked his head thoughtfully to one side, seeming to take in what she'd just admitted. Then he perked up once again. "Well, that makes two of us who are cursed then." A fleeting smile played across his fine features, and then it was gone. She could see he was troubled, and she longed for the passion they had ignited back at the library.

Suddenly she couldn't stand to be away from him another second.

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## Chapter Sixteen

He was surprised to feel Meara's warm fingers on his skin. He looked down to where they wrapped around his wrist, and he raised his hand to her face. Somehow she had crossed the short distance between them without him being aware. To sneak up on a vampire was rare, indeed. It was all he could do just to gape at her. Eventually, he came around enough to move his thumb, to caress the fine line of her jaw and the outline of her plump lip. To his surprise, she drew it into her mouth, and he could feel her tongue swirl around it. His cock began to swell and rise. She noticed too. Her eyes darted down to his thickening shaft, and she smiled around his thumb.

His fingers grazed the warm skin where her shirt didn't cover her abdomen, and he traced a line up, drawing the shirt with it. She sucked in a quick breath as the cool air touched her skin. Bringing his mouth down, he kissed his way back up to her neck and licked her with long, sure strokes. Their passion was building faster now, their actions more bold.

She pulled her top over her head and then threw it to the ground. Her bra followed soon after. She stood before him with her plum-colored nipples tightening in the wind. He stared at her perfect round breasts and took in the glorious moment before he reached out to cup them in his hands. Her nipples reacted to the cold air, pebbling into tight points. He brought his hot, wet mouth down over top of one of them, drew it between his lips, which elicited a gasp from her.

Straightening, he thumbed each nipple with gentle sideways strokes, and she moaned with delight.

Hungry for more, he all but tore her pants off her and brought his mouth to her sex. Sliding his tongue along her slick groove, he inhaled her intoxicating scent. Widening her hips, she opened herself up for the onslaught of his tongue, felt him probe her contours and push his tongue all the way into her. She accepted the intrusion with enthusiasm, until both of them had to come up for air. Barely a second went by before he caught her bottom lip between his and drew it into his mouth. She groaned and dug her fingers into his flesh. Only when she uttered a strangled cry did he realize he had caught her with a fang. Urging her to the ground, he laid her naked body down, and returned his mouth to the tiny injury he had caused her. His fangs tingled and extended. A surge of lust overpowered him, which warned him to stay in control. He brought his mouth to her flesh and dragged his teeth across her skin. He lapped at her, lost in ecstasy until she cried out again, this time in the grips of her climax.

Unable to resist any longer, he shucked his pants, and entered her, his cock sliding easily into her wetness with one demanding plunge. She arched her back up into him, crying out with pleasure. He felt the sting of her fingernails bite into his back, and an ache deep in his belly increased as his desire for her threatened to overwhelm him. She began to buck her hips, urging him deeper, and he struggled to keep their tempo slow. He wanted to savor the moment, but he knew it would be futile. She bucked beneath him, her head tilted back, exposing her throat. His gaze settled on the two small

puncture marks he'd left earlier, and the pressure that had been building surged along his shaft and at the base of each fang.

He brought his mouth down upon her throat again and bit down hard. Blood, tasting both salty and sweet, flowed forth, gushed into his mouth, and swirled around his tongue. He began sucking and pumping while she moaned and writhed beneath him. Their energy circled around them as she gripped him, drove his hips in farther, which made each thrust intense.

He felt the cold atmosphere of the dreamscape rise up to greet them, and he used the unusual abilities of this world to his advantage. When she started to climax for the second time, he held onto the moment, wrapped it around them to extend her pleasure, draw it from her, and passed it through him only to return it to her once again. He rode the green current of energy as though he were a boat on an ocean of water, making them buoyant, even if only in spirit. He prolonged each penetrating stroke, each gut-shuddering withdrawal, and was amazed at her endurance.

He pumped into her over and over again while the mists swirled around them. He felt strong and full, like he could accomplish anything he set his mind to. Never before had a mortal's blood had such an effect, and he didn't want it to end. He wanted to continue like he was forever, floating free, feeling safe, and capable in the dreamscape, enraptured with Meara in a bond that felt stronger than just the joining of their bodies. She writhed beneath him, and he felt another orgasm surge through her. It hit him like a wave, and his



cock swelled again. He groaned, unable to hold off his climax any longer.

Pumping hard, he shot a stream of hot fluid into her, filling her until she overflowed with their efforts. She stiffened, arched, and sagged, and he knew more than just fluids had passed between them. Meara was unusual in more ways than he knew. He was certain their energy had made a complete circle, flowing from her body into his and his into hers. With his awareness of their physical state, the dreamscape faded into the darkness, and he could see the landscape of the mortal world around them once again. His limbs felt heavy compared to the gravity free atmosphere they'd returned from, yet his muscles felt strong and he longed to move them.

Eventually, he retracted his fangs and forced himself to release her throat. Meara's dark, endless eyes were half hooded with her satisfaction when she focused them on him. His heart fluttered with the joy he felt, and he stooped lower to kiss her mouth. Even as he watched, she drifted off to sleep with their bodies still joined, and her heart beating against his chest. He'd never been happier he realized shutting his eyes too. But then, he'd never met Meara.

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## Chapter Seventeen

He could have stayed in Meara's embrace forever, but a beam of light flashed in the far distance, and D'iamonte's head went up. The time had come for him to leave, he noted, yet it felt too soon. He suspected it would always feel too soon. The sun was cresting the horizon, and if he wanted to make it to safety, he had to move fast.

He stole one last glance at Meara's peacefully sleeping form. It would be a shame to wake her, but he knew she needed to rest. For now, he would bring her home, and after he'd secured his own well-being for the day, he'd return to her. They were connected now, in a way not many could be.

The flight back over the city was a quick and pleasurable one. The strength he'd gained because of Meara made everything he did effortless. He brought her to her window and lingered with her cradled in his arms. He kissed her nose with heartfelt tenderness and was pleased to see her eyes flutter open.

She looked around and only reacted a little when she discovered she was hovering two stories above the ground.

"This is quite a way to drop a date off." She laughed nervously and glanced at the distance below. "We're lucky it's still dark. Otherwise my neighbors would talk."

"It's better this way," he said with a regretful sigh, and she nodded. "I will return to you tonight," he promised, when she reached for the ledge. She paused with her fingers gripping the sill. "Where will you go?"

"There is a place down by the bridge."

"Nonsense," she scoffed. With an effort, she pushed the thin pane up and crawled inside, then turned around to give him a hand. He didn't move.

"What's wrong?" She frowned, seeing him lingering outside.

"I cannot enter uninvited."

She cast him a smile that was mingled with disbelief.

"Then by all means, you are my guest."

He knew he should take his leave, but seeing her outstretched hand, and the promise of more intimacy with her, he couldn't resist.

\* \* \* \*

He looked around with keen interest, and she suspected he'd never been inside a woman's apartment before. A smile stretched across her lips as she watched him explore. His eyes lit up with glee when his gaze fell upon the fireplace, and he knelt in front of the hearth. It had never been used. She wasn't even sure it was real, but in moments, he had a fire blazing.

"Where did you get the wood?" she asked astonished.

He looked at the fire and grinned at her. "What wood?"

She shook her head. "I've got lots to learn about you."

He came over to stand behind her and ran his hands along her sides. "I have a few skills."

A current of air moved about him, and she recognized the same scent of the dream world. Only in D'iamonte's case, she didn't find it repulsive. Inhaling deeply she leaned back

against him. She shivered with excitement. "I'm very aware of one of them."

His eyebrows arched. "How do you feel?"

"Exhausted."

He nodded. "You'll need to rest."

"You, on the other hand, look like you could go to a disco club and stay out dancing all night."

"A disco club?" A look of confusion crossed his features. He shrugged and let it go.

There was a rustling in the recycling bin. She looked up and saw the first of the creatures' glassy eyes peering over the side of the box. She frowned, not at all pleased to see it.

D'iamonte chuckled softly. "They're just curious about you."

"Just curious," she sputtered. "They've been harassing me ever since that night in the cemetery. This is just the first time they've shown themselves to someone aside from me."

"Well, I'm different," he admitted with a lopsided grin. "On that note, so are you."

"You've said that before," she said spearing him with a suspicious glance.

He shrugged. "It's not every day someone meddles in my mistress's magic."

Alarmed at what he had just revealed, she snapped up her head. "Did you say you have a mistress?"

He laughed. "Mistress is what I call her, not what she is to me. There's no need for jealousy, except that she'd have liked it to have been that way."

"Then what did you mean?"

"Another way to put it is she's my boss, my master, my owner." Clearly, he was uncomfortable with the last description. "She was the one who imprisoned me in stone all those long years, and you were the one who woke me."

It didn't take much suggestion to conjure images of that glorious moment, and she struggled to stay on topic. "So, are you trying to tell me that I have angered some sort of deity?"

He laughed. "Oh she'd love to hear herself described so highly." He shook his head still smiling. "No. She is a vampire, like me, only stronger, and more temperamental."

Meara relaxed slightly until something else he said started to wear on her conscience. "What did you do to piss her off so bad?"

He grimaced. "I refused her. I suppose it didn't help that she caught me fraternizing with a mortal either, hence the position I was in when I was immobilized." He chewed his lip thoughtfully for a moment before he spoke again. "Courting mortals is forbidden." He spared her a wary glance. "They're food." He gave an impish shrug.

"Vampire society runs much like the wealthy Victorians, a closeness, a clustering kinship that restricts but provides very little room for exploration or deviances. I believe she punished me out of retaliation for something closer to the heart, and she simply made an example out of me. I wasn't the most respectful, shall we say. I had opinions of my own, deviances that embarrassed my clan. My refusal had undermined her authority, put me in a position where I either had to challenge her or be punished. Turning me into a statue

was a convenient excuse to relieve herself of a distasteful memory."

His brow creased, and she could see it troubled him deeply.

She twisted so she was facing him and laid a hand on his shoulder. He stood, wrapping his arms around her. "I never want to go back," he blurted out. "Those days are behind me now, thanks to you."

Before she could say anything more, his lips met hers, and she was swept away with her passion. That familiar ache she'd come to associate with her desire for this otherworldly man flared deep in her belly. She felt her abdomen tighten with anticipation of more pleasure to come when a knock came to the door startled both of them, jarring their lips apart.

Puzzled, Meara went over and opened it. There, looking very much out of place, was the young monk from the monastery.

His eyes widened at the sight of her, and, appearing agitated, he wrung his hands. She glanced down to see that her clothes were still in disarray after her little tryst with D'iamonte. Her buttons were misaligned, and her bra was still out there on that windy rock face.

"Miss, I don't mean to bother you, but after the recent attacks, the abbot sent me out to check up on you. You see, it seems your words had an impact on him after all, what with the indisputable evidence that—"

His gaze settled on her neck. She could only imagine the mess it must be. The aftermath of D'iamonte's bite was not subtle.

D'iamonte came around the corner at that time, and the monk paled. With a little shriek, he took off at a run.

"Who on earth was that?"

Caught, she covered her smile. "A monk, from the monastery."

His forehead furrowed in confusion.

"I have a confession." She came over to him, took his hand, and led him back to the couch. "I was worried, and I foolishly sought some expertise." She laughed. "I guess they came to check up on me, but they didn't expect I'd have company."

"Nor that you would be wearing such revealing attire, I'd imagine. No doubt he hasn't seen that much female nakedness since before he joined the brotherhood."

"Oh dear. I hope I haven't corrupted him."

"I wouldn't be surprised. You certainly have done a number on me." leaned in to nuzzle her neck.

She tipped her head back and uttered an appreciative purr, but her eyelids had all but fallen down. It had been a taxing day for her, and she needed to recuperate but couldn't imagine passing on another round with him.

She looked up into his handsome face, and smiled, thinking she might just be able to muster up enough energy to help him burn a little extra off.

As though he read her mind, he slid his hands beneath her and lifted her into his arms. He carried her to her bed where

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he stripped her down and laid his body down the length of her. She felt his stiff cock pressing against her sex, and she opened her legs to him. She had enjoyed their first time together out on the cold ground of the cliff face, but she appreciated the soft mattress beneath her even more.

He hovered over her a moment, and his dark eyes glittered with mischief before he eased his cock between her thighs. She moaned with pleasure once his girth filled her and his hips began to rock. She could stay like that forever, she decided.

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## **Chapter Eighteen**

Despite the fact that sunlight streamed in through her bedroom windows Meara couldn't keep her eyes open. D'iamonte already slept beside her, his arm draped possessively across her chest. She'd succeeded in wearing him out, she thought with a smile. Had he bitten her again, she figured it would have been a different story, but they both knew she couldn't afford to lose any more blood. It had been difficult for him. That much had also been clear. Perhaps that was why he slept so sound now.

He'd been distracted this time, concentrating hard not to let his fangs come down. She'd felt his struggle as though she thought it herself. His mind reeled with worst case scenarios of what would happen if he let go, let the extent of his desire take over. She appreciated it but missed the closeness she'd felt earlier. There would be other moments, she decided, and snuggled against him, content to sleep for the first time in a long while.

The instant she closed her eyes, the numbing cold returned to her bones, but now, much like the creatures, the dream was getting irksome rather than frightening. She'd started to accept it, to expect it even. It was a new part of her life, an unbelievable life that included one hell of a sexy vampire. She was so incredibly weary not even the eerie whispers that always seemed to be present could keep her awake.

Once in the grip of the dream, it grew dark all around her. She thought she could see things moving about in the mist that had closed in, but she couldn't see well enough to make anything out. Much like before, she became wrapped up in the green current, and her feet left the ground. She stiffened and fought to keep control. A sharp pinch on her arm told her the creatures had closed in around her again, but now, in this vulnerable state, there was nothing she could do. Then, as though someone had lifted an anvil off her chest, she felt the tension ease and her body lift.

Despite the fact that her feet weren't touching the ground, she began walking, yet she had no idea where she was going. She seemed to be drawn forward by an invisible thread, like a fish on a line, with no idea who it was that was reeling her in. She thought she recognized her surroundings. If she wasn't mistaken, it was the grounds just off the site of the ruins. The dead tree that she had uprooted the time before still lay where she had dropped it, and the landscape, at least what she could see of it, was familiar too.

The faint outline of what looked like the tower of the ruins loomed high above her, confirming her suspicions. But to her horror she soared on past, until she realized she was heading straight for the crypt. At that moment, she knew she had to resist. She began to flail, thrashing about into nothingness, but all that served to do was turn her upside down until she was slowly spinning.

The whispers grew louder until she could discern a female calling out to her, using her name. She tried to cry out, but her voice was stuck fast in her throat, and all she managed

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was a tiny squeak. The wind seemed to pick up, and she felt herself carried faster toward some unknown destination. One thing was certain. She was doomed.

\* \* \* \*

A jerky movement drew D'iamonte from his rest, and he turned to discover Meara stiff as a board beside him. Her hands were splayed out across the sheets, and her head pressed into the pillow. She was still asleep, albeit, in terror. He knew immediately that she was under someone's control, and whoever it was held her tight in their grip. Retrieving her would put him at risk, exposing him to the mistress, but he felt he had no other choice.

Gripping her shoulders, he shook her body, but she did not stir. There was only one other way to reach her now. Closing his eyes, he reached out to her, the same way he had done with the old man, but with her, it was much more difficult. Whoever had hold of her had brought her deep into the depths of the dreamscape, the mistress's domain.

Only when sweat beaded his brow did the green current appear. Racing forward he used the current's natural flow and gained more speed. After a desperate moment, he found Meara. She was tumbling out of control, her arms reaching out for anything to grab on to. But there wasn't anything in the dreamscape strong enough to anchor her. The more she fought it, the easier it was for her to be pulled under. It had to come from within, from her mind. He knew he had arrived just in time, but first, he had to locate the source.

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Through the dark, the mist, and the debris, he picked out a lone, dark figure standing in the distance with her arms outstretched toward Meara. Her wings held her aloft with the subtlest of movements, and the long, tattered cloth of her dress fluttered even without a breeze. Dania, he thought with a scowl.

With an effort, he caught Meara and stopped her from tumbling through the dark. He drew her against his chest and held her so she wouldn't hurt him with her flailing. Soon, she came to recognize him and calmed, but he could see she wasn't quite herself. Her eyes seemed vacant.

Dania's eyes had been closed, but they opened the moment he interfered. She looked right at him and smiled.

"It's been a long time, D'iamonte."

His jaw tensed, but he remained silent.

"Still petulant then? Your years of purgatory haven't had any impact at all?"

This time he couldn't resist, and he didn't bother to mask the vehemence in his voice. "Oh, they've made an impression on me all right, and I'm even more determined to resist you."

She clucked her tongue in her cheek and shook her head. "Such a rare treat, D'iamonte, and you've been hogging her all to yourself."

"What I'm doing with her is no business of yours."

"Oh but it is. You are still of my clan. What is yours is mine, and this, my sweet boy, is the ultimate jackpot, untrained and without ties. Why she is ideal. Her blood must be like sipping wine from the finest crystal. It's no wonder

you are acting so cocky. Her blood makes you stronger, D'iamonte. Can't you feel it?"

The thought had crossed his mind, but he wasn't about to admit it to her.

"Bring her to me, D'iamonte, and I'll share."

"I'll do no such thing."

"Then I suppose I'll have to do this the old-fashioned way." She closed her eyes again, concentrating, and to his horror, Meara vanished.

Dania's wicked laugh cut through him, and he struggled to control his panic. He knew Meara couldn't have gone far. In fact, when he turned he saw she was in her bed, lying right next to his prone body. Only now, Dania had pulled him all the way into the dreamscape, made a switch between Meara and himself, and he had to fight the current to get back to the land of the conscious. It was always effortless to enter the dreamscape because of the direction the current flowed. Returning was a whole different matter. When a bolt of lightning flashed by his heels, he knew Dania wasn't about to make it any easier. She planned to trap him there, he realized, or perhaps something worse. With Meara safe on the other side, there was no way he could get to her, but Dania still could.

Drawing on the strength he'd gained thanks to Meara, he forced one foot forward. His leg barely moved. He was no match for Dania. Yet, had he been a hapless dreamer caught up in a strange nightmare, he would have fallen victim easily. But that, he wasn't. In fact, thinking of Dania reminded him of one of her tricks.

Feigning weakness, he allowed his form to break free of the ground. His body lifted fast and tumbled much like Meara's had. He heard Dania gasp with delight, but waited until he was close enough, and she'd let her guard down a little more, before he reasserted his energy and thrust himself backward, up and out of the dreamscape. Her shriek of infuriation rang in his ears when she realized he'd faked her out.

He jerked on the bed, and without wasting a second, he glanced over to where he'd last seen Meara. To his horror, she was already gone. A noise made him turn sharp, and it was there he found Meara, her fingers gripped tight on the window, about to open it.

Under the mistress's charm, she would willingly open the window and step off the ledge no different than she would go for a walk down a garden path. He was sure the mistress would catch her though. She wouldn't be much good dead.

Leaping across the room, he thrust one arm out and stopped her before she could climb out. His suspicions were confirmed. Dania waited for her on the other side.

Seeing D'iamonte, she shrieked with fury. "You dare challenge me?"

"Every chance I get." He hadn't intended to be cheeky. It was an old habit.

"You are breaking allegiance."

"And I'll do more for her."

She threw back her head and laughed, and the sound echoed across the city block. "Again, for a mortal, D'iamonte. Ridiculous."

"You know she is much more than that. You said so yourself."

"Is that what this is about then? You're addicted to her?"

"No." Despite his convictions, her words had an effect. Could it be? Was he that shallow? It had to be more.

"You cannot imagine the upkeep of such a prize all on your own, my love. Word is spreading." She flew back a few feet. "They will come in droves, hunting and sniffing around, many more than you can handle. You will simply go down with her." Her last sentence echoed off the buildings, but she was already gone.

He thought of de Giacomo, and the attack he'd tried earlier that day. D'iamonte hated to admit it, but his mistress was right. Meara was bait. The only hope he had was protection from a clan, and he'd just thrown away his one sure thing. Hell, for all he knew, he could be addicted to her, and she'd need protection even from him. If he had thought it through, or at least not been blindsided by lust, or love, or whatever it was that was making his head spin and his heart ache, then he could have at least had something to offer Meara when she woke.

Thinking of her, he pulled her away from the window and down onto a chair. With the mistress gone, Meara stirred the moment he laid his hands on her. Lifting her head, he pressed his forehead against hers and concentrated. With an effort, he slowed her racing mind, calmed her thudding heart, and willed her conscious. Her eyes opened, and her gaze settled on him. Her relieved smile nearly broke his heart. He knew that look. She was in love with a monster.

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## Chapter Nineteen

Seeing D'iamonte, she wrapped her arms tightly around him. Never had she been so relieved to find a vampire bearing down on her.

"What happened?" she asked when she found her breath.

"You were under a charm."

"A charm?" He was talking gibberish. All she could remember was the dream, and something more. "There was a woman," she blurted out.

His gaze dropped to the floor, and his somber expression grew dark, his thoughts turned inward.

She leaned in so he had to look at her. "What are you not telling me?"

"It's starting to make sense to me now, why the ghouls are here, de Giacomo's interest in you, and the intoxication I felt after I had bitten you. You have magic in your blood, untrained magic that makes you vulnerable. I should have connected it when you told me of your gypsy ancestry, but I didn't. To a vampire, your blood is an aphrodisiac, bringing strength, and vitality, unlike anything I've tasted before."

He stood feeling the need to put some distance between them. He began to pace the length of the room. "And because you don't know how to wield it, it makes you a very attractive target to those who would like nothing more than to take it away from you, or worse, enslave you." He stopped pacing and turned to face her, his eyes wide with revelation. "That's

how you managed to wake me. You cut yourself." He started pacing again. "Damn it, this is all my fault."

"Your fault?"

"I'm the reason she was ever made aware of you, but it was your blood that has made you interesting. Meara, this can't continue."

"What do you mean?"

"This, you and me, acting like we were any other ordinary couple. We're not. You live your life in the day, and I take lives in the night."

"You don't, do you?" She couldn't believe her ears.

"No," he answered irritably. "But you'd be living in fear, and I'd be exhausted trying to keep you safe."

She could see that he was letting her go, keeping his tone gentle, trying not to alarm her. "There is only one option, Meara."

Meara didn't like the sound of that. "And that is?"

"We ask her for protection, and you—" He stalled. "You remain safe."

Meara stood. "Am I hearing you right? You're asking me to be livestock to a clan of vampires."

A pained look crossed his face. "It's too late for any other choices. I made a mess of things with Dania tonight, but I will offer myself up if I have to, Meara. It's our only choice." With that, he moved to the window.

"D'iamonte!" she cried out seeing he was about to leave. He turned to face her again. "What happens if she destroys you, and then comes after me?"

He paused, his face serious. "It's a chance I have to take."

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Then, without sparing her a good-bye kiss, he turned his back to her. His dark form slid through the opening and dropped out of sight, into the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

After D'iamonte left, Meara had fallen apart. Unable to hold back the sob threatening to choke her, she let it all out, embracing the anguish, the fury, and the fear instead of bottling it up. The rat-man approached her cautiously and was immediately rebuked. She wanted nothing to do with them, or their dreamscape. But it was because of him, and his persistence, that she discovered another option. D'iamonte had said the vampires were hunting her because of her gift and because she did not know how to use it.

He didn't know how wrong he was. Her acceptance of the rat-man, and all the others only proved to her that she had already learned a few tricks in order to survive. She wasn't a hapless victim, and she vowed she never would be.

Gathering hope, she knew of only one place where she might hope to gain more knowledge, and she set off, intending to arrive at her parents' house before they returned home from work. That way she wouldn't have to answer so many questions, nor worry them. If she were right, her grandmother would have left something behind, some glimmer of hope, some connection, or at least a breadcrumb trail to her people. Her talents might not be honed, but that didn't mean she had to remain that way.

Stepping outside, she glanced both ways down the street, before exposing her whole body to any lurking predators.

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Seeing none, she hurried to the edge of the street, intending to race across to her car. She was stopped short when a taxi pulled up and the door swung open.

She gasped but calmed down immediately when she recognized the young monk who had come to check up on her. He stepped out, his face a worried knot.

"Miss Rochelle, can I have a word?" He held his arm out, inviting her to join him in his taxi. She bent slightly to see another familiar face within. The abbot himself had gone along for the ride.

Warning bells went off. "I'm actually on my way somewhere right now."

The monk nodded as though he understood, but then with a maneuver so smooth, he drew his arm around her and dragged her into the cab. The cab driver looked alarmed, but when the abbot demanded he drive them back to the monastery, he complied. Feeling stunned but fighting them as hard as she could, she got a few kicks in before the monk wrapped a folded cloth across her face. After that, everything slid into blackness.

\* \* \* \*

Officer Dossy was just coming along Fenton Street when he spotted the very person he'd gone to see, Meara Rochelle. He had a few more questions for her, holes in her story that couldn't be explained by any of her so-called friends. He found it sad how they had all pointed the finger at her and then had shoveled more dirt on top of her, just to get him to

direct his questions somewhere else—anything to make him go away.

They'd talked of paranormal sightings, much like some other folks had over the past couple of days, and it was enough to make him wonder. He didn't like to have his sturdy belief system shaken beneath him. He depended on it to make doing his job worthwhile. If he thought for a second he was up against something supernatural, then what good was he, a mortal man in his early twilight years, to fend off bad guys?

He was still a block away when a taxi pulled up alongside her and a short man in a brown habit stepped out. Right away, he knew something was wrong, and he kicked his pace up a notch, striding onto the scene just in time to witness him shove her inside and slam the door shut. Suddenly, talk of vampires and winged men didn't seem frightening at all compared to the thought of holy men accosting the public, resorting to what appeared to be, a kidnapping.

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## Chapter Twenty

It pained D'iamonte to see the anguish he had caused Meara. It had been clearly written on her face just before he left, but he felt he had no choice in the matter. If she stood any chance against his mistress, or any of the other hungry vampires, then he had to bargain with what they had to save her.

He stood looking at the pedestal where he'd sat for so many long years and hated the idea that his mistress might condemn him to another sentence, one perhaps twice as long.

To his surprise, a small ghoul appeared at his side. It moved about in an animated fashion, seemingly distressed. It tugged on his clothes, jumped up and down, and waved its arms about. Soon the others mingled around him too, squeaking in their tiny voices, shouting to be heard.

Squinting, D'iamonte struggled to understand. They were hard to comprehend at the best of times, but when they all spoke at once, and so fast, it was impossible.

He was barely able to make out a single word when a taxi appeared on the gravel road that led to the monastery. The ghouls pulled at him with more and more urgency, and soon, he too picked up a strong scent that reminded him of Meara. A cold fear swept over him. She was inside that taxi. She was coming here to stop him. That was the worst thing she could do. If she offered herself up, then they had nothing left to offer. To his surprise the taxi continued on, driving down the

road until it vanished behind the thick forest that surrounded the monastery. Something wasn't right.

He stepped forward, his wings outstretched, about to race after her when a stronger wind nearly bowled him over. Dania's shrill laugh rang in his head and threatened to stop his heart. Turning to face her, he saw her hovering just above the crypt, her wild red hair fanned out all around her.

"So you've changed your mind have you?" she said with a sneer.

D'iamonte gathered his wits in order to answer. The fact that he had changed his tune and needed to ask Dania for her assistance had been put on hold, and he had no intention of telling her anything more than he needed to. "Don't get your hopes up, Dania. She did not come here under my advice."

"Then, why?" Her midnight black eyes searched over D'iamonte's head as though she would learn her answer with her sight alone. "No matter, I'll soon find out," she said and rose higher into the sky.

He realized she intended to get to Meara first, and if she did, he would have nothing with which to bargain for their future together. She'd steal Meara away, imprison her somewhere safe, and promptly eradicate any who opposed her. He had to fight her now. There was no other way.

"Not if I can stop you," he said, leaping into her path.

She let out an infuriated growl and knocked him down. "Do not make that mistake again," she snarled, and her fangs extend to a frightening length.

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*by Tara Nichols*

Ignoring her threat, he reached out and caught her before she could fly off again. With a mighty jerk, he pulled her to the ground where she fell in a heap at his feet.

To his surprise, she knocked his legs out from under him. He fell hard, bending one wing tip. He winced but ignored the searing pain. Before he knew it, she had grabbed him again and sent him hurtling through the sky.

It was a moment before he righted himself again, but when he did, he tucked his body in tight and aimed himself at her like an arrow. He hit his target, the middle of her chest, and sent her sprawling. She landed with a gust of air, and he got a few hits in while she was down, but it wasn't enough.

With a bloodcurdling screech, she leaped high into the sky and set her feet back down upon his chest. A sickening crack sounded deep within his rib cage, and he felt all the air rush out of him. Her face loomed over his, and a victorious smile spread across her lips.

"If you'd like, I'll consider her a gift. For once you've done something right."

And then she was gone, and he couldn't resist the warm, numbing sensation that threatened to overtake him.

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## **Chapter Twenty-One**

Meara blinked to clear her blurry eyes, and twisted around to see where she was. A small room, barren, except for a low wooden table, greeted her. The lack of decorations alone told her she was in the monastery. She was lying on her back, and her wrists were bound. She attempted to raise her ankles only to find them bound as well. For some reason, her forehead was wet, and there were drops of water on her clothes, making her wonder if it was raining outside.

She could hear muffled voices through the walls, and she strained to catch what they were saying. It proved to be difficult. The only way to hear or see better was to somehow untie the rope. Hope flared in her when she eyed the sloppy knot work. With a sharp tug of her wrist, the rope tightened, creating a gap large enough for her to twist once and slip her hand out. Clearly whoever had bound her wasn't an expert.

She untied the rest of her bonds and slid off the table. She tiptoed to the door and wobbled a little when her head responded poorly to the sudden movement. Pressing her ear against the door, she listened. Whoever had been talking had stopped. Perhaps they'd heard her and were coming to investigate, she thought, but then a shriek sounded, short and sharp, from somewhere outside. Something told her she wasn't the reason everything had grown quiet.

Hurried footsteps told her to back up, and a moment later, the door swung open. The abbot hurried in, followed closely by the monk. They came to stand beside her, their eyes wide

with fear. They didn't react at all to the fact that she had gained her freedom and instead gripped her by her elbow and ushered her out of the room.

"She has come for you. If that is the case, we must go now."

She'd gathered her wits enough to think to resist, and she jerked her arm free. "Who has come? And go where?"

"To the chapel," the abbot answered impatiently. "We've done what we could to purify you. Now it is up to God."

"Purify me?" She realized the water droplets must have been holy water.

"To extricate the demons from within you, of course."

The kidnapping was starting to make sense to her now. Seeing her in the company of a known vampire, they naturally assumed she was possessed or under his control. "I assure you, I have no such problem."

"We don't have time for arguments," the abbot snapped.

She couldn't agree more, and before they could stop her, she bolted. Running blind down a foreign hallway, she took the only door that was available. Jerking it open, she nearly toppled over into the unexpected darkness that engulfed her. She touched the walls. They were soft, velvet, the raised designs swirling under her fingertips. She crept down slowly, trying her best not to creak on the stairs.

When the doors at the bottom of the stairwell opened and the woman from her nightmare appeared on the other side, Meara's heart sank. She looked at the vampire mistress, with her long tresses blowing around her despite the absence of wind, her dress in tatters and hanging over her feet that were

suspended a few feet off the ground. Her dark eyes stared up, and she wore a wicked smile on her lips. She was little more than a cold dark shadow, but Meara suspected her transparency was deceiving. No doubt, she could pack a hell of a punch if she desired it.

"The Dark Lady!" The smaller monk gasped from the room below. Meara looked down, surprised to see them there. They had anticipated her arrival in that great room and had moved in to cut her off. He looked about to flee, but the abbot caught him by the back of his hood.

Clutching one another, they moved to the back wall. "Don't worry. We are safe here on sacramental ground."

Upon hearing the abbot's comment, the mistress's haughty laugh echoed around them. The ethereal beauty raised a hand in the air, pointed one slender finger to Meara's pounding heart, and instantly a sharp pain appeared in her chest. The apparition moved up the steps, never breaking her gaze on Meara. The courage seemed to drain out of her limbs. Meara noticed with increasing alarm, her arms and feet growing more and more listless, and soon her spirit would follow. There wasn't anything Meara could do to resist. She was drawn down like a fish on a lure, until she had reached the bottom steps.

"Oh dear, Charles, we are in over our heads." She heard the abbot's fear laced whisper. "If what they want is this one, then there is no stopping her." He licked his lips with nervous tension.

"She already is one of them," the other monk whispered in reply. "I have seen the marks upon her neck. They're just here to claim her so they can build up their army."

Had the situation been less frightening, Meara might have laughed at their conversation. They had no idea what they were dealing with. Neither did she for that matter, but she had the advantage in knowing D'iamonte had not turned her into a vampire.

Thinking of D'iamonte distracted her momentarily, and she was surprised to feel a little strength return. The disruption had been just enough to tear her eyes away and break the hold the mistress had on her.

Immediately, the mistress tried another method. Stepping forward, she reached out to touch Meara's hand, but Meara's eyes were on the back corner where D'iamonte had just appeared in the doorway beside the pulpit. "No Dania, you cannot have her," he said, startling his mistress.

The mistress's shriek was enough to shatter glass. "You healed far too fast." She hissed, but she recovered quickly. "I suppose it is the effect of her blood."

D'iamonte didn't answer. Instead, he stalked over to where the mistress waited and came to stand between them.

"D'iamonte, don't," Meara pleaded seeing what he intended to do. She could only hope he wasn't still hoping to barter with this madwoman. "You cannot. Not for me."

He flashed her a weary smile and hung his head. "It's too late."

The mistress rolled her eyes, giving the impression that D'iamonte posed no threat whatsoever.

"And what do you expect to accomplish by sacrificing yourself? Is it possible those first one hundred years of imprisonment and shame weren't enough? It is conceivable that it wasn't the right punishment in the first place." A lewd smile exposed the mistress's fangs, making her appear ugly, for the first time, rather than beautiful.

Seeing that brought Meara new insight into the moment. The vampire mistress appeared nothing more than a little girl, an insecure, spoiled child. After that, she didn't seem quite so intimidating. Now every move the mistress made seemed pathetic rather than frightening, and Meara could feel her strength returning, along with her courage.

With a glance over to D'iamonte, she saw that he didn't share the same perspective. His posture revealed his true concerns for their safety, and in truth, Meara suspected the mistress was capable of many acts of malice. What he didn't know was that Meara herself had started to recognize her own strength.

"Maybe the price simply wasn't high enough." The vampire mistress continued, and before Meara could react, Dania made a motion with her hand as though she'd snatched something out of the air and pulled it back. With a crackle and a sizzle, D'iamonte cried out in pain. To Meara's horror, his wings were severed from his body. He fell to his knees, and blood seeped through his black cotton T-shirt.

Jarred from her thoughts, Meara cried out in shock. She dropped to her knees beside him and looked wildly around for something to staunch the flow. To her surprise D'iamonte took her hands and held them still. He gave his head a subtle

shake, and she could see that the wound was already beginning to heal.

"You know that will not stop me," D'iamonte addressed the mistress through gritted teeth, and he attempted to stand again. "You will have to destroy me before you will get to Meara."

Meara looked to the mistress to see her response, only to discover the other woman looked about ready to tear his throat out. Her fiery gaze flickered from D'iamonte to Meara and back again, and then she smiled.

"Knowing how highly you think of mortals, perhaps I shall give you what you most desire."

With a wide sweep of her hand, she threw D'iamonte's body across the room. He hit the back wall, and then slid in a heap on the floor at the abbot's feet. The abbot jumped back when D'iamonte stirred and tried to sit up, and the religious man's eyes went wide with fright, the dangerous kind. Meara watched him reach for a banner mounted on the wall by a wooden dowel, as though he moved in slow motion. He took it in his hands, and before she could do anything to stop him, he drove it straight down into D'iamonte.

D'iamonte lurched from the impact, his mouth opening in a silent howl of pain. Clutching his shoulder, he swayed and fought to stay upright, but soon the injury became too much, and he saw he was going to fall. In one last effort to help her, he shouted a warning, "Run Meara!" and then he crumpled. His hand fell short of the trembling abbot, and he sagged to the floor, his face twisted in pain.

Meara dropped to his side and rolled him over. He was still conscious. Her eyes widened at the sight of the stake protruding from his body, and a cold sweat enveloped her. Forcing herself not to panic, she tried in vain to help him. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she let them flow.

"Oh how pathetic," the mistress cooed. "Not even ten minutes as a mortal, and his life is over."

A cool breeze warned Meara that the mistress had moved in, and she turned her face up to see that the vampiress's fangs were bared. "It would be such a waste of blood," she said seeming grotesque in a way D'iamonte never had. It was clear what she intended to do. She hovered close by, her mouth open to bite.

Even if it made her vulnerable, Meara was determined not to let the mistress finish him. The fury that was building inside of her was swelling to a point where she felt she could not control it. It sang through her like a familiar song, building in strength and gaining in volume like a chorus sung by a choir.

For once, she was starting to understand, she was not alone. She never was. All those years she'd denied her lineage access to her. It had slipped out in little ways, unconsciously, and mostly in her dreams, but whatever mysterious energy flowed through her veins was about to surface, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Had she paid any attention, or had taken the time to understand what the dream was trying to prepare her for, the mistress would not have been able to enter her dreams and gain access. Or, more importantly, if her parents hadn't

prevented her grandmother from teaching her the skills she'd needed, D'iamonte wouldn't have fallen victim to a sheltered man's fears, and she might have been better prepared for what was about to come. She recognized that she had no choice but to let whatever power that was bursting at the seams within take her over.

When the moment came, her head snapped back, and she let her fury, and the fury of her ancestors, take hold. It screamed loud and long, making a sweep of the room before it centered on its target. The mistress's surprised expression was the last thing Meara saw before everything went black.

When she opened her eyes again, the mistress lay in a heap across the room, and everything leading in a path toward her crumpled body had been bleached bone-white. A hole, the size of a dinner plate had been burned through the phantom woman's chest and through the wall behind her. Meara's fingers had wound tightly in D'iamonte's hair, and she still cradled his head.

The piercing cry of sirens wailed in the distance and drew nearer until they screeched to a halt in a cloud of dust outside the door. Perfect timing, Meara thought with dismay, and looked at D'iamonte's lifeless face and the destruction all around her.

Heavy boots beat a steady rhythm on the steps outside all the way into the cathedral, but they stopped short seeing the chaos that had ensued.

"You're late," she spat and pointed to D'iamonte's still body lying on the floor.



Two of the team members dropped to their knees beside D'iamonte, while the rest aimed their guns at everyone present. Their radios crackled but went unanswered. The two religious men cowering in the back whimpered with fright, and more residents of the monastery peered in from the small door behind the pulpit.

Meara looked up when one police officer stepped forward. "What the hell went on in here?"

Meara recognized him right away. Even behind the visor she'd know the voice that had interrogated her for hours.

"You wouldn't believe it even if I told you, and frankly, after the last time I tried to tell you, I just don't have the time. I need a paramedic, and quick."

Officer Dossy was about to speak when a sound came from the wall where the mistress had lain. Meara turned to see the vampire mistress pick herself up off the floor and dust herself off. The hole in her chest was already mostly healed, and she spared Meara a wary glance before she simply skirted the edge of the room, walked past the gaping officers and slipped through the door outside. Meara knew she intended to return to the crypt, and frankly, she hoped she had learned her lesson and would stay there.

"Call a paramedic," Meara reminded the officer when he had stopped to watch the strange lady with crazy red hair and a hole in her chest walk away.

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## Chapter Twenty-Two

Three ghouls perched on the side of the hospital bed, their gnarled little toes tangled in D'iamonte's dark hair, and she cast them a tolerant smile. She understood their attachment to her now. They didn't linger out of affection for her, like she originally thought, but simply because they fed off her energy, a power source she had been unaware she emitted. Now they hovered around D'iamonte because he smelled of her.

Ever since he became mortal, he'd been sleeping round the clock, and frankly, it had her worried. She'd barely left his side after they reached the hospital, patched up his punctured lung, and laid him out in that bed, but hunger had driven her to the nearest vending machine in search of food.

Wanting to be close to him, she sat down on the edge of the mattress, despite the fact that the nurses had forbidden it.

To her astonishment, his eyelids flicked and eventually opened a crack.

"Meara." His voice was barely a whisper.

Stunned, she gripped his face between her hands, and leaned over him. She began kissing his cheek, his mouth, and his brow. "Yes, I'm here."

He tilted his head up so he could see her better. "Thank you," was all he could manage before he rested his head back against the pillow again.

He tried to sit up, and his face fell. His complexion was ashen, even more than usual. He tentatively reached to his shoulder, confirming his wings were not there, and his eyes closed. She understood he was coming to terms with his loss.

"I'm so sorry," she said, and tears welled at the corners of her eyes. She hadn't been looking forward to the moment he remembered he was now wingless.

It was a long moment before he spoke. "It doesn't matter. Maybe she did us a favor."

Meara couldn't hide the shock at his off-handed comment. "How can you say that? Nothing she did was in our best interest."

His eyes opened again, and his gaze locked on hers. He reached for her hand and held it tightly between his. "Meara, I'd gladly hand them over again if I had to, anything to be able to be with you."

She bit her lip to keep it from quivering, but in the end she couldn't hold back the tears that streamed down her face.

"Don't be sad for me. I have a hunch it's only temporary, to remind me she's still the boss, and for me to mind my manners." He lifted her head and, seeing her concern, kissed her tears away. "I choose you, Meara, over flying. You see, I love you, and without wings, I'll fit in much better." A sly smile brightened his face. "Besides there is always hang gliding."

She choked back a sob she was so happy with his news. "You think she'll come around someday?" Meara could barely believe her ears.

"She's a petulant child." He shrugged. "It might take a hundred or so years, but when she grows up a little I'm sure she'll try to set things right, for both of us."

"Both of us." Meara frowned, not understanding.

D'iamonte just grinned like the Cheshire cat, and Meara couldn't help but laugh. He knew more about his mistress than she'd given him credit for. Perhaps he had everything figured out, for all she knew. She still had to find her ancestors, the ones who would be able to help her with her gifts. That wasn't important at the moment, Meara thought, throwing her arms around him. D'iamonte was hers again, more alive than he ever was.

The End

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### **About the Author**

Ever since Tara Nichols was a little girl, she has had an affinity for romantic adventures. With crushes on the likes of Tarzan and Hans Solo, she grew up looking for the perfect gentleman rogue. When she is not writing about romance, erotica or paranormal fiction, she can be found tending her garden, keeping bees, or reading a spy novel. Tara roams free on the flat prairie land in Manitoba, Canada, where she lives with her young son and husband.

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